Enhancing professional networking and engagement using social media
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Aims of the project

- To explore how social media is currently used by STEM academics to engage with existing formal and informal networks.
- To explore how social media is currently used by STEM academics to extend the boundaries of these networks to reach broader communities.
- To investigate the motivations for social networking and maintaining professional identities online.
- To analyse whether there are gendered differences in styles and levels of engagement and assess the potential impact of these differences.
- To analyse whether there are cultural differences (between STEM disciplines) in styles and levels of engagement and assess the potential impact of these differences.
- To support STEM academics in the development of online professional identities and the use of social media to engage with different user communities.

Methodology

Initial preparation
- Conduct a literature review covering areas such as STEM engagement, digital scholarship, applications of social media and professional identity management.
- Undertake discussions with OU staff and project partners currently involved in these areas.
- Clarify the key issues and refine the project aims.
- Refine and develop the next phase of the project.

Data collection and analysis
- Undertake interviews with STEM academics at UK institutions to explore the current position of social media in their networking activities. For example:
    - Are these tools enabling them to create an online professional identity?
    - Are these tools enabling them to reach extended groups of people, outside of their usual networks?
    - What are people doing and what works?
    - What are people's fears and inhibitions about social media and wider engagement?
- Interviews will be semi-structured with open-ended questions with the aim to generate detailed discussion around the research aims.
- Interview data will be transcribed, coded and analysed.
- It is envisaged emerging themes and issues will be identified which will serve to shape the direction of discussions and further analysis.
- We also hope to study interviewees' online professional identities – viewing their online connections, public conversations, posts, 'tweets' etc. with the aim to reinforce, or otherwise, the findings of the interview data.

Deliverables and outcomes

- Dissemination via conference and journal papers
- Develop and run a workshop to support staff in raising and developing their impact/engagement levels through the use of social media
- Final report