

Sapo Campus: what users really think about an institutionally supported PLE

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are facing great challenges nowadays related with funding, with the discussion of its own mission but, above all, related with answers that are needed in order to cope with new learning contexts and new typologies of students.

However, despite these challenges being traditionally framed within an economical, social and political discussion, they are also a result of technological evolution and new usages of technology.

Following this line of thought we will present a social media platform – Sapo Campus – launched at University of Aveiro (UA) in the fall of 2009 and some preliminary results of a first questionnaire that was recently applied to the university community.

SAPO Campus is a technological platform that results from a R&D partnership between UA and SAPO (the major Internet portal and ISP in Portugal) that aims to launch and assess an integrated Web 2.0 services platform based on SAPO core technologies in order to promote communication, sharing and collaboration skills in Portuguese HEI students and promote and support the use of these services in Higher Education contexts.

This first questionnaire allowed us to obtain an accurate technological profile and Web services usage overview from the community and also to understand their opinions about Sapo Campus evolution and its present and future potential impact as far as learning, social and institutional dimensions are concerned.

In this paper we argue that, inside HEI, technology is not neutral and may perform a major role in a disruptive innovation process of learning practices.

Keywords:

PLE, Higher Education, Survey, Technology, Impact

1. Introduction

Sapo Campus is a technological platform (Santos, 2009a) that provides its users a set of integrated Web 2.0 tools (photo and video sharing tools, a cross-institutional wiki and a blog platform) complemented with two main layers. The first layer is an aggregation one, supported by widgets, that provides tools and resources that aim to promote a PLE construction culture within UA members. The second layer is a social one that allows users to follow other community users' contributions and a comprehensive community news feed.

Sapo Campus platform has been available for the UA community since September 2009. Although technologies and services of Sapo Campus have been changing and evolving, the initial core objectives and principles of the project are still the same: the

promotion of a culture of openness, sharing and communication among UA community members and the outside public and, at a more personal level, the dissemination and promotion of better technology use practices for learning.

Accordingly, the strategy designed for launching this technological platform hasn't changed since the very beginning. At the end of 2008 we assumed that the best method of spreading social web use and disseminating the PLE concept across all University members would be by providing some core technology, somehow connected and supported by the institution. We argued that this approach towards institutional supported Web 2.0 tools and PLE could be compatible with the personal dimension of social software and PLE if institutions were open to provide technology that consciously disrupted some usage control practices and traditional institutional hierarchies and organization issues. This particular approach on technology adoption could represent a strong internal message about how the institution should look to the future and also about the type of interaction and participatory culture and skills that they expect from students, teachers, researchers and other staff.

The concepts of “chmod 777 education” (Santos, 2009b), Open and Social University (Santos, 2010) and Digital Identity (Aresta, 2011) intimately underlie this approach. In our opinion, these concepts can be really transformational if they are implemented together with a technological approach like the one Sapó Campus proposes.

At the present moment, it is possible for all UA members to register in the platform but there isn't, as yet, a fully admitted institutional support from the University towards Sapó Campus.

The results presented and discussed in the next sections are, accordingly, a first iteration that aims to assess the users' point of view at this stage of dissemination of the platform. These results will later be compared with subsequent collected data, at different stages, after the Sapó Campus official dissemination and support by the UA.

2. Methodology

During March 2011 a survey was carried out in order to obtain a first cross-institutional feedback from platform users about the impact of Sapó Campus at the University of Aveiro. The first part of the survey was available for every UA member and aimed to draw an accurate technological profile and Internet usage print from the community. The second part of the survey was only available to Sapó Campus registered users and aimed to understand their opinions about the platform evolution and its present and future potential impact as far as learning, social and institutional dimensions are concerned.

The survey was carried out using the Survs¹ online survey tool. Survey dissemination was based on 3 different moments:

- First week: dissemination across social media tools like Facebook, Twitter and blogs;
- Second week: institutional dissemination using internal mailing-lists;
- Third week: email to Sapó Campus registered users.

¹ <http://www.survs.com/>

The survey was closed with 924 answers but only 740 (80%) were considered valid as compared to an estimated population of 16000. According to Krejcie (1970) the sample size obtained is significantly higher than the required sample size (375-377) to make it representative of the given population. However, in this paper we will only present a partial analysis of results based on answers provided by the group of Sapo Campus registered users. A future in-depth analysis will be required to correlate the two groups of users data.

The Sapo Campus registered users group offered 227 valid answers from an initial population of 958². According to Krejcie (1970), such sample size is not enough to make it representative of the given population. 275 valid answers would be needed to guarantee a 95% accuracy level. That said, current data analysis should be carefully interpreted with this limitation in mind.

The survey structure was based on conditional statements that allowed question segmentation according to each user's previous answers. The survey structure was as follows:

1. Personal profile (available to all)
 - a. Gender
 - b. Age
 - c. Institutional role
2. Technological profile (available to all)
 - a. Internet consumption habits
 - b. Technologies relevance for institutional activities
 - c. Technologies relevance for personal activities
 - d. Aggregation tools for information consumption
3. Institutional technological services usage (available to all)
4. Sapo Campus impact (only available to Sapo Campus registered users)
 - a. Global/Institutional impact
 - b. Personal impact
 - c. Potential future impact
 - d. Positive and negative aspects
5. Final survey feedback (available to all)

3. Survey results and data analysis

As stated previously, this survey data analysis is only related to registered Sapo Campus users.

3.1 Sapo Campus users' profile

Current Sapo Campus users are not a random sample of the overall institution population. As a research project it was inevitable that the first stages of developing and testing were targeted to specific students, teachers and researchers with a higher proximity level to project coordinators. As a research study it is important to understand how these users' profile is related to the global institution population.

² Sapo Campus registration was open during the survey. Until the end of March this population increased to 1053.

One other important note: adding personal and institutional information is optional for Sapo Campus users. The institution obviously does not share this information and the authentication federation between UA and Sapo Campus does not provide personal data.

The data under analysis in this paper was exclusively gathered through this survey. Unfortunately, global statistics from institution users are not available, therefore not allowing for accurate comparisons. Observations presented will be based on our knowledge of the institution.

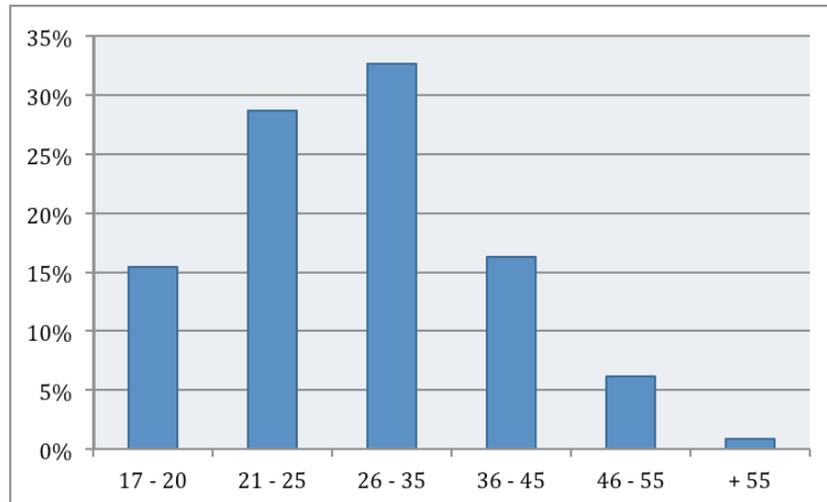


Figure 3.1 Age distribution for Sapo Campus users

The age distribution of Sapo Campus users (Figure 3.1) presents an average that is somehow higher than the actual global population from UA. As only a few students from first and second years of undergraduate courses were involved in formal activities using the platform, a higher participation of Master and PhD students was expected and age distribution data reflects that expectation.

Figure 3.2 presents the distribution of respondents across institutional roles. Although graduate students represent the largest group of Sapo Campus users their relative weight should be considerably higher according to the aforementioned interpretation depicted in Figure 3.1.

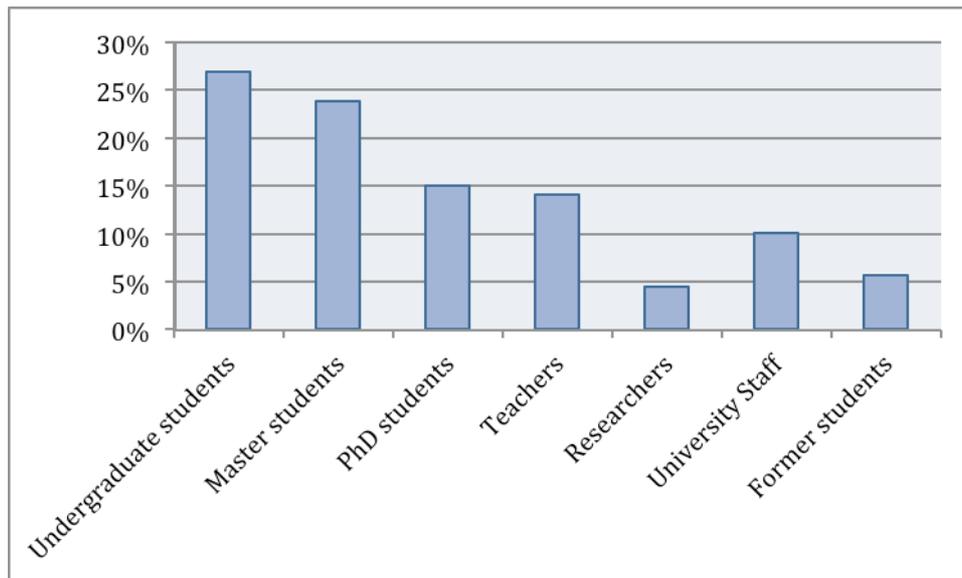


Figure 3.2 Users' institutional role

The Sapó Campus project is developed at the Department of Communication and Art and a closer affinity was expected from this group of the university population. Figure 3.3 shows that almost half of the actual Sapó Campus population is related with this department, which enrolls about 10% of the whole institutional population. It also demonstrates the natural interest from departments related with Education and Computer Science. The enrolment of University staff mainly derives from the institutional support and personal interest of some technical staff in the Sapó Campus core services. Until now, staff members tend to use Sapó Campus as a formal presence of the institutional structure they work with and not so much on a personal perspective. .

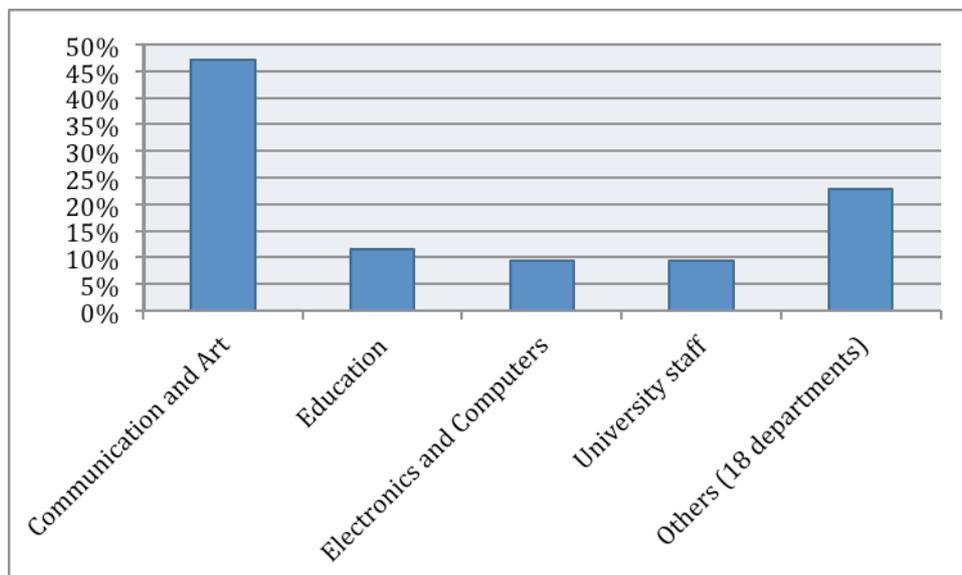


Figure 3.3 Distribution across the University

Survey answers were obtained from all departments and although partially smaller they represent almost one quarter of all Sapó Campus registered users.

In conclusion, Sapo Campus users are spread across the institution but they do not completely represent the profile of the institutional population. The results show a tendency that Sapo Campus users are somehow older and more representative of post-graduation levels, with a profile that reveals a considerable knowledge of technology and educational technology.

3.2 Technology relevance for users' activities

During the survey users were asked to classify the personal level of relevance for a well-known set of Internet technologies and services. The same question was asked related to two different contexts: personal activities and activities related to their institutional role.

Using an average level of relevance for each technology and for each context it was possible to gather users' perspectives towards different technologies. The results obtained are presented in Figure 3.4 where a value higher than zero means the attribution of a higher level of relevance to the personal context and a result lower than zero the attribution of a higher level of relevance to the institutional context.

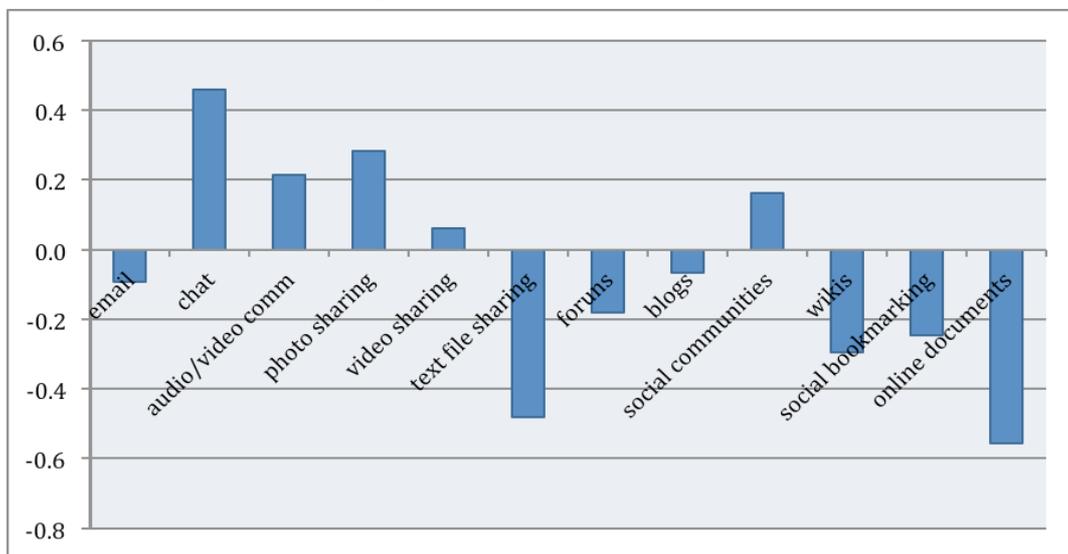


Figure 3.4 Personal vs Institutional perspective on technologies (>0 means more relevance towards personal use and <0 means more relevance towards institutional use)

Some of the results reflect our prior expectations. For instance, it looks expectable that text file sharing and online document edition are more relevant at an institutional context. However, at least two of these variables deserve further study:

- **Blogs:** in spite of a small difference blogs were considered more relevant for the institutional context. From a raw analysis this result is very different from the position revealed by the other group of survey results related with the population without a Sapo Campus registration. More data and further analysis will be needed to understand if this result is somehow related with users' experience in using Sapo Campus blogs service.
- **Social communities:** Social communities are seen as more relevant to the personal dimension but with a much smaller difference than the one obtained in the other group of respondents. Further and deeper analysis will be required to understand if this difference is related with Sapo Campus or as a

consequence of the population differences that were presented at the end of previous sub-section.

To complete this analysis users were asked about their awareness of a global level of distinction - personal or institutional - that is present when they use the Internet.

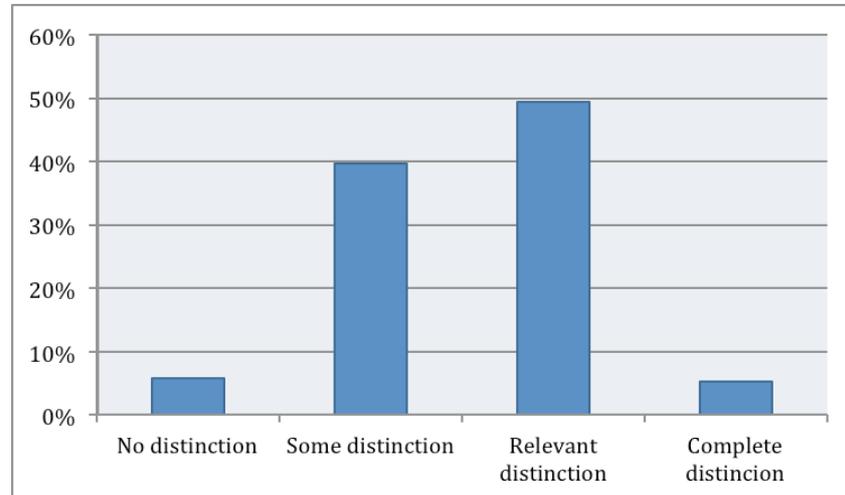


Figure 3.5 Distinction between personal and institutional use of technologies

Results shown in Figure 3.5 demonstrate that the average Sapó Campus user has a considerable concern about the context of use of the technology. This result is in line with our observation of two evident characteristics of Sapó Campus User Generated Content (UGC):

- The almost irrelevant impact of personal and social UGCs across Sapó Campus services;
- The high level of responsibility shown when sharing content that respects the policies defined by the institution: until now, UGC monitoring has produced nearly null results.

Results obtained present relevant questions about Sapó Campus evolution and further and deeper analysis is taking place to understand some key issues. For instance, does it make sense to develop a social layer on a platform where UGCs are almost exclusively academic or institutional? Or, on the other hand, is the development of a social layer indispensable to bring the personal and social presence to the institutionally supported platform?

A deeper and continuous analysis is also taking place to try to understand if the use of this platform contributes towards changing the way people look at and use technology for their learning and academic activities.

3.3 What users "really" think of Sapó Campus

Part 4 of the survey was only available to registered Sapó Campus users. Its main objective was to gather data about the platform's potential impact according to the personal opinion of users with real experience with the technology.

The first question was intended to know the users' opinion about the potential impact of Sapó Campus within a framework of a more widespread use of the platform

across the institution. Figure 3.6 presents the dimensions that were questioned and the results obtained. Answers were obtained under a "Very positive" to a "Very negative" scale. For this specific purpose positive and negative answers were coded in a scale between 2 and -2.

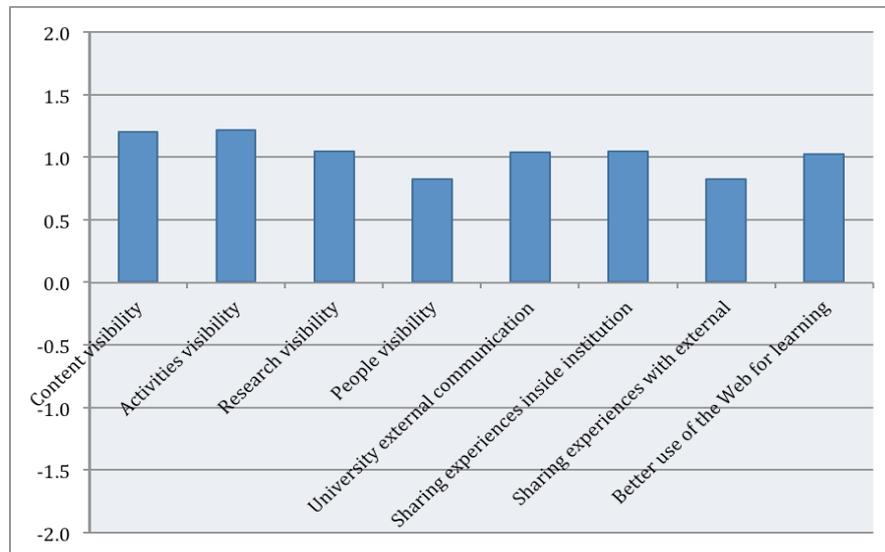


Figure 3.6 Users' perspectives on global Sapo Campus impact (>0 means a positive impact)

A few considerations could be brought into discussion:

- **Content visibility:** the majority of users considered that the Sapo Campus platform has a positive impact as far as the visibility of content produced inside the institution is concerned. In our opinion, the fact that Sapo Campus UGCs are publicly available with a Creative Commons license is a very positive contribution for this rewarding feeling.
- **Activities visibility:** these results are somehow related with the last topic and the same considerations could be applied. It is important to notice that formal and informal activities have been announced through the use of blogs. Relevant institutional events have been registered in photos that are quickly shared through Sapo Campus. Just by following the Sapo Campus user from the UA Communications Office allows a high level of awareness about relevant institutional activities and events.
- **Research visibility:** this is a good example of how users use the technology from a perspective that is different from how it was planned. The Sapo Campus wiki has been used by Master and PhD students to gather relevant research information and, in some cases, to build the first steps of their research projects. By sharing this information students have been able to share resources and learn from what other students are doing with their own research plans. Of course this is just the first step of any research project but sharing and connecting with other relevant researchers could become a positive contribution.
- **People visibility:** this question is closely related with the study being developed by Aresta (2011). Although positive, this topic is classified with the lowest positive impact. In our opinion, this is related with the lack of

awareness of online identity issues that should be a concern for Higher Education communities and institutions.

- **University external communication:** opening up a large amount of UGCs to the Web in a domain related to the institution will contribute towards a higher searchability of the institution. Questions could arise related with the benefits of this higher exposure without institutional and quality control supervision. Anyhow, current users feel that the institutional external communication benefits from the use of Sapo Campus.
- **Sharing experiences inside the institution:** following recent activities or searching inside Sapo Campus allows anyone a quick feedback about what others are doing inside the institution. This personal awareness of the work being done by others helps destroy a classic barrier inside institutions where it is very difficult to get access to the work developed by others. This no-walls approach inside the institution could be a positive contribution towards sharing experiences inside the institution and Sapo Campus users recognize as bearing a high positive impact.
- **Sharing experiences with external members and communities:** Although positive, this topic is recognized with less impact. It seems Sapo Campus' users do not recognize such a higher level of opportunity to interact with others. Probably this limitation is related with the impossibility of external users to register into the platform and also with the widespread use of other social communities like Facebook and Twitter that users seem to prefer in order to communicate with external members and communities.
- **Better use of the Web for learning:** this topic will be detailed in the analysis that will be conducted for the following questions.

The last set of questions had the objective of measuring the recognized personal impact of Sapo Campus as far as content sharing and information consumption are concerned. These two dimensions were analysed in personal and institutional related contexts.

The darker dataset of Figure 3.7 shows that users positively value the impact of Sapo Campus in both dimensions and contexts. The institutional dimension is rated higher than the personal dimension and this could be somehow related with the type of UGC that is being shared and the close connection to formal activities where students were enrolled.

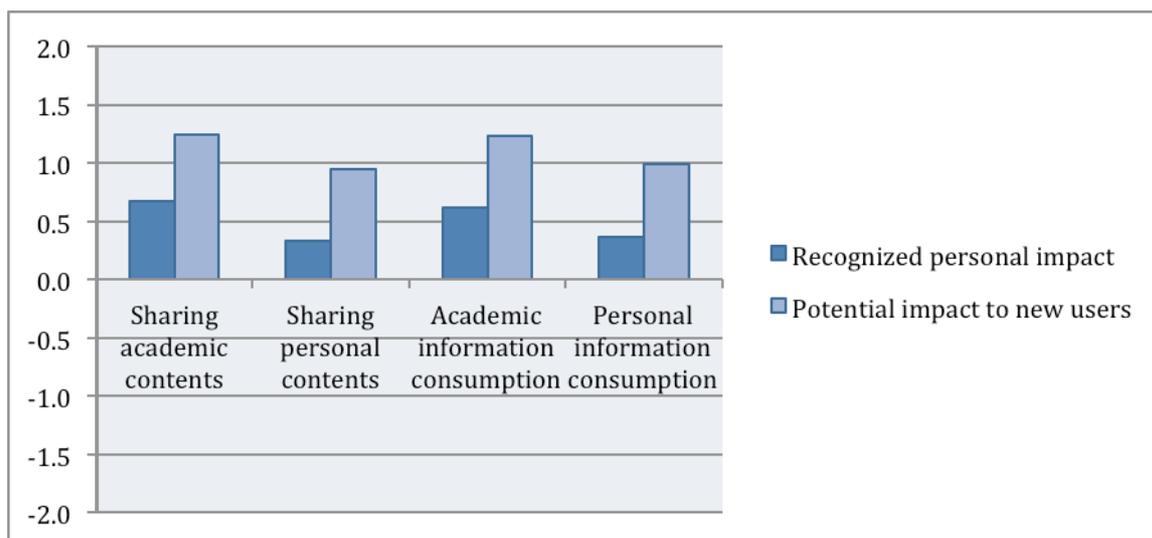


Figure 3.7 Recognized personal impact of Sapo Campus' users experience and potential impact to new users (>0 means a positive impact)

Users were also questioned about the same topics in a future scenario of institutional support and integration of the platform. For this scenario all the different perspectives were valued considerably higher when compared with the actual experience from users.

From this difference it is possible to assume that users consider that a better Sapo Campus integration and support from the institution would represent a benefit for future users. We believe that these results are very interesting and represent a new variable in the current discussion about PLE and the way HEI should promote the use of technology.

4. Conclusions

These preliminary results allowed us to confirm that the way technology is provided by HEI is an important affordance as to its future usage and as far as learners, teachers and staff learning and intellectual and social growing is concerned.

According to these results, users seem to value the fact that technology is provided with some kind of institutional support and, from our point of view, UA is also benefitting and enriching its main mission of helping to create active and responsible lifelong learners.

Finally, we argue that technology may perform a major role in a thorough HEI mission redesign towards what we call a more Open and Social University (OSU).

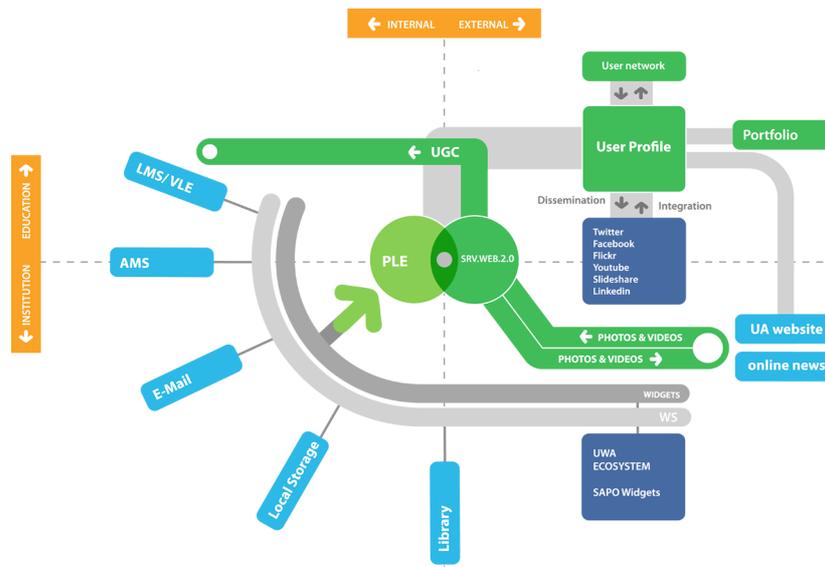


Figure 4.1 Open and Social University concept supported by Sapo Campus institutional integration

The OSU concept (Figure 4.1) stands for a new and evolved institutional approach towards openness and digital identity where institutional walls become weaker and institution members are seen as active knowledge contributors, not only as a result of their work inside the institution but also as a result of their participation and affiliation in external communities.

5. Acknowledgements

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