INTERNATIONAL OFFSHORE STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF VIRTUAL OFFICE HOURS

Steven Wdowik and Kathy Michael
Victoria University
Australia

Abstract

The recent advancement in information communication technologies (ICT) provides new communication channels to promote out of classroom contact between faculty and students. A distinctive gap in the literature identified the need to gauge international offshore student's perceptions of virtual office hours (VOH). The study surveyed 186 international offshore undergraduate students across three offshore campuses and addressed the following: (a) explore international offshore undergraduate students' perceptions of VOH and (b) Examine the relationship between offshore student's skills and usage towards Internet and ICT and their willingness to use VOH. The majority of international offshore students indicated a positive interest in VOH.

Introduction

The explosion of the Internet and the continual emergence and acceptance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is providing numerous transformational benefits to universities (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008). A key transformational benefit that ICT is predicted to have a significant impact on is extending and enhancing communication channels between students and their teachers (Li & Pitts, 2009). Other researchers have noted the rapid increase in web-based learning technologies that facilitates new important ways and possibilities for student-faculty interaction outside the classroom, predominantly through computer-mediated communication (Balayeva & Quan-Haase, 2009; Li & Pitts, 2009).

Today's tech savvy students that attend university are immersed in and continue to have an increasing appetite for consuming virtual world technologies such as Facebook and/or instant messaging software to develop and maintain friendships by chatting and expressing their thoughts and ideas online (Harris & Rea, 2009; Kindred & Roper, 2004). As students familiarise themselves with various virtual world technologies to foster communication links in their personal lives it may be plausible to expect students to express an interest in using ICT in an educational setting. This notion is supported by Harris & Rea (2009) who states "students will expect their learning to mirror their interactive lives"p.143.

Educators are now equipped with new opportunities to enhance student – teacher communication outside the classroom. The availability of virtual world technologies e.g. *Elluminate Live*! facilitates an interactive real-time environment that accommodates several users to participate at the same time

through the means of an online interface, therefore allowing Virtual Office Hours (VOH) to be conducted. Given this, the authors decided to embrace this new opportunity and examine the possibility of extending the out of classroom communication channels by gauging offshore student's perceptions about the potential use of (VOH) to consult with their Australian unit coordinator. The potential offering of VOH is significant since face to face contact is minimal and there is anecdotal evidence that offshore students rarely use email to contact their respective unit coordinators from Australia. More specifically this study will address the following three research questions:

    (a) To explore international offshore undergraduate business students' perceptions of Virtual Office Hours (VOH);

    (b) To explore the relationship between offshore students skills and usage towards Internet and ICT and their willingness to use VOH.

The platform for this study is underpinned by the fact that Australian universities governed by various codes and protocols require them to honour their legal and ethical obligations to continually maintain quality educational experiences to international offshore students (Pyvis & Chapman, 2004). To achieve their obligations universities have been charged with the burden to provide adequate resource levels and strategies to support student learning amongst other things. In addition, recent external quality audits performed by the relevant body (formerly AUQA now known as TEQSA) continue to highlight deficiencies in the provision of offshore education by Australian universities and the subsequent reiterations of various recommendations. One of the fifteen recommendations put forward included the need for universities and their partner institutions to focus on off-campus support.

This study assesses the feasibility of offering offshore students a valuable additional teaching resource that can support their learning, and supplement their traditional classroom teaching through exposure to an alternative teaching pedagogy.   Ultimately offshore students may become more engaged with their learning environment which could add to the quality of their experiences.

Literature Review

The following provides a literature review of the previous research conducted in the relevant and related areas.

The Importance of out of Classroom Communication

One of the aspirations of universities is to provide a teaching and learning environment that will produce an educational experience that promotes academic and personal successes for all students (Richardson 2011). Although there are numerous factors that contribute to the promotion of academic and personal success, Nadler and Nadler (2000) point out that it is staff-student communication outside the classroom which is the most crucial and has led to numerous positive outcomes. These outcomes include improved academic performance, higher satisfaction with faculty and greater higher educational aspirations. In more recent studies researchers have documented that students interacting with their lecturers provides a nurturing atmosphere that encourages academic and social benefits (Johnson et al.,

2007; Hoffman et al., 2003).   Young and Sax (2009) report that student-teacher interactions have a positive effect on both student learning and development independent of their demographic characteristics.

The Changing Landscape of out of Classroom Communication Within the Higher Education Sector
It is common practice amongst teaching staff at universities to provide traditional consultation hours (face to face) outside of class time to assist students needs, including supporting student learning (Wang & Beasley, 2006) and advise relating to their future careers (Davis, 2001).   However, despite the importance of teacher-student interactions outside of the classroom, there is evidence to suggest that students are grossly under utilising this valuable resource and therefore detracting from the quality of their educational experience.   Further, in a well-cited study Nadler and Nadler (2000) report the infrequent use of office hours.

The limited usage of traditional office hours are precluded by designated times and locality offered by teaching staff (Wallace & Wallace, 2001), which may not be aligned with students schedules. To avoid such constraints, students are more likely to use technology such as e-mail to communicate with their teachers rather than attend specified office hours (Atamian & DeMoville 1998). The overwhelming presence of the Internet has seen more teaching staff using email as the predominant communication tool to interact with students (Jones & Johnson-Yale, 2005).

A relatively new trend in higher education is the continuing roll out of ICT software to conduct VOH as a supplement to traditional face-to-face office hours. The new avenues available to facilitate out of the classroom dialogue with their students has attracted attention amongst educators in exploring student's perceptions and use of ICT, for example, Instant Messaging and *Elluminate Live!* A review of the existing literature, predominantly emanating from North America, shows a strong and consistent theme where the majority of students have shown a positive attitude towards VOH (Edwards, 2009; Lim, 2010; Edwards & Helvie, 2010; Roper & Kindred, 2005; Hooper, et al., 2006; Balayeva & Quan-Haase, 2009). An experiment conducted by Harvard University also reported positive responses to the concept of VOH.

Methodology

The following provides a description of the methodology used to conduct this study.

Instrument
Perusal of the existing literature and the collaboration of ideas between the researchers contributed to the survey design to gather information relating to offshore students perceptions of communicating virtually with their unit coordinators from Australia. A pilot survey was distributed to colleagues within the faculty and to a group of onshore students to obtain feedback regarding the layout of the survey and to ensure the questions were written in plain English and easy to understand. Any ambiguities identified from the

feedback were taken into account before the final survey was distributed to ensure quality responses from participants.

The survey contained a total of 32 questions. The questions asked from the survey resulted in self reporting data from students relating to the following areas. Student demographics, including age, gender, study mode, cultural background, site of study, year level, major area of study, learning style and experience of any prior online learning. Investigating student's access to ability in and frequency of using the internet and related computer technology and computer software programs. A Likert - scale ranging from 1 strongly agree to 5 strongly disagree with 3 representing a neutral response was used to capture this information. Gauging student's perceptions in online consultation, including perceived benefits from possibly engaging in online consultation. Students preferred, actual and frequency in using various communication channels with their local teachers. A ranking system was used to obtain this information.

Data Collection and Analysis

The surveys with detailed instructions on how to complete the survey were uploaded on offshore student's respective blackboards. Willing participants were asked to download and print the online survey from their unit blackboard. An online survey was chosen due to ease of distribution and less costly compared to paper based surveys. The survey was expected to be completed outside of class time and students were not required to reveal any information about their identity so they could remain anonymous. Students would therefore respond more honestly and accurately resulting in meaningful and quality data. Students were instructed to place their completed surveys in a sealed ballot box located within the respective Faculty Administration office. The respective unit coordinators from Australia would collect the surveys upon their teaching visit to the respective offshore campuses.

The data collected from the surveys was of quantitative nature. Basic descriptive analysis was employed to measure student's responses to access to, use of and proficiency in using the internet and related computer technology and computer software programs. The software program SPSS v20 was used to examine correlations between offshore students use and skills of Internet and virtual world technologies and their willingness to participate in online consultation resulting in cross tabulations and chi-square statistics. Descriptive analysis was also used to gauge offshore student's perceptions about the possibility of participating in online consultation with their unit coordinator from Australia and measure the perceived benefits of potentially engaging in online consultation.

Participants and Context

The participants for this study was sourced from three offshore partner institutions of Victoria University including, Sydney, Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru during semester 2 2011. A total of 186 students completed the survey resulting in a response rate of 66%.

Of the participants who completed the survey 105 were females and 81 were males. The average of the participants was 20. Majority of participants (98%) was study full time 85% of participants came from a non-English speaking background including Nepal, Maldives, Indonesia, Iran and Brazil. Participants were 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate students undertaking a range of degrees that fall under the umbrella of Bachelor of Business. One hundred and forty six students (78%) reported to have above average experience with prior online learning, whilst seven students (4%) expressed a poor experience and thirty three students (18%) had no prior online learning. The majority of participants (68%) were perceived to be visual learners, 20% were perceived to be tactile learners and 12% were perceived to be auditory learners.

Results and Discussion

 Approximately 99% of the respondents claimed to have access to a computer and the Internet. When students were probed on their proficiency in using technology using a Likert scale system they reported the following. More than three quarters (83%) of the respondents either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" to be proficient in using internet on their own and 32 students (17%) reported a neutral income. Measuring the respondent's proficiency in using online chat programs revealed that more than three quarters (78%) either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" and 38 students (20%) reported a neutral income. Three responses fell in the "disagree" category. Measuring the respondents proficiency in performing basic technical problems (hardware) revealed 70 students (38%) either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" and 65 (35%) reported a neutral outcome. Approximately one quarter (23%) of responses fell in the "disagree" category and 7 responses (4%) fell in the "strongly disagree" category.

Over half the respondents (55%) identified that they used the Internet more than 20 times a week while 24% used it 8-15 times a week. At the other end of the spectrum, only 4 students (2%) reported once a week. Of the average weekly internet usage, half of the students used it for educational purposes 50% of the time, 46 students (25%) used it for educational purposes 25% of the time and only 2 students (1%) used it all the time for their studies.

The above findings that emerge were to be expected. Effectively all students had access to the internet and the majority of students are familiar with and have acquired more than adequate skills in using the internet and related virtual world technologies. Further, the majority of students report frequently using the internet and at least half of the usage is not related to educational purposes, i.e. students use the internet for social activities amongst other things. These findings are broadly supported by an elementary level of ICT proficiency that indicates that students have access to and a preparedness to use ICT for educational and social purposes (Haywood et al., 2004).

Relationship Between Use and Skills of Internet and ICT Software and Interest in VOH

Results from Table 1 (See below) indicate that from those students who were "interested" or "very interested" in participating in online consultation, approximately 81% of students had a strong familiarity with using online chat

programs while19% had basic skills with using online chat programs. These results were highly correlated and statistically significant at the 1% level. It is worth noting that from those students who were "not interested" approximately 69% of these students were perceived to have strong familiarity with online chat programs.

Table 1

Cross Tabulation Between Student Interest in Participating in VOH and Their Proficiency in Using the Internet

	Proficient with Using the Internet			
Interest in Participating in VOH	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Total
Very Interested	26	19	2	47
Interested	30	51	19	100
Not Interested	7	17	11	35
Total	63	87	32	182

Results from Table 2 (See below) highlights close similarities to Table 1. Of those students who were "interested" or "very interested" in participating in online consultation, approximately 86% had strong skills with using the internet on their own while 14% claimed to have having basic skills with using the internet on their own. These results were highly correlated and statistically significant at the 1% level. It is worth noting that from those students who were "not interested", approximately 69% of these students were perceived to have strong skills in using the internet on their own.

Table 2

Cross Tabulation Between Student Interest in Participating in VOH and Their Proficiency in Using Online Programs

	Proficient with Online Chat Programs				
Interest in Participating in VOH	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Total
Very Interested	22	23	2	0	47
Interested	23	51	24	2	100
Not Interested	5	19	10	1	35
Total	50	93	36	3	182

We can conclude that for those students in the category "not interested" in participating in online consultation there are other factors than internet skills involved in impeding their willingness to use online consultation.

Student Perceptions of Online Consultation

Students were asked to indicate their willingness to participate in online consultation with their respective unit coordinator from Australia through the use of a Likert scale system. From an aggregate viewpoint, a high proportion of students were engrossed with the possibility of using a new way of enhancing out of classroom communication with their unit coordinators. Here, 81% of respondents were either "interested" or "very interested," whilst thirty-five students (19%) were not interested. These findings were expected. The reported findings are consistent with previous research conducted in this area (Edwards, 2009).

Perceived Benefits of VOH

The concept of VOH was clearly explained to participants at the start of the survey. This would allow participants to develop an understanding about VOH before completing the survey. The students who indicated a willingness to participate in VOH were asked to select as many benefits that might accrue to them from a list provided. Those students who indicated a non interest in VOH were also asked to select as many benefits that might accrue to them to eliminate sampling bias. All students interested in VOH selected 'support my learning', 143 students selected 'instant feedback', 130 students selected 'feeling valued' and 100 students selected 'convenience'.

It is not surprising that all students choose support my learning to be the most important perceived benefit. Students potentially have access to an additional teaching resource via a new communication channel where they can ask specific questions to clarify subject content and generally discuss course related information. Research indicates that students predominantly use out of classroom communication for task related problems (Nadler and Nadler, 2000; Hassini, 2006). It is reasonable to suggest that the provision of VOH as a supplement and not a replacement to the support given by their local teacher may encourage more students to become engaged in their learning and may lead to greater student success.

Providing instant feedback and feeling valued was also well supported as being important perceived benefits and to a lesser extent convenience. Students may envisage that participating in VOH by using real-time synchronous collaborative software program can foster immediate responses that can assist students to process and understand information in a timely manner and therefore reduce feelings of being isolated which can increase motivation and persistence levels. This notion was supported by research conducted by Lim (2010) and Reinig and Schouten (2009).

The potential offering of an additional teaching resource via VOH and therefore increasing student's interaction with teaching staff outside the classroom may provide them with a sense of belonging or feeling valued at their university (Richardson, 2011). Offshore students may perceive the availability of an extra teaching resource as being extremely helpful and caring since they can engage directly in dialogue with the unit coordinator and become more engaged with their learning environment (Richardson, 2011).

Potentially offering VOH can be seen as a remedy to the problems of traditional face-to-face office hours. Students have the opportunity to interact with their teachers outside of the classroom at a location of their convenience (Hara et al., 2000; Poole, 2000). Although this perceived benefit was least selected by offshore students it is particularly important for those students who never or rarely take advantage of face to face office hours. These students have potential access to a new avenue of out of class contact with their teachers therefore possibly encouraging more students to engage with their studies that can lead to a greater quality educational experience.

Notwithstanding the above, it is also worth noting that the potential offering of VOH by using real-time synchronous collaborative software program (e.g., *Elluminate Live*!) can not only mirror the traditional classroom but may provide international offshore students with an alternative teaching pedagogy. The multiple teaching tools embedded in Elluminate *Live*! such as text chat, application sharing and drawing and pasting images on a shared whiteboard allows for real time meaningful interactions between teachers and students and between students themselves. Further, application sharing allows students to assume responsibility in initiating discussions with their teacher thereby promoting collaborative activity.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. The study in part explored offshore student's perceptions about the possibility of using virtual world technologies to enhance out of class communication. Some students, albeit only a handful may already have been exposed to communicating online through the use of web based technologies therefore adversely influencing their responses. An additional problem lies in the use of self reporting data. The participants may have inaccurate perceptions which can manifest in misguided data being presented. Lastly, grounded in marketing theory the way one perceives something before they use it doesn't necessarily mean their perception will remain the same after they have used it.

Further research can focus on actually implementing virtual office hours with offshore students and report student experiences. In addition, the same study can also be conducted on local students in order to allow a comparison of student perceptions and reveal any underlying differences between the two student cohorts.

Conclusions / Implications

The continuing advancement of new virtual world technologies is providing new channels to promote and enhance student – teacher interaction outside of the classroom. Today's student is equipped with the necessary internet and ICT software skills and knowledge to effectively participate in a virtual world educational environment. The findings from this study affirm the strong interest shown from offshore students in participating in online consultation (VOH) with their unit coordinator(s) from Australia. The perceived benefits of online consultation (VOH) including support my learning, a sense of belonging, instant feedback and offering flexibility and convenience are

factors that can encourage offshore students to become more engaged with their studies that lead to student success and providing a more enriched and quality student experience.

The findings asserted from this study provide an initial insight for the faculty and the university as a whole into offshore student's perceptions regarding VOH. From a faculty perspective, this study indicates a strong interest shown from the majority of offshore students in participating in online consultation (VOH) has the potential to draw attention to and reach out to other staff members. As other staff members possibly explore the new out of class communication channels ultimately a greater number of offshore students may become more engaged in the teaching and learning process which can positively impact on the quality of the student experience. From a university as a whole perspective, increasing the potential to communicate with offshore students beyond the confines of the classroom and therefore potentially adding to resource levels and offering off-campus support provides two benefits. Universities are not only addressing deficiencies as indicated by external audits, but may be seen as continually searching for ways to improve and ultimately enhance the student learning experience.

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