

SOLE Case Study Series



Hospitality Leisure Sport and Tourism

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Website: <http://sole.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/>

Executive Summary

This is the summary of the final report, which analyses the results of a study conducted during 2003 of a full-time and campus-based year 1 module in Business Research Methods as part of programmes in Hospitality and Tourism Management (case study 9). This case study took place in a UK University using Lotus Learning Space as the VLE platform. The research was carried out on behalf of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (Hospitality Leisure Sport and Tourism) as part of the Students Online Learning 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-centred 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:

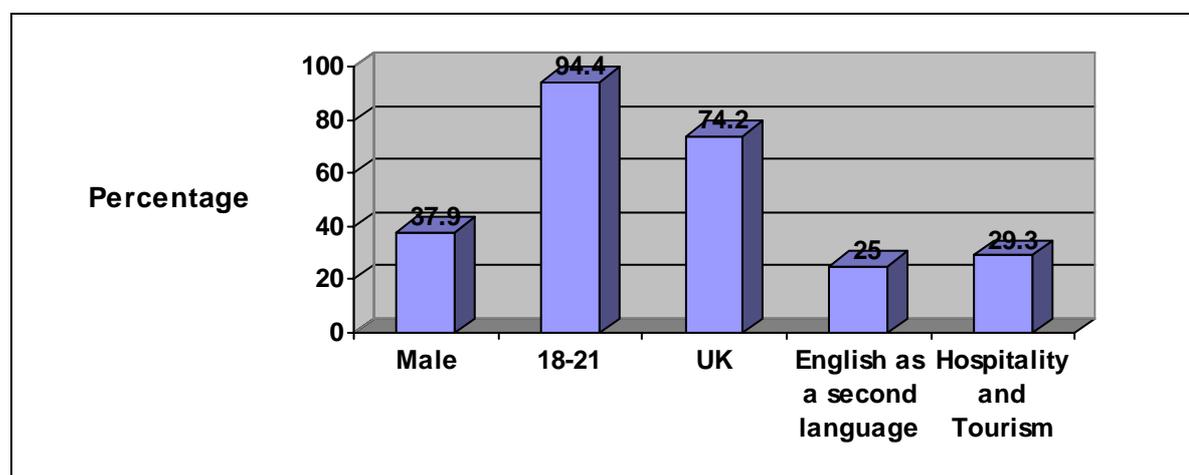
- Student questionnaires (two - one at the start of the module and one at the end)
- Student diaries (two – one in week 3 and one three weeks before the end of the module)
- Individual student interviews (at the end of the module)
- Tutor interviews (two – one at the start of the module and one at the end).

The following secondary sources were consulted:

- The teaching and learning strategy of the institution
- Details of student behaviour in the VLE (e.g. number of times logged on and activities undertaken) where available

Profile of participants

The student cohort examined is a large culturally diverse group in the first year of a series of business management programmes.



Learning model

The case study showed a module in the third iteration of delivery as an online module and offered a sophisticated use of the VLE to deliver the subject with an explicitly constructivist approach, allowing the students to take a large part of the responsibility for their own learning, but supported by an experienced team of tutors in both online and face to face modes. The module was delivered using a blended approach with lectures and tutorials available in addition to the overall and group activities developed through the VLE itself. The module was delivered in this way to facilitate the variety of activities included in the teaching, including links to industry based 'external speakers' in the discussion forum, for sound pedagogic reasons as well as to manage the teaching of a group of around 400 students.

Motivation and confidence

Generally students approached using the VLE in a positive light but there is no doubt that some were apprehensive and resistant to it, which could be related to a lack of confidence in its use. While confidence in using the internet, working and learning online and obtaining information from the VLE grew over the duration of the module, confidence in the subject actually declined – potentially due to the imminent onset of exams following the second survey. General motivation also fell over the module, but a strong correlation was established between confidence in the subject and motivation.

Students were positively motivated by their fellow students, their tutors, personal needs and help and support from the tutor, but found course administration, technological issues, the help and support in the VLE and the physical location as negative motivators.

There is clear evidence that female students felt less confident in using the VLE and consequently were less motivated by working online than their male counterparts. Students following programmes in hospitality and tourism also found working on line less motivating and were also put off by the technological issues.

Use of communications and resources

Students made good use of the online discussion facilities within the VLE and made intensive use of the VLE especially at the start of the module. This however did not affect attendance at the lecture sessions, but attendance at tutorials was split into two groups. While the weaker students and the stronger students attended face to face tutorials, the 'average' students preferred to work online in their own time. There was still a keen interest in maintaining face to face interaction and attendance at lectures continued to be high despite PowerPoint slides with voice over being available in the VLE.

There was some division of opinion about methods of communicating in the VLE. While the tutor was happy with asynchronous communication and felt this offered positive benefits for learning and for time management, some students expressed an interest in the immediacy of real time communication through a chat room facility, which was not available using this VLE tool.

Despite the sophisticated set of communication modalities provided through the VLE, there is still considerable evidence that students still looked for personal face to face contact with their tutors and felt that the face to face element had contributed to their learning.

Roles and responsibilities

The tutors in this case strongly believed in their role as facilitators of learning and acted in this way throughout the module to encourage students to put more of their input into the learning process and give them more confidence with the subject matter. While the students did participate well in all the course room discussions and there was obvious evidence of learning taking place, whether the students understood the philosophy of the pedagogy is questionable, and whether they would have been more involved with the module if they had understood the basis of its design is also open for discussion.

Despite the explicit wish to involve the students directly in the learning, another benefit of the VLE for the tutors was to have better control over the progress of the module with a very large group and a complex teaching and assessment strategy.

The concept of 'virtual presence' was also raised in terms not only of the tutor's style of facilitating online discussions but also in terms of maintaining a level of personal intimacy with others through the electronic medium, which also extended to the idea of developing online group cohesiveness.

Support issues

Students do not automatically take to online learning and need careful introduction to the approach, not only in terms of the technological issues of access and passwords and finding your way around but also in terms of how to take part in online discussions, how to be part of an online group – indeed a whole series of skills they could form part of an online learning skill set.

Support for academics is also important recognising the commitment of time and resources that goes into developing a module in a suitable online form. As was the case with students there is a need for tutors to understand the technology of the VLE but, perhaps more importantly, to understand and be explicit about the pedagogy of the VLE and how they intend to use it.

Further research

Suggestions for developing this current study through further research include:

- Factors affecting the motivation of students
- Differences between groups of students
- Designing effective online pedagogy
- Developing an online learning skill set
- Exploring then issues of virtual presence