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BUSINESS CONTINUITY MANAGEMENT IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study explores crisis communications in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) between the institution and its students. Using a case study of British universities, data is presented from interviews with university business continuity managers and student focus groups. The paper provides insights into current Business Continuity Management (BCM) practice in the higher education sector, business continuity managers' attitudes to social media as a communication tool during the incident response phase, and students' declared communication preferences.

Keywords: business continuity management, communications, stakeholders, social media, higher education, university

1. Introduction

Higher education in the United Kingdom (UK) is big business. The total income of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) totaled £22,923M in 2011-12. In 2010-11 student fee income accounted for £7,755M (33.8%), funding council grants £7,201M (31.4%) and research grants and contracts £3,563M (15.5%) (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012). As of August 2011, there were 115 universities in the UK (www.universitiesuk.ac.uk) and universities themselves have been described as "powerful drivers of the UK economy" (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009), accounting for a total economic footprint of around £59billion (Universities UK, 2009).

The marketization of British higher education is driving universities to become increasingly akin to the private sector in their outlook and activities (Brown, 2011, Shattock, 2010). In effect, whilst HEIs are public institutions, they are subject to both private and public sector imperatives and influences reflecting government moves towards a free market in higher education (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005). The landscape of British higher education is also subject to further change, not least due to the introduction of higher undergraduate student fees effective from the 2012 academic year (Department for Business, 2011, Browne, 2010) and the introduction of a new 'core and margin' model which will mean that universities shall be competing with other institutions for a share in a pool of 20,000 places (Department for Business, 2011). It is widely anticipated that this change, and an environment where many students pay in excess of £9,000 annual tuition fees, will intensify the ongoing trend of the consumerization of UK higher education (Molesworth et al., 2011, Brown, 2011). The current picture with respect to postgraduate education is one of even greater competition. There are no caps imposed upon student numbers and UK institutions compete internationally in an established global market place (UK HE International Unit, 2009).

As student related income constitutes an ever greater proportion of HEI revenues, university institutions are increasingly 'marketers' (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2009) in the vein of their American counterparts. So too then, in British higher education, is institutional brand and reputation a critical weapon in attracting students (Maringe and Gibbs, 2008, Chapelo, 2011, Chapleo,

2010). Furthermore, a consequence of this process are elevated expectations on the part of universities' primary consumers (students) and, increasingly, their 'co-consumers' (parents) (Williams, 2011). Although the reputation and brand of UK higher education continues to draw students from across the world, as a result of these multifarious influences, maintaining and enhancing the quality of the student university experience gains ever greater significance. Threats to this, in the form of disruptions to the student learning experience or devaluing of the institutional brand that the student has 'bought into' must be minimized for the success and longer-term sustainability of any British HEI. Ensuring the robustness of the institution to potential threats and disruption is therefore vital, and business continuity provides a strategy for ensuring organizational resilience. However, many argue that despite evidence to show that universities can be subject to threats and disruptions just as in any other sector, they remain ill-prepared (Mitroff, 2011, Kiernan, 2005, Beggan, 2011). In recent times, many British universities have found themselves having to deal with widespread disruption due to snow. Others have faced a range of incidents which have threatened their standing internationally (for example, the fatal off campus shooting of one of the University of Lancaster's international students in an apparently racially motivated attack) and one university was obliged to restructure as result of a student visa scam (University of Wales).

Given the centrality of students to the operation, financial standing and long term sustainability of university institutions, this research explores one aspect of the relationship between students and university authorities, namely, the

communication process which forms part of the business continuity preparations made by the institution. This paper takes the issue of effective communication between the university and its students during incident response as its focus. We explore this within the context of U.K. higher education and current business continuity practice in that sector. Incident response is a key part of any business continuity strategy, and effective crisis communications with key stakeholders are a vital component of this. Furthermore, given the explosion in the use of social media as a communication tool in recent years,[1] we examine what role, if any, social media might play in a university's successful incident response.

This paper contributes to the business continuity (BC) literature in a number of ways. Firstly, it adds to our understanding of current business continuity practice by presenting findings from an in-depth case study, utilising data gathered from BC practitioners themselves. It is acknowledged that there is a lack of empirical data available on BC (Elliott et al., 2010, Herbane, 2010, Hiles, 2011). Arguably, this is because BC is not yet a well-established and mature management discipline in comparison to areas such as strategic management. Secondly, our focus upon the use of social media as part of higher education institutions' incident response phase of business continuity is novel. To date, much work in the emerging literature on social media has examined its use by organizations in building relationships with stakeholders, (Booth and Matic, 2011, Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010). Studies on social media and crisis communications are scarce (Shankar, 2008) and largely focussed

[1] At the end of 2011, Facebook had 483M monthly active users (Facebook.com) and Youtube had over 800M unique user visitors each month (Youtube.com).

on large scale disaster response (Wajs-Chaczko, 2008, American Red Cross, 2011, Yates and Paquette, 2011). In the field of education, the only work we have located which has looked at social media in relation to crisis examined US public school districts (Gainey, 2010) and consequently our study addresses a gap in the literature. Finally, our in-depth case study makes a valuable contribution to enhancing good BC practice in UK higher education and university resilience to the impact of threats and disruption to its critical activities.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section we set out the conceptual framework for the study drawing upon business continuity perspectives, crisis communications and stakeholder theory. Following this, we outline the research methods employed for gathering our empirical data before presenting and evaluating our findings. We conclude by highlighting strengths and limitations in the communications of institutional incident response before making recommendations for good practice and future research directions.

2. Business continuity

Early approaches to BC focussed upon disruption to information systems, however over recent years the remit of continuity management has been perceived to be more broad (Elliott et al., 2010, Hiles, 2011). This broader remit is reflected in the current International Standard which defines BC as

> [A] "holistic management process that identifies potential threats to an organisation and the impacts to business operations those threats, if realised, might cause, and which provides a framework for building organisational resilience with the

> capability for an effective response that safeguards the interests of its key stakeholders, reputation, brand and value-creating activities." (ISO 22301, 2012:s3.4)

Whilst BCM is a key strategic tool (Herbane et al., 2004), protecting stakeholders, reputation, brand and value creating activities, it is a concept that senior management often don't understand, engage with or take ownership of (Lindström et al., 2010). Under the Governance Code of Practice and the General Principles of Governance (Committee of University Chairs, 2009) UK Higher Education institutions have a voluntary framework of corporate governance which explicitly emphasises the importance of risk management and stakeholder interests in effective governance structures and practice. So, for example, the General Principles state that

> "HEIs are expected to identify and actively manage risks, having particular regard at governing body level to risks which could threaten the existence of the institution" (Committee of University Chairs, 2009:s2.35)

Whilst universities have increasingly adopted a risk based approach to their management processes (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005, Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001), historically, universities have paid little attention to Business Continuity Management (Beggan, 2011). Some authors argue that employees from a private sector background are more aware of BCM concepts, methodology and terminology than their public sector counterparts (Lindström et al., 2010). This is not to say all private and public sector organizations are actively engaged in BCM whilst universities, alone, are not. In a survey conducted by the UK Chartered Management Institute (Pearson and Woodman, 2012), although 61% of respondents reported that their organizations had BCM in place, this was not

uniform across sectors (private sector 52%, not-for-profit 60%, public sector 73%). It is likely that the high public sector showing reflects regulatory and statutory requirements for BC to which some public bodies are subject (such as the provisions of the Civil Contingencies Act, 2004). Universities themselves are not currently obliged by government to have specific continuity arrangements, with the exception of teaching hospitals attached to universities (in their role as a category 1[2] responder under the civil contingencies legislation).

Substantively, there appears to be consensus within the HE sector regarding BC as a management process even though there is no single, widely cited definition of BC. This is illustrated by the variety of definitions provided by individual institutions, many of which highlight the importance of incident response. For example, the Universities of Warwick and Sheffield respectively refer to BC as:

> "the process of assessing potential risks and developing strategies and procedures for dealing with them, so that the University's core activities and functions can recover as soon as an emergency is under control."
> (http:www.warkwick2.ac.uk/services/gov/emerg-planning)

> "an ongoing process to help the University detect, prevent, minimise and where necessary deal with the impact of incidents or disruptive events."
> (http:www.sheffield.ac.uk/incidents/businesscontinuity)

BC models, such as that set out in ISO 22301 (2012) clearly identify different phases within an integrated management approach of which incident response is a critical stage. The Standard requires the establishment of

[2] Under the legislation, category 1 responders are defined as those organisations at the core of emergency response (e.g. emergency services, local authorities, NHS bodies)

appropriate internal and external communication protocols (s8.4.1) as well as incident response structures and procedures for communication and warning (s8.4.2-3) for effective communications with diverse stakeholders during the incident/disruption. Elliott et al (2010, p.262) place equal emphasis on effective communications as a critical element of BCM and its successful operational management, stressing that the method of communication must be closely aligned with the objectives and substantive nature of the message to relevant stakeholders. Indeed, Smith (2003) offers a view of a unifying perspective on the different elements underpinning BCM and which again explicitly includes 'communications and PR' and which was latterly amended by the British Standards Institute can be seen in figure 1 below.

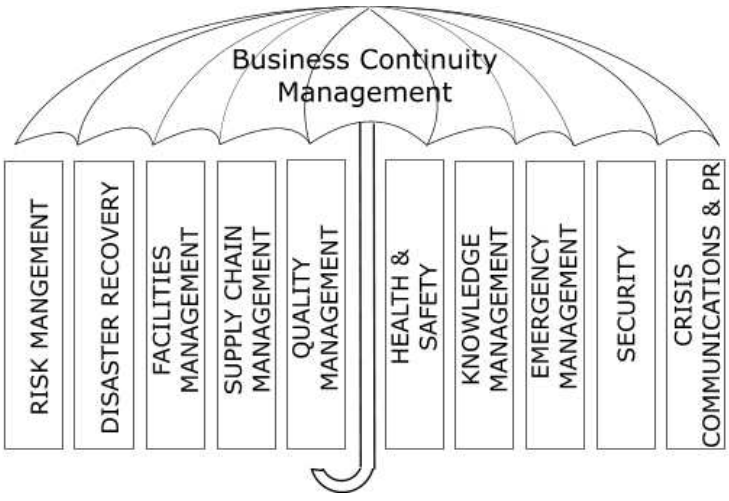

Figure 1: Unifying process for BCM (BSI, PAS 56, 2003)

To date, there is a lack of published guidance on BCM in UK higher education. However, a good practice guide for HEIs, *Planning for and Managing Emergencies* (AUCSO/HEFCE, 2008) has been published. The position adopted in the document identifies emergency planning and BC as

two ‘spheres’ which are distinguishable but complementary processes. It argues that the most common approach within HEIs is to have “one central ‘major incident’ approach” (p.22) and separate BC and emergency planning functions. Nonetheless, as in the holistic BC models outlined above, communication during emergency response – ‘crisis communications’ are seen as critical (p.91-99).

2.1 Stakeholders

It is clear then that there is consensus, irrespective of terminology or focus (i.e. broad based and integrated BC or more narrowly focussed emergency planning), that communication with stakeholders during incident response/emergency response is vital. Disruptions and incidents have the potential to harm organizational stakeholders (Alpaslan et al., 2009) and are increasingly complex and hard to control, complicated by growing numbers of stakeholders (Acquier et al., 2008). Organizations communicate during a crisis in an attempt to maintain their public image and to minimize reputational impact and may aim to inform, convince or motivate specific stakeholders to action (Stephens et al., 2005), both in the short term and longer term. Incidents/disruptions may significantly alter stakeholders’ engagement and salience within an organization (Alpaslan et al., 2009) and may cause particular stakeholders to take ownership of multiple stakes within the crisis (Rowley, 1997), each requiring different responses. For HEIs, students are a direct and critical stakeholder group.

Organizational identity is defined by its interactions and relationships with its stakeholders. To protect brand and reputation, especially during an incident any organization needs to project an image to stakeholders, and adapt this projection according to stakeholder appraisal (Scott and Lane, 2000). Whilst an organization's existence is dependent upon its relationship with stakeholders (Pajunen, 2006), the emphasis it places upon these can vary. By engaging with stakeholders, an organization risks altering the power balance between stakeholders and managers and needs managing carefully (Scott and Lane, 2000). However, it has been argued the explosion of social media has empowered stakeholders to define the organizational agenda (González-Herrero and Smith, 2008). Consequently, whilst this means that it is impossible for an organization to control stakeholder perceptions, there is the opportunity to influence these perceptions. In order to manage reputational impact during an incident, it is important for universities to consider which media they engage with to communicate their message, that that media is appropriate to their target stakeholder group (Schultz et al., 2011) and that their message is consistent within, and across, all stakeholder groups and particularly the student body (Stephens et al., 2005). More recently, it has been suggested that definitions of stakeholders need to be redefined further with the advent of social media (Smith, 2010). Social Networking Sites (SNS) enable an individual to publicly state their stance on any issue meaning that those who previously would not have been considered as stakeholders may potentially be drawn in through these indirect interactions facilitated by social media.

2.2 Communication

Polonsky, Schuppisser and Beldona (2002) note that an organization's relationship with its stakeholders is influenced by multiple factors; relationship orientation, trust, learning, power and reciprocity, commitment and *communication*. Communication is often overlooked as a key variable in relationship management, yet developing a strong relationship and reputation with stakeholders allows the organization to leverage goodwill (Jones et al., 2000) or utilise stakeholders as a resource at a time of disruption (Thiessen and Ingenhoff, 2011). The correct choice of medium for communicating with stakeholders during an incident response can facilitate the leveraging of pre-existing positive stakeholder relationships.

Time pressure is a key variable in incident response (Billings et al., 1980, Pearson and Clair, 1998) and this means that communicating and sharing the right information at the right time (Netten and van Someren, 2011) is paramount. Social media affords significant benefits including faster decision cycles and completeness of information as well as facilitating cross party knowledge sharing and understanding (Yates and Paquette, 2011). With the global expansion of social media, communication from an organization to its audiences is no longer a one-way conversation (González-Herrero and Smith, 2008). The platform offered by sites such as Facebook actively encourages a dialogue between the organization and consumers. Dialogic communication allows users and organizations to engage with each other (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009) and reflects a paradigmatic shift from one way to two-way communication (Taylor and Perry, 2005). However, the reality of one-to-one

communication between a university and its stakeholders must be challenged. As noted by Rowley (1997) firms must respond to the simultaneous demands of multiple stakeholders which may be conflicting (Mitchell et al., 1997). Whilst social media may appear to offer an opportunity for dialogic communication, organizational resource constraints may dictate that it is utilized in a traditional one-to-many manner. Further, there may be disbenefits arising from social media also. Mei, Bansal and Pang (2010) suggest that, rather than being a medium to successfully and quickly manage a crisis situation, social media may actually work as a platform to amplify a local issue into the global eye. Social media enables the general public, and more specifically organizational stakeholders, to share knowledge and understanding of an event, which can both help and hinder responders and journalists. No longer can the crisis responder define the message the public receives, as has been demonstrated in the numerous public uprisings of the Arabic spring or the recent riots in the United Kingdom. These events saw videos uploaded to Youtube and messages to Twitter and Facebook before the traditional media were on the scene.

Social media, particularly in the form of Social Networking Sites (SNS) have become an increasingly popular phenomenon, receiving interest from industry and academics alike (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The most popular networks are Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (Aula, 2010), and social media is starting to move away from an industry ‘buzz-word’ to a recognised strategic tool, receiving increasing support from PR professionals (Eyrich et al., 2008).

The role of social media in crisis communication is an emerging area of research. With the growth of the internet, there is a body of research concerning internet based crisis communication (Perry et al., 2003) but research focussing on the role of social media in particular is only just emerging (see Yates and Paquette, 2011, Schultz et al., 2011).

Web 2.0 technology such as SNS is enabling a greater volume of information to be shared more rapidly amongst a larger range of stakeholders in crisis and disaster situations (Huang et al., 2010). As the prevalence of social media grows this seems to be changing, with communities and external stakeholders becoming a part of the crisis communications response (Veil et al., 2011). Furthermore, it allows news of an incident or disruption to be distributed without the need for mainstream press (Veil et al., 2011), potentially giving rise to the problem of amplification previously discussed. Conversely, engaging with social media organizations can help quash rumours. Despite these emerging debates, as yet, there has been little research into the role of social media in crisis communications and this forms one of the contributions of this research.

3. Research methods and data collection

An exploratory case study approach was utilized for this research project (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) argues that the single, holistic case method is particularly suitable when the concepts underpinning the case study is itself holistic in nature. The previous discussion on business

continuity has highlighted the integrative character of this management approach and consequently there is consonance between the underpinning theory and the methods adopted. Furthermore, business continuity is a developing field of management practice and concomitantly, a relatively novel field of research. Hence a qualitative approach was deemed an appropriate perspective for an exploration of this practice in a U.K. higher education setting. The boundaries and constructs of the area being considered are not yet fixed, for example, through specific defined statutory or regulatory requirements and an exploratory approach allows a deeper understanding of the area. By adopting a qualitative approach, rich contextual data could be gathered that would contribute to a better understanding of current crisis communications practice within higher education business continuity practice, as well as to help frame the issue for future research. There were two strands to the collection of primary data; focus groups to gain insights into student perceptions and behaviours, and semi-structured interviews with university business continuity managers to gain an understanding of current practice in the sector.

Focus groups

Focus group research allowed identification of general trends within the student body, whereas semi-structured interviews enabled understanding of the individual practice of each university leading the crisis communication process. This choice reflects our previous argument regarding the nature of the university-student relationship which is not strictly dyadic per se, but is better characterized as one-to-many with the student population viewed by

the university as a single body with limited differentiation. Focus groups offer potential insights into social norms and beliefs (Bloor et al., 2001) as well as allowing the researcher to obtain a range of ideas and feelings, understand different perspectives, uncover influencing factors and to allow new concepts and ideas to emerge (Krueger and Casey, 2008).

Reflecting the widely acknowledged difficulties in identifying and recruiting focus group members (Bloor et al., 2001, Krueger and Casey, 2009b, Krueger and Casey, 2008) a snowballing technique was utilized by one of the authors to recruit participants. Given the challenges of recruiting focus group members, it was not possible to recruit a critical mass of undergraduate participants and therefore a single category (postgraduate) focus group design was chosen with 3 focus groups conducted each with 6 members, allowing a broad range of ideas to be recorded, whilst also allowing for a natural saturation point for originality to be reached by the end of the third group (Krueger and Casey, 2009a). Each focus group consisted of a combination of questions, group discussion and scenario responses. The scenarios consisted of different types of disruptive event: pandemic flu, weather, and a shooting scenario based upon the Virginia Tech mass shooting case (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). These scenarios were selected to reflect varying levels of severity and time criticality. All focus groups were both audio and video recorded to ensure all contextual data was gathered. Following the completion of all focus groups, the data were analysed using summaries of the content of discussion and researchers notes to draw out key concepts and points of interest (Flick, 2002). The data were

also scrutinised in conjunction with data gathered from the business continuity practitioners.

Interviews

Potential interviewees were identified through their membership of the U.K. Higher Education Business Continuity Network (HEBCoN). Both authors conducted interviews which took place either face-to-face, or by telephone, with 12 participants. Participants came from across the UK and from both 'new' (largely teaching focus) and 'old' (research and teaching focus) universities. In-depth interviews were conducted ranging in length from one and a half hours to over three hours; longer interviews took place over two occasions. The interviews were semi-structured allowing a greater flexibility than structured interviews, giving the interviewee the opportunity to develop ideas and expand on issues raised by the interviewer; and the interviewer the chance to 'probe' interviewee responses as appropriate (King, 2004a, Denscombe, 2007). These interviews focussed upon business continuity practice, with the broad structure of the interview schedule oriented around the BCM lifecycle set out in the British Standard. However, given the stated focus of this paper, interview data relating specifically to the 'Developing and implementing a BCM response' section of the lifecycle, together with a further section of the interview devoted explicitly to social media, are drawn upon primarily in these initial findings.

A pilot interview was conducted by the two authors together, face-to-face with a BC manager. This allowed further refining of the interview schedule. Although participants were offered the option of face-to-face interview, the

majority of interviews (10) were completed by telephone. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed prior to template analysis (King, 2004b).

4. Findings and discussion

Data gathered from interviews with practitioners and the student focus groups can be considered across the themes previously discussed: the nature of BCM in UK universities, stakeholders and communication processes.

4.1 Business continuity management in universities

Based upon the sample of practitioners interviewed (12 out of a total population of 115 UK universities), those with responsibility for BC tended to be relatively new in role ranging from as a little as 12 months to around 5 years. This tended to reflect the fact that the creation of formal positions with specific BC responsibilities were themselves relatively new, rather than job 'churn'. This accords with Beggan's (2011) assertion that historically universities have paid little attention to BCM. The time practitioners dedicated to BCM activity was widely variable, with only one university out of the sample dedicating a full time post to BCM. Others split their role between risk management and BCM, with one practitioner spending roughly half a day a week on BCM planning and activity. Again, this would seem to indicate that BCM, whilst acknowledged as important by the institution, is a function which operates within significant resource constraints. Whilst confident of senior management support, by and large, a number of interviewees did allude to a lack of budget for the BCM function.

Inconsistency in the terminology adopted by institutions emerged in discussion with practitioners. Both the British Standard and HEBCoN (based on the Business Continuity Institute's recommendations) provide specific terminology for different aspects of business continuity activity, thereby seeking to ensure consistency in application. However, in practice, terminology varied between HEIs. By and large, the term 'crisis' was avoided due to its perceived negative connotations. More widely used was the term 'incident' and this may reflect the established 'major incident plan' approach traditional with HEIs (AUCSO/HEFCE, 2008).

When considering terminology one practitioner noted ironically,

> "I cannot talk about Business Continuity. If I talk about Business Continuity I've immediately lost all the academics because we only turn over 600 million quid a year and therefore we're not a business**."**

Another commented,

> "the word business in business continuity – you know some people it rattles them…people that don't see this [the university] as a business and making reference to it as a business seems to offend them."

These comments starkly illustrate current tensions in a sector that is being driven towards ever greater marketization (Brown, 2011, Shattock, 2010, Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2005) and consumerization (Williams, 2011, Molesworth et al., 2011). Whilst government policy and changes in institutional governance drive HEIs towards a more business oriented outlook, not all internal institutional stakeholders share, or necessarily feel it appropriate to engage with that paradigm shift. This could

well serve to perpetuate an emergency planning approach to organizational disruption, rather than a more holistic BC strategy.

4.2 Stakeholders

Multiple factors were identified by practitioners as drivers for developing BCM at their institution. Despite much of the early work in the area being IT related (CCTA, 1995, Elliott et al., 2010, Herbane, 2010) only one institution noted this as the main driver. This may be because universities have well established information systems structures which actively engage with this part of the institutional domain. Evidence of that can be seen in the form of a recent project into the cost and prevention of IT failures (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association, 2011). Other interviewees recognized the importance of IT to the university, but cited influences such as reputational impact, stakeholder expectation, corporate responsibility, the corporate risk register, previous incidents and “because the university genuinely cares about the welfare of its staff and stakeholders” as key drivers. One might argue that these observations indicate the impact that stakeholders can have in influencing the organizational agenda (González-Herrero and Smith, 2008) as well as an institutional awareness of the requirement to meet the expectations of a range of different stakeholders (Pajunen, 2006).

Universities defined stakeholders broadly (Freeman, 1984), rather than narrowly, and variously as “anybody with a vested interest in the university” and “almost anybody and everybody to be honest” with some noting that they could change according to the incident (Alpaslan et al., 2009). Despite

practitioner literature and academic texts emphasizing the importance of identifying and prioritizing stakeholders, allowing the organization some degree of influence upon which stakeholders become engaged with a crisis (Acquier et al., 2008), only some institutions in the sample stated that they had done so. Instead most reflected what seemed a more complacent attitude to the issue, encapsulated by the view of one interviewee who when asked about stakeholders stated, “Oh, I think we know who they are.”

Prioritization of stakeholders in terms of communication in times of incident response tended to be described in broad terms, rather than as part of a wider continuity planning process, with practitioners suggesting that it would be almost impossible to do this in advance of the situation.

> “It would depend on the incident... Because, some of those people might not need to be communicated with, some of them might need a lot of communication, and there’s different types of communication depending on which group you’re talking about.”

With higher fees for English undergraduate students from 2012, interviewees had mixed expectations as to the potential impact upon BCM. Many viewed this primarily from a financial perspective, for example, suggesting institutional budgets would be squeezed. However, they also anticipated that students would become more demanding, and unlikely to put up with disruption for as long as they might have done in the past. There seemed to be little doubt in practitioners’ minds of the reality of the consumerization of education in terms of elevated student expectations and that this would continue define the institutional agenda (González-Herrero and Smith, 2008). Nonetheless, whilst most institutions are receiving increasing requests for BCM plans from

stakeholders such as research bodies and commercial partners, none had experienced requests from students or their families regarding business continuity preparedness.

Many institutions reported increasing interest in their BCM plans from stakeholders, such as research councils. The position adopted by research councils was articulated by one practitioner as follows.

> "...if you can demonstrate to us that you have taken reasonable precautions to protect what you do and continue if you lose facilities, then actually we will probably help you in the recovery. If we feel you've been negligent protecting our investment then best you look out"

As shown previously, research councils are responsible for a significant proportion of university income. However, this funding also directly contributes to a university's ability to generate high calibre research which is frequently a component of institutional brand and reputation for many universities, and particularly 'old' universities.

4.3 Communications

Universities utilized a range of communications in a crisis situation with one BC practitioner describing their institutional crisis communications as follows

> "...it tends to...start by email, because it's quick, easy way to get information out to everybody and usually it will refer to a web link as well to give them more information...We do use social media...We've now set up a free phone number...we've got provisions to put up posters...We're looking at having communications ambassadors...and obviously we've got media as well."

However, there was a stronger trend for institutions to be more measured, and less diverse, in their approach, preferring email, and face-to-face

communications. They were less inclined to engage in such a broad approach because as one practitioner put it,

> "We need to be absolutely sure that whatever we use will work and it will need to have proved itself as a means of communicating routinely with students."

Two institutions cited text messaging as their primary crisis communication method. However, this is not without its difficulties, a number of institutions noted problems maintaining up to date student mobile numbers.

> "But the problem with students you know, bless their cotton socks, is they have more money than me as they change their phones so often."

A novel solution taken by one university was to try to capture numbers in the immediate aftermath of the incident, via an initial announcement on the university website.

It was clear from the interviews with BC managers that the primary communication channels utilized in incident response were predominantly web-based, including email and website announcements which segues with findings in other sectors (Taylor and Kent, 2007, Taylor and Perry, 2005). In the student focus groups, these proved to be the most preferred also. Non-digital alternatives, including the use of posters and individuals with loud hailers were available in some institutions and many universities had, or were, investing in text message capabilities and social media presences. Some institutions were concerned with the immediacy of some of these forms, with one interviewee opining

> "I believe that incidents require...a carefully considered response. They don't require an instantaneous kneejerk reaction."

The vast majority of universities interviewed had the capability or already actively sent out messages via social media, with Facebook pages, Twitter profiles and even Youtube channels. As one interviewee put it

> "...we use Facebook and Twitter. Facebook particularly for communicating with students works really well, because quite a lot of them are on it, quite a lot of them are on it a lot of the time."

All practitioners recognised multiple issues with communicating via social media, including reliability, getting students to 'follow' the institution, proving the messages posted on the site were genuine, and the potential unnecessary escalation of an incident. The latter was a particular source of disquiet mirroring the arguments presented by Mei and his colleagues (2010).

The BC practitioners were aware of the importance of Facebook to students but sensitive to the appropriateness, and potential for success of, deep engagement by university authorities with students using the medium. One interviewee highlighted this issue as a potential reason for students not actively engaging with the university on Facebook.

> "It's like mum and dad trying to...come to a club and go dancing with our mates... They probably think yeah, they might be able to do that, but actually that's a bit sad and a bit embarrassing and I think maybe that's why they don't trust it because they just think "Well, universities just don't do that.""

Whilst Bortree and Seltzer (2009) suggest that social media enables a two-way conversation between the organization and its users, most HEIs only

used social media to send messages or to gather information via social media monitoring if at all. Whilst this may allow a large volume of intelligence to be gathered, it fails to capture and develop understanding between the organization and its stakeholders to deliver a more coordinated community response (Jaeger et al., 2007). One BC manager said of social media as a medium for communication

> "... it would only be for sending out information... In terms of during an incident...we would be looking for our own teams to be supplying the information."

Moreover, fears were expressed over their ability to magnify a problem, and the lack of ability to control the message, again echoing Mei, Bansal and Pang (2010)'s concerns. Another practitioner commented,

> "The whole world would know and we would raise alarm amongst all the parents of our students. The dilemma is that probably somebody within the university will be tweeting on their own Twitter account saying "Hey, do you know what's going on here?""

Universities that engaged in social media recognised that information would make its way into the public domain anyway, so failure to engage in social media meant they would lose further control of the message. However, none recognized it as a means to quash rumours as suggested by Shankar (2008). Only one institution explicitly recognized the ability of social networks to disseminate important information quickly,

> "...the fact is you only need to access 10% of them and important messages will spread really quickly. Students tend not to be on their own, sometimes they are, but if you contact a group they will purposely spread that message on to their department and on to everybody else."

It is interesting to compare the wariness or reluctance to engage with web 2.0 technologies in BC by practitioners with the extensive take-up of such tools in university teaching. The rate of adoption of these technologies in learning and teaching is such that e-learning is seen as one part of a blended learning student experience in higher education (Ellis et al., 2006) as is evidenced by take-up of institution wide technologies such as virtual learning environments (Browne et al., 2008). Whilst it has been argued that cost-effectiveness is a key driver in the introduction and use of e-learning in universities and that their use is not without problems and sustainability (Stepanyan et al., 2013), nonetheless it is clear that there is a significant difference in the adoption of web 2.0 technologies, such as social media, between the academic/pedagogical and operational/managerial parts of UK universities.

From the student perspective

While all focus group participants owned a phone, only five had a smart phone (28%). A recent study by the home university found that 56% of students had a smart phone, compared with the national average of 35% (CiCS, 2011). This may indicate a difference in technological behaviour, and/or disposable income between undergraduate and postgraduate students. When asked to list ways in which they communicate, students had a strong preference for digital communications, with social media and web 2.0 technology featuring heavily. Membership of Facebook was uniform, though far less for Twitter, with only two focus group members subscribing to it.

The members of one focus group were all international students and suggested their use of social media had increased as a result of coming to study abroad.

> "We are all internationals, so I use a lot of digital, when I go home it will be less"
>
> and
>
> "I never even used Facebook before I came here. I had my Facebook account but I never used it."

Comparing communication method with audience, social media was predominantly used to engage with friends and family, never with the university and only to a limited degree with colleagues at work. Instead there was a preference for more established forms of communication with the university, favouring face-to-face contact, letters and email.

Students were not unanimous in their support for text messaging as the primary means of communication by the institution. Two of the focus groups were in favour of email or website announcements when offered a text message announcement as an alternative. Text messaging was only preferred when the message was urgent, for example an imminent lecture cancellation, or a shooting on campus.

> "That one's severe enough that you should get a text. Because they've got your number I think, and if they don't they should."

Urgency and severity of the situation seemed to influence student communication preferences. So, for example, when asked to consider how they would want to be contacted in a Virginia Tech type scenario, one respondent declared:

> "You'd have just thought they would have rung all the porters and got the porters to tell all the staff. I mean email is just an insane way of doing it, most people just don't have smart phones."

In the Virginia Tech scenario responses, all of the focus groups felt that the best response was for the university to contact porters in each building who should then inform lecture theatres in person. In contrast, only one of the institutions interviewed explicitly mentioned building managers having a role in their response teams. As a note of caution, the preference stated by the focus group students may not reflect the opinions of students at all institutions. So, for example one practitioner interviewed recalled their student offspring's opinion on receiving messages from the university:

> "...his university contacts him through text messages...he absolutely loves it 'Look how well organized my university is. Look how much they care for us. They've sent me a message to tell me that it's snowy, but the campus is open'."

In the absence of time criticality, that is, when there was greater time to act on the information provided by the institution, all focus group members were supportive of receiving emails in the scenario regarding snow related disruption.

> "I would expect an announcement before I would even have to ask, I would expect this announcement through email"
>
> and
>
> "Would you not think email before text message, because it's the day before? If it was the morning, then it's a bit more urgent"

The student perspectives which emerged through the focus groups accord with Netten and van Someren's (2011) argument that sharing the right information at the right time is key. Institutions need to give careful

consideration to the communication methods most appropriate for allowing the right information to be given out in the most appropriate time frame. Whilst Thiessen and Ingenhoff (2011) suggest that strong communication will enable organizations to leverage stakeholders in a positive fashion, universities showed a lack of willingness to engage students in crisis response, demonstrating a lack of trust, necessary for social capital to form (Zheng, 2010). As one student participant argued, “The university has to believe in them [the students]”. However, institutions appear reluctant to formally harness the capabilities of student’s social networks, citing factors such as student churn and reliability as reasons not to engage too directly with students in a crisis situation.

5. Conclusions

This paper has presented some preliminary findings from an ongoing project on BCM in UK universities. Specifically, it represents an initial attempt to understand the role that social media could take for crisis communications between a university and its student body. It is novel in its scope, seeking to map current BCM practice within UK universities and to develop a picture of students’ preferences for mode of communication for receiving messages during a crisis at their university, whilst attempting to gauge whether social media will enable universities to develop a more meaningful relationship with students.

Current BCM practice varied between institutions, with no two taking the same approach. To suggest best practice is challenging and risks falling into the “Is-

ought" fallacy (Siponen, 2003). The data showed that BCM is still relatively new practice within universities, but is strongly supported by senior management, a key contributor to programme success. A key area for BC practitioner engagement lies with understanding their organizational stakeholders. There is scope for a deeper consideration of stakeholders, who they are, what their 'stake' in the organisation might be, was and how to prioritize crisis communication response. It is clear that stakeholders can influence the HEI's agenda (González-Herrero and Smith, 2008) and good relationships with stakeholders can be utilised to the organisations benefit (Thiessen and Ingenhoff, 2011), therefore it seems accurate to argue that a meaningful understanding of stakeholders, and particularly the student body, is key to organizational sustainability.

With higher fee levels for UK undergraduates from 2012 (BIS, 2011), increasing competition (Adcroft et al., 2010) and universities ever more reliant on brand and reputation to attract income, developing a trusting relationship with students which can be leveraged to the organization's benefit during a crisis could be a point of significant competitive advantage for a university. At present, the evidence suggests that universities have not effectively engaged with this potential.

Universities used a range of communication modes, and tended to favour adding new methods to their arsenal rather than targeting a select few in the belief that this would capture the largest number of students. In contrast, data from students indicated a strong preference for email and web-site

communications, and face to face interaction in an extreme situation. As urgency was factored into scenarios, it became apparent that students felt that text messaging was an important mode to receive communications, yet only three institutions had this capability at present. More surprisingly, social media was less popular with students than web-site announcements and text messages for communication.

Institutions have not yet harnessed the potential of social media, seeing it solely as a message sending or information gathering facility. By engaging with social media universities could use this medium to develop a relationship with their stakeholders, quash rumours and maintain channels of communication when other networks are down (Valenzuela et al., 2009). However, this requires adequate resource at a time when universities are under significant financial pressure. Students though, did not want to engage with their institution via social media, stating that it was for interaction with friends, not the university, meaning universities will have to investigate possibilities to encourage student engagement on social media.

At present, universities are not in a position to utilise social media to develop social capital with their stakeholders to leverage during a crisis. They do not appear to be actively engaging in building relationships with their student body on social media, but neither do students appear to be interested in developing a relationship with the university on this platform. There also seems to be a reluctance to formally harness capabilities within social networks either online, or offline, which will not enable a trusting relationship to be built with

stakeholders at present. The potential for this capability to be realised is there, and future research is required to understand how this could be encouraged and developed.

Although social media seemed to offer an immediacy of contact for the university, at a low cost, to a large number of students, this study showed that it is not yet in a position to play a pivotal role in crisis communication; rather it offers an additional tool for the BCM manager's armoury. The traditional forms of communication, web-site announcements, email and face to face were preferred by students and still form the back bone of universities current practice. It seems that if urgent communication is required, the future lies in developing text messaging capabilities, not social media. However, given the focus of this exploratory case study, future research, drawing upon data gathered from undergraduate and postgraduate populations across a range of HEIs is needed to investigate this further.

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