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JISC Business and Community Engagement Programme

Embedding Impact Analysis in Research Using BCE Practitioners (Grant Calls 15/11 and 20/11)

CASE STUDY TEMPLATE August 2012

This Case Study summarises one of a portfolio of nine *Embedding Impact Analysis in Research Using BCE Practitioners* projects funded by the JISC BCE programme.

Funding objective: to spread BCE and research information management expertise more widely across the sector in order to enhance the capabilities of research groups to identify, analyse and articulate the benefits of their research to the economy and society.

All Case Studies will be analysed and synthesised by the Facilitation and Synthesis project, run by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), who will produce a synoptic and publicly-available Compendium of Good Practice in BCE- and technology-enabled research impact analysis, for the benefit of the wider sector.

Section 1: Project Details

1.) Project Partnership and Contact Details

Project Title: **Tracking Digital Impact (TDI)**

Project Type A or B: **Project Type A**

Lead Institution: **University of Exeter**

Partner institutions: **University of Aberdeen, Plymouth University, Manchester**

Beacon, University of Southern Queensland

Primary Contact: **Kent McClymont**

Role: **Associate Research Fellow**

BCE Practitioner (s): **Sue Waite, Erinma Ochu, Andy Phippen, Matt Baker, Jennifer Holden**

Information Management specialist: **Kent McClymont, Pat Loria**

Researchers: **Rowena Passy, Elizabeth Brock, Sarah Ward, Ed Keedwell, Elizabeth Tait**

Section 2: Executive Summary

2.) Executive Summary

Context

- A drive to increase the impact of research outside of academia and demonstrate this through evidence.
- Proving the impact of research generated by public, business and community engagement (BCE) is becoming ever more important.
- Universities are now looking at better monitoring engagement.
- Digital forms of engagement is a unique opportunity of potentially collecting “complete” information about how people are engaging the digital domain.
- However, it is difficult to monitor and analyse engagement data in a meaningful, comparable manner without proper training and experience.
- Universities have no yet adopted standard processes for tracking digital engagement or are in the early stages of doing so.
- New guidelines are needed to help shape developing digital engagement policies.

Purpose

The TDI project explored the types of digital engagement that are currently in use and how they are monitored. The project assessed what BCE skills, digital focused and traditional, that were available in the institutions and set out to share and embed these skills and experiences across all partners.

Aims

The project aimed to develop new standards and processes that could form a set of guidelines for implementing effective monitoring procedures for projects undertaking public, business and community engagement through digital technologies. The guidelines were intended to embed digital engagement practices in to researcher led activities which could potentially conform to institutional level policies through a uniform approach. It was intended that the benefits of the new guidelines would be demonstrated through an active case study showing measurable results.

Objectives

- Assessment of current state (Identification of available resources, skills and experience) – identify guidelines, knowledge, training courses and case studies within existing institutions which are currently involved in digital engagement activities and can either (a) provide existing knowledge for assimilation or (b) a suitable platform with which to test the developed guidelines
- Develop guidelines based on collated findings and formalise for general non-institution specific use, using feedback and critical analysis from steering group to help guide the development of the guidelines.
- Implement guidelines at the NCDP case study at Plymouth University to examine the guidelines efficacy for active use in running projects, making observations of the following: ease of implementation; relevance to the case study project, department and institution in general; efficacy of the guidelines with respect to their individual focus; general notes on utility and research opinion of the guidelines and practical implications of their use.
- Collect and assess the case study notes and proposed modifications to the guidelines based on the case study report.
- Dissemination & feedback - conduct a workshop to disseminate and promote new guidelines and receive feed-back on the guidelines and project in general. Collate responses of workshop

attendees on the guidelines and incorporate suitable notes and comments into the guideline's accompanying notes. Incorporate workshop attendee's comments into materials accompanying guidelines and publish for open access.

Outputs

- **Case Study** – demonstration of the TDI tool on a case-study research project (Natural Connections Demonstration Project at Plymouth University)
- **Guidelines** – formalised guidelines for identifying and implementing digital engagement activities, tracking methods and tools.
- **Project Report** – JISC project report detailing activities and outcomes of the project.

Learning

- **Skills & Personnel** – The team learned that it is important to identify and address gaps in the team's skills in order to effectively plan and implement digital engagement strategies.
- **Training** – General lack of training in all institutions on the topic of digital engagement and tracking, monitoring, assessing and evidencing digital engagement.
- **Slow down development and implementation** – it was learned that while plans can be developed and implemented quickly when the skills are available, it is important to slow down the process and incorporate regular and effective self-assessment and feedback to ensure the planned activities are effective.
- **Assumptions** – While many researchers are capable of using digital tools, such as social media, it is important not to make assumptions about commonly used (for personal use) tools. Even if researchers are currently using tools for personal purposes they may not be comfortable using the same tools for professional purposes.
- **Buy-in** – To ensure digital engagement policies and plans are effective it is important to document, share and ensure all team members have read and understood the plans and that they are fully committed to ensuring they are implemented. Without this, the plans are ineffective.

Impact

- **TDI Tool** – the tool provides clearer understanding of what methods and tools are suitable for academic BCE practices and how they are best suited to different aspects of a project in order to improve and maintain research excellence which are facilitating the development of institution specific guidelines and policy documents at Exeter, Plymouth and Aberdeen relating to digital engagement and provide a point of reference with evidence to support effective and efficient changes to current policies and is therefore influencing a number of institutions involved in the project.
- **Case study** – the application of the TDI tool to the NCDP case study provided the NCDP team with an enriched understanding of the best approaches to tracking digital BCE activities. The team is now better able to monitor, adjust and tailor their digital engagement activities to be more effective and relevant to their target sectors and communities. The BCE activities will therefore be more effective and relevant and improve the experience for the public, businesses and communities who engage with these projects.
- **Sector Wide Dissemination** – the tool has been presented at a wide and varied number of different events focused at the whole spectrum of BCE and researchers. The presentations and training workshops has raised awareness of the need for better digital engagement training and guidelines and as a consequence, Kent has been invited to provide talks at external institutions and provide internal training at Exeter. The wide dissemination of the TDI tool and project has resulted in a greater awareness of the problems and benefits associated with digital engagement.

Section 3: Issues, Changes and Impact

3.) The impact or benefits analysis problem the research group was trying to solve

Due to recent changes in research sector, there is now a drive to increase the impact of research outside of academia and demonstrate this through evidence. Proving the impact of research generated by public, business and community engagement (BCE) is therefore becoming ever more important. Many universities are now looking at better monitoring all forms of engagement to both highlight where engagement is taking place and potentially where impact is occurring. Digital forms of engagement, such as social media or digital resources, provide a unique opportunity of potentially collecting “complete” information about how people are engaging the digital domain.

Indeed, researchers are increasingly engaging with, and disseminating findings to, non-academic users through digital technologies which offer a unique opportunity for a wide range of data to be collected about each engagement. However, despite the potential to automate data collection, it is difficult to monitor and analyse engagement data in a meaningful, comparable manner. Unlike commercial enterprises, many universities have not yet adopted standard processes for tracking digital engagement or are in the early stages of doing so. Clearly new guidelines are needed to help shape developing digital engagement policies. The expertise to monitor and analyse engagement is already available for ‘traditional’ modes of engagement in the form of expert BCE analysts and practitioners and this expertise should be harnessed to shape new guidelines for digital engagement.

The TDI project explored the types of digital engagement that are currently in use and how they are monitored. A set of standards for monitoring and assessing the impact of digital engagement were created using case studies from different institutions and organisations. The standards were designed to guide the use of existing and freely available tools such as Google Analytics to improve the impact assessment processes for digital engagement.

4.) The as-is impact analysis capability and process within the research group

At the start of the project, each of the three main participating institutes (Exeter, Plymouth and Aberdeen) conducted internal investigations to identify the extent to which each of the institutions had catered for the emerging digital engagement needs of researchers and research projects. The searches at Exeter and Plymouth both found very little in the way of guidance and rules on digital engagement. For example, the University of Exeter (at the time of survey) maintained only one page on social media. Since the TDI project started the university has now expanded on this site. However, the focus of the site (<http://www.exeter.ac.uk/staff/web/>) is still on the use rather than the tracking, analysis and evidencing of digital engagement. I.e., the site contains just one paragraph on tracking digital engagement, which is represented well by the opening sentence: “*Social media activity is no different to any other professional undertaking, and you should consider how to measure the success of your ventures with clear objectives.*” A similar situation was found at Plymouth University, which also had little staff guidance and no internal training on the topic.

The situation was different at the University of Aberdeen, and specifically the dot.rural Digital Economy Research hub. At the start of the project, dot.rural had just established a new social media policy written after the appointment of its new Training & Outreach Officer: Dr Jennifer Holden. It was finalised in late May 2012 and represented a strategy for social media use (mainly twitter, facebook, YouTube) and policies for what social media channels would contain (e.g. frequency of posting). The social media policy document complemented the recently re-launched (early May 2012) dot.rural website at www.dotrural.ac.uk. Dr Elizabeth Tait was responsible for assessing impact of the dot.rural Hub activities

through her role as Impact Research Fellow. The RCUK Digital Economy Theme had a Theme Review focussed on Impact which culminated with a visit by an international panel to dot.rural in mid-May 2012. This meant that all personnel involved in dot.rural were aware of Impact, with the assessment criteria from RCUK including social media.

The key findings were the lack of support at Exeter and Plymouth and the fledgling developments at Aberdeen which could act as the primary source of knowledge for transfer between the partner institutes. In addition, it was recognised that across all three institutions there was little to no formal support for critical analysis of digital engagement activities. This project could act as an assessment of the dot.rural guidelines to the benefit of all three institutes.

5.) The expertise provided by the BCE impact analyst(s)

The project was supported by a large team of individuals across all institutions. Many of these staff members were experienced in multiple areas and not just, for example, BCE impact analysis. For the purposes of this project the team members have been assigned here to the roles that they are best suited to provide in the context of the this project.

Jennifer Holden (Aberdeen) - experience of assessment of dot.rural and development of new guidance and social media policy. Jennifer has a strong background in social media for public engagement purposes and has previously developed guidance on social media use.

Sue Waite (Plymouth, Steering Group) - guidance on applying the TDI tool to the Natural Connections Demonstration Project and practical BCE implications of the emerging strategy. Sue provided a practical experience of putting engagement activities in to practice.

Erinma Ochu (Manchester, Steering Group) - experience of the Manchester Beacon and establishing new policies at Lancaster University. Provided critical analysis of the tool in relation to the above

Matt Baker (Exeter, Steering Group) - REF perspective and a critical analysis of the project outputs, supporting further embedding in Exeter of the TDI tool.

6.) The expertise provided, and lessons learned, by the information management specialist

Kent McClymont (Exeter) - experience of management systems, social media and web analytics, and developing professional media profiles (in a commercial setting).

7.) The technologies and business intelligence practices and resources which were tested and deployed, and their origin

The digital engagement best practice policy from dot.rural was used as a basis from which to develop a wider policy called the TDI tool. In addition, guidance from the NCCPE web site and the experiences of the team in developing new skills in the area of digital engagement was also incorporated into the tool to further extend it beyond the social media focus of the dot.rural documents.

The tool was developed by researchers at Exeter with regular reviews and comments from the wider project team to facilitate the incorporation of learning across all institutes. For example, in the Natural Connections Development Project (NCDP) at Plymouth, digital engagement was a relatively new area and the project supported the development of skills and competencies in developing social media for university-based projects.

The resulting TDI tool was tested on the NCDP (Plymouth) and used to further annotate the TDI tool with a single cohesive example alongside the guidance to make the tool more accessible. The tool is planned to undergo regular review at Exeter and be incorporated in a wider digital engagement case study (The Big Paddle Project) which is being run at Exeter.

8.) The particular competencies developed and awareness raised

A number of competencies were developed through the project, including materials and resources as well as individuals' experience and skills.

TDI Tool – the primary and most sustainable development from the project the creation of a detailed and critically assessed guidance document. The TDI tool provides institution independent guidance on using digital technologies for engagement with the public, businesses and communities with the aim of facilitating engagement with and resulting impact from recent and active research. The tool has been disseminated to all participating institutions as well as a number of external institutions through workshops and presentations around the tool. Furthermore, the use of the tool has been strongly embedded in the dot.rural hub and the NCDP at Aberdeen and Plymouth.

New Policies – the TDI tool and this case study is being used as a basis for developing proposed institution specific policies at Plymouth and Exeter which, if accepted, may be adopted on a wider institution level.

Individual Skills – by participating the TDI project the more experienced members, such as Kent and Jennifer, further solidified their understanding of digital engagement and the most recent technologies available to researchers. Furthermore, members, such as Sue and Rowena, established new skills in using and monitoring digital engagement activities which is also being embedded within the NCDP.

Dissemination – as part of the TDI project, a dissemination workshop was planned and held at the University of Warwick in collaboration with the JISC BCE PERO project. The workshop was designed to encourage adoption of the tool outside of the participating institutions as well as provide a means of critical feedback (which was collected and incorporated in the latest version of the tool). Additional presentations were made at the AURIL and NCCPE conferences which received significant interest and have led to the establishing of further future workshops at external institutions.

Workshops & Education Resources – workshops have been developed at by the research team based at Exeter which will be run internally as researcher and staff development courses to facilitate and further widen awareness of digital engagement. These workshops will also be designed to aid in the demystification of digital engagement technologies and the basic skills required to start undertaking digital engagement activities.

Long Term Connections – in addition to running workshops and training courses, the team established connections with centres like the Bill Douglas Centre at Exeter. The team have been providing guidance and support to these centres as they undergo reviews of their current activities and plan future strategies.

9.) How the research group has benefited from the project, including lessons learnt by the researchers

Natural Connections (Rowena & Sue)

Starting from a position of minimal experience in digital engagement activities and strategy planning, the NCPD team developed new skills in this area. The team is now capable of conducting effective self-assessment of individual and project requirements and developing an effective digital engagement strategy and policy document to ensure a strong, relevant digital presence to engage more effectively with target groups. The team learned that it is important to identify and address gaps in the team's skills in order to effectively plan and implement digital engagement strategies.

A lack of existing framework within the university and so started from scratch when developing their policy. As a result, the team at Plymouth plan to host in collaboration with Exeter a dissemination workshop to further embed the TDI tool at their institution.

University of Exeter (Kent, Elizabeth, Matthew)

The team previously had experience of digital engagement activities but these were not recorded for sharing or in any formal manner. At the start of the project, the researchers had used digital engagement in a less organised, informal way with no strict plans or established means of assessment. As a result of the project, the researchers learned how to establish effective plans to monitor and assess their digital engagement activities.

Furthermore, the team developed policies for institutional use with are to be submitted for review and/or acceptance at the college and university level. Through developing the TDI tool and policies, the team gained experience of policy development. In particular, Kent greatly developed his ability to devise and deliver dissemination workshops on the tool and digital engagement in general.

Staff training and skills was also highlighted by this project. Many research projects at Exeter undertake some limited digital engagement (be that website updates or blog posts) but none of the project teams had undergone a process of skills assessment and training requirements. It was viewed by many that these kinds of activities are outside the prevue of researcher's and done by those that are interested and willing. Consequently, training workshops have been devised and an emphasis on the need to understand and train staff in digital engagement has been made.

dot.rural (Jennifer)

Being the primary source of the TDI tool and BCE experience, the dot.rural team undertook work to encourage and develop the use of the tool and related policies at dot.rural. Taking part in the TDI project has led to further reflection on the social media policy in dot.rural and a reiteration that things should not be taken too fast. In response to feedback in person and through the institutional survey the multi-author blog launch has been postponed until early 2013 until more dot.rural researchers are familiar with the strategy and happy with the format. Training on social media for dot.rural researchers on using social media for research purposes and how it's being used as a public engagement tool will take place in January 2013 to combat some of the issues raised during the journey of the TDI project. Sharing the dot.rural social media policy has led to external validation of the policy from other institutions and encouraged, confirmed and cemented the dot.rural social media policy currently employed.

10.) Lessons learnt by the BCE practitioners

Jennifer Holden (Aberdeen)

A key lesson learnt through working on the TDI project has been not to make assumptions about commonly used (for personal use) tools. Researchers may have fallen into using tools due to the preponderance of their use in their friendship group and are resistant to employing a personal space for

professional purposes. Working in a large research hub with personnel from 12 different ‘home’ disciplines has shown that there are clear disciplinary differences in attitudes to social media tools being used for research and engagement and the tools used. Perhaps unsurprisingly, social scientists seem to be the most extensive users of social media tools for research purposes and the greatest advocates for social media use. Coming into dot.rural, 2 years into its initial grant period, Jennifer feels she had made the wrong assumption that as it included technical personnel and work on using digital technologies to improve society that social media use would be widespread at dot.rural.

Lessons learnt from the dot.rural social media survey are that more work needs to be done on making sure all researchers involved have read and understood the social media policy including how they can contribute and it relate to their individual social media activities. Where researchers have experience they rate social media channels very effective or effective for finding out about new projects and papers, networking with other researchers, networking with non-researchers, promoting dot.rural work, and promoting their individual research activities. However, there is still a scepticism about the worth and usefulness of social media channels, including in a research Hub and individual context, people say they remain to be convinced and think it may have been overhyped.

The lessons learnt from the TDI project have been reflected upon and incorporated into an online portion of grant proposal to the Scottish Government for public engagement (Talking Science grant: Science with Spokes University of Aberdeen Ken Skeldon and Jennifer Holden, awarded 2012). This means that the lessons learnt from the TDI work have a wider impact in the University of Aberdeen’s public engagement with research activities than in just the dot.rural Research Hub.

11.) Process, technology approaches and other changes agreed as a result of the experience, and future implementation plans

Digital engagement strategy for Natural Connections Development Project (NCDP)

As part of the assessment process of the TDI tool, the NCDP team established a specific digital engagement strategy tailored for natural connections project based on application of the TDI tool. Reflections on this have been included in the TDI tool as an example of how to apply the tool. The digital engagement strategy has been adopted and will undergo regular review within the NCDP as part of their day-to-day research activities and planning practices. This is a significant improvement as previously the NCDP had not had a digital engagement strategy in place and the team were less capable of effectively developing one.

New guidance on digital engagement (Plymouth and Exeter)

As a baseline, Plymouth and Exeter both now have access to the TDI tool for any researcher or BCE practitioner to access and consult. Furthermore, a series of suggested changes to Plymouth website regarding the lack of information on social media and digital technologies have been compiled as well as a new policy, both of which will be submitted for consideration by the university. Similarly, the TDI tool has been submitted to the web team at Exeter for incorporation in their growing digital activities website.

Improved monitoring of digital engagement activities at dot.rural (Aberdeen)

As a result of the TDI project, dot.rural is being more open with its policies and reflecting more on the basics i.e. re-evaluating existing practices within the Hub while making the assumption of little/no knowledge or experience of using social media tools for research or public engagement. Specifically, dot.rural guidance has been adapted with notes on the social media policy to reflect findings from Plymouth and Exeter.

General researcher capabilities.

As mentioned above, the NCDP research team developed new skills in planning for digital engagement activities, including how to assess and plan for training needs. This will support the ongoing development of skills in undertaking digital engagement activities as well as planning and monitoring these activities. Similarly, the researchers at Exeter developed skills in identifying key information and developing research policies to support digital engagement activities as well as formal planning and assessment of digital engagement activities. Kent, in particular, developed skills in training others in digital engagement best practices which will further support the development of these skills in the wider context of the University of Exeter.

12.) How learning has been shared from the project within and beyond the institution.

Dissemination Workshop (Warwick)

A dissemination workshop was planned as part of the TDI project with the aim of exposing external institutions to the TDI tool and project findings and encourage adoption or assimilation of the team's findings. This was run in conjunction with the PERO team to increase the size and scope of the workshop. The workshop was well attended and received and consequently many of the attendees contacted the TDI team for copies of the final tool. In addition, the workshop was used as a means of critical assessment and resulted in the inclusion of a new key question to the tool on staff skills; in addition to other smaller changes.

Workshops (Exeter, Plymouth, Other)

Training workshops – training workshops have been developed and delivered at Warwick on digital engagement and use of the TDI tool in a general context. Furthermore, workshops have been developed specifically for use in the RDP programme at Exeter and similarly at Plymouth. These workshops will be ongoing and sustained within the RDP programme for long term benefits.

Dissemination workshops – in addition to researcher and staff specific training workshops, the team participated in conferences and workshops such as AURIL and Engage 2012 as part of the projects ongoing dissemination activities. As a consequence of these presentations, links have been established with other BCE professionals with the aim to establish similar dissemination and training workshops at other national institutions. The TDI tool was also presented at Exeter's Open Access week as part of the Open Access agenda.

Links (Exeter)

As part of the project, Kent established stronger links with RKT and RDP with the aim of establishing research student and staff development workshops on the topic of digital engagement with a focus on the TDI tool.

Links (Plymouth)

The team at Plymouth have ensured the adoption of the TDI tool within School of Education for use in future research projects, increasing the impact of the TDI tool from just the NCDP project to a school level. To further support this, Plymouth aim to evaluate the wider applicability of the tool and establish links with relevant departments to further embed across the institutions.

Wider Dissemination

Elizabeth Tait and Jennifer Holden were invited to write two blog-posts on the LSE Impact blog related to the TDI project work. The first post about the new dot.rural social media policy and survey was published in July 2012, a follow up blog is planned for early in 2013.

The TDI tool has also been shared online and will be included in the synthesised NCCPE compendium. The publically available tool will also be advertised through the NCCPE's NING site as well as at workshops and conferences like AURIL and Engage 2012.

Section 4: Additional Observations

13.) Any additional findings, reflections or implications relevant to a wider audience?

Open Access

A dialogue was established between Exeter Open Access and the TDI JISC project. Open Exeter deals with open access and archiving and the team were consulted on open access and how it could be incorporated in the TDI to include archival of long term data from digital engagement activities. These kinds of connections, also with the Catalyst and DESCRIBE project, were vital in establishing a local context for the TDI tool.

Acceptance

Despite or perhaps as a consequence of the impending REF, many researchers at all institutions were not willing to engage with the TDI project or the topic of BCE activities as they felt “pressured” into “no research” activities. There is still the need for a mass culture change (which is coming slowly) which sees researchers accept and understand that BCE activities are part of and core to good research. Post REF 2014, there is likely to be significant shifts in attitudes to BCE.

General and Conceptual

When developing TDI it was quickly realised, through discussion with steering group and researchers at the partner institutes, that a conceptual tool / guidance document would be more useful than a technology solution and more easily adopted by a variety of institutes, from Museums to HEI research centres. It was also recognised that the issues around digital engagement weren’t technological as much as they were skills, perception and training based. There are many researchers that are “frightened” to start any digital activities as they are untrained, unskilled and inexperienced. However, with increased confidence many are happy to adopt and often strongly embed digital engagement activities in their daily work processes.

Section 5: Acknowledgements and references

14.) Acknowledgements and references

This project was funded by JISC (EXT IMPACT: OSINNOS). The TDI team would like to thank Simon Whittemore at JISC and David Owen at the NCCPE for their guidance and input during the project and Mark Randall-Smith at Mouchel for his support of the project.

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