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Distance education accounting students' perceptions of social media integration

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Abstract

Online student support is frequently used by distance education institutions worldwide, but in South Africa it remains a challenge to educators as not all students have access or can afford using the internet regularly. However, as most students at the University of South Africa (Unisa), a distance education institution, have mobile phones, opportunities emerge for academics to make use of social media. Accounting lecturers incorporated a number of social media applications into a second-year module and on the basis of the evidence provided it is evident that using social media can enhance the teaching and learning of Accounting.

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1. Introduction

There is a crying need for professional accountants in South Africa. This has been confirmed in a study commissioned by the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) in 2008 who then estimated that South Africa was short of 17 000 accountants and 5 000 chartered accountants (CAs) (Enslin-Payne, 2011; Innocenti, 2009; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012). A CA candidate can qualify within seven years, but this is not the norm in South Africa as on average only one out of five students who start will successfully pass through university within the allotted timeframe (Van der Post, 2010). This results in an annual growth in the CA profession of only

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around 5% (Bates & Poole, 2003; Bates, 2005; Bean & Eaton, 2000:48; Enslin-Payne, 2011) which will definitely not ease the shortage soon.

Before a CA candidate can write SAICA's qualifying examination (QE) in South Africa, the candidate must obtain a BCom Accounting (CA stream) degree and pass a Certificate in Theory of Accounting (CTA) postgraduate qualification at an accredited university (Van der Post, 2010). These undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications are offered by most residential universities as well as the University of South Africa (Unisa), the largest distance education (DE) and open distance learning (ODL) institution in the country (University of South Africa, 2013). Although Unisa has been offering its undergraduate BCompt degree (the required BCom Accounting degree for the CA stream) and the CTA postgraduate qualification for many years, the number of Unisa students passing the QE examination has been low (2009–37.8%) when compared to residential universities (2009–62.2%) (Olivier & Bulman, 2009). There is thus an urgent need to increase the success rate of both the BCompt and the CTA postgraduate DE students at Unisa as this will inevitably help to alleviate the shortage of accountants and CAs in South Africa.

Research by a variety of scholars in the DE and ODL fields have established that students' success depends not only on the quality of the learning package, but also on the quality and scope of support given to these students (Bates, 2005; Birch & Volkov, 2007:291; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2012; Simpson, 2008:159; Waddoups & Howell, 2002:1). An important theory which focuses on students' support and success is Holmberg's theory of didactic conversation (Saba, 2003:4). Holmberg is of the opinion that if facilitators practice an empathetic approach in DE, their students' learning outcomes will improve (Bernath & Vidal, 2007:432; Simonson et al., 2012:48). Holmberg further argues that communication within a natural conversation can be understood and remembered easily and that the concept of conversation can be successfully translated for use by media and made available to DE students (Holmberg, 2003; Simonson et al., 2012). Holmberg's theory further states that this feeling of connectedness tends to promote study pleasure and motivation, particularly if well-developed instructional materials exist and two-way communication supports study (Holmberg, 2003; Simonson et al., 2012).

Two-way conversation is indeed necessary in the field of accounting studies, as students often struggle to understand different concepts and calculations. Although the use of computers and the internet have given DE a new dimension, this is not always the case in South Africa as many of the registered students at Unisa come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and live in remote areas which have poor infrastructure and lack sustained electricity supply. Research conducted in the past confirmed that not all the students in a second-year Accounting course (FAC2602) have access to computers and to the internet (Prinsloo & Van Rooyen, 2007:59). If the FAC2602 lecturers thus want to increase communication between lecturers and students, they have to consider making use of a technology to which almost all students have access and which they can afford. As previous research indicated that most students have a mobile phone (Van Rooyen, 2010:47), the FAC2602 lecturers decided to make use of mobile phones and social media application software (apps) such as Facebook, Twitter, Blackberry Messaging (BBM), Whatsapp and MXit to assist students. The FAC2602 students registered during the first semester of 2012 were invited to make use of the apps to ask the lecturers questions and to communicate with other students via these platforms. This research project explored the possibilities of assisting these students in a more synchronous manner. Students were able to discuss problems with their lecturers during the day, at night and over weekends via these social media apps. Students also formed study groups and regularly communicated with other students on the same module. Limited research has been conducted on the use of social media to enhance student support through deductive conversation in the field of accounting education and more particularly in South Africa. The research project reported in this paper was part of a case study examining the impact of technologies on Accounting students' retention and success rate at Unisa. Obtaining both quantitative and qualitative data from students, this paper reports on Accounting students' perceptions on the possibilities of using social media apps to support them with their studies.

2. Research design and method

As explained previously, during the first semester of 2012, social media was introduced in the FAC2602 module to assist students with their studies. At the end of the first semester of 2012, these students were asked to provide

feedback regarding their perceptions and experiences on the possibilities of using social media to assist with teaching and learning.

2.1. Research design

As part of a case study, this project used a mixed-method design which combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches for data collection and analysis. An online LimeSurvey questionnaire (LimeSurvey, 2014) with both closed and open ended questions was designed and the link to the questionnaire was sent to all students registered for the FAC2602 module. In addition to a few demographic questions, the students were asked to give feedback on the following five questions:

- a. With regard to the use of different technologies in the FAC2602 module, with which one of the following statements do you agree?
 - I would prefer to study without technology interventions.
 - I would prefer fewer technology interventions in the module.
 - I would prefer the use of technology as is currently the case.
 - I would prefer the use of more technologies in the module.
- b. What are your perceptions with regard to the use of technologies in the FAC2602 module?
- c. With regard to the use of technologies in a Unisa module, with which one of the following do you agree?
 - I think the use of technologies makes studying at Unisa easier and more interesting.
 - I do not think the use of technologies in Unisa modules is helping me.
 - I think the use of technologies interferes with my studies.
- d. What would you change with regard the use of technologies at Unisa?
- e. What are your perceptions on the use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, BBM, Whatsapp, MXit etc) in academic support?

2.2 Participants

The participants in the study were the second-year Accounting students registered in die first semester of 2012. The link to the questionnaire was made available to students between 2 June 2012 and 6 August 2012. A total of 2 121 students were registered for the FAC2602 module during the first semester of 2012; 155 students completed the questionnaire which represents 7.3% of the registered students during that semester. Although this was a small percentage, the data obtained assisted the lecturers to plan future student support strategies.

2.3 Data analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Statistics version 21 and the three open-ended questions using Atlas.ti®. All data are reported anonymously, the extracts are direct quotes and grammar, punctuation and spelling errors have not been corrected.

3. Findings

Both quantitative and qualitative data were received from the FAC2602 students and are discussed below.

3.1. Results and discussion of the quantitative data

Feedback from the first question regarding the use of technologies in the FAC2602 indicated a large number of participants in favour of the use of technologies in the module. The fact that almost 94% of the participants supported the use of technologies in the FAC2602 module, created opportunities for lecturers to incorporate even more technologies into the module to assist students (See Figure 1).

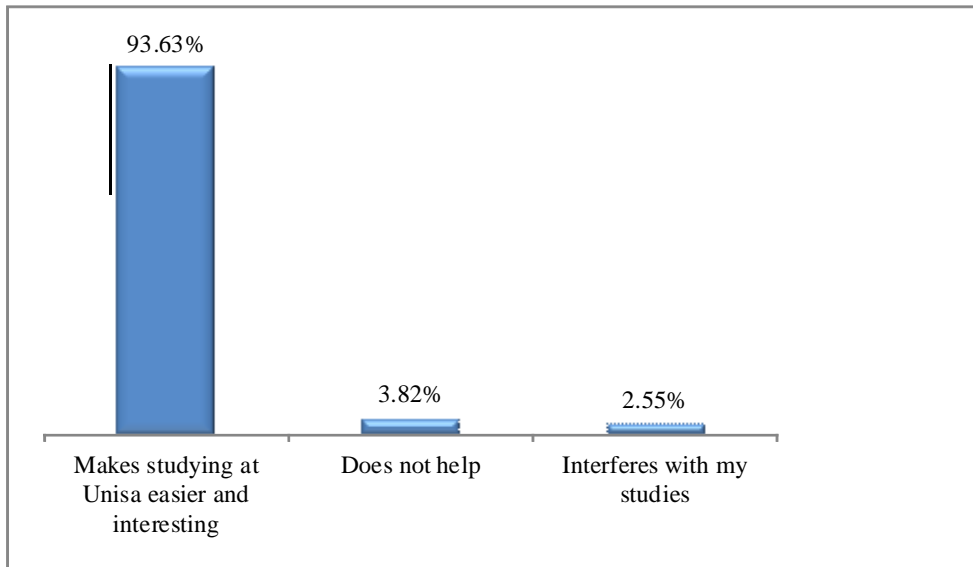


Figure 1. Use of technologies in the FAC2602 module

Subsequently, the participants were asked to indicate the effect the use of technologies had on their studies at Unisa. Once again a large number of participants (93.63%) said it made studying at Unisa easier and more interesting (See Figure 2).

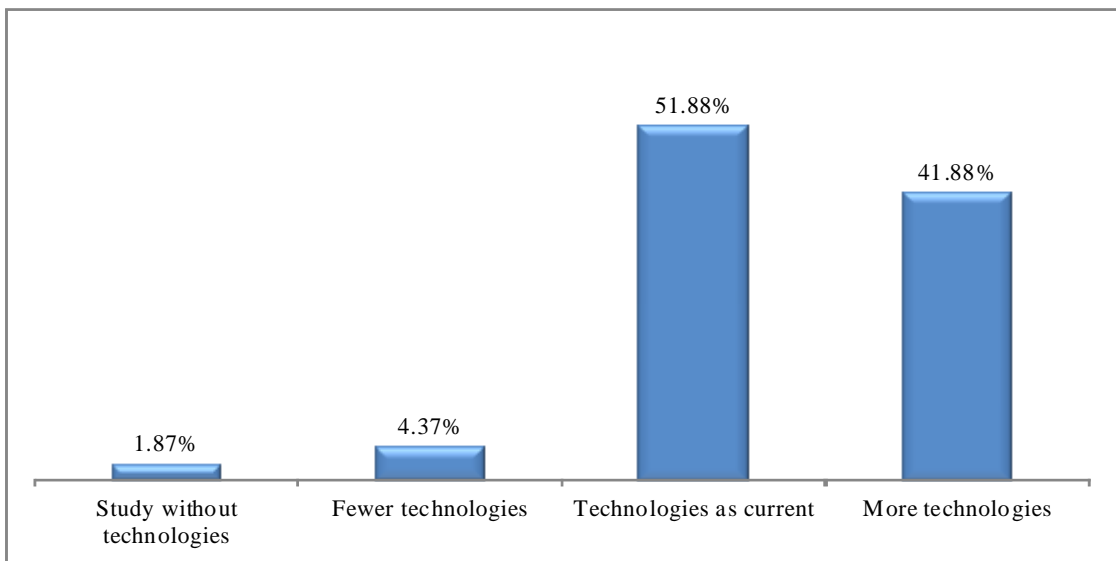


Figure 2. Use of technologies at Unisa

3.2 Results and discussion of the qualitative data

The results from the open-ended questions are briefly presented here according to three main themes that emerged:

- Perceptions on the use of technologies in the FAC2602 module
- Perceptions on the use of social media for academic support at Unisa
- Possible changes regarding the current use of technologies at Unisa

It was evident from the feedback that most of the participants perceived the current use of technologies in the FAC2602 module positively. Many of the participants emphasised the greater access they have to study materials, as may be seen in the following responses:

The use of technologies in the FAC2602 module was very helpful and something I would like to see more of. It created greater access to more study material and tools.

as well as

It is helpful. Not everyone has access to all technologies. Therefore it is good to try and accommodate all technologies so that you can have access to those you do can use.

Some of the participants confirmed the problems they often encounter with online technologies but by using mobile technologies they could overcome some of these problems, for example

As a full time working student, I do not always have access to my e-mails, but with the mobile technologies, it was much easier, as I believe that 95% of all students have cell phones, so it is much more accessible.

and

Problems are solved anywhere and anytime students don't have to go home or cafe to access computers and internet.

Participants were of the opinion that students enjoy the use of social media, as expressed by one participant *Students always got smile when they get messages from their social media, this reduces the frustration and emotional tension not to able to access information as required .*

and others praised the incorporation of mobile technologies in the following manner

The world is fast becoming all online and it is enterprising of UNISA to try adapting and keeping up by making use of mobile technologies and social networks and cell phones, and I am sure many students appreciate this.

as they perceive this way of communication being effective at Unisa as is evident in

Mobile technologies are an excellent form of communication, as almost every UNISA students has a cell phone and it brings the students at different places.

On the other hand, there were also some negative comments from participants regarding the current use of technologies, as seen in the following responses:

using a mobile phone is not my preference to communicate with the lecturer or other student.

as well as

Those would interrupt my studies. You can not seriously expect me to follow FAC2602 on twitter. Sorry I do not agree with that. Social media and studies do not go together.

Concerns regarding connectivity and access were once again emphasised, as one participant mentioned *internet and cell phone connectivity may not be available in the more rural area.*

and another said

As much as the facilities are there on the FAC2602 but I do not have access to some always.

However, perceptions obtained from the participants regarding the use of social media for academic support at Unisa were generally positive, as may be seen from the following responses:

It is beneficial because the technology is within reach and can be accessed at any time.

and

Easier and cheaper form of communication and fast access. Much preferred.

Many of the participants also highlighted the fact that they use some of the social media apps already and are thus familiar with the apps, for example

I like it, especially BBM and Whatsapp, because I got access on them.

and

I found BBM very useful, and also found the group to be inspiring and supportive.

as well as

It is a great idea as some of us use it and some are cheaper most students can afford them. I Prefer BBM, Twitter and Whatsapp.

Participants were of the opinion that mobile technology can play an important role, as some of the participants emphasised

Well the use of mobile technologies is the way to go, because student and/or employees are working off their blackberries, ipads, smartphones.etc but what about the students who don't have access to these technologies.

and

I also think that more students have access to MXit, Facebook, etc. via their mobile phones than they have to a computer with internet connection, which also makes it a better form of communication.

and also

Mobile technologies are an excellent form of communication, as almost every UNISA students has a cell phone and it brings the students at different places.

Once again some of the feedback reflected a less enthusiastic view on the possibilities of using social media for academic support, as some were saying

I hate chatting apps, especially blackberry, I do have Facebook but I hardly log on.

as well as

Some are a waste of time, I only use Whatsapp to communicate with my family and colleagues and the few close friend I have.

and

None - I am not on Facebook, Twitter etc. AND I do not want to be on it.

Regarding the changes participants would recommend on the use of technologies at Unisa, the following are ideas received from the participants:

I won't really change anything, and UNISA can certainly use technology to communicate with students as much as they can, just don't take away our good old fashioned hard copy study material!!!!

and

Great potential. Lecturers who can be actively (on a daily basis) be involved on something like a Facebook page for the module can build a relationship with the students in the same way public questions in a classroom situation can be addressed. Great potential there. Also build a student community feeling.

Some of the participants also want other modules to make use of these apps, as was seen in the following responses:

Facebook page per module will be useful. Students can have conversations on the page's wall post suggestions in the same way as the myUnisa forums, just with better usability.

and

I think it is a wonderful idea and definitely think the other modules should consider doing this as wel.

as well as

I would recommend the use of technologies in other modules, because it makes it easier, for student to stay encouraged and abreast with the module and schedule.

Three of the participants almost summarised the whole project by saying

Most of students almost all do have the mobile and social media you have mentioned so it for their convenience to have good quality of communication and clear contact with their lecturer. Whatsapp and Facebook are good two-way of communication, but not all students might have access to Whatsapp because certain type of cell phones can accept Whatsapp.

and

Because most students have social media, and with Unisa being a distance learning institution; mobile

technology plays an important role that serves a link between the lecturer and student. Firstly it's cheaper to write a message/comment/questions/clarity regarding the module, and the lecturer can then answer/advise, thus making it an interactive session.

and finally

Most students are more familiar with MXit, Whatsapp, etc., than with email - I think they also feel more comfortable using this type of media to communicate, which will give them the confidence to speak up if they struggle with a concept. I also think that more students have access to MXit, Facebook, etc. via their mobile phones than they have to a computer with internet connection, which also makes it a better form of communication.

4. Conclusion

In general, feedback received from the participants were positive regarding the possibilities of using technologies and more specific social media for academic support at Unisa. The fact that Accounting modules at Unisa need to increase students' success rates and the possibilities these social media apps now provide to lecturers, make this indeed an opportunity to explore more rigorously. These readily available and affordably technologies have the capability to increase didactic conversation, which is a critical ingredient for student success in the DE and ODL environment. Technologies are fast becoming a part of the instructional process and although the use of social media for academic support has only just begun, it can be a valuable tool as can be seen by the response of a participant who said *I have not used social media for academic support but I believe there is a place for it seeing that social media is part of our everyday life*. Therefore lecturers need to remind themselves that students are, as a participant correctly stated, *part of a generation that mostly communicates via mobile technologies*. Social media can indeed assist Accounting lecturers at Unisa to answer to the cry for more professional Accountants in South Africa.

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