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Hospitality students' perceptions of digital tools for learning and sustainable development



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ABSTRACT

This paper interprets students' perceptions of how they utilise technology for their learning and the link to sustainability and employability. A focus group approach is adopted with final year undergraduate hospitality students at three academic institutions in the UK, Switzerland and UAE. Diverse perceptions of the relationship between learning activities, eLearning tools, sustainability and employability are revealed. Comparisons are examined to better understand students' perceptions of eLearning tools for sustainability. This paper highlights students' awareness of the role of technology in sustainability and employability and calls on educators to promote a more integrated and multi-disciplinary approach to curriculum design.

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1. Introduction

Technology-enabled learning (Thomas & Thomas, 2012), a growing awareness of sustainable issues at the institutional level (Djordjevic & Cotton, 2011; Yuan & Zuo, 2013) and a concentration on graduate employability skills (Jackson, 2013) are all significant changes in higher education. It has been acknowledged that technology can make a contribution to sustainable development (Ali & Frew, 2012; Kamp, 2006) and Middleton (2009, p. 187) suggests that technology provides students with opportunities for “engaging meaningfully with ideas of sustainability.” Moreover, Pavlova and Huang (2013) have argued that sustainability will be a key graduate employability skill demanded by employers in the near future. Despite the growing body of work in these individual aforementioned areas, there is little academic research investigating these multi-disciplinary subjects. Through this exploratory study, students' perceptions of eLearning tools for sustainable development and the impact on their employability will be investigated. Specifically, the research question is phrased as:

do hospitality students perceive the use of digital (i.e. technology enabled) tools as a facilitator of learning and an enhancer of sustainable development during the learning process and as a contributor to their employability?

Technology enabled learning (also known as eLearning, online learning and digital learning) has been extensively discussed and researched (Bristow, Shepherd, Humphreys, & Ziebell, 2011; Strauss & Hill, 2007). This concept includes

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applications such as virtual learning environment, webinars, blogs, wikis, crowdsourcing, mobile learning and classroom use of social media (London & Hall, 2011). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have invested in such technologies to keep abreast of the rapid technological changes and this new generation of hi-tech immersed students, coined “digital natives” by Prensky (2001), p. 1. More recent research acknowledges a radical shift in the learning process is needed to exploit the use of technology, particularly Web 2.0 (Liburd & Christensen, 2013) in order to develop newer ways of teaching and learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). However, these rapidly morphing technologies pose challenges for educators who struggle to engage students and implement more flexible modes of learning (Eastman, Iyer, & Eastman, 2011). Research exists which demonstrate the relationship between digital tools and how students exploit them in their learning activities (diFilipo, 2011; Kay & Lauricella, 2011) but little is conducted specifically from a hospitality perspective. Therefore in answering the research question, an understanding of how hospitality students use digital tools for their learning activities will be established.

Concurrently, many HEIs have embarked on facilitating sustainable development as a cornerstone in their strategy and this effort has come to the fore with the United Nations declaring 2004–2014 as the decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The most renowned definition of sustainable development originates from the Brundtland Report which declared it as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). This definition is employed as this research focuses on sustainability in higher education. In this paper, we examine hospitality students’ use of digital tools for their learning activities and how this adoption allows them to make a contribution to sustainable development. The term sustainability and sustainable development will be used interchangeably throughout this paper for ease of reading.

Additionally, HEIs have devoted considerable resources into understanding and developing undergraduate employability skills (Jackson, 2013) due to heightened requests from governments and industry for better prepared graduates (Wilton, 2011). There is a large and growing body of research on graduate employability (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Pool & Sewell, 2007) but Tymon (2013) comments that research into undergraduate students’ perceptions of the importance of employability skills is limited. There is less research from a hospitality perspective on students’ perceptions of their employability skills beyond that of Conneally and Egan (2012) that focused on numeracy and Weber, Crawford, Lee, and Dennison (2013) which examined soft skills competencies. To satisfy the research question, this study seeks to understand if students perceive the use of digital tools for sustainable development as contributing to their employability.

The hospitality sector has discovered the advantage of sustainability as a selling point, while recognising that their operations have led to wide-ranging impacts on the environment (Sloan, Legrand, & Chen, 2013). Research indicates that hospitality graduates should have know-how of sustainability (Boley, 2011) and it is imperative for hospitality educators to have advanced knowledge of such contemporary issues to equip students to be successful, competent graduates (Barber, Deale, & Goodman, 2011; Millar, Mao, & Moreo, 2010). Therefore, this paper is significant in a number of ways. It links the specific learning activities to the digital tools that students utilise, which should help educators select the appropriate tools to direct eLearning activities in a more meaningful way. It identifies the learning-related digital tools that students perceive to be useful for sustainability. Such a focus would assist educators in aligning their institutional sustainable strategy to the learning process and create awareness amongst stakeholders concerning the activities that engage students towards a more sustainable perspective. Lastly, it identifies students’ perceptions of sustainability as an employability skill. Gauging their perceptions is important for curriculum designers and educators as it allows them to better prepare graduates for a complex and dynamic world of work.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainable development in higher education

The education sector is being challenged with regards to its purpose and how it is preparing graduates given the changes occurring in the environment (Von der Heide & Lamberton, 2011). Education and learning are critical components in achieving sustainable development and HEIs are being urged to incorporate and support these principles (Barth, Giodemann, Rieckmann, and Stoltenberg, 2007). HEIs are seeking to do so through ESD and sustainability has now become a critical issue in all spheres of university life (Du, Su, & Liu, 2013).

ESD focuses on the three components of sustainability, i.e. a multi-disciplinary approach, promoting participatory learning and high levels of thinking (United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organisation, 2007). HEIs, through the delivery of their programmes, are seeking to develop a competent and well-trained working population who positively influences a sustainable society through the decisions they make (Arbuthnot, 2009). ESD is often focused on younger members of society to develop them into future-oriented, globally aware and more responsible citizens (Burmeister, Ruach, & Eilks, 2012).

Embedding sustainability into all aspects of higher education presents a great opportunity to develop and prepare students to become more proficient decision makers in an ever-growing ambiguous future (Glasser et al. 2005, as cited in Yarime et al., 2012). There has been some progress in understanding the competencies required by students to deal with the present and future sustainability challenges (Barth et al., 2007). The Higher Education Academy (2006) identified 14 skills which are important for students for ESD which include an appreciation of the economic, environmental and social-cultural aspects of sustainable development, knowledge of sustainability and its key principles.

de Haan (2006), p. 22 in a German school context concentrated on “Gestaltungskompetenz”, which refers to the ability to act and problem-solve in executing ESD. Brundiers, Wiek and Redman (2010) identified three groupings of key

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