

## **STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF VIRTUAL OFFICE HOURS IN A FACE-TO-FACE UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS COURSE**

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### **Abstract**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have transformed significantly over the past decade, enhancing the communication channels between students and their teachers. Coupled with compositional change in the way current students learn and the influence of social media in an educational setting, Universities are obliged to explore the integration of effective communication strategies into traditional face-to-face courses, by enabling flexible course design, creating an instruction to engage and connect and a means to retain students. This study explores undergraduate business students' readiness for and perceptions on the use of Virtual Office Hours (VOHs) and other communication mediums in an attempt to facilitate their education.

### **Introduction**

Since e-learning is prevalently spreading in higher educational institutions, this study explores undergraduate business students' readiness and perceptions on the use of a virtual tool to communicate with their teachers out of normal class time. Traditionally, student consultation refers to the time set aside by staff allowing students to seek face-to-face contact on issues specifically related to study matters. Despite the value of such sessions studies have shown that students rarely take up this opportunity (Bippus, Kearney, Plax, & Brooks, 2003; Kuh & Hu, 2001) hence the potential offering of Virtual Office Hours at Victoria University (VU) within selected units in the College of Business was seen to be very significant in supporting students. Victoria University (VU) is predominately a traditional university where the prime channel of out of class communication with students is face-to-face office hours. VOH is not intended to replace the traditional face-to-face contact time between teacher and student, but to provide a new flexible opportunity to interact with staff.

Research has shown a rapid increase in technologies that facilitate new ways for student-faculty interaction outside the classroom (Balayeva & Quan-Haase, 2009; Li & Pitts, 2009; Michael, 2012b). Pressure is emerging on universities to embrace new technologies to enhance traditional curriculum and extend support to students beyond the university campus. Hence, the concept of VOH was considered a viable solution. VOH are based on the same principles of the traditional setting of consultation hours except it is offered in a synchronous online format. It's been reported that VOH can facilitate student-teacher collaboration outside the classroom and give students a sense of belonging whilst supporting their learning and enhancing their overall university experience (Michael, 2012a). Offering students a more

flexible option to communicate with their teachers was thought to be welcomed and beneficial given that today's students are trying to balance education, family and work commitments and often find it difficult to attend restricted pre-set traditional office hours.

Prior to considering the implementation of (VOH) through the software *Blackboard Collaborate!* it was important to gauge student perceptions about the concept and about their preferred communication tools for contacting their teachers. Having knowledge of student intentions and the factors that influence student beliefs about e-learning, could assist in devising mechanisms for attracting more students to this learning environment (Grandon, Alshare, & Kwan, 2005).

This paper is structured as follows. The first section presents a selective review of literature surrounding attitudes and usage of VOH and other ICT tools to assist student-teacher interaction outside of the classroom. The next section presents the research design followed by a discussion of the results as related to the main research questions. Finally, limitations, future research and a conclusion will be presented.

### **Selective Literature Review**

The importance of student teacher out of classroom communication has been well documented to improve academic performance and enhance the student experience among other things (Nadler & Nadler, 2000; Young & Sax, 2009). Furthermore, research on the effects of student-faculty interaction outside the classroom have consistently found that informal contact between teachers and their students was positively associated with personal, social, and intellectual outcomes as well as students' overall satisfaction with their college experience (Halawah, 2006; Myers, Martin, & Knapp, 2005).

It is common practice for universities to provide face-to-face consultation hours for students to discuss subject related matter (Wang & Beasley, 2006). Nevertheless, studies have found that students are not taking advantage of this out of class support channel and thereby foregoing a valuable resource that can detract from their educational experience (Nadler & Nadler, 2000; Pascarella, 1980).

In keeping with the research, academics are discovering that students are more likely to use technology such as e-mail to communicate with their teachers rather than visit them at their offices during specified hours (Atamian & DeMerville, 1998; Jones & Johnson-Yale, 2005). Various studies have been conducted in connection with face-to-face communication with students versus the application of communicated mediated tools to connect with students. Benson and Hewitt (1998) showed that students found the collaborative experience provided by computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools beneficial, whilst Wilson and Whitelock (1998) reported the CMC environment more useful than the telephone for interacting with teachers.

Wang and Beasley, (2006) further employed the usage of instant messaging systems to remedy the problems of traditional office hours in a university setting. Chou (2001) and Klassen and Vogel (2003) also reported the benefits of CMC as a means to facilitate and increase the amount of interaction and communication between students and their teachers.

As student appetite for virtual world technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and instant messaging increases as a means to foster communication links in their personal lives (Kindred & Roper, 2004), it is plausible to expect students to express an interest in using ICT in an educational setting (Harris & Rea, 2009). Therefore, this study adds to the growing literature surrounding ICT in teaching and supporting student satisfaction by gauging student perceptions of innovative technology.

Currently, Australian scholarly papers focusing on VOH as an extension to face-to-face consultation are limited. Given the changing academic conditions and the influence of technology, some universities are now providing VOH as a supplement to the traditional face-to-face office hours. This new trend, primarily taking place in North America, has indicated a positive response from students (Balayeva & Quan-Haase, 2009; Edwards, 2009; Edwards & Helvie, 2010; Hooper & Pollanen, 2006; Lim, 2010; Roper & Kindred, 2005).

In an attempt to remedy the current problems of traditional office hours this paper explores student perceptions on VOH as an option to communicate with their teachers out of the classroom. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are undergraduate business students' perceptions of VOH and their perceived benefits?
2. Perceived ICT competency levels and Willingness to adopt VOH?
3. What are undergraduate students' preferred and used communication mediums to connect with their teacher?
4. Frequency and importance placed on face-to-face consultation?

### **Research Design**

This empirical study examines student perceptions on communicating with their teachers outside the traditional classroom environment.

### **Demographic Profile of the Sample**

The sample composed of 208 undergraduate business students studying across two accounting units within the College of Business at VU. The sample comprised of 54% females and 46% males. Those enrolled as full-time students made up 78% of the sample whilst the remaining 22% were completing their degree on a part-time basis. During the implementation of the survey, 51% of students reported to be employed. This figure could be underestimated given a large number of students within the sample are international students studying in Australia. Some international students may be hesitant to report they are working as it breaches their visa requirements. Furthermore, 24% of the participants reported to come from an English speaking background, while the other 76% came from a non-English speaking

background. Participants aged between 18 to 21 years old made up 33% of the sample size, whilst 56% were aged between 22 and 29 years of age.

### **Research Instrument**

A self-administered questionnaire was utilised with a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Investigation of the existing literature and the collaboration of ideas between academics contributed to the development of the questionnaire, which sought to gather student perceptions on communicating virtually with their teachers and their preferences on other communication mediated tools. Prior to implementation a pilot of the questionnaire was conducted among a small group of students (6–8) similar to those in the target population to filter any ambiguous, biased or repetitive questions (Sekaran, 2003).

The questionnaire was made up of two parts. Part 1 solicited demographical information such as age, gender, chosen major, ethnicity, enrolment status, employment status, country of residency and campus undertaking studies. Part 2 on the other hand was divided into various sections allowing students to self-report data relating to their (i) ability to use technology, (ii) access, confidence with IT skills, and frequency of using computer technology, (iii) preferred and actual communication channels with their teachers and (iv) student perceptions, initiative and desire to interact virtually with their teachers.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

An invitation to participate in a questionnaire was extended to 312 students (undergraduate international and local students) completing 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year accounting units within the College of Business at VU. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and made aware that it was of a voluntary nature. The software package SPSS version 20 was used to conduct descriptive and inferential statistics on the data. Descriptive analysis was employed to report the frequencies and percentages of some questions while other questions were examined using the Pearson's Chi square analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section will present and discuss a number of insightful results that emerged from the data collected. There are somewhat conflicting views about gender and the relationship it plays with Internet usage. Approximately 99% of the sample size reported to have access to a computer and to the Internet. When asked about their Internet usage, females reported to use the Internet more than males, consistent with multiple US surveys confirming that females outnumber males online with no significant gender gap in Internet usage. On the other hand, results were inconsistent with Ramayah and Jantan (2003) who found computer and Internet usage higher among males than females.

There were no significant results found to suggest that a participant's age had an influencing factor on students' willingness to use VOH. It is worth noting that 92% of those students who reported not to be interested in using VOH were between the ages of 18 to 30. This finding is consistent with Kraut, Mukhopadhyay, Szypula, Kiesler, and Scherlis (1998) and Gay, Mahon,

Devonish, Alleyne, and Alleyne (2006) outcomes, which implied that older students may have a somewhat more positive perceptions towards computers.

### **Students Perceptions of Virtual Office Hours**

Using a Likert scale students were asked to indicate their level of willingness to participate in VOH with their teacher. A definition of VOH was provided in the questionnaire to assist students with answering the question accurately and honestly. A small portion of 25% reported to be either “not interested” or “unsure” with the concept. A significant 75% of students were either “interested” or “very interested” with the opportunity to engage with their teacher(s) virtually outside of class time. These findings further supported those of Edwards (2009) and Wdowik and Michael (2012) who reported a strong interest towards the concept of VOH.

Interestingly there was a significant correlation (Chi-square= 13.029,  $p < .05$ ) found between students willing to try VOH and the students' country of residency. Those whose home residency was China were found to be more willing to try VOH rather than a student whose residency was Malaysia or Australia.

The correlation between students willingness to use VOH was shown to be statistically significant with students whose native language was not English (Chi-square= 12.932,  $p < .05$ ). Approximately 71% of students who showed an interest in VOH reported to come from a non-English speaking background reinforcing findings from Harasim (1990) and Leasure, Davis, and Thievon, (2000). Such results suggest that a student's background (country of origin) may have an impact on their attitudes and characteristics as a learner.

### **Perceived Usefulness of VOH**

In order to eliminate sampling bias, regardless of whether students indicated an interest or non-interest in participating in VOH they were still required to indicate the possible benefits they may inherit from this additional resource. A list of possible benefits was provided to students and they were asked to consider as many as they thought applicable also providing them with an option to add to the list.

From the selected list 65% of students viewed VOH as an opportunity to communicate and connect with their teacher(s). Such results suggest that students have a desire to communicate with staff out of class time but perhaps the traditional set up of face to face communication is no longer viable for today's student.

Surprisingly, 54% of students reported that VOH would support their learning, varying to the results of Wdowik and Michael (2012) who found that the entire sample of international offshore students selected “support their learning” as a benefit. Convenience and instant feedback was equally ranked as third choice (Johnson et al., 2000). Other suggested benefits made by students included “acquiring a competitive edge” against their peers.

### **Perceived ICT Competency Levels and Willingness to Adopt VOH**

To gain insight into the self-reported ICT skills of students and their willingness to adopt VOH, analysis was done on student's perceptions towards prior online learning, and their proficiency with the internet and chat programs. Approximately 86% of students who reported to be "very interested" or "interested" in participating in VOH, further reported to have strong familiarity with using the internet on their own. These results were highly correlated and statistically significant (Chi-square= 21.091,  $p < .05$ ). It is worth noting that from those students who reported "not interested" in participating in VOH approximately 83% reported to be proficient with using the internet on their own, hence indicating that the lack of basic ICT skills was not a contributing factor for showing no interest.

Furthermore it was identified that there was strong correlation between those who have had previous online experience with their ICT skills (Chi-square= 51.312,  $p < .05$ ). Unsurprisingly, results found a significant correlation (Chi-square= 27.164,  $p < .05$ ) between students interested in participating in VOH against their proficiency of using on line chat programs. Approximately 79% of students reported to have strong online chat programs skills.

In conducting cross tabulations on the survey results, a highly correlated and statistically significant correlation (Chi-square= 34.270,  $p < .05$ ) was found between students who had prior online learning experience and those students willing to participate in VOH. Approximately 78% of participants reported their prior online experience to be average and above and 89% of these respondents reported to be either "very interested or interested" in participating in VOH. It is worth noting that the trivial number of students who reported a poor experience with prior online learning were still "very interested" with the concept of VOH. Overall the results were indicative of prior experience.

### **Frequency and Importance Placed on Face-to-Face Consultation**

The responses from the questionnaire indicated that students are clearly not taking advantage of the opportunity to communicate with their teachers on a face-to-face basis during designated office hours. Approximately 35% of the 208 respondents reported to contact their teachers at least once a month on a face-to-face basis during designated consultation hours, whilst 17% asserted to never contact their teachers during designated times. Interestingly 45% reported to never contact their teacher on a face to face basis out of designated hours. Given these students are enrolled in a traditional face to face course it would have been envisaged that students contact their teachers more frequently. Results were consistent with other studies such as Bippus et al. (2003), and Nadler and Nadler, (2000) who have shown that the traditional approach of face-to-face office hours is infrequently used by students.

Interestingly enough 56% of the sample indicated that students contacted their teachers at least once a month via email therefore supporting the findings of Li, Finley, Pitts, & Guo (2011) who found that students preferred asynchronous tools such as email to communicate with their teachers.

### **Preferred and Used Communication Tools**

When students were asked to rank their preferred tool for communicating with their teachers, 58% ranked face-to-face as their most preferred method congruent with previous research indicating that face to face communication is often favoured over computer mediated communication (Ruberg, Moore, & Taylor, 1996) Continuously, 16% ranked email as their first choice, whilst 11% ranked virtual synchronous tools as first choice. Social networking sites (face book and twitter), web based software (blackboard) and telephones were not ranked that favourable.

Given more than half of the respondents selected face to face as their preferred means of communication with their teachers it raises a concerning issue given the results above highlighted that 35% of students will contact their teacher at least once a month. Students were asked to further rank the tools they have used in the last 6 months to contact their teachers, 37% identified their usage of face to face consultation whilst email was ranked at second place with 33%.

Given that little is known about what facilitates and influences students to interact with staff out-of class (Cotten & Wilson, 2006), the questionnaire set out to identify the reasons why students attend a face-to-face session with their teachers. Approximately, 54% reported to discuss clarity of subject matter whilst 24% reported to ask questions about upcoming assessment, 6% further reported to attend a face to face session in order to discuss their grades and progress or get advice about their future careers. It is worth noting that speed and convenience is more important to students as oppose to the method of communication utilised (An & Frick, 2006).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was based on students' self-reported perceptions, rather than direct observation of student behaviour. What students report to prefer may not correspond to their later actions. A longitudinal study embedding additional units and semesters would add and enhance significant data and research reliability.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the factors associated with students behaviour to accept and use VOH and other ICT tools has practical implications for academics. Successfully implementing and maximising the potential of VOH requires recognition of the perceived value to be conveyed to students. Consequently, the objective of the study was to identify student perceptions of VOH in a face to face course and to examine feedback as a means in which to improve communication support systems.

Students reported positively towards the opportunity of VOH with recognising the benefits to be acquired from the experience, namely support their learning, and increase the communication channels with their teachers in a flexible and more convenient manner. Results further identified that students were equipped with the essential ICT skills to partake in virtual communication channels with their teachers.

The study discovered that whilst students indicated they preferred to communicate with their teachers using the traditional form of face-to-face, the actual usage of this method was not reflective of their perceptions. Instead students confirmed they use email more frequently to communicate with their teachers.

Knowledge that students are willing to use new channels of communications and they have the relevant skills to proficiently use computers, the internet and chat programs provides insightful information to academics in addressing the continuous problem with out of class communication.

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