Exploring the use of Virtual Professional and Academic Learning Communities to Foster Sustainable Learning in Management Education

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Track: Learning & Knowledge

Summary: (150 words)

In the present study, Virtual Professional and Academic Learning Communities (VPALC) were used to offer academic, technical (IT), psychological, and reflective support to undergraduate final-year Business students in the UK with the aim of meeting their needs for sustainable learning development, networking, training and professional growth through peer support and interaction with experienced professionals in the post-Covid-19 era. An exploratory survey design and anonymous feedback via Mentimeter during the implementation were used to examine the impact of VPALCs on students' attitudes and academic performance within a one-year time frame. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed to examine the data. Findings indicated that VPALCs can be used to support students, especially BAME in closing the awarding gap, through collaboration, peer mentoring/coaching, networking, and sharing of resources. The study provides recommendations for Business Schools to support students through VPALCs as they can enhance knowledge transfer, peer support and sustainable learning.

Key words: Virtual Professional and Academic Learning Communities, sustainable learning, well-being, student learning attitudes, BAME awarding gap, post-Covid-19 era.

Word Count: 2770 words (excluding tables and references)

Introduction (530 words)

Covid-19 changes, challenges and stressors affected Management students' mental, emotional, and physical well-being (Krishnamurthy, 2020) in addition to the normal rigors of Business schools. To address these realities, Business schools must respond to the needs of their students through the implementation of strategies to enhance student coping, emotional well-being, and mental preparedness (Peltier et al., 2022). One education structure to consider for working on supporting student learning, emotional welfare and mental preparedness is the learning community (LC). An LC can be defined as a group of people (students in this case) sharing common goals, values, interests, and ideas that actively engage in learning with and from each other. LCs, an iteration of small group learning, offer opportunities for students to engage in mentoring, coaching and wellness activities with support from both their peers and staff (Shochet et al., 2019). LCs intentionally focus on enhancing student engagement, interaction and communication, not only with staff, the syllabus and the curriculum, but also with peers and through self-reflection and other-awareness (Ferguson et al., 2009). This is frequently accomplished through a perceived increase in social, peer and community support. The purpose of this case study is to describe the approach of a Business School in the UK to using VPALCs to transform students' learning experience in management education and innovate in the post-Covid-19 era.

The present study is grounded on a sociocultural perspective which assumes that students' learning is social and, therefore, highly affected by their interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1986). In formal educational contexts, students' interactions are determined by sociocultural practices that account for ways of talking, reading, writing, knowing, and doing (Gee, 2008). The community of learning framework also includes various types of behavior such as interactions between members of a community and how these interactions can explain the degree of human members' engagement in community goals (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Jan and Vlachopoulos (2018) found that the type of interaction between the participants of a learning community is a key influential factor in the formation of the community. Some of the original views about interaction in education focused mainly on human–human interaction. Wagner (1994) characterized interaction as "reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interactions occur when these objects and events mutually influence one another" (Wagner, 1994, p. 8).

According to social theories of learning and distributed cognition (Salomon, 2000), student-student interaction is desirable both for cognitive purposes and motivational support. However, student–lecturer interaction is valued by both students and lecturers and has been found to be associated with positive perceptions of learning (Wu and Hiltz, 2004). Recent studies have also utilized the framework of communities of practice to examine how learning communities engage in learning practices. For instance, González–Howard and McNeill (2016) found that the interactions between students (working in smaller group structures, such as pairs) and the interactions between students and tools (linguistic resource for engaging in science discourse) enhanced students' engagement in argumentation. Students' commitment in practices, like argumentation, by using scientific models to build explanations or framing issues in their social context, depends on lecturers' knowledge and practices (Chen, 2020; Pierson et al., 2019).

To sum up, the current paper reports on Human Resource Management (HRM) students' attitudes towards the use of a VPALC scheme in the post-Covid-19 era. This was used to improve students' learning and professional skills and support their well-being. It aimed to explore whether VPALCs can effectively support diverse cohorts with multilingual and multicultural students fostering intercultural awareness, promoting a sense of community, and

enhancing students' psychological safety and well-being in the post-Covid-19 era. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations will be provided as to how all relevant stakeholders in Management Education (ME) can promote the use of VPALCs to support Business students effectively and minimize the harmful impact of crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This may also support BAME students who are particularly disadvantaged due to the crisis and allow HEI to close the awarding gap.

Research Focus, Rationale and Questions (132 words)

The current study explored how VPALCs can support undergraduate students in the post-Covid-19 era both in terms of promoting sustainable learning and developing their professional skills, but also in providing emotional support and a sense of community when they are threatened by isolation and some of them face mental health issues due to challenges related to the pandemic. This study also aimed to support BAME students who were particularly disadvantaged due to the crisis and help Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to close the awarding gap. Finally, it intended to examine final-year Business students' perceived benefits and challenges they encountered while participating in the VPALCs. Based on the outcomes of this study, several recommendations will be offered as to how HE lecturers can support their students in the post-Covid-19 era and promote sustainable learning and development in order to transform students' learning experience in Business Schools.

Research Methods (192 words)

To examine the perceived impact of the implementation of VPALCs on 110 undergraduate HRM students (volunteers – randomly chosen), a mixed-methods approach was used. Volunteers were asked to participate in an online survey (closed-end statements and open-ended questions) at the end of the academic year. Surveys which are "subjective" methods were employed to answer the research questions. According to Watanabe (2004, p. 23), surveys can help researchers gather public opinions which otherwise could not be identified. Learners also provided anonymous feedback - via Mentimeter - during the sessions regularly (every 3 weeks) responding to the lecturer's questions after joining VPALC sessions (a separate one for each year of undergraduate study) once a week for 2 hours for a whole academic year immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the closed items of the survey and thematic analysis was used to analyse the recurring themes from the open questions of the survey and the anonymous feedback (King and Brooks, 2018).

The aim of the current study was to address the following research questions:

- What were students' attitudes towards the VPALC sessions during the Covid-19 crisis?
- What were students' perceived benefits of participating in the VPALC sessions?
- What were the challenges students encountered while participating in the VPALC sessions?

Preliminary Analysis and Initial Results from First Phase (681 words)

The current study yielded rich preliminary data. Quantitative data from the closed-ended statements of the survey indicated that the respondents believed that VPALCs were valuable

for the development of their academic and professional skills as they helped them develop their writing skills and improve their academic performance considerably. Students also confessed that they helped them network, find a (peer or expert) mentor and develop their digital skills. They felt less isolated and found their interactions with their peers, lecturer, and guest speakers meaningful. Finally, BAME students who seemed more vulnerable and in need of support reported that it helped them significantly since otherwise they would have had no opportunities to get to know their peers better, communicate with them regularly and receive additional support when necessary. Ultimately, VPALC sessions also allowed them to share their concerns and challenges regarding their return to in person classes. Their lecturer and invited speakers listened actively and then provided useful advice which helped them immensely. They were then able to improve their academic performance and achieve their personal and professional goals (Nieto, 2015).

The themes derived from the analysis of the qualitative data (anonymous feedback and open-ended questions of the survey) revealed several benefits that students thought they gained when involved in VPALC sessions. Students reported that VPALCs allowed them to feel psychologically safe as they were able to receive and provide support to their peers regarding challenging aspects of their learning and ultimately felt more included since they were intimidated to interact with their peers face-to-face immediately after the pandemic. The kind of emotional support students received in terms of the VPALCs was also highlighted in their feedback as some learners faced considerable mental health issues and still had to support their families in the post-pandemic era. Feeling afraid to interact with their peers on campus made them feel isolated and 'lost' since some students were sick or had to support sick members of their family. Some students even requested support from academic mentors and training to develop their digital skills and participate more actively in the sessions.

Taking into consideration the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, this time in Business and Management education history calls for systematic innovation and ingenuity to continue training future HRM professionals (Hamouche, 2021). The call for innovation is particularly important in light of Covid-19's and numerous other health disparities' disproportionate impact on BAME (CDC, 2020). The Business School student body in the UK is comprised of more than 60% racial and/or ethnic minority students. HRM VPALCs should continue to evolve and change based on faculty and student feedback to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. This allows for streamlined and effective programming in service to future HRM students and in future challenging times. As the UK is currently in a "quasi normal" post-pandemic era, the impact that virtual learning had on current students' experiences needs to be monitored over the entirety of their time in Business school. Assessment of the cohorts affected by the Covid-19 pandemic will be essential to identify if unusual struggles or needs for resources arise. Underrepresented students often come into Business school with lower grades compared to their counterparts (Winkle-Wagner and McCoy, 2016). Students that are underrepresented in Business Schools may also experience different external pressures, cultural norms and realities that could be affected by an event like a pandemic.

However, producing a competent and diverse workforce in HRM is essential in the quest for equity in Business and combating social disparities (Thevanes and Arulrajah, 2017). To retain and support a diverse Management student body, there must be consideration for the social determinants of health that may affect the global and national student population differently and focus on mentoring and relationship building (Gasman and Nguyen, 2015). All in all, the findings indicated that VPALCs promoted sustainable learning and supported students in the post-Covid-19 pandemic as they allowed them to share their values and vision, develop their

reflective professional skills, build collaborative networks, and develop their skills through group and individual learning as previously stated in the literature (Stoll et al., 2003).

Theoretical Contribution of the Study (229 words)

Conceptualizing the members of an HRM course as a learning community (Turner et al., 2018) offers a powerful lens through which to explore students' learning and development of professional skills as they interact in the context of an HRM discipline. The idea of the course as a learning community can be traced back to the works of Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1986) who claimed that the process of learning is facilitated through individual participation in social interactions. Thus, the learning activities based on this social-constructivism perspective stress learner–learner interactions within a group engaged in constructing a culture of shared understanding. Conceiving HRM courses as communities emphasizes participating in learning activities, developing professional skills, sharing experiences, and communicating the meaning and value of these experiences. Thus, applying a sociocultural conceptual framework allows lecturers to estimate learning and development by analyzing students' experiences in relation to HRM (Redmond et al., 2018). A key aspect of understanding learning through this lens is that members of an HRM learning community acquire the skills to perform practices by interacting with educational tools, digital tools, peers, and more knowledgeable members of the community (instructors and guest speakers) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As such, this conceptual framework highlights the importance of identifying the kinds of engagement and interactions that provide a context for learning and professional development to take place for an entire HRM community.

Practical Importance and Implications
- **Implications for research** (83 words)

The current study used a relatively small sample which was not representative of HRM students in the UK or even in London. More research is needed to explore the impact of VPALCs on students' academic and professional development especially in the post-Covid-19 era. The current study was conducted in the UK; thus, the results cannot be generalized across other countries. Moreover, a nation's culture and values shape diversity, thus cross-cultural and comparative studies can also be conducted by aspiring researchers in the field.

- **Implications for practice** (545 words)

During the pandemic, students were fearful of losing their academic momentum. Utilizing the VPALC model, peers began receiving academic assistance from each other. The sharp edge of competitiveness was replaced with collaborative efforts to see each other not only survive, but also succeed. This VPALC structure was already robust and impactful but became helpful as both a mode of teaching and of support for students after the pandemic. Students were able to interact with each other in a safe space that fostered validation and a sense of security but also learned to be resilient from one another in these times of uncertainty.

This study describes how VPALCs can be used as a vehicle to create and maintain relationships, receive real-time feedback from students and monitor student well-being in the post-pandemic era. The abruptness of the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in panic and insecurities. By utilizing the well-established VPALC structure intrinsically built into this Business school curriculum, the cohesive small groups easily connected and were able to address concerns as a team. Navigating uncharted territories together brought a sense of

security and further bonded the small VPALCs. Mentors and students alike voiced their uncertainties of the future, all while being supportive of one another. The VPALC structure was a forum to process academic anxieties, emotional concerns, Covid-19 losses, and post-pandemic insecurities.

Virtual VPALCs may help students connect with their classmates when other modes are not readily available. However, VPALCs must continue to be relevant and timely or they risk being seen as an "add-on." With a tightly packed curriculum, VPALCs can potentially become just another time commitment. Some students may find the loosely structured, conversation-focused VPALC sessions less critical in comparison to other coursework. It is important for faculty, student leaders and student participants to commit to the sessions. This engagement includes equal and active participation from all members of the VPALC. The relevance of the session should also be included in the discussion guide and explained during the conversation. A focus on the importance of self-reflection, peer mentoring/coaching, active listening and student engagement can enhance positive student perceptions of VPALCs.

The findings of the current study indicated that HEI need to regularly remind faculty and students to stay flexible, adaptable, and open to change in the face of numerous unknowns-especially after major crises. This is helpful in decreasing anxiety for situations outside of their control. VPALCs served as a vehicle to deliver information to students with immediate student feedback to said information. VPALC sessions often began with "Roses and Thorns," an assessment of student experiences, successes, and challenges since the last session. This portion of the session enabled students to voice their concerns in a safe space, giving peers the opportunity to support each other in agreement (Tucker et al., 2021). They also promoted sustainable learning (Hays and Reinders, 2020) as students were able to develop various academic skills over the course of the academic semester and improve their performance closing the awarding gap, especially for BAME students (Hubbard, 2021) as they confessed in the survey and anonymous feedback they provided. Finally, they developed students' intercultural awareness (Barker and Mak, 2013) as students were asked to work in multicultural groups to discuss the different issues raised by the speakers and develop their academic skills fostering sustainable learning and development.

In terms of this developmental paper, we are still in the process of analyzing our data. It is hoped that this procedure will be completed before the conference.

Discussion Point and Further Development

The Covid-19 pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities for HRM education. It is clear from this case study that finding ways to continue to create a sense of safety and community during times of stress and unpredictability immediately after a pandemic are key for faculty and students in HEI. VPALCs appears to be an advantageous curricular component for adapting HRM education after a major crisis, as well as creating a sense of safety and community. As time goes by, and space is intentionally made for reflection, curricular change may need to occur to assess what modes of HRM education can remain virtual as opposed to in-person, as well as increase or decrease learning sessions based on student need. O'Byrne et al. (2020) call for pandemic preparedness content to be added to Business education curricula. As HRM practices continue to evolve, pandemic preparedness HRM education will need to include not only the digital learning and research aspects of Covid-19, but also the psychosocial components for managing the lived realities of future HRM practitioners in the post-Covid-19 era.

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