The use of Social Network Applications’ as an Educational supporting tool at Vaal University of Technology Ekurhuleni Campus.

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Abstract

The importance of this research is to support higher education teaching and learning by using the power of social network applications. The Vaal University of Technology (VUT) Ekurhuleni campus strives to be a leader in innovative knowledge and quality technology education. The study was conducted by using relevant social network applications applicable to educational use. This paper highlights the significant role of using social network applications for educational support in higher education institutions, also discussing the implication of social network applications on learners and lecturers. The purpose of this research is to determine if social network applications have a role to play for educational support at the VUT Ekurhuleni campus. The time spent in the classroom (formal learning) is not enough for lecturers to address all requirements of learners, requiring lecturers to also provide support outside the classroom (informal learning). The significance of this study is that it contributes to the current discourse on the use of social networks in higher education, promoting greater awareness on the impact of social network applications on society. Most, if not all learners have accounts on different social network applications. It is important that we find ways of using those applications to strengthen learning. With technology rapidly changing, social networks are becoming more relevant to be used as a measure of supporting learning in the current “net generation” or “digital natives”.

Key words: formal learning, informal learning, higher education, social network applications
1. Paper introduction

The Vaal University of Technology (VUT) is devoted to remain relevant locally and internationally. As such, the University seeks to strengthen its international dimension through partnerships and collaborations. As part of e-learning, social networks applications (e.g. Facebook, Google+, Whatsapp) are important tools in supporting and extending teaching and learning in higher education (Ming-Chi, 2010; Tasir et al, year unknown). Social network applications give opportunity to students to be in contact with other students, therefore collaboration, while being in contact with facilitators outside the classroom environment. Social network applications also empower students to stay current and informed regarding the ever changing world we live in today.

Higher education institutions have the responsibility of constantly adapting and changing the way learners learn, and the tools they use. In this modern era, the market expects a learner graduating from higher education institutions to have relevant and progressive Information Technology (IT) skills. Learners use the power of IT through social network applications to share what is happening in their environment, alerting fellow learners of relevant information, including job opportunities that are available in the market. It is not so strange that VUT Ekurhuleni learners do not find it difficult to find placements in the market, especially IT learners, since they utilize connections established and enabled through social networks. Although learners themselves have a role to play in making sure they become competitive in the market place, higher education institutions also have the responsibility of giving learners the necessary tools to ensure this competitive advantage. It is true when they say “a students that excel in what he does in the working environment, gives the employer a good impression about the institution he comes from”.

2. References to relevant literature

While most higher education institutions struggle to establish the role of technological innovations to effectively support teaching and learning, social networks is fast-tracking the pace of encroachments into every aspect of the lives of learners (Roblyer et al, 2010). Social networks are the most popular and fast growing internet based technology, especially in the “net generation”.

Social networks debuted in 1997 when SixDegrees.com was launched, the application allowed users to create their own profiles (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Roblyer et al, 2010). Subsequently, Facebook was developed, which is one of the most popular social networks (Kwong, 2007). Who would have predicted that Facebook. Initially limited to learners from the Harvard University, will go as big as it did (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Roblyer et al, 2010). One of the most important benefits of social networks is the improvement of communication and collaboration, allowing learners to share information more easily at a lower cost than most other communication channels.

Facebook is not only used by students in higher education, but also increasingly by lecturers (Mazer et al, 2007). For example, the VUT Ekurhuleni tourism department, during a weekly academic meeting, shared with other departments they strategy of using Facebook groups to extend communication and create a user-friendly environment. Tourism employment opportunities are pasted on the group, and not only the lecturers, but also learners can add pictures of tourism trips they have visited. Higher education institutions have to utilize Facebook as a way of extending communication. Facebook seems to be perceived as an “excellent mechanism for communicating with our students, because it allow us to go where they already are, an environment our students are already comfortable with “(Mack et al, 2007; Roblyer et al, 2010).
Social network such as Facebook can have a positive impact on learners in higher education (Munoz & Tower, 2009), supporting informal learning and collaboration. A learner can effortlessly use the power of Facebook to communicate with other students in his course to discuss any assignment or group project, or even contact a lecturer if required (Hew, 2011).

3. Discussion of important issues

3.1 Case study: VUT Ekurhuleni

With less than 1600 students registered at the campus, VUT Ekurhuleni is one of the four campuses of VUT. Ekurhuleni campus is the only campus located in the metropolitan municipality of Ekurhuleni, one of the most economical active regions in South Africa. The campus is located less than 10km from the gateway of South Africa, O.R Tambo International Airport, offering five major disciplines including IT, marketing, cost accounting, auditing and tourism. All the courses are three year national diplomas, except a B.Tech degree, specifically presented in the IT discipline.

3.2 According to (VUT Institutional Performance Plan, 2013)

The following strategic steps are envisaged by VUT to ensure the improvement in quality of education in the next few years.

On academic perspective: The institutions seek to increase the number of students placed on Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programs from 1800 in 2012 to 2100 in 2013. This will make the university a favourable environment for teaching and learning, and it will make the university more competitive in vocational and professional training.
On dominant global trends: Increase the provision of massive online open courses, giving the university the opportunity to offer and attract more online students. This will not only allow the support of formal learning, but also the support of informal learning.

3.3 VUT Co-orporative education

VUT aims to reach excellence in teaching and learning activities by developing technological skills. Co-operative education at VUT is a program that involves the combination of productive relevant work experience with academic studies. Institutions needs to align themselves with the corporate market, by partnering with businesses and organizations that will assist in making sure the university meet market needs. One cannot deny the power of social network in this digital era. Social networks must be utilized to optimize teaching and learning. The current generation of learners (digital natives) use social networks more and more, forming part of their culture and identity.

3.4 Students account on social networks

VUT Ekurhuleni campus needs to use social network applications for teaching and learning which are available to students at large. One of the most widely used social network applications in the world is Facebook. This is not surprising, based on the results obtained during the study, depicted in Table 1. All participants indicated that they were utilizing Facebook.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mxit</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2go</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBM</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myspace</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whatsapp</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Learner utilization of social media sites
The above results were obtained from semi-structured interviews the researcher conducted with twenty students enrolled for an IT bridging course at VUT Ekurhuleni.

The researcher also asked participants what they think of using social network applications for academic purposes. One participant responded by stating that:

“good idea, there are good pages I found on Facebook, in December last year I had a learnership which I found on Facebook, now I have experience in the course I am doing which is IT”

This above response indicates that social network applications are impacting, not only on the social lives of learners, but also on employment and career advancement.

3.5 The power of Facebook

The researcher conducted a study at VUT Ekurhuleni campus with enrolled learners. The result obtained gives an indication that students are already using social network applications, not only to communication for social purposes, but also for further educational and employment opportunities. Below are some examples from Facebook, supporting that social networks is a powerful tool in higher education. Not only higher education learners, but young people find online social network applications an attractive stage for socializing, based on its accessibility and low cost.

3.5.1 shares personal graduate programme on Facebook

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit." – Aristotle
The first day of the Volkswagen Group South Africa Graduate Trainee Programme was one of the most memorable moments in my life. My year on the Graduate Trainee Programme was very good, challenging, exciting and it gave me the opportunity to grow both personally and professionally. The programme helped me kick start and cement the foundation of my career, whilst acquiring new skills. Being a Graduate Trainee has also facilitated the transition of being in university to joining the 'big league' of the corporate world. All in all, the Graduate Trainee Programme has opened my eyes to many perspectives and to brand new experiences.

Lebogang, a graduate shares his personal experience he has gained from the VW graduate programme (depicted in Figure 1). He explains how the graduate programme has assisted him from being a university graduate, to what he calls “the big league”. The VW programme has prepared him for the real working environment. Other students on Facebook who are friends with Lebogang are able to prepare themselves well in advance, because he has shared his experience of being employed. Yet, at the same time, other students who did not know about VW graduate programme, now knows that VW has such programmes.

3.5.2 Sourcing talent of Facebook

Thabo Seepe wrote on Petrus Sipho Shabangu’s timeline.
April 10 at 1:02pm

Diversified Asset Management (Pty) Ltd T/A DIAMGRO aims to partner with individuals and organizations who wish to help improve the economic challenges faced by our society. We seek people who are serious about investing and who can contribute in making this company into a large Industrial Group. It has been mentioned that Africans own less than 20% of the JSE listed companies. The only way to improve this statistic is by partnering with people who are determined to help the JSE and government in solving this problem. Call us on (011) 810-2326 or email me on thabom@diamgro.co.za if you are interested. We will open a portfolio account for you at affordable prices. We need your contribution to help this country grow.

Figure 2: Partnership opportunity posted on Facebook

Thabo took advantage that Petro has lots of friends on Facebook and wrote on Petro’s wall (depicted in Figure 2). Knowing that Petro has lots of friends, Thabo is confident that he will be able to communicate his message to a bigger audience.

3.5.3 Students using the power of Facebook to reach their fellow students and sharing job opportunities

Petrus Sipho Shabangu shared a link

January 4

LEARNSHIPS - Standard Bank Learnerships - Standard Bank Operations Learnership
Applications accepted until: 11th of Jan, 2013
Advert Code: BSA201301
...See More

Jonti 2.0 - Client : Apply

bsa.jonti2.co.za

1132Like · · Share

Morena Mosia Do you sometimes ad I.T posts?
Figure 3: Employment opportunity pasted on Facebook

In Petro’s profile picture on Facebook, it is him with the South African current president, Mr Jacob Zuma (depicted in Figure 3). The profile picture attracts lots of attention; this is no surprise that most people regularly check his wall to see what he has posted. Morena, an IT student, was able to view IT employment opportunities from a site he was told by Petro.

3.5.4 Job opportunity pasted on Facebook

Bheki Mamane
4 years Nursing Course application forms are out go to any Department of Labour with your CV and certified documents. Closing date: 15 April 2013. U can call 011 644 8900 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting 011 644 8900 FREE end_of_the_skype_highlighting for more info.
Figure 4: Employment opportunity posted on Facebook

Bheki posted on Facebook, notifying people who will read his wall that nursing application forms are available for interested applicants (depicted in Figure 4).

3.5.5 Facebook groups

IT Buddies group

Hlayie Shivambe Rikhotso

http://www.gradz.co.za/job-seekerz.html?gclid=CJTGmdbBtrACFWchtAodFhfn7g

Guys i hope ur making use of these sites

Graduates, register with GradZ SeekerZ to complete your online CV and have it verified.

www.gradz.co.za

Graduates, log in to GradZ SeekerZ to complete your online, verified CV. GradZ has improved the process for listing your CV for recruiters to search, enhancing your employment opportunities.

Figure 5: Facebook group

Hlayie is a member of one of the Facebook groups called IT Buddies (depicted in Figure 5). Group members in this group are former class mates of Hlayi, who were students at VUT Ekurhuleni. This also shows that they don’t only use the group for gossiping, but also to inform each other of any employment opportunities available out there. It is not strange that
learners will first search on Facebook for a friend he lost contact with; this is because there is a high possibility that the friend has a Facebook account.

3.6 VUT graduates

In 2013, the university graduate 3 925 students across the four faculties at all of the four campuses of VUT. There is no doubt that this new graduates are potential contributors to the current market. As such, these graduates are fully equipped with the necessary knowledge that the current market requires. This represents a growth of nearly 500 students per annum. It is also the highest number of students to graduate in a year from VUT, and represents an 18.5% throughput rate against the total number of students registered (Source: VUT internal publication).

4 Paper conclusion

VUT strive to produce graduates with a curriculum that is relevant to the current market. It is important for VUT to constantly engage with the market, thereby continuously adapting its curriculum to varying market forces (Bigg & Tagg, 2007: 3). This will naturally impact on the way lecturers teach and learners learn, requiring the optimal use of technologies. Social network applications can be successfully used to support innovative teaching and learning strategies. Social network applications enact a critical role in the learning of students, based on the impact on the lives of learners. Learners enjoy to be taught with the language they understand more, which is current technology. We are not postulating that learning should only take place in social media, but we proposed the active incorporation of social media in education. Based on the discussion finding above (Figure 1 to 5), most of the learners are using social network applications to communicate employment opportunities and also to
learn from others. Research findings also agree that social networks are excellent tools for knowledge sharing and collaboration between learners (Tasir et al, year unknown).

5. Acknowledgements

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