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Assessing the Technological Adeptness of University Students in Mauritius

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Abstract

The new generation of students who have grown up surrounded by technology, are often referred to as ‘digital natives’. Living in a digital world, it is quite normal for our young population to use emerging technologies in their daily life, be it the regular use of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter or increasing number of videos being uploaded on You Tube or access to computers, laptops and mobile phones, to name a few. We find a similar growing interest in our young population in Mauritius. This has led to a debate whether there is a need for a change in our pedagogical models to integrate these emerging technologies in our teaching and learning process. There are limited empirical studies on our student population’s access and use of technological devices in education. This paper has as objective to get the answer from the target concerned. A survey of university students from public as well as private institutions in Mauritius was conducted to understand how technology is influencing their social and academic experiences. The results show a varied outcome in terms of usage and adoption of technologies by our young population in their daily activities compared to its use in their studies. While a certain portion of our so called ‘digital natives’ have adopted technologies in their regular activities, there is still some who are non-adopters. Educators and policy makers need to ponder over such diverged results as this may influence their decision while adopting online learning.

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1. Background

From the early 1980s a new generation of students has emerged in higher education. This new generation of students, often referred to as digital natives, have grown up surrounded by technology and are characterized by their ability to multitask, their dependence on technology to maintain social contact, their openness to share content and their ability to rapidly understand and adopt new technologies (Prensky, 2001; Dede, 2005). There is a need for universities to understand, how this new generation of students use technologies in their everyday life and in learning contexts before implementing new policies and practices. (Prensky, 2007), in his study states that digital natives are insistent for new technologies to “be used as part of their education, in part because they are things that the students have already mastered and use in their daily lives, and in part because they realize just how useful they can be.” Conforming to (Prensky, 2001), (Gros, 2003) and (Frاند, 2000) agree that digital natives want to receive information quickly; be adept at processing information rapidly; prefer multitasking and non-linear access to information; have a low tolerance for lectures; prefer active rather than passive learning and rely heavily on communications technologies to access information and to carry out social and professional interactions. Convenience, connection and control are the main characteristics driving the Net Generation to adopt information and communication technologies and this is increasing steadily (ECAR, 2008). However, can this be considered as a general case for all students of the Generation Y? (Kennedy, et al., 2008) showed in his study that not all students have access to, or use the latest technologies. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to better understand the social and academic practices of those students who are at the centre of higher education’s services, policies and facilities.

Many assumptions have been made regarding the use of technologies by the Net Generation students. However studies have come to show that these digital natives are significantly diverse in nature, especially where their academic use of technology is concerned (Lang, 2007). This divergence in technological experiences and ability challenges the implementation of technology enhanced education at the level of universities (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). (Kuh, 2003) concluded in his research on student engagement that universities should not develop policies and practices in the absence of student engagement data or other comparable information. Some research on the Net Generation claim that digital technologies are pivotal in their daily lives (Strauss & Hoew, 2006). While others like (Kennedy , et al., 2006) questions the digital literacy of these Generation Y and their interest in the use of digital technologies for academic purposes. They found that first year students in Australian universities did not use technologies as widely as expected. In fact (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) found in his survey of American students that mature students balancing work, family and study were more likely to use technologies as learning support. University students are diverse in nature, presenting factors such as socio economic conditions, access to services and infrastructure and personal interest in technologies (Gibbons, 2007). The (ECAR, 2008) report states that while students may have access to technologies such as laptops, they decide not to bring them to campus due to issues like weight or fear of theft. The same results are seen for the use of smart phones in the field of mobile learning (NMC , 2010). Studies in the US showed a high usage of social networking sites by students, however not for educational purposes (Ellis & Goodyear, 2010)

In the trend of adopting technology enhanced education, it is crucial for educators to understand students and their academic and social practices with regards to technology use. This need is felt even in Mauritius, as we embark in adopting technology as learning supports. The objective is to provide a contribution as evidence base to support the implementation of learning technology infrastructure at higher education level. For the purpose of this study, an online survey was conducted with target the new generation of students from both public and private tertiary institutions in Mauritius. This paper contributes to a better understanding of students’ experiences and expectations of technologies in their daily life and for their study purposes, with a view to have a more holistic approach to designing a technologically based infrastructure.

2. Context of study

For the purpose of this paper, Mauritius is taken as a case study. Mauritius is a small island state with a population of 1.3 million inhabitants. From (Internet World Statistics) as at June 30, 2012, the internet users totaled to 458 927, representing 35% of the population and as at December 31, 2012, the Facebook users totaled 367,900,

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