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Use of VLE apps in business education: Challenges and Emerging Issues?

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HE institutions are investing in mobile applications (apps) for tablet and smart-phones, enabling students to access their Institution's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) without restrictions on time and place. For students in HE Institutions a smart phone represents a 'key social connector and a learning tool', (BlackBoard.com, 2013) and reduces the issues with wireless technology (Benson & Morgan, 2012). The 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) in higher education today are used to technology and increasingly expect mobile forms of communication and social networking, which can aid engagement (Okoro, 2012). Earlier research (Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2012) indicated that students prefer to separate their private and study activities, particularly on social media such as Facebook. Potential technical issues, and the most appropriate pedagogic approaches, are still unclear.

The research is based on a case study of launch of a mobile application of Blackboard VLE in a UK HE Business School. Usage levels are analysed, along with short surveys with Business School students and staff (still ongoing) regarding their use of mobile systems for both learning and social networking, attitudes to usage, along with reasons for using or not using the system,

The ability to take part in mobile collaborative discussions and particularly social media linked to their coursework could increase engagement of the increasingly technologically 'savvy' HE students. It may encourage those not yet fully aware of the business requirements of technology use to gain important skills that will increase their social capital and employability. However it will not happen without substantial work by academics to make appropriate use of the systems. The technological investment is just a small part of what is needed to ensure the engagement objective is met. We recommend that staff receive specific support to develop approaches to the VLE, including social media, that will enhance engagement through mobile apps.

We will also discuss the pedagogic implications of developing learning systems that work well on an app but remain challenging and interesting to students. There may be new pedagogical approaches that make full use of the potential of mobile. A challenge for HEI's is to adapt rapidly to new developments in this increasingly fast-changing technological society, we will discuss the implications of our findings for the incorporation of other innovations that might emerge in the future.

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