

The Online Experience – The Students’ Perspective

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Introduction

Online delivery of teaching is rapidly becoming important for tertiary institutions as they endeavour to broaden their catchment areas for international students in an increasingly competitive environment. Whilst the urge to implement cutting edge technology is often enticing, the questions remains as to how best to go about online delivery of courses and how well institutions are able to meet the needs of both teachers and students utilising various online learning systems. (Allen & Seaman 2005)

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is following the international trend of utilising the Internet as a means of course delivery, either as a complement to or a replacement of other modes of delivery. This is, maybe, unsurprising, as its unique nature of having 12 member countries has meant distance education has always been an important aspect of the delivery of USP courses. However, although information and communication technology (ICT) is widely recognised as being “the key to ending the tyranny of distance” (Pacific Islands Forum 2006: 1) there are a number of barriers to the effective use of such technologies. These include low computer literacy and technological barriers such as slow or unreliable Internet connections access (Pacific Islands Forum 2006). It is therefore very important to examine how Pacific Island students, as a unique group that may face special challenges, experience and respond to online delivery of courses.

This article aims to explore students’ experiences of online course delivery based on feedback from students enrolled in law and undertaking the compulsory first year unit Legal Method and Research (LA 102) in 2004 and 2005. It can be assumed that, for the majority of students undertaking LA 102, it is both their first year studying law and their first experience studying online. The primary purpose of this paper is to scrutinise the major issues that were anticipated by the students and to examine whether they

translated into reality throughout the semester. Furthermore, it considers solutions that could be implemented to address the biggest problems that these students faced.

Background

USP began to offer law courses at certificate, or pre-degree, level in 1985. All of these courses were offered through print-based distance education, in which the student was provided with books of lecture notes and readings. Offerings at LLB level commenced in 1994. All of the first year and some of the second year LLB courses were initially offered both through face-to-face teaching and print-based distance education. In 1998 the School of Law began to develop online delivery, and by 2005 had phased out all print-based distance education. Currently, all compulsory and most elective units for the undergraduate law degree are offered online as well as face-to-face.

LA 102

LA 102 introduces students to a range of generic and legal skills, including reading and writing, legal research and legal problem-solving. It also introduces students to the notion of law being a profession, and what ethical obligations this creates for lawyers. When LA 102 was first developed for distance education in 1999, it was offered in semester 1 as an on-campus course, and in semester 2 as a print-based distance course. In 2002 the print-based materials were scanned and uploaded so as to be available to all students through the Internet, but these materials were not developed for online teaching in any way and the course was not offered as an online course in that year. In 2003 and 2004, LA 102 was offered in semester 1 as an on-campus course and an online course, and in semester 2 as a print-based distance course. In 2005 the print-based distance version of the course was not offered, in part because there had been so many modifications to the online material that sections of the print-based course were obsolete. In 2006, following a review of all first year courses, LA 102 was phased out and replaced with LA 112, Legislation.

Table 1: student enrolments in LA102 from 2002 - 2006

Year	Total LA 102 students	Total online students	Total on-campus students [Emalus]	Total print-based students
2002	170	Not offered	23	147
2003	216	72	32	112
2004	275	77	36	162

As Table 1 indicates, whilst distance students still preferred to study using print-based material, when they were first offered the option of studying online, online enrolments exceeded those of face-to-face students from the outset. There was, however, a considerable drop in total enrolments in 2005, when the print-based materials were phased out. There are a number of possible explanations for this. Studying a print-based course is cheaper than studying an online course, so the higher fees may have discouraged some students from enrolling. Students may not have enrolled in LA 102 in semester 1 as they were expecting it to be offered in semester 2. Students may not have been confident to enrol in an online course and so chose not to study law at all.

Whilst issues related to student fees and the timing of course offerings are out of the hands of lecturers, we are able to help in providing a learning environment in which students feel confident. In order to be able to do this we have to first find out why students may not be confident of a particular learning environment and then identify strategies to overcome students' fears. It is the first part of this process, identifying students' fears in relation to the online learning environment, which prompted the development of this article.

Methodology

As part of their course involvement for LA 102, both online and on-campus students were encouraged to participate in the online discussion forum. This is an Internet-based online forum that equates to an asynchronous electronic chat room where students are able to ask questions of their online tutors or of one another. Similarly, they may answer questions posed

by either the online tutor or other students. Any person who is enrolled in the course is able to read all questions and answers posted on the forum.

As part of their course assessment, online students were required to answer a series of tutorial questions that were posted on the discussion forum. Each student was required to post an individual answer to each tutorial question on the forum, which was then marked by the online tutor. Whilst on campus students could also answer these questions, their answers did not form part of their overall course assessment.

Question 2 Semester 1, 2004 reads as follows:

LA 102 is an online course. Some of you might be nervous about studying online. Some of you might really like this form of study. If you have any comments or questions about online study post them now. Let me know if there is anything that you are worried about and I might be able to help. If you are looking forward to online study tell us all why – your comments will provide encouragement to others.

Question 15 Semester 1, 2004 reads as follows:

Imagine that a new law student has come to you to ask advice on how to go about studying an online course. What advice would you give him or her?

Similar questions were asked in weeks 2 and 15 of semester 1, 2005, the only difference being that in question 2 there was more of an emphasis on students expressing their concerns rather than their positive expectations. The main reason for this shift in emphasis was so that the online tutors could address such concerns at an early stage. As such, the responses to question 2 in 2005 appeared to exhibit a greater negative bias.

The data that is analysed in this paper is gathered from the discussion forum postings to these questions. Given the data gathering methodology, this paper does not hold itself out to be an empirical study. At the time the questions were put to the students, it was only with the intention of reviewing their experiences by way of an impressionistic approach.

Instead, the questions were designed to be able both to provide immediate responses to students and to take the form of a preliminary survey of issues law students at USP faced in relation to online study.

The respondents

For the purposes of analysing the 2004 group, all answers posted by online and on-campus students form part of the results discussed. With the 2005 group, only answers posted by online students form part of the results discussed.

Table 2: Responses, 2004 and 2005

Year	Total students	# response to q. 2	% response to q. 2	# response to q. 15	% response to q. 15
2004	113	28	25%	41	36%
2005	126	45	36%	60	48%

Whilst there was a reasonable number of responses to each of the questions, the respondents were self-selecting, and it is probably safe to assume that those who responded tended to be amongst the more confident users of the online environment. This means that some of the more significant barriers preventing some students from ever going online were not identified through this research.

Other difficulties

In 2004 the number of students who made each response was recorded. Unfortunately, technical issues meant that data from 2005 was lost before this part of the analysis was completed. This means that it is not possible to identify the most frequently raised difficulties.

Results

Fears and apprehensions in relation to studying online as expressed by students in the first weeks of the course

These results came from responses to question 2. In 2004 some new

students at the beginning of LA 102 identified a variety of positive benefits that they anticipated from studying online, including that they expected online study:

- would improve IT skills (identified by 3 students);
- would improve self discipline (2);
- would improve research skills using web (3);
- would speed up response times to questions and assignments (2);
- would be interesting and challenging, which would make study more interesting (8);
- would be a more convenient and flexible form of study than print or face-to-face study (5).

In 2005 the question did not include anticipated benefits and focussed solely on identifying students' fears and anticipated problems, some of which arose from initial experiences of the system. For the purposes of analysis, students' responses have been grouped into five categories surrounding issues relating to student skills; technical/IT matters; social/personal factors; the staff/student relationship; and resources. See Table 3.

Positive and negative aspects of studying online as expressed by students in the last week of the course.

These data, which were drawn from responses to question 15, are organised using the same classifications identified above and shown in Table 4.

Suggestions and strategies to future online law students

Students' suggestions and strategies (from question 15) are tabulated in Table 5, aside from two students in 2005, who thought the course and, in fact, the entire degree should be offered only in direct mode.

Table 3: Expected difficulties of LA 102 students in relation to studying using online material (question 15)

Category of responses	Survey group	
	2004	2005
Student skills	Apprehensive as poor self discipline (2) Nervous due to lack of familiarity with online method and computers (3) Need assistance with time management skills (2)	Lack of time management skills
Technical/IT matters	Some online materials not accessible (2) Internet download time slow (3) Late receipt of passwords (1)	Information needed to deal with technical problems Disruption of online services due to technical faults or power shortages No access to lecture notes
Social/personal factors	Difficulty using screen with eye problems (2) Prefer to use printed materials (1) Difficulty working in isolation (2) Difficulty with self motivation (1)	Lack of face to face discussion and assistance Difficulty in transition from using print-based materials to online resources
Student/staff relationship		Lack of clarity of USP policies relating to assessment penalties due to technical problems
Resources	Insufficient computers at Laucala campus (4) Poor access to computers living off campus or no personal computer (2) High cost buying own computer (1)	Lack of print-based materials Limited access to texts Need for dedicated computer laboratories for law students Restricted access to computers

Table 4: Positive and negative aspects of online study from LA 102 students in their final week of study

2004 survey group		2005 survey group	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
<i>Student skills</i>			
Improves IT skills (1) Improves research skills (4) Improves understanding of course wk(1) Improves independence (1)		Improves IT skills Promotes time management skills	Tend to miss critical dates Poor IT skills makes difficulties
<i>Technical/IT matters</i>			
Online forum provides ability to talk with other students (2) 24 hour access to materials (2)	Downloading materials difficult and slow (2) Overall connection speed slow (1) Technical problems (4)	Results received faster via email or online than post Computer laboratories more readily accessible at night	Log in time & internet speed often slow Poor access to computers due to demand exceeding supply Computer bookings restricted to 2 hours per session Delays at start semester with password access Technical problems with some online activities Poor IT support in Fiji Computer & server breakdowns Technical system problems
<i>Student / staff relationship</i>			
Faster feedback from online tutors on assignments (1) Easy to contact online tutors via email (1)	No access to lecturers or tutors (1) Lack benefit from direct mode teaching (3)	Good feedback from online tutors. Able to ask personalised questions. anonymously Fast responses from tutors.	Slow responses on forum. Feedback from tutors not always instantaneous.

Resources			
All materials available at start of semester (3) Materials easy to work with (2)	Inability to download materials if no personal computer (1) Poor information about accessing materials online in Tonga (1)	No textbooks needed. Reduces cost of materials. Online materials extensive & cheaper than books. Wider form access to materials via internet.	Dedicated law computer laboratories used by other students. High printing costs. Difficult if no personal computer. Internet access from home expensive especially when upload time slow.
Social / personal factors			
Greater flexibility for working time (3) Different and interesting (3) Online anonymity less intimidating than attending lectures (3)		Limits travel overseas Ability to interact with regional students Study in own time Work at own pace Forum provides good interaction Allows more flexibility for studying Anonymity online	Poor eyesight Isolation of working alone Lack face-to-face discussion

Table 5: Question 15, strategies and suggestions

Student skills	
Develop time management skills and prioritise workload (25)	Keep up, don't get behind
Keep up to date and work consistently (22)	Develop time management skills and personal discipline
Develop skills to cope with system delays and be patient (9)	Check online forum regularly (4)
Use study groups to facilitate discussion (7)	Develop IT skills before starting (4)
Go online regularly to keep abreast of postings	Regular online use 3-4 hours daily
Technical/IT matters	
Use computer labs outside peak hours (1)	Utilise access to Internet efficiently
Back up work in case of technical problems (2)	Book computers in advance (3)
Student/staff relationship	
Use online forum to ask questions of tutor and students (9)	
Resources	
Down load materials at start of semester (5)	Have print-based materials as backup
Buy own computer if possible (2)	Attend computer training
Obtain a copy of old printed materials (1)	

Discussion of results

Positive aspects of online study

It is apparent from examination of the responses to Question 2 that, from the outset, students' apprehensions and expectations covered almost the full range of issues. Whilst many of the fears that were categorised as student skills and social/personal skills, such as the need to be self-disciplined, to have good time management, and the difficulty of working in isolation, apply to students studying by both print and distance education, there were, unsurprisingly, a number of specific concerns related to the lack of experience in using a computer, potential resources issues and potential technical or IT difficulties.

The responses to Question 15 indicate that the positive aspects of online study revolve around student skills and personal and social reasons. In relation to student skills, fears about online studying largely related to time management and lack of familiarity with computers. By the end of semester very few students identified these as being negative aspects of studying online. Rather, a number of students who responded saw that online studying improves IT skills and promotes time management. Similarly social and personal reasons often related to being worried about isolation. Again, by the end of the semester many students, particularly in 2005, identified one of the advantages of studying online as being the ability to interact with regional students through the forum. The anonymity of being online actually helped some students to participate more in class and interact more with the lecturers.

Matters relating to staff and student relationships also tended to form part of the positive aspects of online teaching. Whilst students in both 2004 and 2005 found that online study allowed for faster feedback and personalised contact with teaching staff, some students still wanted personal contact. Some students found that feedback could, at times, be slow.

In each of these areas, whilst there is obviously room for improvement, it would appear that by the end of the semester students who responded were generally happy with the online environment. However, we do not know whether these challenges continued to exist for the large number of online students who did not respond to the discussion forum questions.

Negative aspects of online study

The negative aspects clearly concentrated on technical and resources matters, with the problems that students anticipated in these areas being fewer than what they actually experienced. Whilst it is reassuring for lecturers who have designed and are teaching courses that the main areas for concern are not matters that are within their control, this should still be a concern for course designers who need to take into account slow download speeds and limited access.

Differences between 2004 and 2005

Naturally, there will always be a subjective element involved in an individual student's selection of mode of study and experiences of that study. For some students, studying alone represented a positive factor whereas others felt that the isolation of online study was counter-productive. Similarly, many students viewed the lack of formal lectures and tutorials as giving them more flexibility compared to those who felt they would benefit more from the discipline of a structured teaching environment. Students were not asked why they chose a particular mode of study but obviously the personal, social and possibly financial factors associated with living away from home would be determinative features.

The results suggest that the degree of a student's choice over their mode of study does affect their experience of the learning environment. In 2004 students who could not afford to come to Vanuatu's Emalus Campus to study law face-to-face had two choices for studying law via distance; online or print-based. It can be assumed that the majority of students studying LA 102 via the online mode chose this over the print-based mode of study. In 2005 students no longer had the choice of studying through print-based distance education, and so some students, who could not afford to come to Port Vila to study law on campus, may have felt 'forced' to study online.

This may help to account for why, as a whole, students in 2004 were less apprehensive of studying online and, at the end of the course, were more positive about the experience than the 2005 cohort.

Another possibility is that the increase in the online class size between 2004 and 2005 affected students' experiences. Obviously higher numbers

of students means more competition for resources. It may also mean that students received less personal attention from their lecturers. The impact of class sizes on students' experiences of online learning bears further examination.

USP responses in 2006

The survey groups' suggested strategies for future students primarily reflected their self-acknowledged and undeveloped personal disciplinary and time management skills and their adverse encounters with poor technical support.

In 2006, in an attempt to address some of the concerns raised, the School of Law prepared an orientation video for online students introducing the Law School staff and the unit each person was teaching, as well as describing all the facilities and resources available to assist students. It also provided a detailed demonstration of how to use the online material and discussed School of Law policies relating to plagiarism and law assignments. This strategy aimed at giving students an 'almost face-to-face' introduction to their lecturers and, by demonstrating the online environment, it also hoped to reassure students that using the online courses would be easy, even for people with little familiarity with computers. In addition, for students who were concerned about the lack of library resources, it demonstrated that the majority of resources needed to study or practise law in the Pacific are now online.

Resources were also increased. Two additional teaching staff were appointed to provide face-to-face tutorials for the increasing number of online students at Laucala campus in Fiji and online assistance to other regional centres. Computer facilities available to law students were also expanded. Many courses were provided to students both online and on CD-ROM. Whilst students still needed to go online to complete activities such as discussion group postings and online tests, the CD-ROMS did provide the lecture notes and readings, and therefore reduced the need for students to go online simply to download material.

Finally, additional online student resource materials were provided regarding the use of the online law system and the Internet and time management and organisational skills. These resources are available to all students and also form part of the teaching material for the first week of one of the first year law courses. The responses of students from 2004 and 2005 in respect of advice that they would give to new law students has been included in this material, so new students can benefit from and build on the experiences of earlier students.

Future Directions

It will be appropriate to evaluate these initiatives, and the program as a whole, in more detail. A comparison of USP's experience with like institutions may also disclose useful information, although the USP region possesses unique features that could make accurate comparison complex. The challenge for the USP region, in the face of limited resources, is to keep pace with the increase in student demand while providing technology that meets current standards. Whereas countries out of the region have ready access to high-speed Internet services at reasonable cost, at present, this is not the Pacific experience and there is a need to constantly reflect on and develop our online teaching strategies in light of these difficulties.

Conclusion

The issues raised in this discussion deserve a deeper analysis than the length of this paper permits. No endeavour has been made, on this occasion, to make meaningful comparisons with like institutions elsewhere or within the region. Nor is there any examination of why students select one learning mode over another. Finally, no separate analysis has been attempted of individual regional centres, nor does the paper include a survey of the quality of online delivery from the teachers' perspective.

However, it is apparent from the examination of the collated student information that, at the beginning of their online experience, their hopes and fears spread across the entire ambit of issues. However, by the end of the semester, the positive aspects of their online experience concerned personal, social and skills issues and the negative aspects were very clearly

positioned in the technical and resource categories. Many of the suggested remedies from the survey groups were well considered and practical and USP moved to address a number of the students' concerns in 2006. An ongoing program for review and development of teaching and learning will be needed in order to ensure that the School of Law's online courses continue to meet various educational objectives.

References

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