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SocCHAT: AN OPEN LOCALIZED SOCIAL NETWORK FOR DIGITAL MARKETING, VIRTUAL NETWORKING AND MENTORSHIP IN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Social Networks have become the best tools for digital marketing. Careers have been developed, enabling public and private institutions to tap into the growing number of social media users. The government has also created institutional accounts in major social platforms to engage with citizens for effective service delivery and real time feedback. This study showed that universities can deploy an open social network for digital marketing, virtual networking and mentorship and have complete control over it, develop its on terms of service, statement of rights and responsibilities, as well as privacy policy. This would help disseminate information better than notice-boards, and obtain feedback in real time to save paper. The open social network discussed is the Humhub, so far deployed and tested. It offers rich features that would ensure continuous traffic to the university website which is usually low since clients rarely visit their own websites. SocChat offers mentorship features for instilling self-confidence, motivation and passion that cannot be taught in lecture rooms. It inherits security features offered by Yii Framework from which it has been developed using the PHP scripting language.

Keywords: Google App Engine, Humhub, Real-time, Localized, Traffic, Security

INTRODUCTION

Each and every business organization relies on effective and efficient marketing tools to capture the attention of potential clients, hence drive a steady increase in the sale of goods and services. It is no doubt that young universities in Kenya have a critical mission of forwarding their development agenda as evident in their aggressive marketing of their programs on television, radio and print media. It would be quite prudent for any university administrator to defend this strategy by saying they are targeting the parents of the potential students who would eventually be forking out the fees every semester. However, it is the student himself or herself who needs to be well informed of the programs offered by the university beyond

just the program titles, minimum entry requirements, mode of study, number of semesters and the fees to be paid per semester. In a study, it was concluded that most students end up taking the program that their parents require of them or that is economical to the parent's college budget. This resulted in universities having disillusioned students who have little or no motivation whatsoever to enroll for the courses suggested by their parents or guardians. The student needs to understand what the 'desired' program entails before he/she can comfortably come to a conclusion that is undoubtedly the desired program. To achieve this, universities can complement the conventional marketing strategies in place today with digital marketing tools that can transform the way university programs are advertised to potential clients who are the students themselves. Digital marketing has been proven to help students make more informed decisions on the courses they would wish to undertake as social media is the in thing for youths all over the world today.

With a localized social network, universities have the power of content creation and removal as well as developing a social network that is in tune with the university's mission, vision, philosophy and policies. Having users on this network can be a burden if the university does not formulate a policy for it. The formulation process would require a representation of the potential users (students, lectures and administrative staff). The initial users to drive the social network would be current students, lecturers from various departments and a handful of administrative staff members each with their own role in the initial testing of the social network. This would require steady and continuous activity on this digital platform as there is on established social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp.

It is important to note that the localized social network is not a replacement of these networks but rather a complement. One would argue, why come up with a localized social network while with Facebook and Twitter you can do the same and target even more clients from the millions of users globally? While this is true, you will realize that potential students who are most likely to join a certain university will nine out of ten times visit the university's website. The website may have bold links to their Facebook and Twitter accounts where prospective clients are promised real-time feedback on their enquiries. This still begs a question, why would a prospective client visit the heart of your business then be turned away to another venue for more personalized information.

Universities can tap into the online presence offered by their website to create a tool (localized social network) that would engage their clients to a point of satisfaction from the point they search the university on the internet and the one-stop shop website comes up first. The potential benefits of a localized social network (SocChat which is short for Social Chat) are not limited to digital marketing and bringing in students alone. SocChat also offer immense benefits to already enrolled students through virtual networking. The platform offers students a chance to meet their lecturers, faculty heads and even the university management in a manner that is more effective from the conventional bureaucratic way of booking appointments and checking in week after week whether you can settle in for the appointment which may actually be long overdue. For lecturers and administrators am sure it would be satisfying to see all the mentions being of a positive nature as a result of timely feedback and effective referrals for issues beyond one's jurisdiction. This sense of satisfaction would result in more motivation and a sense of worth to the institution of higher learning.

Motivation

Various needs necessitated the development of this paper as detailed below:

1. The Need for Information

This need is basic irrespective of the area of specialization and to all stakeholders be it parents, students and all levels of university management. Parents need to know how much it would cost to take their children through university education. The student needs to make a decision that would define their careers probably for the rest of their lives. As if this is not fundamental enough, a study shows 20% of students in Kenya enroll for courses that they would later on drop out of as they do not fit their interests. The university management need to make projections of the budget before the start of every financial year at the strategic

level. Universities at the departmental level need to predict the course units they would have to teach and allocate lecturers the same. This information if not relayed in certainty at an administrative level would cause delays and inconveniences to both the students and lecturers themselves.

2. The Need for Guidance

Guidance in this case is polymorphic. From academic, spiritual, social, economic up until guidance on maintaining healthy relationships. Although university stakeholders plan on activities aimed at guidance, these are usually seen as one-time events that come and go yet guidance should be available on a daily basis. Students usually feel uncomfortable visiting the student counsellor's office in person but would be willing to speak to him/her at their point of need. A social network platform such as SocChat can facilitate an on-demand consultation on various issues affecting the students and have them guided accordingly for the greater good of academic success. Lecturers are also a crucial piece in the puzzle of guidance. Some students may be unable to approach the lecturer in person after class due to issues such as self-esteem or just the fear of being turned down. With such a platform, these kinds of students can even gain the courage to post the question on the wall of the lecturer concerned.

3. The Need for Socialization

What better way to understand introvert and the silent students in class than through a platform where they are free to express themselves? Not only is the platform better suited for them to talk their hearts out but it also helps them vent off pressures and ultimately reduce suicidal tendencies among the students. As students, lecturers and administrative staff socialize on this platform in a semi-formal manner, the management is better able to understand the immediate needs of the university community as well as what needs to be changed or implemented to avert the negative effects of strikes as they disrupt the academic calendar.

4. The Need For Mentorship

Students are usually faced with the burden of who to look up to. With most having their parents far in space and distance and being disconnected from the teachers they had been fond of back in high school, students usually find it hard to choose a role model who would mentor them through their four years in pursuit of academic success. This results in most students giving in to peer pressure and getting misled to early pregnancy, drugs and eventually deferring their studies or dropping out of university.

5. The Need for Continuity and Support

The alumni are an important organ in academic institutions. It is from these organs that students can acquire role models, the university can acquire technical and financial support for its projects and provides an opportunity for the former students to give back to the institution that was key to which they are today. Most universities that grow exponentially have a thriving alumnus that is alive and active in providing this essential need of continuity and support.

6. The Need For Relevance and Fame

There are those students who are loud and would be ready to get a chance to show they are famous and to remain relevant. A social platform such as SocChat can allow them to acquire as many followers as the student population and even make them think of vying for positions in the student's association. It is also the responsibility of the management to look out for these kinds of students as they can easily influence a large number of students either to a positive or negative cause.

7. The Need for Convenience

Gone are the days when you have to move around the noticeboards located across the university pinning notices on events, timetables and conferences. A platform such as SocChat allows you to post a scanned copy of your notice on a platform that you are sure is accessed by a significant number of students and allowing them to read the notice at the convenience of their rooms. This is also a convenient and cost-

effective method as one is sure that the platform is considered a trust-worthy source and students can be informed in real-time.

SYSTEM DESIGN

The system is based on an open source social platform known as HumHub which is based on the widely used Yii Framework. The following steps show you the process of setting up the network on any domain and as suggested it would be better suited to be hosted on a subdomain on the university's main domain.

SocChat Social Network – A Secure Social Network

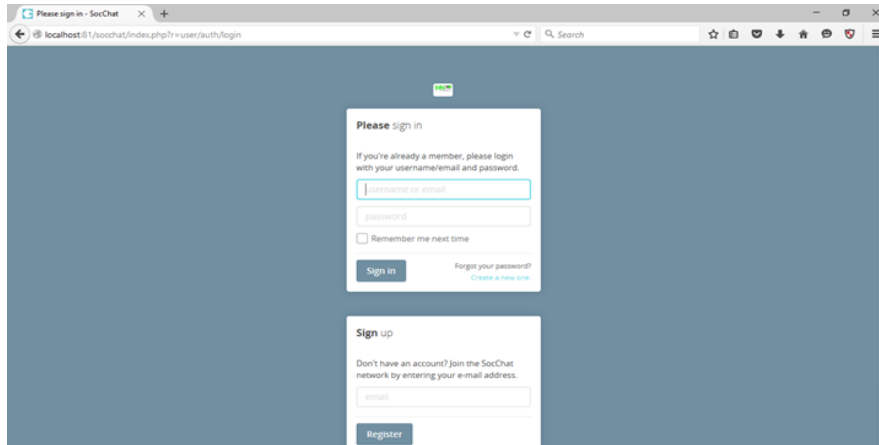


Figure 1(a): An instance of the SocChat Social Network login screen

The system is developed under the Yii framework which employs the Model-View-Controller framework that encapsulates web objects and password hashing. Figure 1(a) shows the login page for a locally set up SocChat site. It is also on this screen that you can provide your email address to register for the site. Once you provide your email address, a registration link is sent to your email (this requires that the administrator has set up the SMTP mailing setting for the domain on which the SocChat Network has been set up) and allows you to register to enter the site. On clicking on the link, the user will be required to provide the following details: First name, Last name, username, Password, Confirm Password (basically repeating the password provided in the password field). On successful registration, the user is directed to login to the system on the initial screen that they signed up from.

The System Administrator may alternatively register users manually on the system by clicking on the Administration Panel and selecting the users as shown in Figure 1(b) below. The same details entered by the user when he/she is provided with a registration link via email will be entered by the administrator who will in turn inform the user of his/her login credentials into the network. System administrators may also activate an option on the network to require them to confirm users even after they have successfully registered and logged in to the system. This is usually a good control measure to ensure that only authorized users can have full access to the social network but it may also be restrictive if it is a public social network that is projected to have a large number of users. Once a user has successfully logged in the system loads the dashboard which provides a user with the latest posts made by other users on the network. This allows one to catch up on any posts made in the spaces that he/she is a member of.

SocChat Spaces

SocChat Social network allows members to create both private and public spaces by default. Public spaces are visible to all members of the network. Spaces can be joined through invite only, invite and request or where everyone can enter that space. Private spaces can be created by a member to invite other members to work on a specific project or to discuss a sensitive matter in camera. The system administrator can set restrictions on which spaces the users can be a member of or even disallow members from creating private

spaces. Figure 1(c) below shows a popup screen for creating a space on the SocChat social network.

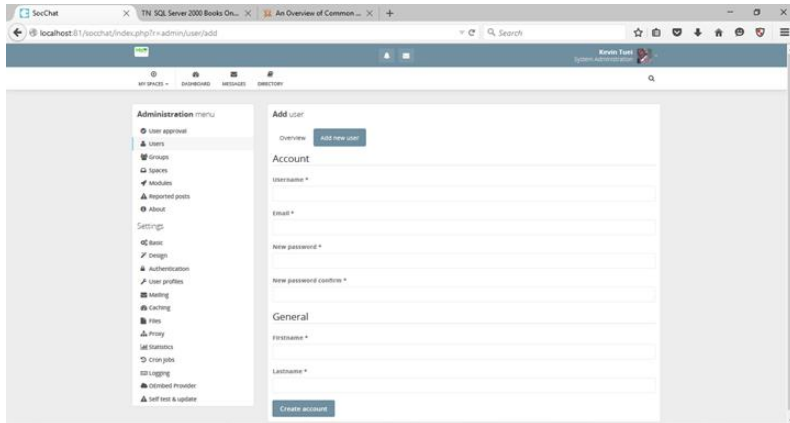


Figure 1 (b): Manually registering a user through the Administration Panel

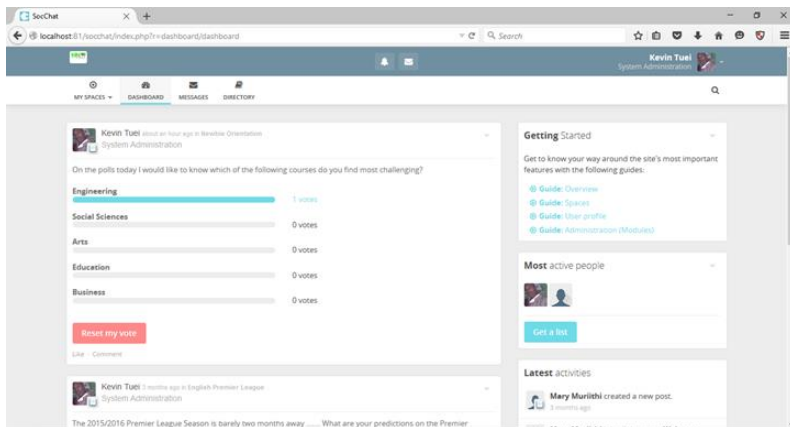


Figure 1(c): A pop-up screen showing how to create a private/public space on SocChat

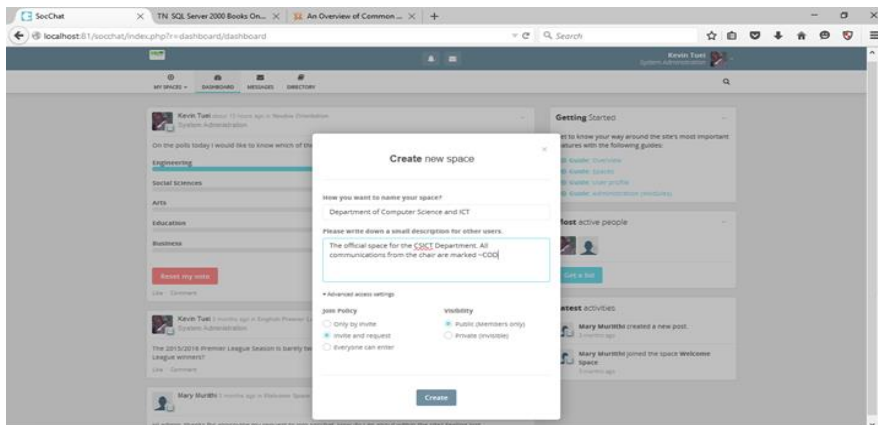
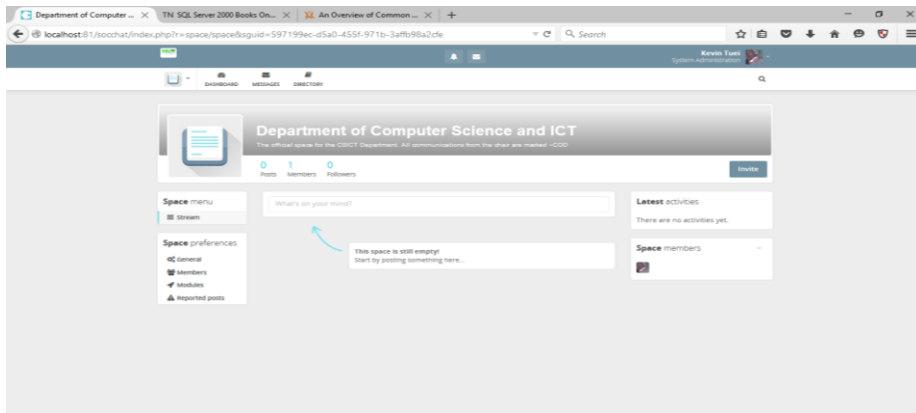


Figure 1(d): A page showing the Department Space after being created as Public, Invite and Request



SocChat Modules

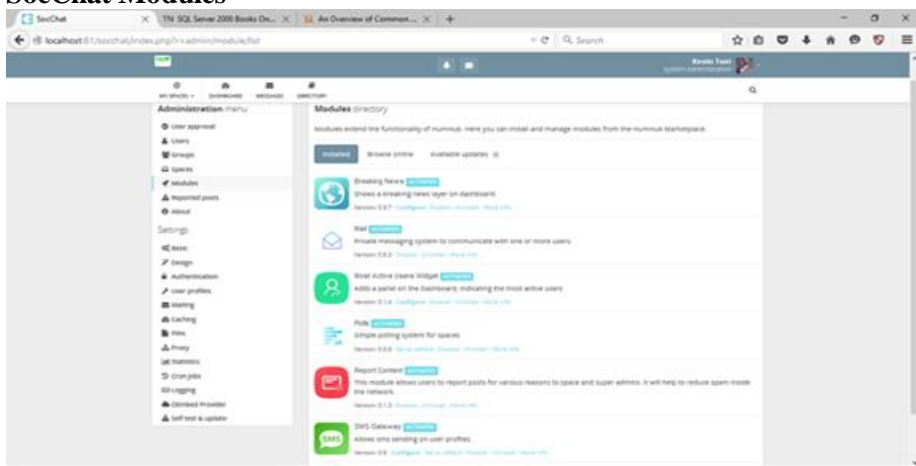


Figure 1(e): SocChat Modules Directory

The HumHub network which provides the framework to create multiple SocChat instances also provides a wide range of modules that an administrator can download on to the network and activate. Modules provide additional functionalities to the network to complement the basic functionality of the network which is to register members and allow them to create and join spaces. Figure 1 (e) shows the modules that have been downloaded and activated on this instance of the SocChat social network.

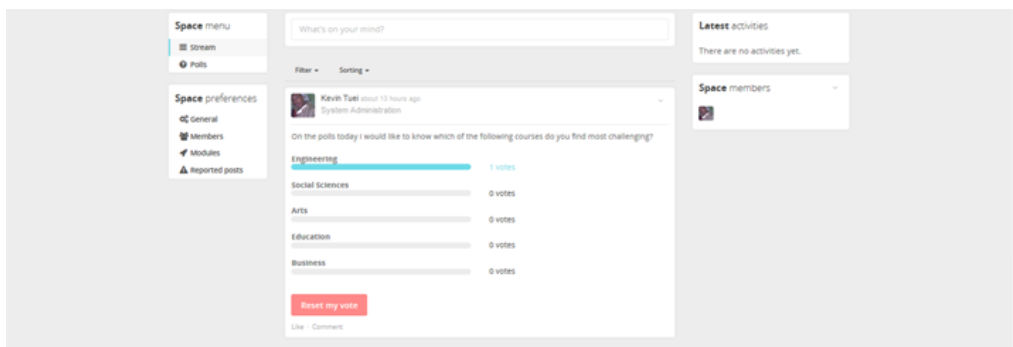


Figure 1(f): Polls Module being used to create a survey

Popular modules that are usually downloaded include: The Most Active Users Widget which adds a panel on the dashboard indicating the most active users on the network, Polls which allows users to do surveys on the spaces that they are a member of. Figure 1(f) shows the Polls Module at work.

Setting up the SocChat Network on socchat.net

After getting the look and feel of the SocChat network, it is important to know how to successfully setup the network in order to make it ready for use by members. The steps that are shown below have been formulated in an easy to understand manner and are devoid of technical details to ensure that a person with a non-IT background can easily set up the network without any additional help.

The following subsections show how easy it is to set up your own social network on a chosen domain or on a server in a local intranet.

Step 1: Download the HumHub Framework

Download the HumHub framework from the official site [2]. Once you have downloaded the zip file of the network you need to make the following considerations. If you are going to deploy the SocChat Network on a local computer for intranet use you would need to extract the zipped file onto the htdocs or www folder of the server running on the local computer on which you are setting it up. If you are going to deploy the HumHub on a domain that supports paid hosting, log in to Cpanel, load the file manager with the Web Root as the directory and upload then extract the zipped file. Once you do so you can now begin the process of setting up the SocChat network.

Step 2: Use the Humhub Framework Wizard to complete the setup.

Once you extract the zipped file, all you need to do to load the wizard is to enter the URL of the domain on which the HumHub was uploaded.

2 a. HumHub Wizard Walkthrough

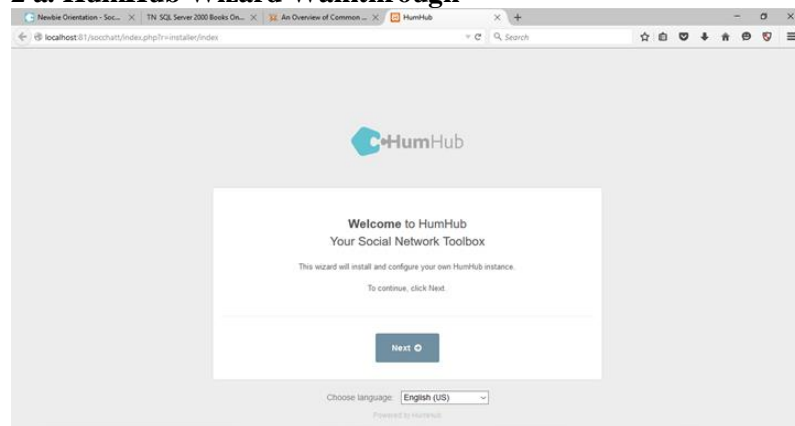


Figure 2 (a): The first screen that shows once you load the HumHub wizard

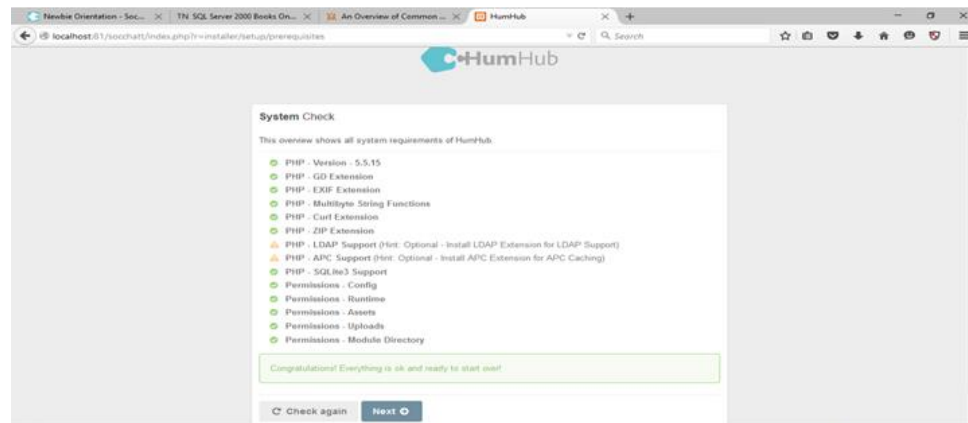


Figure 2(b): Once you click next, the wizard performs a system check

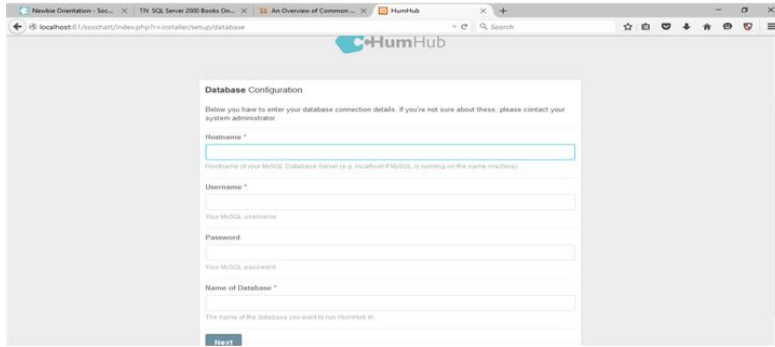


Figure 2(c): Humhub Wizard Walkthrough: Database Configuration Step. This step allows you to setup the database name as well as provide the username and password for the database server.

Once you provide the details, the server may take a while to prepare the database for the network.

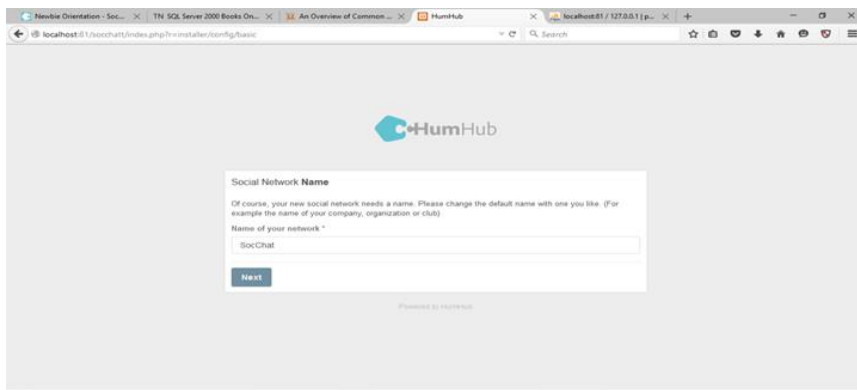


Figure 2 (d): HumHub Wizard Walkthrough: After successful database configuration one provides the name that will be used to identify the social network

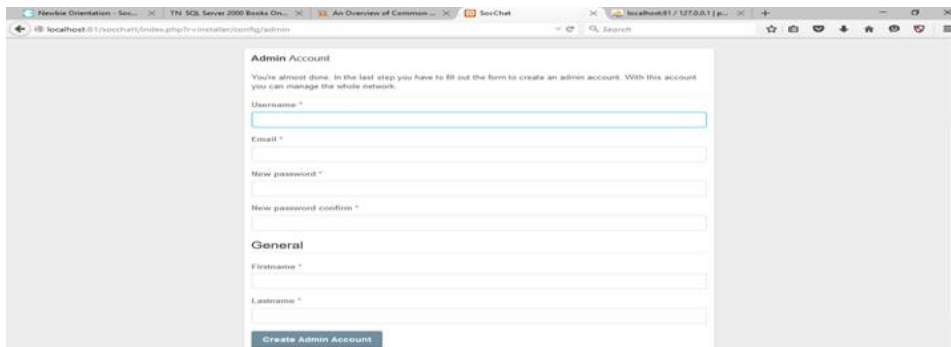
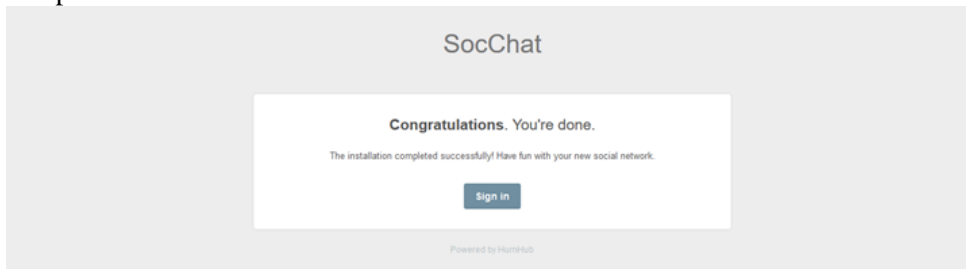


Figure 2(e): Humhub Wizard Walkthrough: Admin Account Setup. Below shows the successful setup completion



CONCLUSION

Finally, the paper has explained the need of an open social network that would ease the need for various stakeholder of the university to engage with its students in a semi-formal manner. The various needs for the social network show that a successful deployment of the SocChat social network can bridge the gap on mentorship, virtual networking and digital marketing. Mentorship and virtual networking are fundamental in catalyzing the internal growth of the university especially on the academic front. If such a social network's instances are deployed in various universities and maintained well by the Webmasters and System Administrators, the disconnect that is usually felt between various stakeholders in the university would be a thing of the past. Students would feel a sense of belonging to their institutions and would go on to support it beyond the completion of academic programs as alumni.

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