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Student Engagement With VLEs: Why And Why Not? (0199)

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**Overview**

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) allow students far greater access to the academic material provided by their education establishment than ever before (JISC, 2007). Learning can take place via the internet from home or around the campus, whether this is to access material provided by academic staff, revise information previously covered, or retrieve information when it has not been possible to be physically present at classes, lectures or seminars. In addition, VLEs allow mass communication from academic staff to an entire course or specific cohort and in some cases allows students to do the same. It can therefore be seen that VLEs are a vital element for student learning in modern education due to the very flexibility that they allow (UCISA, 2010).

However, their use is not universal; some students make extensive use of VLEs whilst others only use them at specific times (e.g., revision for exams) and some fail to utilise them at all (Hutchings, 2011).

**Project Aims**

The current research, funded by the Higher Education Academy, builds upon the findings of Hutchings (2011) which indicated that providing VLE training to incoming university students improved subsequent VLE use during the academic year when compared to an untrained group and a group who had been offered training but

chose not to take it. However, one of the key recommendations made in that paper was the need to explore possible reasons for lack of engagement with VLEs. The current study addresses this gap in the literature.

Whilst the original study focused purely upon the quantitative data of student VLE use, the current study set out to explore in greater depth the behaviour of students in their VLE usage and also their attitudes toward the technology. Qualitative and quantitative data on student attitudes, behaviours, and experiences with the institution VLE was collected in order to establish a detailed understanding of the student VLE experience. This was then combined with the quantitative VLE usage data from the Hutchings (2011) study to provide a comprehensive account of student VLE use over the course of the students' degree course.


**Methodology**

Students who had taken part in the original Hutchings (2011) study were approached for consent to analyse their VLE usage data over the second and third year of their degree course. Of the students remaining on the course for the full three years of study 56 (from an initial 77 in the original study) agreed to allow their data to be analysed.

Analysis of quantitative data included examining patterns of usage across time (when materials were accessed), for different modules (whether usage differed for different types of modules), and materials (what types of materials, such as lecture slides, podcasts, and seminar readings, were accessed). Further quantitative data were gathered in the form of a questionnaire exploring attitudes toward use of

technology in general and VLEs in particular.  Finally, 18 open-schedule interviews were carried out, with data recorded and transcribed to provide qualitative data regarding attitudes toward VLE use.

**Results**

Whilst data is being analysed at the time of this submission, preliminary analyses indicate that student use of the VLE over the course of the three years of study overrides initial training; that is, students in the non-trained group who showed lower levels of VLE use in the original Hutchings (2011) study did not differ significantly in levels of final-year use from students who had received training.  However, those who did not take up the offer of training in the 2011 study continued to show significantly lower levels of use than these groups.

Overall student attitudes toward VLEs were positive, even amongst low users. Qualitative interviews indicated some regret on the part of these students that they had not used the VLE more but no specific barriers to use were identified.

A post-hoc questionnaire of staff responsible for VLE modules was conducted to explore their intended use. It was found that many set up their module (e.g., making all lecture slides and notes available at the start of a semester, or a week before lectures, or directly after lectures) with an intention that students access these materials in specific ways.  However, students tended to access materials uniformly across modules, not taking these intentions into account.

**Study Implications**

The current research, combined with the findings from the Hutchings (2011) study, has allowed us to follow a cohort of students across the three years of their degree and to examine their VLE usage and their attitudes toward VLEs.

Whilst final analyses of the data should provide more robust interpretations, preliminary analyses suggest that the majority of students improve in their use of VLEs as they progress through the years of their degree course.  However, some of those with a low level of engagement in Year One will continue to fail to engage throughout the course of their studies, even though they recognise the usefulness of VLEs.  This suggests that it is not a practical difficulty of using the VLE system that exists but a mind-set, and that more needs to be done at an early stage in their studies to explicitly highlight to these students the benefit of engagement with the VLE.

Another finding of particular interest is the failure of the intentions of the staff to translate to student usage.  Whilst current analysis does not highlight one particular way of structuring a VLE as being more advantageous than another, the fact that students approach each module in a uniform fashion even when they have been structured differently suggests a dichotomy in expectations.

**References**

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