

USING SYNCHRONOUS E-LEARNING TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATION WITH OFFSHORE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper reports upon international offshore students' experiences using *Elluminate Live!* to participate in virtual office hours (VOH) with their Australian unit coordinators. Information on student experience was collected from a combination of reflective data entered into a critical reflective journal and discussions from student focus groups. The participants in this research offered their thoughts regarding the use of VOH and the impact it had on promoting a culturally inclusive academic environment.

Introduction

Universities have a commitment to provide all students regardless of geographic location, culture or level of knowledge an equal, supportive and fair environment. At times geographic location can cloud our judgement of this commitment. Australia is one of the world's major exporters of education (Harman, 2004) and as Australian universities continue to expand their international profiles through offshore programs, the momentum towards communication and inclusiveness in higher education is growing.

The upsurge in international students studying overseas with Australian providers (Heffernan & Poole, 2004) has prompted Victoria University (VU) Australia, to establish a mission to "engage effectively with local and international communities". From 2008 to 2011, the School of Accounting and Finance (SoAF) witnessed a 51% increase in offshore international enrolments. The expanding cohort of international offshore students provided an opportunity for the school to explore paths to facilitate the communication and integration process of international offshore students and to promote cultural inclusiveness. For the purpose of this study, offshore international students are operationally defined as students who: (a) permanently reside outside of Australia; and (b) are enrolled in one of VU's international partner institutions.

Research examining the importance of student-faculty interaction outside of class and the positive impact it has on local student experience is well documented (Nadler & Nadler, 2000; Wallace & Wallace, 2001; Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Myers et al., 2005; Halawah, 2006; Cotten & Wilson, 2006). A growing trend of literature is now exploring Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools to facilitate the way communication transpires between educators and students (Myers et al., 2007; Kohorst & Cox, 2004; Hooper et al., 2006; Wang & Beasley, 2006; Edwards, 2009).

Technology is being used to facilitate virtual office hours (VOH) for both distant learning environments and as a supplement to the traditional pedagogical practice of face to face office hours (Myers et al., 2004). Evidently there appears to be a gap in the literature where research to date has mainly focused on VOH in the context of local onshore students experience and very little research has explored the experience of international offshore students.

Pyvis and Chapman (2004) and Shah et al. (2010) highlighted the need for universities and their partner institutions to focus on off campus support for international offshore students. More importantly this has become a recurring theme identified in the audits of offshore programs by Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) now known as TEQSA.

Feedback on international offshore student experience is undoubtedly one of the most important factors enabling academics to judge the quality of education in offshore programs (Ellis, 1993). Given the importance placed on such factors the limited research (Shah et al., 2010) exploring the experience of international offshore students requires attention.

VU offers a wide range of offshore programs to countries where student's first spoken language is not English. With the universities mission in mind, and in aiming to provide a consistent and equivalent student experience across all faculties and campuses, VOH were offered to international offshore students to consult virtually with their Australian unit coordinators using the software *Elluminate live!* As with traditional face to face consultation, the introduction of (VOH) meant that time was set aside for students to contact their teachers online for academic support.

This paper will firstly address the methodology used to collect data from international offshore students and then discuss the motivation behind the pilot project. The set up and implementation of the project is outlined prior to discussing the themes which surfaced from the student experience of using VOH.

Research Design

In 2011 a pilot project was launched offering undergraduate international offshore business students the opportunity to interact and engage with their unit coordinators in Melbourne via VOH. The opportunity was extended to students enrolled in two units (Management Accounting a second year specialisation unit and Corporate Finance a third year unit) across three international partner sites. Approximately 298 students were given the opportunity to participate in the VOH of which only 15% took up the offer.

The study sought to draw on qualitative data to explain and understand the student experience with VOH. All the students involved in VOH (45 students) participated in the survey. Information on student experience was gathered using two main instruments, (i) qualitative data collected from focus group discussions and through survey questions implemented with the focus group

and (ii) analytical data collected through a critical reflective journal. Premised on the collection of data through the above tools conclusions were drawn to the experience encountered by these students and how their experience could further be enhanced.

Establishing a focus group enabled participants to clarify and challenge views towards VOH and provided the opportunity to explore unanticipated issues. In fostering and supporting a relaxed and conducive environment conversations were not recorded (Puchta & Potter 2004), as permission was asked but not granted by participants. Students were selected for the focus group based on their willingness to participate.

Furthermore a detailed critical journal was maintained documenting reflective conversations with students and staff, email correspondence, meeting notes and other ad hoc observations. The reflective insights garnered through this research will help other academics looking and bridging the communication gap with their international partner institutes.

Why provide Virtual Office Hours?

Given today's youth have a strong desire for social technology it is expected that students will enter university with a least a basic level of ICT skills and that they have access to and a willingness to use ICT to support their education (Haywood et al., 2004).

With the rapid development of computer mediated communication tools VOH have become more common for university students. The research presented here is an extension of a larger study conducted by Wdowik and Michael (2011), who amongst other things set out to investigate the perceptions towards VOH by international offshore students. The results from this accompanying study suggested a high support of students having virtual contact with their Melbourne unit coordinators. Given these study results, VOH were set up across one academic term across three campus sites, namely Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and Sydney. Prior to the implementation of VOH the prime medium of communication between offshore international students and their Melbourne unit coordinator's was email.

Alongside the interest shown by international offshore students to have such a tool made available, it was also an opportunity for the school to provide these students with a support line to assist their studies and make them feel inclusive with the university curriculum.

Implementation and Set Up of VOH

Announcements were placed on the students learning management system introducing them to a series of regular VOH sessions with their unit coordinators in Melbourne, Australia. It was made clear that the VOH were totally voluntary and students could attend as many or as little of a session as they liked.

A set schedule of dates and times for VOH was announced at the start of the semester in order to allow students to plan ahead. Initially each campus was

offered three VOH sessions. Times and dates varied for each campus in order to allow for differences in time, term breaks and public holidays. As the semester proceeded the schedule expanded to offer students more VOH around dates where assessment was due and exam periods. It was no surprise that there was a greater take on the sessions prior to examinations.

A link to the VOH sessions was placed on students LMS, this ensured that only enrolled students could access the virtual sessions. A handout of instructions on how to use the software and how to connect to the virtual office sessions was also posted alongside the link. Short demonstration with their local teachers also helped with the implementation process. The first fifteen minutes of the first session were dedicated to exploring the interface of the *Elluminate live!* window and introducing students to the features of the software. Whilst staff introduced themselves in the first session through the webcam, students were discouraged from using it after introductions were made given it slows down the system. The introduction session was also used to assist students with any technical problems surrounding their microphone.

Software Selection

Given the numerous software and ICT tools available, the selection process was made challenging. There are two main reasons for why the software *Elluminate Live!* was chosen to implement the VOH. Firstly, the software has been piloted within the school for several years and therefore staff were confident of its ability to meet the requirements of the project. Secondly, unlike other available mediums *Elluminate Live!* offered a vast mixture of tools to communicate. It provided the ability to chat via instant messaging and allowed up to six people to talk simultaneously in a session, has a whiteboard which allows for the showing of power points and to interactively work on solving problems, allows the sharing of internet links and conducts polls. *Elluminate Live!* caters to real time instruction which facilitates synchronous learning, unlike other mediums which lend themselves to asynchronous exchanges. *Elluminate Live!* supports sounds, images, colours, and text, which appear to be ideal tools for the cognitively diverse classroom.

The functions of *Elluminate Live!* can lead to other pedagogical practices such as a more student centered environment, encourage student engagement and lend itself to visual learners given its ability to use icons and pictures (Michael, 2012). Alongside its user friendly interface *Elluminate Live!* also allowed record keeping of participants and maintained order and fairness with its facility to raise a hand prior to speaking.

Those students who actively participated in VOH reported positive comments about their experience with the software and when asked whether they would consider participating in VOH using another communication medium such as face book, Skype, texting or other, they responded: (i) "I don't want to use a tool that I use for my social life, I want to keep my social life separate to my education," (ii) "I liked Elluminate it was easy to use," (iii) " I liked the instant feedback, " (iv)"I enjoyed using the icons ☺ and I liked how the teacher used colour on the board to highlight important parts," (v) "Given we are so far

away I don't think texting is appropriate." It was gratifying to have students endorse the selected software.

Themes

Using the outcomes from the focus groups and my reflective encounters I was able to identify several important themes about the delivery and the student international offshore experience(s) with VOH using *Eliminate Live!*

Low Student Participant Rate

Whilst offshore international students expressed enthusiasm regarding the potential offering of VOH (Michael & Wdowik, 2011), the adoption of the software indicated otherwise. Given this tool was made available to approximately 298 students, the given participants at any time and was disappointingly low. Approximately 15% of enrolled students took advantage of the tool during the semester further supporting the findings of Li and Pitts (2009) who found that while providing VOH improved student satisfaction the student usage of VOH remained low.

It was found through student discussions that those who participated in at least one VOH session made the effort to attend another session. This suggests that familiarization could influence the frequency of VOH? It was summarized clearly by one student who emailed me to say thank you and proceeded to state "I wasn't sure about this, but I really like that it made my study helpful."

Students themselves identified VOH as an important tool by those willing to embrace it. One of the students from the Kuala Lumpur campus stated, "In my opinion, it is very helpful for me because it really allows me to understand more clearly on certain topics. I truly believe it can bring benefits for students who are willing to participate in this online consultation."

Student Engagement

Student engagement is frequently been investigated and made reference to in higher education as more and more academics are struggling to engage with their students. Prior to the implementation of this pilot project it was thought that the offering of VOH would lead to an increase in student engagement. The results at the end of the pilot supported Crane's (2000) assertion that whilst an online environment can draw benefits to students and encourage engagement, it can't be assumed the opportunity will be embraced.

Some VOH sessions in particular those very close to examinations were found to be very congested as students found to make the effort to be part of these sessions. For instance, one student commented: "I only participated in the final consultation which was held before the exams. I found it very beneficial as it served as an additional guideline on how to tackle the exams." Some session logs prior to exams indicated up to twenty students at a time.

Often many students were just lurking throughout the session and showing no interest of engaging. It was discovered through student feedback that some student's joined the VOH sessions so they could learn from the conversations between other students and the coordinator. As one student put it, "I wanted to

see if anyone else was going to ask the same question I had before I raised it.” Other students joined the sessions not because they had any questions to discuss but rather to eavesdrop on the conversations and to be sure they didn’t miss out on any additional information their coordinators might have to offer. A student reports, “I didn’t have anything to ask I just wanted to see what others were asking so I listened and took down all important points that was brought forward during the consultation.”

On the surface some sessions seemed light in student numbers but it was often difficult to determine the true number of students behind the screen. One student explained, “We studied as a group of three and we also attended the sessions as a group. We logged in as one person but three of us were listening and contributing.”

Potentially the self-confident students with the better English skills were the most vocal during the sessions. The less confident students spoke less during the sessions and utilised the chat box and icons. As one of the respondents expressed it, “My English not good, scared my teachers think I’m dumb.”

It was identified from the student focus group discussions that the lack of student engagement in the VOH sessions was driven by student anonymity. When asked to describe the atmosphere of the VOH sessions, students mainly reported to find the sessions relaxing and enjoyable and few reported the atmosphere to be scary. The majority of students who used the VOH sessions claimed to prefer using the icons and chat box more than the two way audio feature of the software. Reasons for such actions were related to (i) fear of coordinator not understanding me –cultural differences and the English language, and (ii) fear of being recognised by coordinator or peer. These comments further support the focus group discussions where students were asked whether they would like to see the VOH sessions recorded. The majority of students expressed their dislike towards the recording of the sessions mainly due to being identified.

Anonymity / Student Identity

Illuminate Live! has a feature which allows students to remain anonymous throughout the session to both their instructor and to their peers. When this feature is activated both instructor and participants will be given systematic names as participant 1, participant 2 etc. This feature was not activated during the sessions but rather students were advised if they wanted to remain anonymous they could select another name during the sessions. Survey results and student comments showed that a significant number of students (60% of the participants) considered “anonymity” very important. Furthermore survey results indicated that the anonymity was more important to students based at the Kuala Lumpur campus than any other campus site. By disguising behind another name, student’s felt more comfortable in asking questions and expressing their views without fear that their coordinator or their peers will judge them. This finding is consistent with those found by Hooper et al., (2006).

Students opted to use their given names, surnames, student id numbers or just a nick name. A small portion used anonymous names preferring to remain unidentifiable during the session. From student comments and emails received throughout the project, it was clear that whilst some students were hiding their identity from their peers others were hiding their identity from their coordinator. Examining student feedback the main reason(s) for a student wanting to stay anonymous were: (i) “feel safe from embarrassment,” (ii) “I used a made up name so I wasn’t afraid to ask questions about things I didn’t understand.” (iii) “It’s quit[e] shameful in our culture if answer questions in front of class and get it wrong because it shows I was unprepared.”

An observation made by the coordinators conducting the VOH was that those students who stayed anonymous participated more passively in the session(s) hence reinforcing student comments regarding the fear of being judged by either their coordinator or peers. Various discussions with students also enlightened me to the issue of competitiveness. Students admitted to examining the names of those participating in the sessions prior to contributing. What these students were actually referring to was intrinsic motivation. Students were of the belief that those attending the sessions were the better students of the class and were generally the more motivated hence the reason for the initial usage of the tool.

As an academic, when students remain anonymous there is extreme difficulty in identifying how students are progressing with their studies.

Fostered Inclusiveness and Enhanced Student Faculty Interaction

Research has indicated that student involvement with curricular activities affect the affiliation they have with their university and other students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A move towards inclusiveness in higher education has gained increasing attention given the number of students who are finding the traditional methods of teaching a challenge (Macdonald & Stratta, 2001).

Virtual office hours fostered a rapport with offshore international students that would normally be difficult to establish given the geographical distance. This rapport was built with students who participated in the VOH but further extended to all students given they were aware the opportunity existed. One student expressed via email gratitude for the sessions, “I am really thankful for all you did with us. I would start with saying it is one of the most powerful tool that helps me to be attached with my unit coordinator.”

Students reported that their unit coordinators were accessible, approachable and very helpful. Students using VOH felt connected with staff and the university program they belong to, most thought using VOH was more personal than emailing unit coordinators and increased their confidence to contact staff more regularly throughout the semester. Student comments included:

Having the opportunity to speak with my unit coordinator made me feel equal to local students and made me feel important- I wish all units provided VOH.

Never contacted my teacher before because didn't want to be a nuisance, but my teacher very helpful and helps me a lot...I think all teachers should do this.

Maximised Student Opportunities

As the traditional forms of teaching and communicating (face to face) at higher education continue to move towards a blended online forum (Lockyer & Bennett, 2006), students are further provided with the opportunity to become more independent learners (Singh et al., 2005). Making VOH available to students allowed them to maximise time with unit coordinators which has not previously been an option. It also gave students a chance to interact with someone other than their local teacher, as indicated by one student who commented,

Online consultations help me to understand wider and deeper because my local teacher was not that clear about some topics. Accessibility was really easy and convenient and it was such a friendly program to ask questions and receive answer, immediately, exactly like a classroom.

Through discussions with students, it was found that the main source of motivation behind the usage of VOH was to obtain as much information as possible directly from the source (unit coordinator). It seemed that the students using this tool had a thirst for knowledge. It was also highlighted that students generally were driven to these sessions because they would receive an automatic response to their concerns.

Conclusion

Providing VOH to offshore international students through *Illuminate Live* found to aid and support their learning experience of those who participated in it. A descriptive analysis revealed that students who participated in VOH expressed satisfaction and found them beneficial, particularly when scheduled before assignment due dates and examinations. The integration of VOH for international offshore students constituted a positive experience and the tool proved to be a useful resource for making students feel inclusive with the university program and curriculum. Findings also revealed students wanting VOH made available in more units across their degree.

A logical progression from this study would be to implement VOH more widely to all offshore international students who do not have face to face contact with unit coordinators. Further, a comparison of student experiences and student usage could also be undertaken. VOH has tremendous potential to improve the way the school supports its offshore ventures and the findings from this research could help other academics looking for a path way to assisting the learning experience of international offshore students.

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