

# Social media in higher education: engage, share and learn

 By [Michelle Strauss](#)

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I recently had the opportunity to co-present at the Amabhubesi Social Media in Higher Education Summit, and what an insightful summit this was.

Within the last few years social media has become more integral in the lives of students and what I took from this summit was this: now, more than ever it is vital for higher education to get social.

I will never forget the day I joined Facebook - if the fact that I know the words to most songs from the 80's doesn't give my age away...this trip down memory lane certainly will - I was a University student and somewhere in a computer lab on campus, with a group of friends, I signed up, scared but excited to explore the world of social media I was getting exposed to.

Social media is offering tertiary institutions a new way to communicate, contributing to better learning and development processes. Through utilising the various social media platforms higher education can introduce innovative ways of sharing lectures, facilitating discussions, providing support to students, building campus communities and reaching out to alumni.

Leading universities and tertiary institutions are using social media to reach their target markets on platforms where they spend most of their time. But what are the benefits of social media in an educational context?

## Recruiting students

According to Social Bakers the largest age group using Facebook in South Africa is between 25-34, followed by users between the age of 18-24.

Social media enables tertiary institutions to target their preferred audience and engage with them on platforms where they spend most of their time.

## Broadening reach

The South Africa Digital Nation report found that nine out of every ten people online are now online every day.

Social media enables higher education to reach a large number of people at any given time and presents the opportunity to target and engage current and prospective students, alumni, research groups, industry peers and the general public.

## Strengthen and market the brand

Social media allows educational institutions to showcase academics, awards, campus life, local updates and news, with the aim of promoting the institutional brand.

## Engage communities and students

Being part of the online conversation and engaging with target markets on relevant platforms has the benefit of revolutionised learning and admin processes, knowledge sharing, and creating informed and connected communities.

In a recent analysis on how South African and international educational institutions are utilising social media to build successful relationships with key audiences, it became evident to me that it is very important that higher education professionals are equipped with the latest social media technology and approach social media with a strategy.

Here is a list of four key points to consider when embarking on utilising social media in higher education:

- *Create a strategy:* Identify objectives, determine who your target audiences are and on which platforms you can most effectively engage with them.

Consider your brand's tone and identify and plan content with the overall strategy of the institution in mind.

- *Consider your brand:* Keep in mind that social media is a showcase of the institutional brand. Across universities and tertiary institutions there are various faculties, communities, interest groups and departments that would benefit from using social media as a communication tool.

Be considerate of image application and naming conventions across all communities - so that the brand image is consistent across various platforms and departments.

- *Stay in control:* Although various faculties or departments within educational institutions may utilise social media platforms, it is advised that social media processes and policies are in place to ensure brand consistency and offer guidelines in the management of social platforms.
- *Ensure sustainability and value:* Embarking on social media is a long term commitment. To establish successful relationships with key audiences and to add and get value from social media, the conversations should be maintained and managed.

The essence of social media is communication and therefore it presents invaluable opportunities for higher education to connect, share and create a new kind of conversation about education in South Africa.

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