Modern Trend in Higher Education: Enhancing and Assessing Student Learning through the Internet

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Abstract : Technology, and more specifically information technology, has radically changed the way organisational members communicate internally and externally over the last five years, Barrett (2002). Information technology does assist and provides universities quicker access to reach the students and other potential customers. Information technology is an invaluable tool in support of teaching and learning, it helps the lecturers to communicate with students and provide them with up to date information on time.

This paper will examine literature on the internet, internet teaching and learning and website design to better understand how relationship between a university and students can be enhanced using the internet..

Keywords: Technology, communication, Higher education, website design, e-learning, internet, Teaching and learning.

Introduction

The whole issue of internet technology is of major interest to the higher education institutions. The new millennium has provided some of the most exciting technological advancements, which has transformed the way higher education institutions are managed, organised and developed. The technology is a phenomenon, and it is dramatically changing the way universities do business with their customers.

In a climate of increased competition, reduced funding, possible drop in university applications, one way of increasing student numbers would be by enhancing student experiences on the internet. It is widely accepted that relationship marketing enhances by positive experience and the Internet is a key relationship building tool.

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Technology will essentially bring about a great need for fully automated environments whereby management, planning and everyday administration will be the domain of the technician. Universities will find themselves with students that require further funding to manage and implement procedures to enable managerial functionalities to operate better and efficiently in the given environment.

The current interest in the information technology, from individuals and to organisations, is phenomenal. As a communication tool for the organisation, the Internet, in particular the web, offers great opportunities to students and some forward thinking companies. Briggs (1997) reinforces this by stating that it is not only web sites that are increasing, but also there are more and more people using these sites. Until recent years the telephone was the only method readily available for spontaneous communication. However, with the introduction of information technology to events and tourism, it has changed the image of the consumer and business environment Barrett (2002).

Moreover, it has been widely accepted that the last decade has witnessed the explosive growth in computer, telecommunications and information technology. New technologies such as the Internet, The World Wide Web, digital television, interactive kiosks and videophones are doing with the need for visiting shops. With all the technological advances, the way business is conducted has been altered dramatically. The internet has been described as the most important innovation since the development of the printing press, which may radically transform not just the way individuals go about conducting their business with each other, but also the very essence of what it means to be a human society.

This paper considers the changing nature of information technology and the implications for the higher education institutions. The last decade has witnessed a growing interest in the development of higher education and increasing numbers of students. The paper will also consider the gaps in the research in this sector, in particular, as to how the internet can be used to enhance university student relationship higher educations institutions

Growth of Internet Technology in 21st Century

Technology, and more specifically information technology, has radically changed the way organisational members communicate internally and externally over the last five years, Barrett (2002). Information technology does assist and provides organisations quicker access to reach the local community and other

potential customers. Information technology is an invaluable tool in support of community-oriented events, it helps the event manager to communicate with employees and provide them with up to date information on time.

The current interest in the information technology, from individuals and to organisations, is phenomenal. As a communication tool for the organisation, the Internet, in particular the web, offers great opportunities to community organisations and some forward thinking companies.

Briggs (1997) reinforces this by stating that it is not only web sites that are increasing, but also there are more and more people using these sites. In Britain current figures shows over and above 10 million home users in the UK.

> **"Usage is growing at least 10-15% per month, making the Internet the fastest growing communication medium ever"**

<div align="right">(Briggs, 1997, p.27).</div>

Barrett (2002, p.1) states that information technology has out grown in last 5 years beyond imagination of individual organisations.

> **"The developments in information and communication technology have leapt beyond what was thought possible five years ago and astonishing advances in this epochal human creation of the 21st century are continuing. Information and communication technology has profoundly affected every major industry and area of human activity including government, security, health, banking, transportation, entertainment, manufacturing, commerce, aviation and economics."**

Renshaw (1992, p.1) identifies the channel of communication as a crucial aspect of any successful business.

> **"All industries which produce goods and service need a way of ensuring that their products reach the consumers. In marketing terms this is known as the "distribution framework" or the channel of distribution".**

Technology will essentially bring about a great need for fully automated environments whereby management, planning and everyday administration will be

the domain of the technician. We shall find ourselves with community events that require further funding to manage and implement procedures to enable managerial functionalities to operate better and efficiently in the given environment.

Appreciation for Internet Technology by HE

A lack of recognition of the potential benefits of using the information technology at higher education level is also highlighted as a barrier to progress for students.

> **"Information from the United States suggests that even where people are able to afford access to ICT, particularly the Internet, they will often choose not to use it because they do not perceive that the content or the functionality is meaningful for them".**
>
> http://www.med.govt.nz/pbt/infotech/ictinclusion/ictinclusion-04.html

This is particularly true for students coming from deprived communities, but can extend also to other groups in society. The students from deprived communities are not using the Internet. In the UK the internet is significantly under represented within the ethnic minority communities. By not using the information technology to enhance their learning and knowledge, such groups are missing out on access to information, knowledge, products and services that could enhance their well being and increase their ability to make a greater economic contribution.

The Government must make a greater effort to spread its message to students from ethnic minority and other deprived communities. Communication can be improved dramatically in one step, if the government invested time and money into ensuring that ethnic communities are aware of the benefits of information technology. This would send a clear signal to the ethnic minority community that the government was taking account of their specific needs and concerns.

Castells (1998) highlights the inequality of access to the information technology, which can be found within industrialised countries and less industrially developed countries. Castell (1998, p.162) believes disadvantaged communities are:

"Socially and culturally out of communication with the universe of mainstream society"

In addition, Information Technology has become a powerful tool for enhancing student learning. These developments on innovative technology in community environments have posed the challenging impact in information technology. The utilisation of Information technology, as a part of company's corporate strategy, enhanced customer service and substantial competitive advantages (Boone & Kutz, 1999). Moreover, students need to adopt the information technology as a major communication tool for the future in order to compete and have the competitive edge.

Internet Teaching and Learning

Electronic learning is a generic term for all mechanisms employed to aid learning and disseminate information through an electronic medium. The term e-learning within this paper involves using the Internet as a communication medium. Such a tool has been used extensively with the HE sector as a means to assist in the learning process and at the same time assist with geographic differences associated with distance learning. Whilst not intended to be a replacement for traditional classroom methods, electronic learning does offer alternative teaching methods which must not be disregarded and treated as futuristic, non operational and inappropriate. Throughout the HE sector it is clear that electronic learning does offer all educational stakeholders opportunities, to not only engage with HE environment, but also offers potential resource and cost savings which themselves can be passed on to the student community. In addition to the aforementioned savings, electronic learning does enable HE institutions the potential to further facilitate student retention and therefore impact positively upon student development.

Common e-learning tools used via the internet include discussion boards, e-mail, chat rooms, video streaming and document transfer. In fact, Bonk (2004) lists thirty different technologies currently used to disseminate e-learning. But what ever e-learning strategy is employed to facilitate student learning they need to be employed in such away that all students are fully embracing of such an approach and that e-learning is not simply employed to replace traditional teaching methods.

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Expansion of Higher Education System in the UK

The expansion in UK HE provision has greatly increased over recent years, to such an extent that projected Government figures identify an increase in participation rates. Such patterns of growth are themselves in part fuelled by Government support, for the development of an experiential FE / HE culture, which advocates the merits of education and vocationalism to all, irrespective of social class and ethnic origin. According to UCAS figures for 2002-2006 there has been a sustained demand for HE places. (figure 1).

The numbers of applications, applicants and accepted applicants.

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Choices	1,978.659	2,046,131	2,098,710	2,285,596	2,215,434
Applicants	461.365	476,467	486,028	522,155	506,304
Accepted applicants	368,115	374,307	377,544	405,369	390,890
Main scheme	304,096	308,435	317,496	342,765	325,072
Extra		2,463	2,621	3,391	3,262
Clearing	39,757	38,666	34,862	37,197	38,032
Direct entrants	24,262	24,743	22,565	22,016	24,524
Choices to acceptances ratio	5.4	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.7
Applicants to acceptances ratio	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.3
Average choices per applicant	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.4	4.4

Figure 1. Source: http://www.ucas.com/figures/ucasdata/summary/index.html

Whilst participation rates in HE are themselves predicted to rise, user makeup and consumption patterns are themselves fundamentally different from students of the early 1960 and 1970s. Such differences include the increased propensity for students to study closer to home and the utilisation of part time attendance modes, all of which combine to create a new breed of student fundamentally different from the past. In addition to the above the student fraternity is becoming increasingly more demanding in terms of quality of provision and expectations; this it-self is in part due to the direct costs associated with study placed upon the student.

Indeed, whilst many HE providers have raised teaching and learning provision in terms of ICT support and educational infrastructure, so to have prospective students who are more educationally astute when differentiating between HE providers. These newly created and increasingly educated user types, have themselves accelerated demand to such an extent that HE providers are having to continually benchmark their own provision with competitor institutions, with increasing importance being placed upon providing an innovation and rewarding educational experience and at the same time attracting student numbers, in sufficiently large numbers.

Student Experience in Higher Education

The debate of regarding students as *customers* (or consumers) has been evident in the education and marketing literature for several years. (Driscoll and Wicks 1998; Comm and Labay 1996; Conway *et al.* 1994). Over three decades ago Kotler (1971, 1972) and later Kotler and Andreassen (1987) believed that when universities face falling demand they should focus on the customer (i.e. the student) and remarket the product (i.e. education). Conway *et al.* (1994) from their literature review on the role of students in HE concluded that the student is perceived as the customer and the product is seen as the course/programme. However, from their own exploratory research of eighty-three HE institutions mission statements they discovered that only half the institutions implied a customer orientation in their planning and only one institution clearly identified the dual role of the student as a product and as a customer. As a result the authors warned that many UK HE institutions were ill-prepared to respond to the increasingly competitive environment in which they have been placed.

In an apposing view Driscoll and Wicks (1998: 59) argue against the use of marketing oriented practices in HE and the use of customer to refer to students. A

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customer orientation assumes that customers are aware of their needs, and can communicate them to producers or use them as a basis for selecting among competing products. Students do not necessarily possess self-serving tendencies and university faculties are not always best able to know students educational needs. On a similar point Brookes (2003) stated that the marriage of the ideas of consumerism and education seems strange for many academics for they believe that ideas are priceless and that they are free. Thus to make ideas buyable is a new concept and, for most academics theoretically uncomfortable.

The students can not be treated as *consumers* in the truest sense as in a commercial meaning. For example, in a restaurant a new meal could be given if you are not entirely happy with the one already served but it would be inappropriate to alter grades just because the students may not be satisfied with the grade awarded. However, as students are contributing to their fees resulting in a financial transaction taking place then universities may have to consider adopting some consumer oriented practices to enhance their learning experience. For example, designing courses with student job prospects in mind, improving communication with the students and being sympathetic to their individual needs. E-learning can offer students the flexibility to learn in their own time, the availability of notes and assessment in electronic format to be downloaded at their own convenience, and a platform to communicate with staff and colleagues in real time. All in all, providing a level of service which meets the needs of the customer and produces customer satisfaction. Therefore, we hypothesize that in order to develop relationship with the students in an e-learning environment a customer oriented approach is needed which positively impacts the service quality provided.

Parties involved in a relationship must have positive experiences in order to reach the required overall level of satisfaction over a period of time and develop the relatiohship further. Negative experiences may, of course, hinder the relationship, or even lead to customer defection. Furthermore, one tends to remember best the last experience. Thus one positive experience may be sufficient to alter perceptions of more than one preceding negative experience, and vice versa. This suggests the important influence experience can have on customer satisfaction and, the more satisfied the customer, the more durable the relationship. Storbacka *et al.* (1994) believes that customer satisfaction can be experienced at both an episodic and at a more general relationship level.

Therefore it follows that e-learning students must have positive episodic experiences during their course of study in order to develop the relationship with

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the university. Unfortunately, according to Bonk (2004) currently most online learning tools focus on recording and facilitating student enrolments and reporting progress and completions, not on engaging learners in rich, interactive experiences. Bonk and Dennen (2003) state that there is a need for motivationally engaging content. They continue by pointing out that there is a need to know how to build effective interaction, collaboration, and engagement with online technologies.

Bonk and Dennen (2003) further note that in traditional classrooms, effective instructors create a supportive but challenging environment, project enthusiasm and intensity, provide choice, create short-term goals and offer immediate feedback on performance. Instructors may also create a positive and psychologically safe learning environment. In order to enhance the student's online-learning experience Bonk (2004: 4) suggest that instructors might emulate off-line strategies by having students use or manipulate real world content. Using a problem based learning approach; they may create final products for a real-world entity or solve real world problems. During such a project students could interact with experts and community leaders online or engage in online conflict with their peers in debate or role-activities. Their completed assignments might be displayed in online-gallery or studio. The hope is that students will receive immediate, genuine, and specific feedback on their work from their peers, instructors, and external examiners.

Antecedent of student Experience
Trust

Trust as a concept crosses several disciplines including ideas from economics, marketing, sociology, psychology, organisation behaviour, strategy, information systems and decision sciences. (Mukherjee and Nath 2003).

Trust is generally ill defined, (Egan 2004), but is often taken to mean "an acceptance of vulnerability to another's possible, but not expected, ill will or lack of good will" (Blois 1997:58). Trust is therefore, a psychological state comprising of an intention to accept this vulnerability based upon the positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of others or confidence in exchange partner's reliability and integrity. This implies that it is generally expected that the *word of another can be relied upon.* Trust is built upon experience, satisfaction and empathy. A high level of trust is likely to engender a more positive attitude, which in turn is likely to increase the level of customer orientation. (Conway and Swift 2000).

Shared values

Shared value is the extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviours, goals and policies which are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong (Morgan and Hunt 1994). In the context of e-learning shared values symbolises the extent to which the university and students share common beliefs on values such as ethics, security and privacy.

Ethics in e-learning is an important part of shared values. Ethical values determine the chances of university providing incomplete course information or divulging confidential personal information about students or selling student information to other organisations. Ethical values also determine that students do not use university's ICT systems to download or view material which is inappropriate and obscene. Mechanism such as the Data Protection Act and the university's own rules and regulations can build trust by addressing security and privacy concerns.

In order to build trust with students in an e-learning context measures such as quoting the data protection act on the website, establishing secure links, password checks and providing accurate and up to-date information could be employed. We hypothesise that in e-learning, where there is a perception of shared values, such perception will lead to increased trust.

Communication

Communication is a vital component in the establishment of relationships, yet it is a variable that is often assumed or taken for granted and consequently overlooked as a component of relationship development. This is unfortunate, as all other components are experienced through the medium of communication (Conway and Swift 2000).

Selnes (1998) agrees that communication is not only an important element in its own right, but also has the propensity to influence levels of trust between buyer and seller. Similarly, Sin *et al.* (2002), assert that communication, especially timely communication, fosters trust by assisting in solving disputes and aligning perceptions and expectations.

The communication is considered as a multidimensional construct. The variables that constitute communication are openness, speed of response, and quality of information.

Trust is negotiated through openness in communication and is specific to the individual students and their relationship with the university. Research

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conducted by Gefen and Straub (2001) discovered that man-machine communication, or at least the belief that the electronic systems has characteristics of social presence, is critical to building online customer trust. The extent to which a Web site can enhance social communication in terms of openness, speed of response, and quality of information will influence the ability of the site to address needs for online customers who in turn will respond to it. Methods to increase a website's social presence include real-time interaction on web-forums and chat rooms, fast online response using email and personalisation of messages.

Flexible Learning Approaches

The obvious solution for higher education institutions is to develop clear and flexible learning approaches to meet the cultural needs of students. It is important, therefore, the higher education institutions have understanding of the needs of students, and know how to use teaching methods and strategies to meet the needs of students. Student's progression in higher education courses will depend to a great extent upon their lecturers' knowledge, skills and understanding of how to support their learning needs. To support their learning needs, it is important to understand the cultural differences of students, in part second language competence and the sensitivities of the willingness of students to approach tutors and peers in the progression of their studies, and perhaps through the cultural expectations of 'rote' learning.

In addition, for international student it can take up to one full academic year to learn and adjust to the environment to achieve advanced language, academic, and cultural coping skills. During the first 6 months the student is learning different culture experience in terms individual learning, adjusting to the new city, and assimilating culture information at an incredibly rapid pace. During the second part of the year the student is applying and using what he has learned and develop new methods and techniques to understand the different culture. Moreover, it is also the time when international students realise that they are in different environment and have made lifelong friends to exchange culture experiences.

However, more fundamentally international students have been taught and socialised in different culture, which should be understood and assimilated into learning strategies in 'host' institutions. For example, the women in South East Asia and Middle East are normally taught in single sex school compare to European countries. In addition, within the cultural tradition of some countries students are socialised to show greater 'respect' and deference to their lecturer and generally

not show disrespect towards their adults and lecturers.

Moreover, understanding the differences between the systems of education in the international students' country of origin and that in the UK is a major step towards understanding the problems that the student may experience in the classroom. For example, in Asia, Africa and Middle East, the teaching is very much centred around the lecturer, as teaching materials is limited. On the other hand the assessment might be exclusively based on end of year exams. During the year assessments are not common practice in some countries, particularly in Africa and South East Asia.

Summary

The paper has discussed information technology developments within the higher education sector has witnessed the explosive growth in computer, telecommunications and information technology in the last decade. This includes new technologies such as the Internet, The World Wide Web, digital television, interactive kiosks and videophones.

The availability of chats, bulletin board system as well as voice and video conferencing facilities on the Internet will also provide the chance for universities to have online meetings or conferences with their students, no matter geographically where they are. As a result, understanding and implementation of these variables will enable universities to enhance student commitment during and after their courses.

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