SOLE Case Study Series

Students'
Online
Learning
Experiences

Economics

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Executive Summary

This is the summary of the final report, which analyses the results of a study conducted during 2003 of two full-time and campus-based year 1 Economics modules (case study 7 and case study 8). These case studies took place in two different UK Universities, using Blakboard and WebCT respectively. The survey was carried out by the Economics centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (Economics LTSN) as part of the Students Online Learnng Experiences (SOLE) project.

Introduction

SOLE is a project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) via the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Tranche 2 initiative and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to undertake an independent evaluation of students' usage of virtual learning environments (VLEs) in higher and further education. The purpose of the study is to draw out the effectiveness of VLEs in supporting different subject areas, different national agendas (such as that of widening participation) and student learning in general.

Methodology

The study methodology was based upon the evaluation framework set out in the handbook for learner-centered evaluation of computer facilitated learning projects in higher education (Philips et al., 2000). Several aspects of the research have drawn on the Critical Incident Technique pioneered by Lockwood (Gilbert and Lockwood, 1999).The approach is designed to provide an in-depth set of case studies based on course modules across a range of subjects, with a wide range of data and collection methods.

The following main primary data gathering tools were used:
- Student questionnaires (two - one at the start of the module and one at the end)
- Student diaries (two – one in week 3 and one two weeks before the end of the module)
- Individual student interviews (at the end of the module)
- Tutor interviews (two – one at the start of the module and one at the end).

The following secondary sources were consulted:
- The teaching and learning strategy of the institution
- Log details of student behaviour in the VLE (e.g. number of times logged on and activities undertaken)
- Discussion board transcripts.

Culturally diverse students

The UK Economics student cohort consists of 32.4% non-UK students, 12% mature students and 67% male students (HESA, 2001). Our two case studies involved large groups of students (216 and 97 respectively) with a culturally diverse background, the majority of case study 8 students and just under half of case study 7's students with a first language other than English. Almost half of case study 8 students were mature (over 21 years) and both case studies approximately reflected the national economics student cohort of a 7:3 male to female ratio.

Figure 1: Percentage profile of participants for both case studies
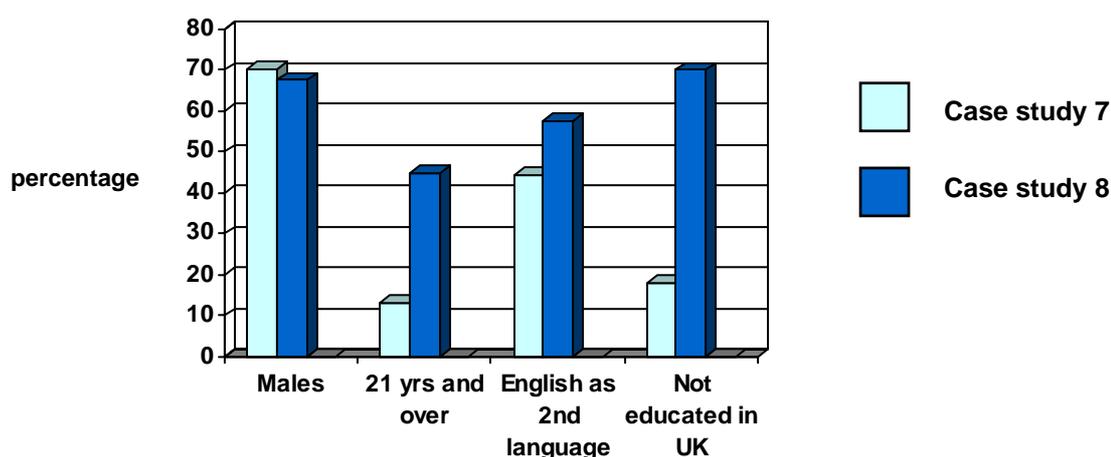
Different learning models

Both case studies presented very different learning models, with case study 7 focusing on collaborative learning in groups and case study 8 following a more traditional lecturer-led format. However, both courses explicitly undertook to involve students actively in their learning and to use VLEs to involve students in collaboration and discussion, as well as to provide resources.

VLEs used a resource-base

The learning models for both case studies were not fully translated to the online environment, with both case studies experiencing some difficulties with online communication. Primarily the VLEs were used by students to access course information and materials. Both courses to use the VLE to support teaching large groups of students by providing the students with extra support and contact, and reducing their own administrative load.

Working online positive motivator

Working online and help and support from the VLE registered as large positive motivators for both case studies, and many students commented on the usefulness and motivating effect of having module resources at their finger-tips when they wanted to use them. However, many students became less confident over the course of the modules, about learning and communicating online.

Issues of confidence?

Students who were motivated in their subject and confident in themselves to do well in the module had higher levels of confidence in using a VLE. Females and students with a first language other than English were less confident in both themselves and their subject and made greater use of VLEs (females in case study 7 and non-native English speakers in case study 8). Along with the many positive comments about using a VLE this goes some way to suggest that VLEs can provide useful support.

Issues of communication, roles and authority

Cultural differences, including language competence, previous teaching and learning modes and attitudes, and modes of address in our case studies contributed to difficulties in online communications, for example low levels of participation in online discussion in case study 8.

Tutors in our case studies did not necessarily take on the roles of guides or facilitators as a result of their VLE learning models. In case study 7 the tutor had a facilitation role and the students viewed themselves as independent learners, but this was intrinsic to the learning model and not attributable to the VLE. In case study 8, conversely the tutor had a strong leadership and expert role, reflecting a traditional learning model. Cultural differences may have also contributed to issues over roles and authority within the VLE.

Support gaps

The VLE inductions for students were largely focussed on the technology, but students who were otherwise clearly motivated lost confidence in learning and communicating online, suggesting that they may not have had the necessary online study skills support.

Both tutors had access to pedagogical and technical support, including pedagogical support, but time issues prevented them from accessing it and developing their VLE materials. The tutor from case study 8 recognised a need to see how other people were using VLEs.

Where next?

The data collected from these two case studies is comprehensive and rich, and may still yield more interesting and informative findings. In particular the following issues would be worthy of further analysis:
- cultural, gender and age issues
- transferring a collaborative face-to-face learning model to an equivalent online model.

Further data collection is also being considered including:
- expanding the number of case studies to provide more generalisable and significant data and information
- revisiting the students in our 2 case studies in the coming two years and comparing their later experiences and attitudes of VLEs.

As a result of this study and in order to enhance and develop our support of Economics lecturers, Economics LTSN is:
- commissioning new case studies to be available online, including ones that give examples of innovative and successful use of online communications, support of culturally diverse students and supporting students' online study skills
- developing a new paper-based and online chapter of our Handbook for Economics lectures, focussed on online communications
- developing our VLE workshops for lecturers to reflect our findings
- reviewing how we might best support lecturers in their support of Economics students' online study skills.