The Impact of Employability on Technology Acceptance in Students: Findings from Coventry University London

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand impact of employability on technology acceptance in students from a constructivist perspective.

The growing significance of technology usage in academia prompted this research as well as the need to understand if the technologies that I and my colleagues use on a regular basis were successful in engaging learners. It was imperative to understand if we were meeting the expectations of our students as well as Coventry University London which has invested a great deal into their implementation.

Therefore, 20 students from Coventry University London were interviewed to uncover their thoughts and experiences into their acceptance and ultimate use of learning technologies. These students were interviewed over a two-year period (2016-2017) in order to capture accurate data and keep pace with the ever-evolving and arguably ephemeral nature of technology. Students also participated in focus groups after each set of interviews in order to explore relevant issues in greater depth. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was then applied to ascertain if employability was a significant variable in influencing technology acceptance. It was important to understand if the learning technologies utilised by academics were able to help students gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

The empirical data confirmed the view that learning technologies which had a positive perceived benefit in enhancing employability outcomes play a significant role in engaging an array of international students in their studies.

These findings arguably demonstrate the need for the institution to reconfigure and enhance the clarity of its technology-enhanced learning strategy as well as its level of support to teaching staff. This proposal will allow academics to have sufficient opportunity to effectively utilise and apply learning technologies as part of their own individual pedagogical strategy and students to improve their employability skills as a result.

Key words: Technology acceptance, TAM, international postgraduate students, academics, employability, learning technologies, constructivism.

Introduction

This article examines the relationship between the integration of technology in the curriculum and graduate employability.

Much has been written about embedding learning technologies into higher education curricula. Walker et al. (2014) suggest this is due to increased competition as HEIs seek to address student
expectations though investing in technology software in areas such as communication, online assessment, plagiarism detection and e-portfolios. Kirkwood and Price (2014) add investments in hardware relating to learning management systems (such as Moodle and Blackboard) and mobile devices are commonplace. It can be argued technology use has ‘created the conditions for pedagogic innovation to flourish, enabling academics to employ technologies to support student-centred learning activities’ (Walker et al. 2017: 4). However, as Lai and Smith (2017) argue, despite considerable this investment there is a perception amongst many academics that universities do not offer a clear and robust support strategy to their students. Furthermore, Newman and Beeham (2017) in a study of 22,000 UK learners discovered the use of learning technologies was not as prevalent as thought amongst UK HE institutions with technology being used more for convenience rather than pedagogical purposes. Crucially it was discovered that although 80% of HE learners believed the acquisition of digital skills were important for their future career, there was a perception that only 50% of courses were able to prepare them adequately. This raises serious questions regarding the effectiveness of the investments made by many UK HE institutions. These issues and their impact on technology acceptance in students will be explored throughout the paper.

There are many studies such as these although technology tends to be included as a component rather than as a subject in itself. Thus, identifying specific literature on the impact of interactive learning technologies on technology acceptance in students in UK HE is challenging. Whilst there has been a focus on student satisfaction, student voice and students as partners (see HEA for a full suite of publications and resources), there is limited evidence of a significant body of work exploring this relationship. There is also very little literature that examines acceptability and the introduction of technologies from a student and academic perspective. Moreover, there is no study that takes technological acceptance from an employability perspective into account.

This is surprising as JISC (2017a: n.p.) articulates ‘90% of all new jobs require good digital skills’. Nevertheless, there is concern amongst students that digital skills relevant to their chosen careers are not being addressed effectively at a course level. The same research found 81.5% of students view ‘digital skills’ as relevant to their future careers, raising questions regarding the awareness and expertise of lecturers’ IT capabilities. The report highlights the need to effectively embed these skills into the curriculum in order to enrich the student experience and to improve the professional development of staff and thus developing student employability (JISC 2017b).

The remainder of the article is divided into four sections. First, a description of the teaching and learning context is given. After that, there is a review of the relevant literature. Then I present and analyse the collated data. The final section reflects on the overall process and acknowledges a number of limitations and recommendations associated with the research.

Teaching context

Coventry University London (CUL) was founded in October 2010 and now has over 18 different degree programmes. Coventry University London is a teaching and learning-led institution, with strong links to industry and which is focused on providing opportunities for learning that develop career-ready, and global enterprising graduates.

CUL is a part of the Coventry University Group. Coventry University was named 'University of the Year' in the 2015 Times Higher Education (THE) Awards, has a Gold TEF rating and a ranking of 2nd in the UK for Teaching Excellence and is 13th in the Guardian League Tables 2018 (Guardian, 2018). In recent editions of The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide Coventry University's innovative approach to higher education has been highlighted. They cite the London Campus as an
industry-leading initiative – as well as complimenting various 'eye-catching' courses. CUL promises to deliver “a real business experience” for its students (Coventry University, 2015, n.p.).

International students studying an MBA in International Human Resource Management were selected to participate in this study due to taking the most modules that focused on enhancing employability skills. Interviews and focus groups took place over a two-year period (2016-2017). The demographics of each respondent is listed in appendices 1-4.

There were three research questions to consider:

1. To what extent do employability-related learning technologies have an impact on technology acceptance in students?
2. To determine the impact of the current provision of employability-related learning technologies at CUL.
3. What particular employability-related learning technologies facilitate technology acceptance?

Technology Acceptance Model

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is an information systems model that has been designed to understand how users accept and use a particular technology (Davis, 1989). As can be seen in Figure 1 below, TAM can be used to understand the decision making process when users are presented with a new form of technology. In this study, “employability” is used as an external variable:

Figure 1: TAM

Source: Davis (1989)
As can be seen above, TAM articulates that beliefs (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) influence attitudes which ultimately leads to behavioural change. For instance, if a technology (such as PowerPoint) is perceived to be useful in a future job and/or easy to use there is greater likelihood that a student’s attitude will be positive. This in turn leads to a positive behavioural intention to use and finally actual system use.

TAM asserts perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU) are particularly influential when making the decision to use a certain technology. Davis (1989) defines PU as the extent to which an individual user believes using a technology will improve their job performance. In the context of this paper, “job performance” is interpreted as how technology will enhance students’ performance in their studies as well as their perceived future performance in the workplace. PEOU is explained by Davis (1989) as the extent to which the use of a particular technology is viewed as straightforward and free from effort. These areas subsequently determine student attitudes, behaviour and subsequent actual system use.

Perceived ease of use

Perceived ease of use (PEOU) is viewed by Davis et al. (1989) as being the first and most influential construct in technology acceptance. Venkatesh and Davis (2000: 345) argues there are three areas that influence PEOU – “anchors”, “adjustments” and “experience”. “Anchors” are described as one’s general thinking about a particular technology. “Anchors” is separated into four further areas. The first area is described as self-efficacy and is related to a user’s perceived ability to use technology successfully. The second aspect is articulated as the perceived amount of external control a user believes he/she has. Computer anxiety completes the third area with the perceived amount of playfulness fulfilling the fourth aspect (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000).

“Adjustments” is articulated as the current beliefs a user has regarding a particular technology. Venkatesh and Davis (2000) divide “adjustments” into two areas – “perceived enjoyment” and “objective usability”. These adjustments are based upon individual users’ past experiences with technology.

“Experience” is described as the length of time using a technology which may be positive or negative. Venkatesh and Davis (2000) elucidate experience is associated to both the complexity of the technology as well as to what extent the user received a suitable introduction regarding how to use it.

Perceived usefulness (PU)

Davis et al. (1989) label this construct as the degree to which an individual using a particular technology will perceive the technology as helpful in job performance. Although PU does not elaborate on the specific task at hand, Davis et al. (1989) affirm this element is associated with extrinsic motivators such as financial incentives. For instance, Davis et al. (1989) assert if a technology is not perceived to be useful in accomplishing this aim, there is little likelihood that it will be accepted.

As mentioned above, PU is often influenced by PEOU. However, the PU of a particular technology will not always be considered if it is perceived to be overly complex.
Behavioural intention to use

Behavioural intention to use is an integral part of the technology acceptance model and dependent upon PEOU and/or PU being accepted. As Ajzen (1985) states there should be a clear relationship between behavioural intention and actual system use. In terms of learning technology acceptance, an individual will be more likely to engage in its use if PEOU and/or PU are accepted in positive terms by that user.

TAM’s strengths and weaknesses

With reference to the acceptance of learning technologies, it can be argued if an individual student user believes a particular technology will be useful for their learning and it is seen as straightforward to use there will be greater likelihood of more participation and ultimately greater engagement (Edmunds et al., 2012). The same argument can be applied to academics – if a technology is viewed as easy to use and useful in their jobs, there is greater likelihood it will be accepted and become part of an academic’s teaching strategy. Arguably, TAM’s linear structure can clearly demonstrate the process of technology acceptance as in the examples provided above.

Furthermore, King and He (2006) observe that TAM has been proven to be a popular and statistically robust model particularly due to its qualities regarding transparency and simplicity. It can be further argued that it possesses the potential and flexibility to be used more widely and in a variety of differing contexts (King and He, 2006). However, Bhattacherjee and Premkumar (2004) articulate the perceptions of users regarding technology usage may change over time as they become more confident and familiar. Using the data collected over two longitudinal studies, Bhattacherjee and Premkumar (2004) observed student beliefs and attitudes changed to become more positive and optimistic. In addition, they discovered satisfaction with a specific technology was a key factor in improving attitudes and beliefs. Nonetheless, providing the content is coherent and relevant I believe TAM possesses the flexibility to be applied in various contexts such as in this study.

Research methods

This research will adopt a constructivist approach. In contrast to interpretivism, which believes there are different interpretations of reality, constructivism assumes reality is socially constructed (Creswell, 2012). Constructivists believe reality is constructed via social interactions rather than being interpreted (Creswell, 2012).

As Crotty (1998) elucidates, the constructivist paradigm explains how individuals construct and understand their own particular situation. This means social phenomena is created due to human interpretation of the events they experience. This phenomena is unable to be quantitatively measured as it is qualitative in nature. As Crotty (1998) adds, the constructivist approach looks for understanding of a particular situation as well as values and authentic experiences. This contrasts with positivism which is more objective and more concerned with identifying explanations and confirming or disproving hypotheses. Thus, it is argued the use of a constructivist paradigm will provide myself with the opportunity to discover the true impact of employability on technology acceptance in students and how each negotiate their own realities.
Furthermore, Merriam (1998: 6) claims constructivism is the closest paradigm to qualitative research as ‘the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds’.

Therefore, a qualitative strategy implementing semi-structured interviews and focus groups will be used to investigate and answer the research objectives. Further information on these strategies can be found below:

**Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are argued as the most appropriate strategy for this project in which to discover the most appropriate data due to the fact that they are beneficial in facilitating two-way communication between the interviewer and participant. Unlike structured or unstructured interviews, they allow me to ask further questions based on an initial response. This personalised approach permitted me to ask specific questions when necessary and probe the experiences of the interviewee in order to understand a particular situation in greater context (Babbie, 2007).

Although it is acknowledged as difficult to accomplish in a focus group where many participants are involved, semi-structured interviews were valuable in discussing more sensitive topics once trust was established with each interviewee. I found they were also useful in identifying non-verbal indicators such as attitudes to a topic and in evaluating truthfulness through facial expressions, responses and body language. Another benefit is that respondents were interviewed individually meaning their answers could not be altered by anyone else. The usage and implementation of a standardised question script was particularly helpful in providing greater uniformity and structure to the whole student interview process (ibid).

**Focus groups**

Focus groups were also utilised as an integral aspect of the research project in order to gather further data after each set of interviews were completed.

There are several benefits regarding their use which will now be discussed. First of all, I was able to stimulate the discussion and keep the conversation on track in order to create more appropriate data. Furthermore, they were helpful in generating new ways of thinking due to participants sharing knowledge with each other (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Saunders et al., 2007).

**Piloting**

As Polit et al. (2001: 467) elucidate, a pilot study is a ‘small scale version or trial run in preparation for a major study’. Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) both contend piloting is an essential aspect of any research project in order to enhance the quality of the final inquiry. In addition, Yin (2002: 79) claims a pilot study ‘will help you to refine your data collection plans with respect to both the content of the data and the procedures to be followed’.

Piloting in this study took place with students in 2016 (prior to the first data collection period) in order to understand if the provisional interview questions generated sufficiently detailed and relevant data and to make amendments if necessary. As Fink and Kosekoff (1985) state it is
important for researchers to identify questions that produce the same responses and questions that are unanswered in order to revise them in such circumstances. The piloting process resulted in two questions being omitted due to producing similar responses. The finalised interview and focus group questions can be found in appendices 5-6.

**Sampling and recruiting students**

Purposive sampling was employed due the advantages it possessed in connection to my insider’s perspective (Acharya et al., 2013). Although arguably not as objective as other methods, purposive sampling was useful in identifying particular students who were most exposed to learning technologies. Other forms of sampling such as random sampling, snowball sampling and theoretical sampling were considered but not implemented. Random sampling would have increased the level of validity and reliability although with such a small population to choose from it was concluded that this strategy would not be successful (Ekitan et al. 2016). Therefore, purposive sampling was decided as the most suitable approach to adopt.

I used my own “insider perspective” to recruit students for this research by email as I had a direct link to the environment that was being investigated (Robson, 2011). Arguably, insider research is an appropriate fit for the constructivist paradigm due to it being immersed in multiple realities and can be clearly associated with the role of the researcher in constructing a specific reality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Nonetheless, there are still issues which must be acknowledged. For example, Mercer (2007) argues it is important for researchers to view respondents personally and not universally. In this study, great care was taken to treat participants professionally and as individuals as elucidated by Paley and Lilford (2011).

However, in my own unique situation I believe the role of an insider offered a number of benefits in the research process. Due to my position, I possessed unique knowledge of the university that any outsider would not have. Moreover, I believe I had greater credibility with students due to being familiar to them. Perryman (2011) argues this scenario can lead to the creation of deeper and more authentic data as well as greater trust (Breen 2007).

**Results**

The constructivist approach and application of TAM clearly demonstrated students were much more likely to accept and use a particular technology if it had a positive perceived impact on employability.

For instance, Student F1 commented he was pleased the technologies he learned at CUL could be applied in a future job. This contrasted positively with another university he went to as an undergraduate. This student said he was much more likely to be engaged in a particular software if it could be used in the future. A similar remark was made by Student F2. Moreover, Student D1 stated she was more likely to accept and use a particular technology if it could help her get a better job. This was viewed as a “plus point” although she stated she thought possessing an understanding of technology was not especially helpful in securing a job interview.

Student G1 concurred with the theme of technology being able to enhance employment prospects when stating “Now jobs ask for the basic knowledge of the Microsoft. If you can’t use it, I don’t think you would be able to find a proper job”. This student also thought it was vital to be able to understand how to use PowerPoint effectively. Similar points were made in the first focus group in
2016 with Student D1FG commenting “If I get my career in training and development I will definitely use Kahoot and Socrative” (online quiz applications). These students stated they believed the technologies they used at CUL could be replicated in a future job. Both Student G1 and Student D1FG wanted to be exposed to further technologies that they could use to improve their attractiveness to employers.

The need to use PowerPoint appropriately and to a high level was also observed by Student B1FG who stated it was important to look professional and make a good impression. This student had practiced the PowerPoint techniques she had learned in class in her internship and in doing so was able to catch the attention of her audience. This experience gave her confidence to apply the same or similar techniques in future employment. Student A1FG said she was satisfied with the techniques she had been exposed to and applied although would like to learn more: “I think so far so good but I would still like to know a lot more learning and development techniques because it helps us to utilise them for our careers in the future”.

Business simulations (interactive activities that enable students to experience realistic business scenarios) had positive perceived benefits in improving student engagement in the lesson content as well as enhancing perceived future employability. Student E1, Student F1 and Student A2 all believed simulations were very helpful in providing students with more knowledge and practice of how organisations operate. Student F2 thought simulations were “really engaging”.

Despite the acknowledgement that students were much more likely to accept and use a particular technology if it had positive perceived benefits for their employability, there were a number of comments that the current level of provision was insufficient in accomplishing this aim. For instance, Student A1, Student E2 and Student G2 all stated they were disappointed with the quality and relevance of learning technologies that were used. These students believed technology was used more for hedonistic rather than pedagogical purposes. Moreover, Student B1 and Student AFG1 believed academics did not possess the requisite skills in teaching students how to use technologies effectively. This perception had a negative effect on technology acceptance.

On the other hand, Student C1 believed there was no discernible impact on employability as technology acceptance was “not quite relevant” in securing future employment. However, this student stated he was more likely to use a technology (such as a podcast) if he could use it in an actual job. Nonetheless, there was overwhelming positivity regarding the potential of learning techniques to effectively influence the securing of employment as well as when students started working.

Conclusion

This section will now conclude the article and answer each of the research questions.

Research questions answered:

1. To what extent do employability-related learning technologies have an impact on technology acceptance in students?
It was discovered that employability-related learning technologies do have an impact on technology acceptance. This research has demonstrated that students were much more likely to accept and a technology if it had a positive perceived effect on future employability. There was greater likelihood of students using a technology if it had positive perceived benefits in both securing a job (by enhancing their CV) as well as when they actually started work and could use the techniques they had been taught. This arguably highlights the need for the institution to create a new and more integrated pedagogical strategy that focuses on improving student employability through learning technologies.

2. **To determine the impact of the current provision of employability-related learning technologies at CUL.**

The current provision of learning technologies that focused on the development employability skills was found to be lacking. The results confirm the arguments of Newman and Beetham (2017) who discovered although 80% of HE learners believed the acquisition of digital skills were important for their future career, there was a perception that only 50% of courses were able to prepare them adequately. This finding was prevalent throughout both data collection periods. Students wanted much more input from their teachers (rather than from their classmates) and were disappointed that academics were generally unable to deliver what they needed. There was scope for a great deal of improvement in this area.

3. **What particular employability-related learning technologies facilitate technology acceptance?**

It was discovered there were several specific learning technologies that facilitate greater acceptance in students. For example, students wanted greater exposure to Microsoft applications (particularly Word and Excel) so that they would be able to use them confidently in a future job. Students believed it was important to be able to understand how to use PowerPoint effectively so they could make a good impression in future presentations. Similar points were made regarding the application of interactive software (such as quizzes) which could be used to interact with audiences in future training sessions or workshops. Furthermore, simulations were perceived as very helpful in providing students with more knowledge and practice of how organisations operate. This perception led to greater technology acceptance.

**Limitations**

There are a number of limitations regarding this research which will now be acknowledged. First of all, it was conducted at only one university. As a result, I was unable to generate comparative analysis by analysing several institutions. Moreover, with CUL being a subsidiary of Coventry University the student profile is different (there are more international students) meaning any recommendations may not be entirely relevant and to be able to be replicated in other institutions. Indeed, the results and recommendations (see below) may be more suitable to post-1992
universities rather than older, more established institutions such as those that are members of the Russell Group. The use of purposive sampling can also be questioned as discussed previously although this strategy was useful in identifying specific students who had the greatest exposure to learning technologies.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that these findings are very much based on the analysis of the two-year period in which the study took place. The ephemeral nature of learning technologies may render these results inaccurate for future research as educational technology is likely to have continuously evolved. Nonetheless, these findings are argued as important for similar institutions and particularly CUL so that it is able to deliver the “real business experience” it promises for its students.

**Recommendations for future research**

This section has been constructed with recommendations for the institution firmly in mind. These recommendations will inform the way academics teach and ultimately in the way students learn with technology.

The research has discovered that the institution needs to pay greater attention to the way employability is enhanced by learning technologies. The students in this study were much more likely to accept and use a particular technology if it had positive perceived benefits for their employability. A case in point is the example of simulations which had perceived benefits for both hedonistic purposes as well as being a positive impact on future employability. It is suggested that simulations continue to be a major part of CUL’s learning technologies provision.

It is important that the university effectively liaises with both employers and professional bodies so that they can adequately prepare students to be successful in their future careers. Both employers and professional bodies should have input into the curriculum. It is also suggested that CUL needs to adapt best practice policies from competitors, particularly those that focus on embedding technology into the curriculum.

Further recommendations from JISC (2017a) should be considered. These areas include the development of authentic learning experiences (such as “live projects” where students carry out an activity that can be replicated in a future job). Examples for HR students may include the delivery of a training session and the creation of a recruitment and selection strategy.

All of the above suggestions above should form a unified teaching, learning and assessment strategy that has learning technologies at the centre of its design. It is suggested that there should be a series of CPD training programmes that are available to all academics. This strategy will improve the knowledge, skills and attitudes of academics as well as reducing the possibility of technology anxiety occurring. These training sessions must be mandatory and not optional in order to increase attendance and the ability of everyone on the teaching team.

For the institution, it is recommended that they continue to look for ways to embed innovative and relevant technology into the curriculum. In order to accomplish this aim, academics should be given access to the latest software and hardware that can be used to effectively engage students. Employability should be at the heart of this strategy.

**References**


Appendix 1 – (2016 Student interviews)

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## Appendix 2 - (2016 Student focus group)

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Appendix 3 - (2017 Student interviews)

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Appendix 4 – (2017 Student focus group)

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Appendix 5 – (Interview questions with students)

Interview script with students

Scene-setting

1. Why did you choose to join Coventry University London Campus (CUL)?
2. What subject do you study?
3. Why did you choose this subject?
4. Did you realise technology-enhanced learning was a major part of CUL’s teaching and learning strategy before joining?
5. How is your experience of CUL different from your previous university?
6. Which classes do you like the most? Why?
7. Which classes do you least like? Why?

Teaching style

8. How often have you experienced learning technologies in lectures? Has this been a positive experience? Why/why not?
9. How often have you experienced technology-related activities in seminars? Has this been a positive experience? Why/why not?
10. Does the use of technology in class maintain your interest in a subject? Please explain your answer.
11. Do you feel more satisfied about a module if it uses learning technologies? Please explain your answer.
12. The use of online quizzes, creating YouTube videos, using presentation software etc. are commonly viewed as useful activities in engaging students in seminars and making classes more interactive. To what extent do you find activities such as these useful?
13. What do you think about Moodle?
14. What are your opinions of Turnitin?
15. What do you think are the characteristics of an ‘effective’ teacher that uses technology to engage students?
16. Can certain teachers use learning technologies too much? Please explain your answer.
17. Do you think the use of learning technologies inside and outside the classroom improves your experience? Why/why not?

18. Does the use of learning technologies improve your grades? Why/why not?

19. Does the use of learning technologies and your use of them improve your IT literacy? Why/why not?

20. Do you think learning technologies have an impact on your future employability? Why/why not?

**Nationality and learning technologies**

21. Do you think different nationalities find it more difficult to use learning technologies when compared to others?

22. What do you expect from teachers in terms of using technology?

23. Have your expectations of technology usage at CUL been realised? Why/why not?

24. In your opinion what is the most effective learning technology with regards to engaging and motivating? Please explain your answer.

25. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix 6 – (Focus group questions with students)

1. What particular learning technology has been most useful for your classroom engagement? Please explain your answer.
2. Has this particular learning technology improved your experience and satisfaction? Please explain why/why not.
3. What learning technology has not been so engaging? Why not?
4. Do you think certain nationalities engage more with learning technologies? If so, which nationalities and why do you think this is the case?
5. How do you think students and teachers differ in their attitudes to the effectiveness and adoption of learning technologies?
6. Do you think certain teachers are more confident and proficient than others? Please explain your answer.
7. Has your experience with learning technologies been consistent throughout your course? Please explain your answer.
8. How can teachers use learning technologies most effectively?
9. Have your expectations of technology usage at CUL been realised? Why/why not?
10. Do you think you will use any of the learning technologies you have been introduced to in the future?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?