LISTENING TO THE STUDENT VOICE: LEARNERS' VIEWS ON THE USE OF PERSONAL MOBILE DEVICES AND SOCIAL PLATROMS AS TOOLS OF STUDY

Prof.Dr. Melissa Lee Price
Staffordshire University, UK.
m.l.price@staffs.ac.uk

Prof.Dr. Andy Lapham
Thames Valley University, UK.
andy.lapham@tvu.ac.uk

1. Introduction

Over the last decade or so, universities have increasingly adopted and developed telecommunication media as vehicles for delivering courses. This paper explores students' views of the use of such technologies and how universities may be making erroneous assumptions about students' desires to mix the technologies used in their private lives with those use to support their learning.

1.1 Drivers for Technology Adoption

The take-up of telecommunication media and devices as mechanisms for teaching and facilitating learning is partly driven by institutional policy and partly by tutors adopting and using new technologies as part of their personal and work-related lives (Price, Lapham, & Schaffer, 2008). Other drivers for technology adoption are several and include: the primacy of current theories of learning founded on learning as a social process; the much-anticipated roll-through of techno-savvy students; and a move to make learning and study socially inclusive by moving away from a traditional classroom-based curriculum. Learning through social interaction is formalised in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social cognition and, for example, Gee's (2004) theory of social learning. Universities are now seeing students with very different characteristics compared with those seen only a few years ago. These so-called 'digital natives'

(Prensky, 2001a, 2001b) *'think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors'* and *'represent the first generations to grow up with […] new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age'* (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1). The use of technology to remove the constraint that teachers and learners need to be co-located both temporally and geographically, has been a goal of educators for long time. Early studies (eg Hiltz & Turoff, 1993) explored the potential for computer-mediated communication through email and bulletin boards to facilitate learning, whilst numerous contemporary studies have explored the use of email (eg Murnan, 2006), mobile phones (eg Brown & Green, 2001) and SMS text messaging (eg Barkhuus, 2005) for social interaction, teaching and learning.

1.2 The Social Web

Most recently, socio-technical developments have seen the rise of the phenomenon of Web 2.0. The term is attributed to Dale Dougherty of O'Reilly Media in 2003 (O'Reilly, 2005a, 2005b). Rather than technical changes, the term refers to the repurposing of the WWW from what had become, essentially, a broadcast medium (relatively few content producers broadcasting to a vast number of end-users) to a platform for serving web applications, facilitating content production at the micro level of the end-user and fostering and building communities based on shared experiences, shared interests and shared space. Technologies that characterise the social and community-building nature of Web 2.0 include podcasts, wikis, social bookmarking and blogs. Typical examples include: Facebook, MySpace, Wordpress.com, Flickr (photo blogging) and Last FM (radio and music social network). Social bookmarking applications are typified by the del.icio.us community site.

1.3 Web 2.0 and Universities

A quantitative and qualitative study carried out by IPSOS MORI for the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC, 2007) revealed that 98% of student respondents (n=501) used instant messaging

(68% regularly) and 94% of respondents used social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook (65% regularly). In general, universities have responded rapidly to the use of Web 2.0 by the digital native generation and have developed its use in a number of educational and administrative areas. These range from podcasting, facilitating social learning (Ilaria et al., 2007) and developing creativity in learners (Lapham, 2007) through providing virtual campus tours in Second Life for potential students (Young, 2007) to collecting library fines and disciplining unruly students (Pavia, 2008). Many tutors now have their own Facebook sites and encourage students to visit. A recent newspaper article featured a not untypical view from a tutor: *"[s]ome students are my friends. I put up lots of pictures of my holiday, my pets and my kids and what I'm doing this week. It's a way of keeping in touch with students or anyone in your life"* (G. Salmon quoted in Hoare, 2007).

The question is how do students feel about mixing their social and personal lives with their university lives on the same social network platforms? The recent JISC study (JISC, 2007) suggests that they may be ready to draw a line and keep their lives separate.

2. Methodology

Research questions were examined in university settings in the UK and USA using an innovation-adoption framework. The study sample of media and communications students (broadly defined to include, inter alia, journalism, photography, video/film, radio/audio, graphic design, advertising, public relations and interactive media) was sent letters via their tutors inviting them to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited basic demographic information on respondents and gathered details on their use of the Internet and the communication technologies they used in their personal lives and as part of their studies. A final section of the questionnaire used Likert-style statements to gain insight into the attitudes of respondents. The survey was carried out in two tranches – late 2007 and early 2008.

3. Results

3.1 Basic demographics of respondents

The survey received 101 responses up to April 2008. Tables 1 & 2 show the breakdown of respondents by gender, country of study and age.

	UK	US	TOTAL
MALE	48	16	64
FEMALE	24	13	37
TOTAL	72	29	101

Table 1 - Respondent gender by country n=101

	<18	18-22	23-30	31+
MALE	2	47	12	3
FEMALE	1	30	6	0
	3	77	18	3

Table 2 - Respondent gender by age

3.1 Technologies Used and Attitudes

The survey focused on two groups of communications technologies; the more *traditional* technologies such as websites, email and bulletin boards and contemporary technologies such as mobile phones and web 2.0 applications. Respondents were questioned on their use of the technologies in each of these groups in both their personal lives and their university studies.

Figure 1 shows the length of time respondents have used the web and other Internet technologies in each of the spheres of their lives. The data supports Prensky's (2001a) notion of the existence of a generation of *digital natives,* whilst also confirming the growth of the use of web-based technologies in education over the past decade.

Figure 2 illustrates the Internet-based technologies that respondents have been exposed to during their study. Almost all (94.7%) had used module/class or programme/major websites and the majority had used email as a form of communication with their tutors for a variety of tasks, eg 83.2% had emailed questions to a tutor and 54.7% had emailed *work in progress* for feedback. Almost two thirds (66.3%) of

respondents had used a course management system (CMS), such as Blackboard, WebCT or Moodle) and 24.2% felt they had used Web 2.0 technologies and applications.

Figure 3 shows respondents' use of contemporary communications technologies in each sphere (personal and study) of their lives. Unsurprisingly, when considering use in personal lives, mobile phone calling (78.9%) and SMS messaging (83.2%) had high penetration rates, whilst more costly photo- and multimedia-messaging had been used by 67.4% of the sample. Instant messaging had been used by almost nine out of ten (87.4%) respondents. Web 2.0 applications had been used by 70.5% of respondents in their personal lives and 40.0% of respondents as part of their studies. This supports evidence from elsewhere as to the rise of Web 2.0 in education (eg JISC, 2007).

Figure 4 gives further support to the *digital natives* theory. Respondents were asked to rate their attitude to four Likert-style statements:
a. sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the rapid changes in technology;
b. I like to stay at the leading edge of technology change;
c. I like to make a fashion statement with my use of communications technology;
d. I find that communications technology helps me better organise and structure my time. (Figure 1- 2-3-4)

3.3 Comfort Levels
The survey elicited respondents' *comfort levels* with the use of various technologies in both spheres (personal and study) of their lives. Responses to the use of mobile phone calling (87% felt comfortable or very comfortable, Figure 6), SMS messaging (95.0%, Figure 7) and instant messaging (93.8%, Figure 5) in personal lives produced the highest levels of comfort. This picture is not reflected in comfort levels with use as part of studies. Technologies with a cost attached eg Video calling (Figure 8) show the lowest levels of comfort in both personal and study spheres of lives. Comfort levels with the use of Web 2.0 technologies and applications (Figure 9) appear to be very similar

between the two spheres of respondents' lives (78.2% were either comfortable or very comfortable with the use of Web 2.0 in their personal lives, compared to 68.8% as part of their studies. (Figure 5-6-7-8-9-10)

3.4 Provision and Expectation
The survey asked respondents to rate their agreement with three statements relating to university expectation of, and provision and training in, the use of the communications technology in their studies:
a. my university provides sufficient training for me in the use of communications technology to support my studies;
b. my university provides sufficient technical support for me in the use of communications technology to support my studies;
c. my university expects me to use communications technology to support my studies.
Responses (Figure 11) show a high level of agreement to all three statements (to statement a. above, 71.3% agreed or strongly agreed; to statement b. 70.0% and statement c. 87.3%).

Finally respondents were asked about their knowledge of the existence specific university policies regarding:
a. the appropriate use of campus email;
b. the timely responses to student emails by tutors.
Figure 12 shows that a high level of respondents *don't know* of the existence of either policy (a. 38.0% and b. 63.3%) (Figure 11-12)

4. Conclusion
This study is the second in a series that includes students and academics from other disciplines. The purpose of the initial survey was to establish a baseline of behavior in a group of academics that was considered to be 'early adopters'. The second looks at how the students of early adopters are using technology in their personal and academic lives. Media and Communication academics are indeed early adopters of with 73% having over 11 years of online personal use and 38% using it to support their teaching during the same time frame (Price, Lapham, Schaffer 2008). Media and Communication students

are comfortable digital natives using and embracing technology with ease in their personal lives. The interesting cross-over is that as their tutors/professors are introducing new technologies into their teaching, these digital natives are not sure that they want these technologies used in an academic setting. Ten years ago students were hesitant to use email to contact their tutors/professors instead opting to telephone or to drop by during office hours. Now they see no barrier to firing off an email at any times of the day. Perhaps as Web 2.0 technologies are used more frequently in an academic setting students will accept that as the norm as they have accepted the use of email.

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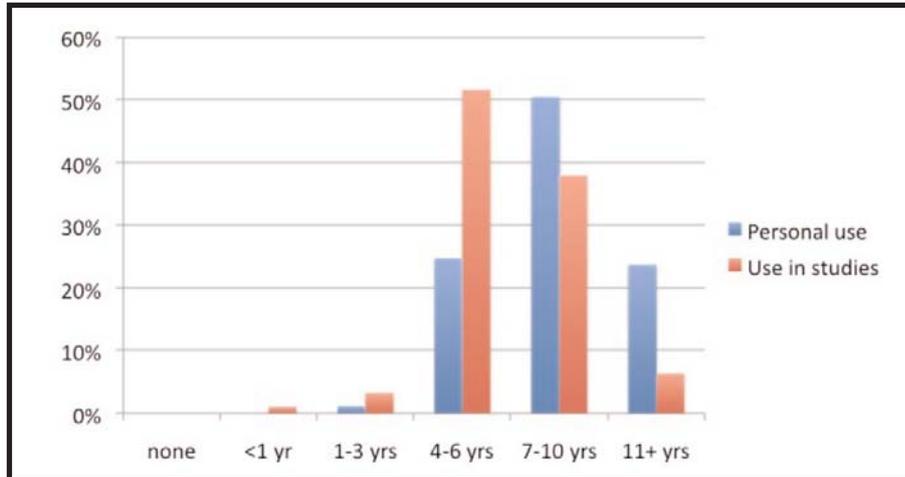
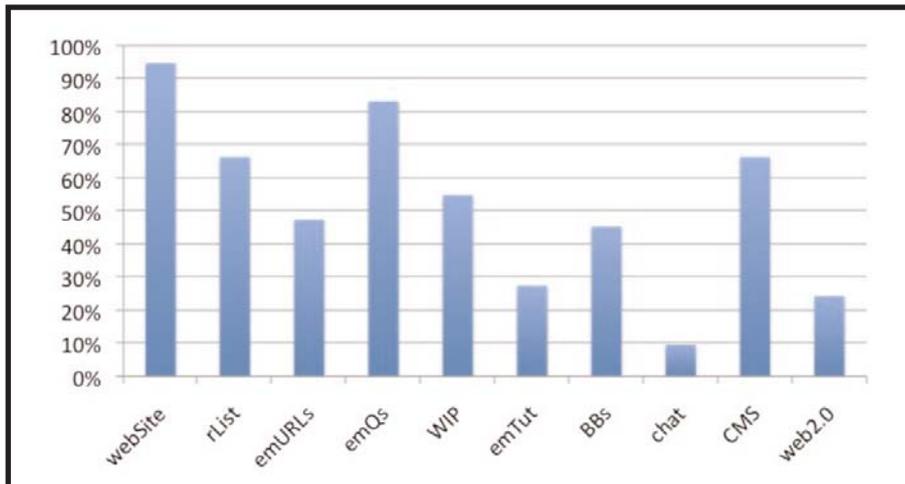Figure 1 - use of www/internet technologies (all respondents)

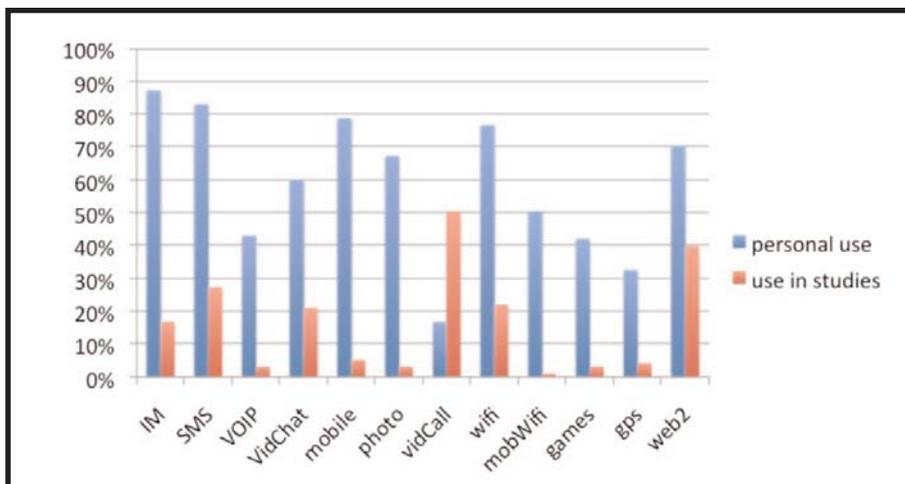Figure 2 – www/internet technologies used in studies (all respondents)

Figure 3 - contemporary communications technologies used (all respondents)
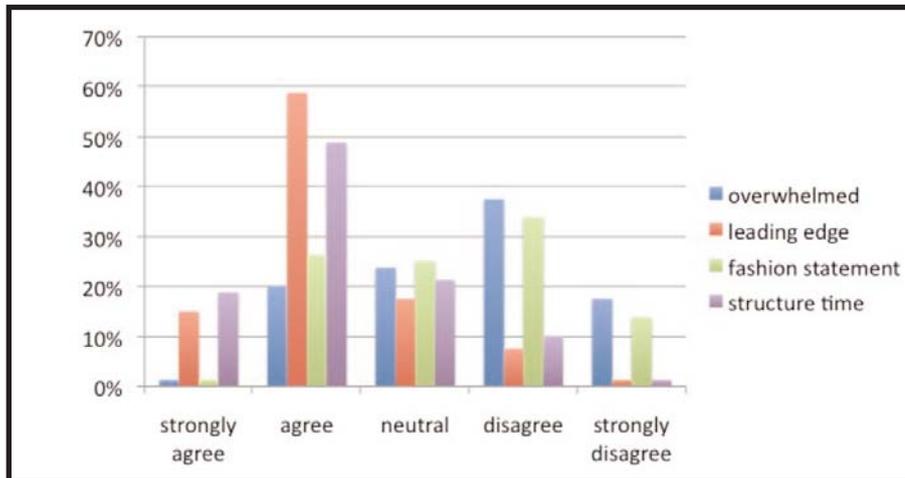
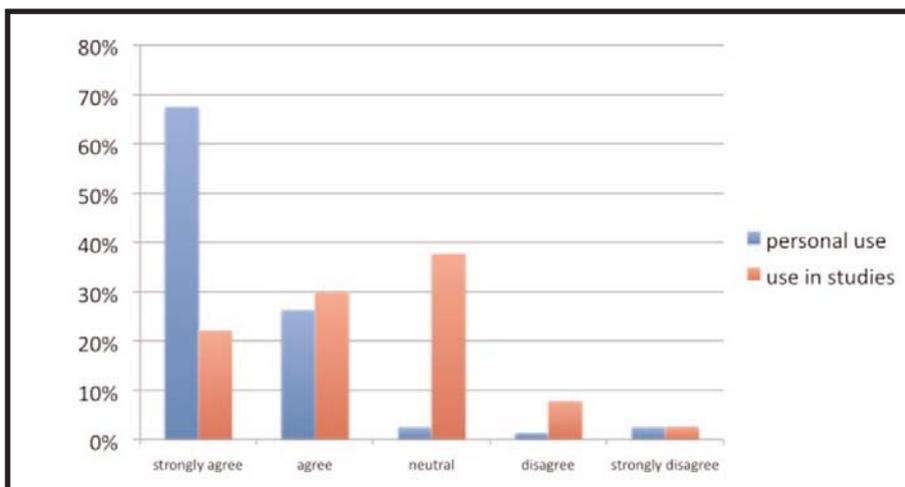Figure 4 - attitudes to technology (all respondents)
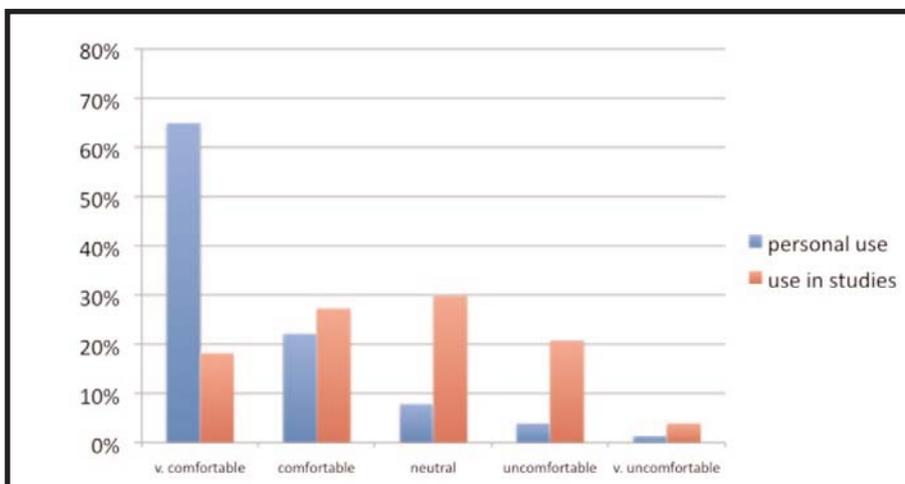

Figure 5 - comfort levels with use of IM
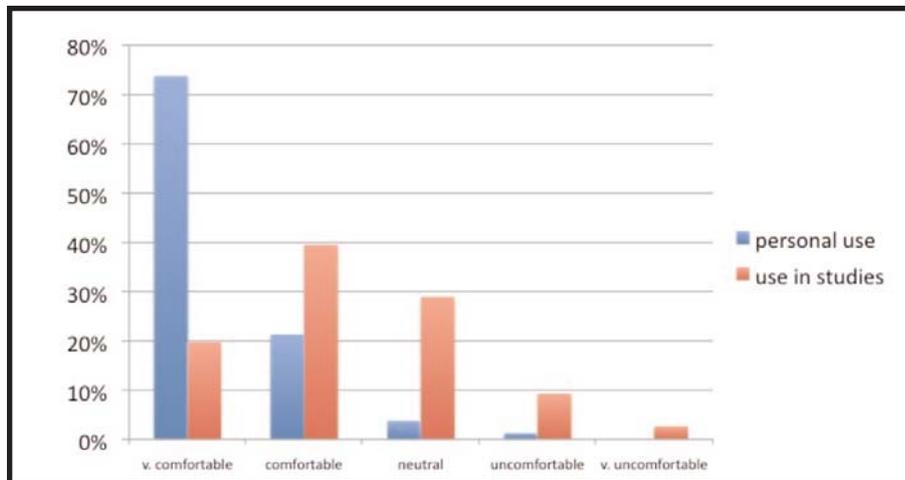

Figure 6 - comfort levels with use of mobile phones
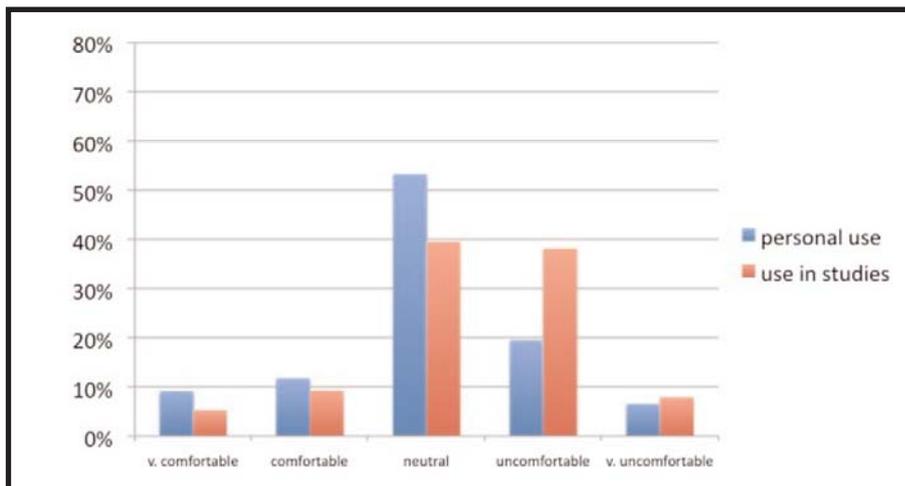
Figure 7 - comfort levels with use of SM
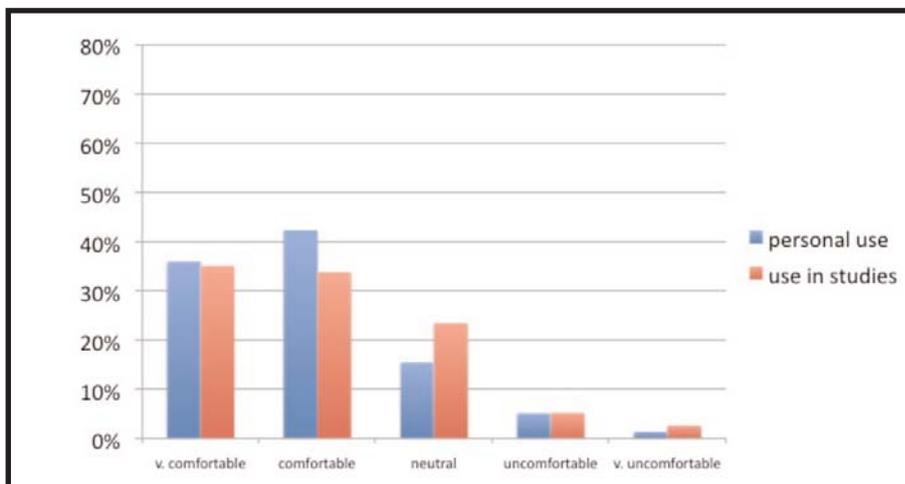

Figure 8 - comfort levels with use of video calling

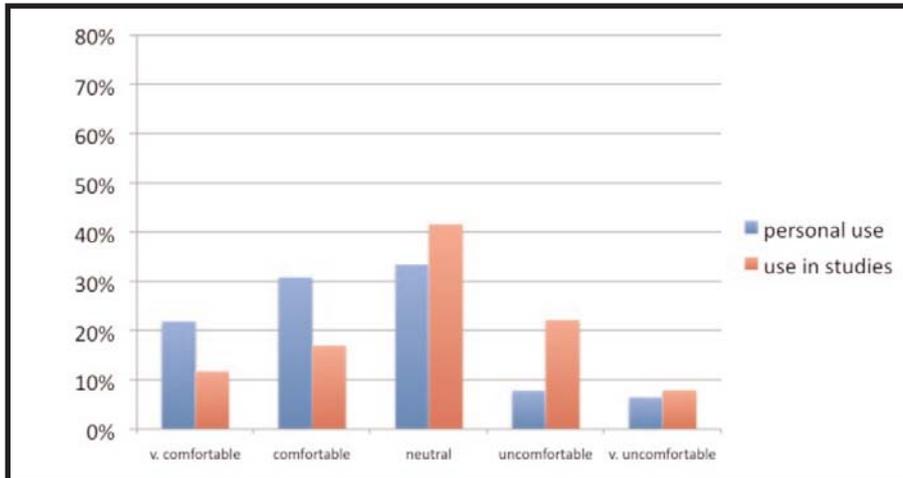Figure 9 - comfort levels with use Web2.0 technologies

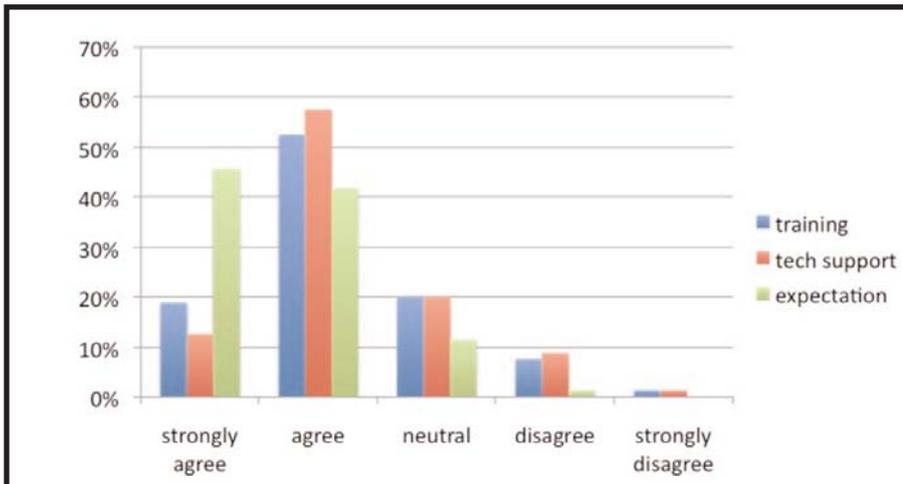Figure 10 - comfort levels with use of video chat
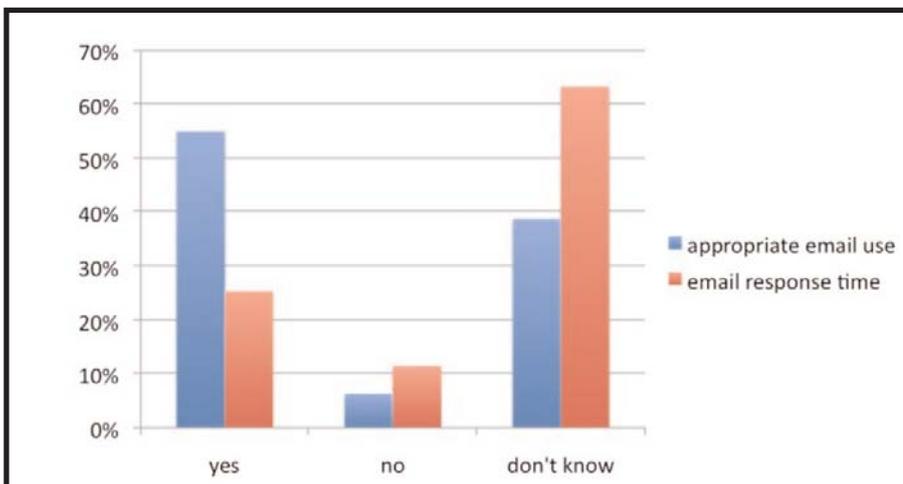

Figure 11 - views on university provision and expectation

Figure 12 - knowledge of university policies