The social benefits of online chat rooms for university students: an explorative study

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The social environment prevailing within higher education institutions in Australia has seen many changes in recent years. Many factors have contributed to these changes and this paper explains the areas in which student life in Australia has changed and the challenges these changes have posed to students. This paper argues that universities in Australia and elsewhere need to prepare themselves to cope with the rapidly changing needs of their students. Information technological tools such as Internet chat room could be one of the cheapest and student-friendly tools which universities could use to meet the social and psychological needs of their students. A chat room was created for the students of Flinders University (Adelaide, Australia) and this paper explains the ways in which this chat room was used by the students. Based on the observations made, this paper highlights the fact that chat rooms could be a useful tool for universities in this day and age.

Keywords: administration; internet chat room; psychology; social; student; university

Introduction

Recent advancements in information technology and telecommunications have revolutionised the ways in which people communicate and interact. These technological advancements and their impact on fundamental social behaviours have forced many social institutions to modify the ways in which they operate. One such institution is the university. Classrooms and teaching methods have undergone remarkable changes due to the availability of Internet-based technology. Many courses that were traditionally considered as unsuitable for distance-based teaching are now being taught off-campus with the assistance of digital and telecommunications technology (Hay et al., 2004; Lai, 2002). Significant sections of library resources have been converted to electronic format and some reference librarians are now available online for consultation (Johnson, 2004). In line with these developments, many university administrative services, such as enrolment, fee payment, academic consultation and student governance, are currently available online.

Technological developments have also simplified the traditionally complex academic and administrative procedures in universities. The decreased cost and increased efficiency offered by technology have allowed universities to expand their technological use. The trend to modernise and upgrade is not just an institutional agenda; the consumers of university services may also be a part of the driving force behind these technological revolutions. Students who are an active part of the ‘Net generation’ are used to having vast

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amounts of information available at the click of a mouse, and instant responses through synchronous digital technological tools such as chat rooms and SMS services. Universities have been obliged to serve the needs of their students, and the best possible strategy has been to acquire state-of-the-art technological tools to fulfil those students’ needs. Nevertheless, whether it is student-driven or university-driven, the technological advancements within universities have changed campus life permanently. Interaction patterns amongst students and between students and teachers have been irrevocably modified (Seng & Al-Hawamdah, 2001). Web-enabled academic and administrative operations have reduced the need for students to come to campus. Remotely accessible classrooms, teaching and learning materials, library resources and academic consultations have allowed students to receive services online.

Other recent factors have also had a significant impact upon campus life. Increases in educational costs have made the cost of obtaining a degree much higher and it is very common to see students completing their education with a significant amount of debt (Barnett & Macklin, 2005). Added to this is the financial pressure on students to meet their living expenses during their studies. Financial assistance from the Australian government, such as Youth Allowance and Austudy payments, are far from generous. The amounts paid are not adequate for rent, bills and other university costs, and the majority of students have had to take up part-time work. A number of students are not eligible for any government assistance at all, and are forced to work even longer to be able to pay for their studies. A study by Long and Haydon (2001) found that between 1984 and 2000, students had increased their work hours threefold, from an average of 5 hours per week to 14.5 hours. In the year 2000, 70 per cent of full-time students had part-time work and 90 per cent of part-time students were also working. Approximately 28 per cent of students reported that they had missed classes due to work commitments. Specifically, Hillman (2005) argues that juggling work and study commitments is one of the greatest areas of difficulty for students commencing their first year of tertiary education.

Given the pressures of study and work, the transition to university life can be difficult for many students who are commencing their university education. There is evidence that students rely heavily on each other for information and support, and their friendship networks play a substantive role in the transition process (Zadoroznyj, 1999). Students have identified a range of concerns about commencing university education, including: academic issues, such as how to manage the workload, staying motivated, attendance requirements, access to lecturers, resources and career planning; personal issues, such as making friends, fitting in and balancing other commitments; administrative/procedural issues, including enrolment and obtaining student ID cards; and, finally, concerns about resources and places, such as finding their way to the right building and room, access to computers and opening hours (Walker, 2001). A Flinders University survey highlighted that the greatest factor helping students feel settled into university life was meeting people and having friends (Zadoroznyj, 1999). For those students who do not establish social networks there are a number of implications. Kantanis (2000) found that socially isolated students had lower self-esteem; missed opportunities to discuss ideas and academic subject matter with other students in a non-threatening environment; were unlikely to undertake collaborative study for exams with other students; were less able to access scant resources; took longer to become familiar with the institution’s services and policies; and had reinforced feelings of negativity about the university, others and themselves. Ultimately, students who feel isolated or marginalised have much greater levels of attrition (Tinto, 1995).

Owing to the increasing pressure on students to work while studying, and also because of the availability of study materials online, the amount of time that students spend on-campus
has declined significantly. This trend has seriously affected the quality of the social support networks that students form on-campus. Many universities across Australia have been looking at ways to improve the quality of campus life so that they can improve their student retention rates; this being especially important because of the recent reforms introduced by the Australian federal government, which link university funding to student retention rates (Soutar & Turner, 2002). Universities now face the pressure of penalties through cuts in funding if they are unable to retain their students. Many Australian universities have therefore been developing their own strategies to increase the quality of campus life (Calder & Hanley, 2004). However, although Australian universities have been quick to introduce various technological advancements in the areas of academic and administrative services, they have shown less interest in using technological tools to improve the social and psychological aspects of their students. The institutions of higher learning in Australia have come under increasing pressure to explore various technological tools that may improve the social and psychological well-being of their students.

Technological tools such as Internet chat rooms have come to the aid of some Australian universities. Their popularity has been increasing rapidly in recent years; they provide opportunities for people to create their own social networks online. Chat rooms also provide an opportunity for people to seek and receive help by sharing experiences, and by learning from each other. A few universities are currently experimenting with synchronous ‘real-time’ tools such as chat rooms. These technological tools have great potential to allow students to interact with each other without being present on-campus and to form their own personal social support networks. In particular, they could be very valuable to students from a range of backgrounds, overseas students, and students from rural areas coming to urban centres for educational purposes. Chat rooms offer an increasingly popular way for students to connect with each other and pass on information. Their ability to be accessed 24 hours a day and seven days a week provide students with ample opportunities to connect with each other outside of traditional lecture times and work commitments.

Numerous universities have already created online chat rooms for their students in which students can socialise virtually and share their emotions freely. A quick Internet search finds that a number of special chat rooms have been created to allow freshmen, and new and prospective students to find out more about the university and life on-campus. The University of Southern Maine, The University of Delaware, and Columbus State University in the United States; The Bengal Engineering and Science College in Shibpur in India; and The Athabasca University in Calgary, and The University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, amongst others, have all launched chat rooms for students. The University of Guelph has also created general chat sessions for students staying in the university residence. San Francisco University has a range of chat rooms, one of which is an alumni chat room and message board, and the Stanford College of Sports in San Francisco has moderated chat rooms for sports personalities to share their experiences with students. Both New York and Kwangwoon (Seoul, South Korea) universities have chat-based services for singles, where students are invited to share their photos online and socialise. A few Australian universities have already begun using Web-based technologies to support students. Flinders University in South Australia has established discussion groups for postgraduates; the University of Ballarat has created a chat room for its students; and the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney use chat software for real-time discussions within their teaching programs. However, at this stage the chat rooms in these universities are generally used with an academic focus, rather than a social one.

Although there are many types of chat rooms in use within universities, to date very few attempts have been made to study their usefulness and limitations. A review of the
literature indicates that there are no studies at the time of writing this paper that evaluate the usefulness of Internet chat rooms for university students. It could be argued that continued usage of these technological tools without knowing their real strengths and weaknesses could harm students instead of benefiting them. Although universities have been using chat rooms for a few specific purposes, the true potential of chat rooms within a university environment is yet to be known. With this in mind, an explorative study was undertaken at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia, to study the usefulness of a chat room for university students. A chat room was created and students were encouraged to use this chat room to interact socially. The study aimed to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the chat room and the ways in which its usefulness can be maximised. The present paper is based on a pilot study involving students using Flinders University’s student accommodation services. It will describe the process through which the chat room was created and will discuss the purposes for which the students used the chat room and the ways in which universities can benefit from the Internet chat room technology.

Methodology

A Web site was created for the research project; this site can be accessed by visiting www.flinders.edu.au/flinchat/. This Web site has a link to the chat room, which can be accessed only with a registered user name and password. The online system was named Flinchat. Additionally, a mailing list was created – flinchat@flinders.edu.au – which, although not strictly a part of the system, was a very useful addition, as it allowed the researchers simultaneous automatic access to all queries and transcripts. The Java-based chat system was hosted by Parachat®. The Web site consisted of general information about the project and technical information for using the chat system. Additionally, links to information were provided to students to help them overcome various issues in relation to their personal and academic lives. These links were named ‘Personal’, ‘Academic’, and ‘Relationships’. The intended purpose of that information was to be as a starting point for discussions within the chat room. Every page of this Web site started with a link to the chat room, and also contained a link for emailing the researchers with any questions.

The entire Web site was purely static; that is, it did not contain any common dynamic elements such as counters, bulletin boards, news feeds or animation content (such as Flash). This was a deliberate choice for two main reasons. First, not all systems and Web browsers support the full range of dynamic elements; and, second, security of the content against manipulation. The dynamic and interactive part of Flinchat was the chat room only. The pages were designed for maximum compatibility, with steps taken, for example, to ensure that the graphics and content would be clearly arranged at a minimum resolution of 800 × 600. (Computers not capable of this minimum resolution are not generally Internet-enabled anyway.) Elements common only since about 1998, such as frames, were not used because many such elements display differently in various Web browsers and may have caused readability issues. Since the target users were students, a very conservative view was taken as to the abilities of the computers used to view the pages, and steps were taken to ensure that the download size of the Web site was kept at a minimum to cater for low-speed Internet connections. Later versions of the Web site were built with the aid of a graphics design student to achieve a modern look that was comparable to many of the Flash-based services available, but with much lower system requirements.

Unlike the majority of popular chat systems in use today, such as MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, IRC and ICQ, the system used was a chat room, not Peer-to-Peer (commonly P2P) chat. In P2P the users identify each other over the Internet directly, and pass
messages to each other very much like a phone conversation. A chat room is not dissimilar to the common electronic bulletin board. There is a central chat server to which everyone connects separately. Comments made by the users are sent to the server, to a ‘room’, and everyone else connected to that room sees the message. Unlike a bulletin board service, this all happens in real time, so there is no opportunity to interject and, unlike a bulletin board, the messages are visible only to members logged in – they do not remain open for others to read later.

As demonstrated by Figure 1, the Web site component of Flinchat had hyperlinks that opened a Java window to allow the user to log into the chat room. Clicking the hyperlink started the chat program running on the Web browser in the Flinchat Web pages. The students simply used their browser which communicated with the chat server. Since all conversation went through the central server, a transcript could be kept of all conversations held within the room. As the chat software and the server were maintained by the host company, this removed almost all maintenance issues from being a burden to the researchers. There were only two basic requirements that students had to adhere to:

- Have Java installed (a common part of almost all Web browsers, and optionally available to all others).
- Have the correct port permissions. This was a requirement for the Internet service provider, rather than the end user.

![Diagram showing the components and interaction of the established system. The left-hand side shows the three service-providing systems. Note that, although they are separate here, there is no reason why they could not all run on a single server if one was available. The right-hand side shows a student computer running a Web browser, Java, and an email program.](image-url)
Security on the Web server was managed by Flinders University, as they would be by any Web host. As mentioned earlier, care was taken with the Web site to keep the pages static, meaning that the only vulnerability was to have the content changed. FTP access (FTP = file transfer protocol, required to make changes to the files on the server) could be made only from within the campus network, and was password protected. Each student participating in the study was required to meet the researchers in person and provide their student number to get a login account – the account details being established by the users in person at that time and not sent by email. Administrative access to the chat room settings and member management was via an SSL-secured Web site (SSL = Secure Socket Layer, a way of communicating securely over the Internet), which was managed by the chat room provider. Internally, the system had additional security settings for the users, such as URL verification, to ensure that the Flinchat account could not be accessed from any Web page other than the one hosted at Flinders University. These steps were necessary because they are designed to defeat more serious hacking methods such as ‘phishing’, during which users are taken to a fake version of the Web site and tricked into submitting their passwords. Steps to prevent unauthorised users from gaining membership, or access to any user accounts, were taken seriously. Since the conversation transcripts were monitored, any accounts exhibiting undesirable behaviour could simply be suspended to ensure maximum security of the chat room system.

Safety of participants

When this research was proposed to Flinders University Ethics Committee, one of the major concerns raised was the safety of the participants within the chat rooms. This would especially be the case if a particular person in the chat room required immediate professional assistance, for example, manifested by the expression of suicidal thoughts, physical or mental illness or crisis arising out of life circumstances. To address this issue, the researchers decided to make the Flinchat Web site a source of useful information to help the students deal with emergency situations. Information on the availability of professional help accessible in Adelaide during and outside of office hours, and contact details for those help services were added to Flinchat. In addition, the researchers uploaded useful information for students, such as how to deal with transition to university, how to deal with stress related to academic and personal circumstances, challenges arising from sexuality and conflicts in personal relationships.

At this stage of the research, students living in Flinders University Housing were invited to take part in the research. Flinders University Housing is an accommodation facility located on Flinders University campus grounds, and is available only to students enrolled at Flinders University. Students from interstate and overseas are the primary residents. The researchers placed flyers in the Flinders Housing offices, and also conducted information sessions about the research. During these information sessions the students were given assurances about privacy; that matters discussed within the chat room would be kept confidential, and that no Flinders University Housing authorities were involved in the research directly or indirectly, nor would they have access to the transcripts. The students who contacted the researchers with an interest in taking part in the research were requested to meet the researchers in person. During the meetings between the students and researchers, the researchers helped the students to understand the aims and objectives of the research and clarified any issues raised by the students.

The students had to agree to abide by the following list of terms and conditions when participating in the research (taken directly from the student consent and sign-up form):
1. Each participant will have to logon to the Internet chat room attached to Flinchat at least three times a week.

2. Members are not allowed to reveal details about their identity while interacting through the Internet chat room.

3. There are possibilities that the members of the chat room may come to know the identity of one or more members of the chat room since they are staying in a common accommodation and may coincidentally be enrolled within the same degree/course. In such circumstances, the members will have to agree to change their login name without revealing the new login name to other members so that the member(s) continue(s) to remain anonymous within the chat room.

4. Members of the chat group are required to abide by Flinders University policy and respect the integrity of each member and refrain from expressing words or ideas that may insult or discriminate on grounds of gender, age, race, place of origin etc.

5. Members are not allowed to express or seek sexual favours within the chat room. Members are requested to use the personal chat rooms for more personal conversations. However, members are reminded that, regardless of which room they are in, all conversations will be recorded. Members are requested that even in these personal chat rooms details about their identity should not be revealed for any reason.

6. While chatting in the chat room, if members come across a situation wherein another person in the chat room requires immediate professional assistance due to reasons such as expression of suicidal ideas, physical or mental illness, crisis arising out of life circumstances etc., the members must report the details to any one of the sources of help listed on the chat room’s Web site.

7. A student who fails to follow the aforementioned terms and conditions will be warned once. Any further repetition of offensive language, ideas or failure to logon at least three times a week would entitle the researchers to exclude the member from the research program.

Those students who consented to abide by the rules above and were interested in participating in the research had to sign a consent form and then provide their preferred user name and password. The researchers carefully reviewed the user names chosen to ensure that they were not directly or indirectly offensive to anyone. In all, 32 students agreed to participate in the research.

Initially, the students had difficulty in choosing a time that was suitable for all of them to chat. There were many times when the students would fail to ‘meet’ each other; they would login to find no one else online, so they would logout again. To address this problem, ‘online conclaves’ were established. These were specific times during which students were invited to login, creating a greater opportunity for involvement. The researchers were also present for the conclaves to facilitate discussions, if needed. These proved to be a much more successful structure for the chat room than just leaving it open ‘all hours’.

Findings

Major topics of discussions in the chat room

Owing to the rules regarding anonymity, all students logged in under a chosen pseudonym – their user name (e.g. ‘wintery’, ‘homer’, ‘DissidentPhoenix’, ‘cloning’, ‘memberkati’ and ‘Roxy’). To preserve confidentiality, the following transcripts list participants only as ‘student’, with a number to differentiate them within a conversation. The transcripts are
presented here as they appeared in the chat room. The students talked about a range of different topics, and initial conversations had them introducing themselves with age/sex/location (i.e. ‘asl’) and swapping information regarding what they were studying. They were also very positive about a chat room that was designed specifically for Flinders University students.

Transcript 1: Social benefits of Flinchat

Student 1: . . . the chat room for the uni is a fantastic idea I think
Student 2: hope there will be more ppl joining soon..
Student 2: yes.. i agree
Student 1: i hope it gets moved along. I know that I’ve really benefited from knowing plenty of people who go [to] the uni, but I know a lot of people don’t get those benefits
Student 1: I’m just lucky I joined plenty of clubs back when i was in first year
Student 2: icic..
Student 2: ya, that’s a good way to know much ppl..

Not surprisingly, many of the students were very computer literate and they would provide comprehensive advice about dealing with worms and viruses.

Transcript 2: Sharing of knowledge and expertise

Student 1: hah hah, I have a Nvidia Geforce Fx5600 356mn Ram with tvout and DVI out
Student 2: DAMN YOU!

and

Student 1: hey, what kind of computer do u have?
Student 2: AMD Athlon 2400+, 1024mb ram, running xp (evil! thinking of switching to a linux build) You?
Student 1: p4 3.06b with hyperthreading, 2048mb ram, running windows xp with service pack 2
Student 2: Niiiiiiiice. Very nice.

The conversations in the rooms ranged from general social and academic issues to personal issues at times. They swapped information about cheap movie tickets and how to win prizes from a local radio station, discussed their favourite television shows and music, as well as commiserated with each other regarding assignment deadlines and workloads. Senior students used the chat room to provide advice and information to students who were new to the campus.

Transcript 3: Senior students sharing their experience with other students

Student 1: I love my lecturers
Student 1: they are so animated
Student 2: wow. U are doing shitloads of work just because u love ur lecturers. I salute you.
Student 1: I prefer it tho, all the lecturers know me by name
Student 1: they cut me so much slack now
Student 2: haha that’s cool
Student 1: if I ask for an extension [sic] they give it to me
Student 2: lucky you
Student 1: it’ll be the same for you come 3rd year
Student 1: if you keep at least 1 subject all the way though
Student 2: hmm I’ll probably keep biology or chem.. I don’t know yet.
Student 1: If your [sic] not sure take them as minors
Student 1: do them both for 2 years
Student 1: and then choose a subject to take for 3 years
Student 2: damn I have so much 2 learn
Student 1: its only 1st term, 1st semester, 1st year
Student 1: you don’t have anything to worry about
Student 2: ye[a]h you’re right

Transcript 4: Some of the students were happy to talk about harder times they had experienced

Student 1: if all had went well in my life, i’d be doing hono[u]rs this year
Student 2: sounds sucky . . . . life has a lot of bumps along the road . . . . although some really should be called mountains!
Student 1: but I kinda got in a bad situation 1st semester last year -.- had to withdraw from everything and head back to [m]y family for a while
Student 1: i know!
Student 2: thankfully mine have been dramatic, but not enough to effect [sic] my study
Student 1: this one was a mountain – I couldn’t get out of bed for a while, let alone study cos I felt that miserable. I’m still on medication :P
Student 2: (not thankfully dramatic, but I think you understood me . . . . THINK)
Student 1: Nah, I know what you mean ☺
Student 1: I’ve had a few of those as well
Student 2: doesn’t sound to[o] great to me . . . im greatful I have a good bunch of people around me this year to help me out

Transcript 5: Sharing of personal problems that are sensitive in nature

Student 1: I got a bit disturbed when I researched what antidepressants that I’m taking do to me
Student 1: like side effects and stuff
Student 2: hrm
Student 2: i could only imagine
Student 2: prolly be just as good as going out on the street for marijuana?
Student 1: lol! [lol = laugh out loud] Happy pills are much better than that *nodnods* but when I first started on them, I got side effects. Felt really nauseated, like . . . even watching tv made me feel sick!
Student 2: that doesn’t sound very pleasant!
Student 2: but are they helping now that you are on them properly?
Student 2: or do you still have ur moments where you’d rather drop them altogether?
Student 1: It wasn’t too pleasant at first. but it really does help me I think! Things don’t upset me as easily as they used to, and I’m thinking of upping my doseage [sic] a bit. I don’t think I’d want to drop them – even if they aren’t working, they’re a helpful placebo – and I don’t get the side effects any more. I can even read on a bus!

Downloaded By: [Dobson, Ian R.] At: 12:23 6 May 2009
**Student 1:** even though I’m studying psychology and lots of psychs consider drugs as a last resort, I think that they’re really useful :) well, drugs as well as counseling, both helped

**Student 2:** at least you can be an honest psych person when you get to the end of [your] degree who knows exactly what its like for the person!

**Student 2:** some will really find that helpful!

**Student 1:** Yeah, I hope so! I gotta write a personal reflection essay at the end of this semester for counselling class – I’m gonna talk about it a lot in that I think. Like . . . hwen [sic] someone who is depressed says that if they go outside and see a car go past that they feel like throwing themselves in front of it . . . well, I’ll know how they feel

**Student 2:** i think it would be hard to find a person who doesn’t know what that is like

**Student 2:** a lot of my previous years (actually most of them until this year) i would always drive home, a nice 4hr drive, and with every truck that drove past i always would stop to think it could all be over now, all i have to do is turn slightly on my wheel . . . 3 secs and its over no more . . .

**Student 1:** Yeah, I think you might have a point there. Its weird. we learn all these statistics about how many people suffer from depression and its only supposed to be like . . . 1 in 5 people or something. i reckon it’s have [sic] to be more than that

**Student 2:** but thankfully i don’t think like that anymore!

There was some confusion amongst participants about how much they could disclose without breaching the anonymity rules. Interestingly, a number of comments were made about not liking being anonymous. During an ‘online conclave’ the researchers asked about this.

*Transcript 6: Anonymity within the chat room*

**Researcher:** i would have thought the anonymity may have made it easier to talk about other stuff though, or do you need to get [to] know people through sharing stuff before you can do that online?

**Student 1:** i don’t come on that often but so far i haven’t found many people talking about ‘other stuff”

**Student 2:** *ponder* I don’t know – for me, I have no problems sharing stuff with people whether I’m anonymous or not, which might not be completely normal though. I think that most people do need to spend a bit of time bonding first though.

*Transcript 7: The issue of safety within chat rooms*

**Student 1:** Strange really. A lot of people are really concerned about chatting online etc etc because they’re worried about stalkers. I’ve been giving out my real name for years [in] the city I live in and I’ve never ONCE had any problems

**Student 2:** maybe the stalkers don’t believe you? maybe they are thinking that it’s too easy to get your real name?

**Student 1:** Or maybe they just aren’t as common as the media likes us to think when they sensationalise things. Sure, there are dangers out there – but I think that a lot
of people who have problems, especially women might be silly enough to give out details in a random chat in some chatroom after cybering with a guy. And then blaming the internet for their own stupidity.

**Student 1:** The same thing goes with kids who are preyed on by paedophiles. It’s a horrible thing to happen, it really is – but the kids should be educated about safe places to be on the net, and be taught not to talk to anyone who tries to bring anything sexual into a conversation with them know they’re a minor.

**Student 2:** true. How may percentage [sic] of ppl in chatrooms will be some mad guys? Maybe just 1 or 2% or even less. the probability to meet one will be damn low.

**Student 1:** Yeah. I can’t deny they are out there – but it’s not as thought [sic] it’s impossible to block them from you[r] instant message lists or simply not respond to them talking.

**Student 1:** And I do think that younger kids should always be supervised. I have an 11 year old brother and I don’t let him on the net unless there’s someone supervising him – at least if I know he wants to go places that could be an issue. Like if he wants to look up game cheats or key numbers after losing the case for some of his cds – because sites with them tend to have porn popups that he shouldn’t be seeing!

**Student 3:** you [sic] can block those with service pack 2 you know.

**Student 1:** Yeah, I know. But it doesn’t catch all of them – and it doesn’t catch banner ads on websites either. I can use firefox which catches them better than sp2 imo, but you still get the occasional thing.

**Discussion**

The discussions held within the chat room clearly indicate that the Flinchat chat room proved to be valuable to the participating students for getting connected on-campus. The wide range of topics discussed within this chat room supports its value for establishing strong social support networks. The conversations included both personal and social matters and there were strong indications that the students become mentors for one another (transcript 1). Particularly, senior students shared their experiences with the newcomers regarding academic services available on-campus, administrative procedures valuable to students, subjects that are useful, experiences in the classrooms, and so on. These were very much appreciated by the newer students (transcripts 2 & 3). The chat room also created a social environment that was conducive to the students forming strong friendship networks with others. Many interesting topics, such as popular TV shows, movies and restaurants, served to entertain the chat room members. When discussing personal matters, such as depression and suicide, the students demonstrated warmth and social support for each other (transcripts 4 & 5).

Anonymity within the chat room generated a popular debate and provided useful information for the researchers to consider (transcripts 6 & 7). There were mixed reactions from the research participants. Some felt comfortable with the protection of their identity, which helped the free expression of ideas, whereas others found it restrictive, as they were unclear about how much personal information they could disclose. Students who were familiar with chat rooms generally felt very comfortable disclosing personal information about themselves, within certain boundaries. It is believed that giving students the choice regarding levels of anonymity, combined with the chat room guidelines regarding offensive comments, will allow students to have a sense of personal safety within the room. The transcripts were read daily to ensure there was nothing inappropriate being raised and, as
all students were registered, the researchers had the appropriate contact information to contact them, if necessary.

Although the students raised personal issues about depression and suicidal ideation, these were past issues that they had largely resolved. There were no postings by students who were feeling suicidal, so the usefulness and relevance of the contact and support information on the Web site cannot be determined at this point. Until further research is undertaken, it is recommended that chat rooms continue to be actively monitored so that ‘at risk’ students can be contacted if necessary, and so that concerned students who have spoken with them are also being supported.

This research project has made a few observations that may benefit Australian universities. The real-time nature of chat rooms means that they can be used to provide quality services to the students with instant response capability. The chat rooms also can be useful to improve certain specific administrative areas, such as student enquiries, library services (Johnson, 2004) and student counselling. The research described in this paper has provided strong evidence that the chat room can serve as a valuable tool in helping students to make a smooth transition to university life. By providing a virtual forum for new students to get connected with the university community, they will, hopefully, feel more comfortable on-campus and also build a strong social support network. This might then assist with their academic performance (Kantanis, 2000; Tinto, 1995). The virtual nature of chat rooms encourages new students to get connected to the campus even before physically entering the university. This will significantly reduce the misconceptions students develop about university life and the services available within universities, and reduce any anxieties about the transition process to university life. By providing valuable opportunities for the students to ask questions and listen to the experiences of senior students, chat rooms can help universities facilitate long-term friendships among their student communities.

Recent government policy changes in Australia have strong implications for the social environment prevailing within Australian universities. The introduction of voluntary student unionism may restrict the financial capabilities of Australian universities to provide quality services to students. The student unions, which were previously the coordinators of student services on-campus, are now restricted in their capabilities. These developments will continue to have many serious implications for universities, particularly those that are smaller or located in regional areas of Australia. While Australian universities are in the process of understanding the implications of these policy changes for students, there is an urgent need for creating a range of measures that will help students to cope with the policy changes and find ways to connect with one another. Internet-based tools, such as chat rooms, can benefit Australian universities in this particular area. Already, these tools are in use within the universities for academic purposes and require minimal effort and financial commitment to use these tools to help and support the students. Chat rooms can help to minimise the gap appearing between students and university administration that has been caused by the recent federal government policy changes. They can also create fora for a meaningful discussion between students. Student organisations can use chat rooms to help them reach students and establish a strong rapport at a minimal cost.

Limitations of the research

The Flinchat research project has identified some potential challenges regarding chat room use within a university environment that require specific attention. Although chat rooms provide a useful and novel platform for students to get connected, they can also be misused and even abused. By carefully monitoring the chat rooms this risk can be minimised.
This, however, requires the universities to commit financial and human resources. At the time of writing, to the researchers’ knowledge, no publicly available studies or research exists about the level of commitment required to operate chat rooms in this manner. Concerns about the privacy of the students using the chat rooms are another area requiring further attention. It is crucial that the chat rooms operated by universities are protected from external threats and intrusions.

The Flinchat research has a number of limitations that need to be considered when generalising its findings. The research is based on a small sample of university students, who were selected via purposive sampling. The study participants shared a common background of an accommodation facility, which may have influenced the conversations held within the chat rooms. Although analysis of the transcripts did not indicate any direct influence of this background, it should be considered when analysing the findings of the present research. The chat room created for the present research was operational for six months. This short time duration might have influenced the topics discussed within the chat room. Further research that involves a larger student population over a longer time period would be of benefit.

The chat room created for this research had a mailing list that was found to have major technological vulnerability for hacking. This was the only facility that was exploited by the hackers (the term ‘hackers’ is being used generically here). Accidentally, the mailing list was not just created as an email alias with three recipients for the three researchers, but as a full-featured list with password-based feature management. One of the available features was the ability to become an additional member of the mailing list without any password notification and even without any verification by the other members. This oversight became apparent only after the university restructured much of its email services, and sent out a general maintenance request. When the settings were reviewed, it was found that five additional email addresses were receiving all Flinchat traffic and transcripts. Fortunately, the hacking occurred only after the main phase of the research was completed and the chat room was being used by other students for discussing course materials. Additionally, neither the transcripts nor any email sent through the list during the period of vulnerability contained any confidential information or passwords. The vulnerability was repaired before the next research phase commenced.

Conclusion

University campuses have undergone significant changes as a result of the revolution in telecommunications in recent years. Telecommunications technology has also influenced student behaviours in many interesting ways. Australian universities have come under intense pressure to fulfil the ever-growing needs of the digital generation by acquiring a range of ‘high-tech’ tools. The Internet chat room is one such tool and this tool has much potential for future exploration. The Flinchat project indicates many advantages that Internet chat rooms can offer to Australian universities. The future will present many challenges to university administrations, which can be addressed through technological tools such as Internet chat rooms. Further research to understand the advantages and disadvantages of these technological tools are crucial for the universities to maximise their potential.

References


