From limited to limitless access:

An exploration of Indonesian students’ learning activities in Australia

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Abstract
Recent information and communication technologies (ICTs) potentially facilitate supportive environments for academics and have impacted on students’ learning processes. Although previous scholars have examined the use of ICTs during university education and the internet as a teaching-learning tool, there are very few studies investigating these issues in relation to international students’ lives in Australia. This study focused on Indonesian students who are currently studying in Victorian-based universities examining their new media ownership and internet usage once they have made the transition into a new educational context in Australia; a very different situation from their home country. Using a mixed method approach that combined survey data from 94 Indonesian students with 10 in-depth targeted interviews, the findings consist of the comparison of new media items owned by students before coming to and while studying in Australia, the students’ internet access and usage in terms of place of access, various websites visited, online activities particularly for academic purposes, and the participants’ future expectations after returning to their home country.

Keywords
New media, internet usage, internet access, learning activities, Indonesian students in Australia

Introduction
Indonesia and Australia are two different countries mainly in terms of the use of information and communication technologies. In 2007 the Australian population was nearing 21 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008) with 15.3 million internet users (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008; Internet World Stats, 2007) and 689 internet service providers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Moreover, the penetration of internet users in Australia is 72.9% (Internet World Stats, 2007). In the same year there were around 234 million people in Indonesia (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007) with 20 million internet users (Internet World Stats, 2008) and just 198 internet service providers (Indonesian Internet Service Provider Association, 2007). This translates to a penetration of internet users in Indonesia as being 8.5% (Internet World Stats, 2008).

According to the report of International Student Enrolments in Higher Education, tertiary institution has the largest number of international student enrolments in Australia and it increases annually (Australian Education International, 2007). Most of these students came from China, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Indonesia. Regarding their level of study,
around 57% of university enrolments were in Bachelor degrees and 34% were in Masters by coursework. From the total number of Indonesian students in Australia (12,559), more than fifty percent were aged between 20 to 24 years old. In 2006 there were 8,772 students from Indonesia enrolled in Australian tertiary institutions with 3,672 of them in Victorian universities.

Studying in tertiary level is different from primary or secondary level. In higher education the learning processes need to combine students’ prior knowledge, their ways of writing and reading texts with course requirements (Lea, 1998). This suggests that students in Australian universities should be able to construct new meanings and new knowledge bases. Over the last few years the use of ICTs in higher education particularly related to the internet usage has increased (N. Selwyn, Gorard, S., Furlong, J., 2006). There is a wide variety of online resources available that have impacted on the popularity of books and printed articles. For instance, students are now able to download electronic journals, communicate via email to lecturers and supervisors, have online discussion, and scan documents (Lea, 2004).

Research Questions

The differences between Indonesia and Australia and the requirement of learning process in higher education drew my interest to investigate how Indonesian students in Australian universities cope with their new learning environment. This study aims to answer these questions:

- What kind of new media items do Indonesian students have before coming to and while studying in Australia?
- What were their previous experiences of using the internet?
- What changes of the internet usage do they experience in Australia?
- To what extent does internet usage contribute to their learning activities?
- What are they going to do after returning to Indonesia?

The Study

My project applied mixed methods (Babbie, 1998; Neuman, 2000). In the quantitative stage, I developed a questionnaire to collect the students’ demographic details, comparison of their new media products before coming to and while studying in Australia, their internet access including main location and cost, and their time of usage. The questions about new media ownership in the survey questionnaire were adapted from Livingstone’s project (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) and questions related to internet access were developed from adults use of ICTs project in UK (N. Selwyn, Gorard, S., Furlong, J., 2004). Then in the qualitative stage, I used in-depth interviews to explore previous and recent experiences of the students internet usage related to their learning activities, as well as their plans after returning to Indonesia. Data was gathered during June to September 2007 then analysed with SPSS for the questionnaires and NVivo for in-depth interviews (Pallant, 2007; Richards, 1999).

There were 94 Indonesian students in Victorian-based universities who agreed to fill in the questionnaires. The number of participants was almost equally divided between males (51%) and females (49%) with their ages ranging from 17 to 48 years old with a median age of 27 years. Two thirds (67%) of the participants were Masters and PhD students, while the others were undergraduates in various disciplines studying at Monash University, the University of Melbourne, Victoria University, RMIT, Deakin University and Swinburne University. Around fifty percent of participants were scholarship recipients, other 37% funded by their
family, only a few were self funded (6%) and work sponsored (4%). Their length of stay in Australia varied from 6 months to 7 years. Almost three fourths stayed in Australia between 6 months to 2 years and the remained more than 2 years.

Before coming to Australia, most of participants resided in the middle of cities and suburbs in different areas of Indonesia covering almost all of the big islands - Java, Sumatera, Sulawesi, Bali, Kalimantan and Papua. Nearly eighty percent of the participants have known the internet for the past 6-8 years. In addition, nearly half of all the participants rated themselves as being advanced internet users, forty five percent saw themselves as average users, while just 3% considered themselves as a beginner. Only one person described herself as an expert.

At the second stage of data collection, from 38 participants who agreed to be interviewed, I chose 10 interviewees based on region in Indonesia from which they came: 4 students from Java who resided in the cities of Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bandung, Surabaya; 3 students from suburban Jakarta and Yogyakarta; 1 student from Denpasar on the island of Bali; 1 student from the city of Padang, Sumatera; and finally a participant from a city in Papua.

Findings and Discussion
This paper describes key findings mainly related to the participants’ experiences such as the first exposure to the internet, their internet access and usage, as well as their future plans.

Previous Experience
Regarding their first time internet usage, nearly seventy five percent of survey participants said that they had never attended a formal course while 20% said that they had one or two training sessions. Furthermore, all interviewees admitted that they learnt individually or taught by friends or family members. Some postgraduate participants pointed out,

"...because my friend used email and I wanted to have my own email. Then he taught me how to open an email and I thought it was fantastic..." (AV)

"...I learnt by myself. But sometimes I went to kiosk with my friend so we learnt together... we did learning by doing and trial and error..." (ED)

"...my little sister taught me a bit more about using the internet especially how to open an email account and how to set up yahoo mail..." (RH)

The Main Access
Prior to coming to Australia, a third of the Indonesian students in the study reported that they mostly accessed the internet from an internet kiosk; while 31% had access at home, and 27% got access from their workplace. This finding is similar to previous research which has shown that around half of the internet users in Indonesia have access from internet kiosks (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2002) From 94 students surveyed, 42% of participants spent less than Rp 100,000 per month on internet access in Indonesia, 31% reported paid between Rp 100,000 - 200,000, and 21% spent more than Rp 200,000. One interviewee claimed that generally the cost of having access at an internet kiosk was affordable which varied from Rp 3,000 to 5,000 per hour or approximately 50-70 cents in Australian dollar.
Table 1
The comparison of main internet access and monthly cost in Indonesia and in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33% kiosk</td>
<td>71% home (85% broadband)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31% home</td>
<td>22% campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27% work</td>
<td>7% others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9% others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly internet cost</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42% less than Rp 100,000</td>
<td>54% less than $40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31% Rp 100-200,000</td>
<td>34% $41-$80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21% over Rp 200,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the participants were studying in Australia, their main location of access was home (71%), followed by on campus (22%). Additionally, 85% of students who had home internet access in Australia chose broadband. This was not surprising because the majority of people in Australia use the internet at home via a broadband connection (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). During their stay in Australia, 54% of the student participants spent less than $40 on their access connection. Further 34% paid $41-$80 per month for their access and there were a few participants (12%) who did not know their internet expenditure because it was included in their housing rent costs.

The Internet Usage
Regarding their internet usage during a typical weekday, nearly forty percent of the student participants used the internet for 3-5 hours for academic purposes. These activities included finding and reading online journals or book chapters. A third of the survey participants (33%) spent between 1-3 hours for the same purposes. On a typical weekend the trend for using the internet for academic purposes turned down slightly - around twenty percent for between 3-5 hours, about 31% for 1-3 hours, and 20% for between 30 minutes and 1 hour. Conversely, during a typical weekend, there was an increase in internet use for non-academic purposes. These non-academic activities consisted of sending or reading emails from friends or family, chatting, looking for products or service information, buying goods and services online, banking, reading news, looking at other peoples’ websites, creating or maintaining blogs, as well as downloading software, music, film or images.

Table 2
Internet usage for academic and non-academic purposes by weekdays and weekends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekday</th>
<th>Weekend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38% 3-5 hours</td>
<td>31% 1-3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33% 1-3 hours</td>
<td>20% 3-5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32% 1-3 hours</td>
<td>31% 3-5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21% 30 mins-1 hour</td>
<td>23% 1-3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21% 3-5 hours</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When they were asked about how often they visited certain websites during two weeks, around one third of participants checked their own university websites more than 40 times but more than half (55%) didn’t look at other university websites at all. Regarding library visit to get academic journals, articles or any databases related study, almost one third of participants did so more than 40 times, 21% between 11-20 times and 18% visited somewhere between 21-30 times over a two week period.

**Table 3**
Frequency of email usage and website visits for academic purposes during two weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sent email to lecturers/tutors</td>
<td>61% 15%</td>
<td>1-5x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent email to university staff</td>
<td>48% 45%</td>
<td>1-5x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited my university website</td>
<td>33% 25%</td>
<td>more than 40x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11-20x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited other university websites</td>
<td>55% 31%</td>
<td>not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1-5x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited library</td>
<td>29% 21% 18%</td>
<td>more than 40x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11-20x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21-30x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding the use of emails to communicate with academics, one student preferred to send emails to her supervisor because she was required to:

"... my supervisor prefers to have communication via email rather than by phone or come to her office because her office is not in the same campus with me." (ED)

Similarly another postgraduate participant agreed that email is the easiest way to communicate with her supervisors:

"... we are physically not in the same floor... they are not always in their room, they have teaching appointment or stuff like that, I found it more convenient to send emails..." (HL)

This is not just the case only for postgraduate students. An undergraduate interviewee who had good experience of communicating with lecturers via email observed:

"Often I send an urgent email and they send a quick response." (AM)
Conversely, some participants chose not to send emails. One reason for this decision was provided by a Masters student who said that:

"Actually I sent one or two emails and they didn’t reply. Well, I think maybe they are very busy with a lot of PhD students..." (JS)

Another possibility is that the student had no reason to ask the lecturer. For instance this participant said that:

"I prefer to look for information from my friends or to discuss my questions with my friends first before asking to lecturer. Also I often find everything is clear in the lecture..." (SI)

The Differences

During in-depth interviews, some interviewees provided interesting comments regarding their previous and recent experiences of using the internet. One interviewee from Bali confirmed that:

"In Australia the internet is the most common tool to get any information. But in Indonesia, it is very difficult to get access to the internet..." (KW)

A more detail comparison was described by another interviewee from Yogyakarta who mentioned that having an internet access in Australia is similar to having other household basic needs. He said:

"It is easy to find public internet access in Indonesia, we can go to internet café. But to get online service at home or office would be very expensive and people think what the benefit is, compare to their income. In here, it's much cheaper to have access at home and the university provide free access but it's not easy to find public internet access... it's not a problem because we can get our access easily and simply like having access to electricity, gas, water or phone." (RH)

Future Plans

There were diverse answers from the interviewees when they were asked about their plans after returning home to various parts of Indonesia. One student who previously lived in West Java pointed out:

"... we have to [go] back to a real reality that we have a very slow internet connection." (ED)

While another interviewee commented on the costs of having internet access:

"I will get stress because so many differences... I use the internet at home and the telephone bills increased rapidly..." (AV)

At least three other participants agreed that their online experiences in Australia will influence their future usage:

"I believe that I'm getting more addicted when I [go] back home..." (RH)
"I will still use the internet and have access at home, although it’s not as cheap as in here." (AA)

"Since I study here, I realise that it’s a primary need to have an internet access. Not only for me but also for my husband and children... I will set up an internet access at home in Indonesia." (EA)

Conclusions
This study confirms that new communication technologies have influenced the students’ learning processes but their impacts are complex depending on the users and their usage patterns. All interviewed participants admitted that the internet has become a basic need while studying in Australia although some of them had not been using the internet for their previous learning when they were in Indonesia. Moreover, the experience of having the internet in Australia had confirmed their intention of maintaining their internet access after returning to Indonesia at the completion of their studies.

The importance of this study is that it deals with participants from bachelors, masters and doctoral programs from Victorian based universities who came from diverse parts of Indonesia. The project’s findings provide essential information for preparing Indonesian students who are willing to pursue their degree in Australian tertiary institution. Furthermore, it also assists academics in Australian universities to understand international students’ learning experiences particularly those coming from Indonesia.

References


