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Low Adoption of Adaptive Learning Systems in Higher Education and How Can It Be Increased in Fully Online Courses

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Abstract: Adaptive Learning Systems (ALS) aim to provide differentiated instructions at a personalized level of learning. While the number of students enrolled in a fully online learning environment is growing rapidly, the amount of personalization that an online facilitator can provide becomes limited, which increases the need for an ALS for more effective and efficient teaching and learning. Review of literatureindicates that though studies on ALS have been conducted for more than a decade, the adoption rate of ALS in higher education is still low. One of the main issues of the low adoption of ALS is facultysupport. Due to lack of comprehensive and systematic understanding of ALS, faculty in higher educationis reluctant to the changes brought by ALS and doubtful of the feasibility and applicability of ALS. To address this issue, the paper presents a pilot trial which includes a three-stage implementation model of ALS in a fully online learning higher education organization as a case study.

Keywords: Adaptive learning System, Online Higher Education, Misconceptions, Student Model

1. Introduction

Online learning has been designed so that students can have asynchronous learning. Online learning is also beneficial for students as they can learn at their own pace with the availability of online materials. With small number of students, online facilitators were able to devote their attentions to the students and would be able to tailor the contents for them (i.e., address their specific misconceptions, point them to the right resources and contents specific to the student's needs). As student numbers grow, they have to divide the academic team's attention by limiting the time to get to know the individual student's learning needs.

Students on average, perform two standard deviations better under one-on-one tutoring compared to standardised group instruction. Education professor, Benjamin Bloom described this effect of personalised instruction as the 2-sigma problem (Bloom, 1984). One approach to personalised instruction is adaptive teaching (or learning). Although the objective of adaptive teaching and learningis the same, the context to where it is used seems to be different. Adaptive teaching often refers to how teachers can respond, when necessary, to difference among students (Westwood, 2018). Using the theory behind adaptive teaching, the term adaptive learning systems (ALS) is often used to refer to thesystems that are technology-enabled and utilise data-driven approaches to customise instructions and personalise the learning experience (Gupta et al., 2020; Khosravi, Sadiq, &Gasevic, 2020; Mavroudi, Giannakos, & Krogstie, 2018; Newman, Bryant, Fleming, & Sark-isian, 2016; US Department of Education, 2017; Walkington, 2013). The idea of improving learning through adaptive personalisation of teaching becomes a teaching and learning movement for change in higher education (Casarez, 2019).

This paper first summarises the advantages of ALS and investigates the reasons for its current low adoption in higher education. It is reflected from the literature that faculty support issue due to lack of comprehensive and systematic understanding of ALS remains to be the major issue that leads to thelow adoption of ALS. To address this issue, the paper further proposes a three-stage implementation model in the initial phase of adopting ALS in UniSA Online as a case study for in-depth analysis.

2. Adaptive Learning Systems and Its Low Adoption in Higher Education

2.1 Adaptive Learning Systems (ALS)

ALS are defined in various forms, ranging from simple systems based on a preconceived set of rules to complex systems with self-learning algorithms (Mirata & Bergamin, 2019); or it can be a platform on which to build and contain adaptive courseware (Vignare et al, 2018). When applied to online learning, the technologies that we have now provide online facilitatorsthe ability to support each student with personalised learning and adaptability that was difficult to accomplish before. Adaptive learning may help to address the drawbacks of large online courses, a potential source of inequity (e.g., only students who frequently ask for help and post questions get attention; students at risk of failing are given more attention and thus no time left to help other students to seek their potentials). Early studies have shown that adaptive learning systems can promote student engagement (Khosravi et al., 2020; Li, Cui, Xu, Zhu, & Feng, 2018; Wang et al., 2020; Yakin & Linden, 2021); have positive effects on grade performance (Holthaus, Pancar, & Bergamin, 2019; Liu, Mckelroy, Corliss, & Carrigan, 2017; Xie, Chu, Hwang, & Wang, 2019; Yakin & Linden,2021); reduce drop-out rates (Daines, Troka, & Santiago, 2016; Mosia, 2020), and promote equity through addressing diverse students' needs and social and education background (Wang et al, 2020). There is also a growing support for leaders in higher education toward adaptive learning (Green, 2018). Despite positive attitudes of these leaders towards the adoption of adaptive learning and the growing number of research studies showing positive benefits of this approach, there is very little adoption and implementation is limited. A survey conducted by Green (2018) showed that only 8% of higher education courses use adaptive learning systems in practice and that actual adoption of innovative practices already proven to enhance undergraduate education remain low (Hariri &Roberts, 2015; Phua & Ng, 2019).

2.2 Low Adoption of Adaptive Learning Systems

Despite a massive number of studies have been conducted on ALS, there has been a notable lack of successfully implemented adaptive technology-based learning systems in practice (Cavanagh et al., 2020). This gap between research and successful application of the innovation is the so-called valley of death, which can be caused by technological and scalability-related issues, lack of resources and support from stakeholders, and pedagogical issues (Mirata & Bergamin, 2019; Samuelsen, Chen & Wasson 2019; Imhof et al, 2020).

An ALS introduces challenges to technology because it collects and analyses multiple streamsof data in real time (Zlobaite et al, 2012) and requires data integration (Samuelsen et al. ,2019) and the availability of scalable architectural and technological solutions, (Dziuban et al., 2018, Venu & Kurra, 2017). For online learning, although the Learning Management System(LMS) is capable to provide real-time data, data integration is still not fully automated. In a study conducted by Samuelsen et al (2019) on data integration, most of the research reviewed show that higher education uses multiple data sources for their learning analytics and do not integrate data but rather analyse them separately. It is crucial to have integrated data available and that integration of data is automated so that real time data can be used by the adaptive learning systems. The integration of the adaptive system in the LMS is also challenging since LMS offers pre-defined settings that requires extensive customisation (Boticario, Santos & Rosmalen, 2005; Venu & Kurra, 2017). In providing customisation, many of the algorithmsfor adaptations, results and data that can assist in the implementation of ALS remain proprietary (Johanes & Lagerstrom, 2017). In addition, since private student data is being used, how educational technologies store and/or access data must also be taken into consideration.

Other reasons for low adoption of ALS in the higher education is the lack of usability. It has been reported that the users have "counter-intuitive user experience" (Adeyemo, 2018) and usability issues for students (Imhof et al, 2020; Dziuban et al., 2017; Hariyanto, Triyono, Köhler, 2020) and teachers (Lerís et al., 2017). Although several studies have been undertaken on the usability of ALS from students' perspective, there seem to be limited studies on the usability from the teachers' perspective.

The issue with time, resources and strategic vision due to complexity, high cost and scepticism from stakeholders prevents the potential of ALS in higher education to be fully recognised. Buy-in from stakeholders is one of the major reasons of low adoption of adaptive learning systems in higher education. Teacher participation is a principal factor in adoption. Often, there is resistance to adopt by teachers (Mirata & Bergamin, 2019), teacher engagement issues and scepticism that new practices take significant effort (Tagg, 2012). The adoption of ALS also changes the role of the teachers from "telling" to designing, orchestrating and supporting learning experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2017)and teachers are often scared to adopt this. Fears that adaptive learning is changing their role in highereducation can be traced from the idea that technology replacing instructors (Dutton, 2018).

Aside from convincing the students and teachers of the value of ALS, institutional commitment is very important. Unless mandated by an institution, 100% adoption of ALS by all teachers in higher education is impossible (Casarez, 2019). Integration of ALS into overall university strategy requires resources both financial and personnel. The institution should recognise that the implementation of ALS is a time-consuming process, and it should be factored-in when resources are allocated. Mirata and Bergamin (2019) stress the importance of securing monetary resources in addition to convincing all stakeholders. Highlighted as one of the downsides of ALS is that it is costly and requires extensive support typically beyond the expertise of the teachers. It requires more support staff in the form of instruction designers and technology specialists (Fahmy, 2004). In higher education, the concepts of cost, quality and access exist in tension with each other (King & South, 2017; Murray & Pérez, 2015) and these has always cost conflicts (not only in the adoption of ALS) but in improvements in higher education in general. "Increasing access can dilute quality. improving quality leads to an increase in costs; and reducing costs can negatively impact quality and access" (Duncan, 2009).

Another major obstacle in the adoption of ALS is the substantial development cost and effort in developing high quality content for learning. Although several ALS studies have shown its effectiveness on specific courses or context, when implemented on a bigger scale, there is lack of significant student success due to time factor and design flaws (Liu et al., 2017). Often, developed learning materials are difficult to reuse and adapt to new and different educational contexts and the difficulty of designing due to the need for the granularity of the course to be consistent.

3. Proposed Adoption of Adaptive Learning in Online Higher Education: A Case Study Approach

The practical implications of adaptive learning are currently limited since there are still various challenges that ALS are facing now. These limitations often prevent the adoption of ALS even though the current technologies have the capabilities and have multitudes of possibilities. As Casarez (2019) stated in his research that the development and success of adaptive learning as an innovation in higher education is being highly dependent on the institutional and economic environment and actors. In this paper, we proposed a staged approach in implementing adaptive teaching and learning, prioritising what is feasible in the current context of the education environment and implement automation only when all concerns and limitations identified above have been fully addressed.

Each education environment, especially online learning environment, is unique and has different factors that affect the adoption of ALS and that is the reason why context is important in this study. The case study below describes the context, motivation and introduces adaptive learning concepts in online learning.

3.1 University of South Australia Online (UniSA Online)

UniSA Online is one of the fastest growing online education providers in Australia. It is an education unit of the university that offers a wide range of undergraduate degrees designed for 100% online learning. Its online environment allows students to access the course content, weekly activities and assessments fully online and communicate with academic staff and peers through various online communication channels. The full-online learning allows flexibility for a wider range of students to continue to study. Aside from a growing demand in fully online studies, the high level of growth in its enrolment in the past few years is attributed to its high level of support provided to the students.

3.3.1 Current State

UniSA Online uses a LMS to deliver and manage contents, communication, grading, and administration of the online courses. LMS is critical in the development of adaptive learning, as they are the platforms on which most adaptive learning systems are built. In addition to LMS, a dashboard which provides real-time learning analytics is currently being used. Learning analytics collects and reports on the context of the student engagement which can be used to inform ALS. Having the learning analytics allows the online facilitators to have a new role of observing the information from the learning analytics, which suggest when and where to intervene. Although being implemented at UniSA Online, there is still an urgent need for more-fine-grained learning analytics data reporting. Learning analytics systems and tools are used to make use of insights from learning data for online facilitators to implement academic support to students. For each online course, a teaching dashboard that works based on real- time live data, captured in the normal course of a student's learning engagement, is available to the online facilitators. The reported data is analysed with the intention of optimising the student learning experience itself. The academic team often uses the dashboard to look at student engagement, follows-up with non-engaging students, and monitors student's performance. It is also used for evaluating resources and activities used in the course and looking at their impacts and effectiveness. For example, how many students and how many times the students have accessed the e-readings, videos, quizzes, and other resources and activities in the course. In addition, students are also provided the opportunity to have scheduled group drop-in sessions or an individual one-on-one online consultation. These data are then reflected in the course evaluation to inform the need to further improve the resources and evaluate the appropriateness of the learning activities implemented in the courses.

UniSA Online has been successfully providing individualised support to its students at its infancy. In the past years, as the number of online students has been growing significantly, the demand for personalised experienced also increases. Existing students expect the same personalise learning experience they had when there were smaller number of students in the course and the academic staff would like to continue providing those personalised teaching to all their students. The requests for one-on-one online consultation, or questions posted in different online communication specific to their personal learning have taken up significant resources in terms of the academic team's time, which also has brought budgetary implications and concerns for the institution.

An adaptive learning system is an appropriate solution to these concerns. The online academic staff have been initiating adaptive teaching approaches and have started to look at how ALS can be fully utilised and practiced.

3.2 Pilot Trial of the Adoption of Adaptive Learning Systems

All ALS follow a similar core architecture, the student model, domain model and the adaptive model. The student model gathers data about the student and represents the student's characteristics while the domain model refers to the content and structure of the topic to be taught. The adaptivemodel uses information from the student model and domain model to provide a set of recommend learning activities and tailored feedback. This can be simplified by looking at the design process: gather data from the student, model the student, where and when can adaptation be applied and how will adaptation be provided. In this case study, the same design process is followed. The reason behind the staged implementation of the processes is that the students from the courses can start getting the benefit of adaptive learning even though it has not been fully automated and implemented.The proposed implementation of each process and how it addresses the issues of faculty support will be described.

A proof of concept is needed to get buy-in for stakeholders and in few cases where adoption of adaptive learning systems in higher education was successful, participation of the faculty is an important factor (Dziuban et al., 2018). This proof of concept can be staged and ease budgetary requirements.

A key part on the adoption of ALS depended on the support of the faculty therefore they shouldbe involved from the start of the process. Several issues in the previous sections were identified on why there were faculty scepticisms. In the proposed stages, the aim is not only to build a proof of concept but also alleviate these scepticisms.

In this pilot trial, the online facilitators from various disciplines, psychology, design, accounting, and programming, were involved in identifying how adaptive learning can assist in improving student engagement, motivation, retention and performance in their courses. We recognised that successful adoption of innovation in an organisation depends on its unit's culture and is influenced by its employees (Hogan & Coote, 2014), and would be adopting this concept in the phased implementation of ALS.The focus is to simulate the adaptive learning systems process and automate the lesser resource intensive part of adaptive systems (i.e., estimation of students' progress) since data from learning analytics and LMS are already available. The online facilitators are involved in identifying what student data can be pulled and used in its raw form from the LMS, which data is available from LMS but still needs data formatting and processing. In this stage, the estimation of student's progress is granular and looks at the data that is an indicator of student's learning, i.e., misconceptions, marking criteria, feedback and marks on summative assessments. In this study, misconceptions are defined as inaccurate or incomplete ideas about a concept or a process (Savion, 2009). Given the data about the students' summative assessments, a clustering-based approach is applied to estimate the students' progress based on misconceptions. From these groups of misconceptions, the online facilitators identify the appropriate intervention. The online facilitator's participation in this process will help them understand the changing role but also remove the fear that technology will be replacing them and the fear of the use of the technology. They will also be aware of the amount of effort needed in developing ALS, understand why automation is necessary and more efficient, and experience the effectiveness of the approach. Figure 1 shows the three stages. These stages are iterative such that continuous refinements of the process can be implemented after the initial phase

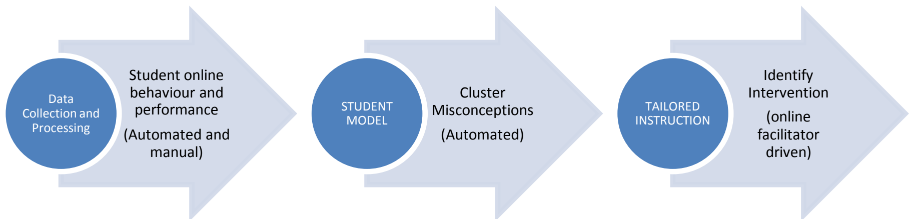

Figure 1. Proposed three-staged Approach in the Initial Phase of Adoption of ALS at Unisa Online.

3.2.1 Data Collection and Processing

The LMS that interacts with students to deliver content and assessments to support student learning captures time-stamped student input and behaviours within the system. Since at the initial phase, the student modelling will only focus on identifying student's misconceptions, the data will focus on the student's summative assessments grades and feedback from online facilitators. The online facilitators from different disciplines, psychology, digital media, accounting, and programming will be involved in the collection of data from their courses. These data are available in the LMS but are in differentforms. For example, grades can be downloaded as CSV file while the marking criteria and feedback for the assessment are in the document form. Students grades in the assessments are numerical and can be extracted from the grading book. The courses from different disciplines that is used in this initial phase are introductory courses. For programming courses, especially for the introductory ones, syntax, logic and semantic errors remain to be the main barriers for students to fully grasp the language-independent concepts and learn how to code novel problems independently (Sanati, Soon, & Lin, 2020; Veerasamy, D'Souza, &Laakso, 2016).

In this study, the data collected are the occurrences of common logical, syntactical and semantics errors identified as part of marking criteria and feedback for summative assessments. For each type of misconception, errors are further grouped into three levels of severity and saved in a spreadsheet. For non-programming courses, the marking criteria and feedback are in the form of documents. It is tedious to manually go through all the qualitative comments and extract the feedback. Natural Language Processing (NLP) is used to manipulate the textual information for semantics and syntactic analysis. The result of this is a text data set that contain the summary contents and extracted key phrases relevant to the assessment. The result of the data collection and processing also includes a set misconception patterns that have been extracted from the text analysis.

3.2.2 Student Model

In this stage, the student model focuses in estimating the student's progress using clustering algorithm based on student misconceptions. We use the term misconception when a student's knowledge is erroneous, illogical or misinformed. In some adaptive learning systems, the student's demographics and learning behaviour data are used in tracking the student's progress. An initial research on students' demographics at UniSA Online (Bretana et al., 2020) indicates that these data are not significant factors in predicting a student's success in the course, but it is the performance-related data that yield a more accurate prediction. This is the reason why at the initial phase of this study, the focus will be on the performance, specifically misconceptions in summative assessments.

The rationale behind clustering students based on misconceptions rather than their achievement (or grades) is that research in education have shown that grouping students based only on their achievement or ability (grades) is not an effective strategy for improving educational outcomes (Francome & Hewitt, 2020; Steenbergen-H, Make & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016). In an "ideal ALS" scenario, an individual student model is identified and personalisation of the correction of the misconception is applied. However, in this initial phase, since intervention is not fully automated but online facilitator driven, grouping students with similar misconceptions is a more efficient way to use the resources (time, money and academic staff). By gaining insight on students' misconceptions, these misconceptions can be addressed irrespective of the grades the student's grade. This gives all students with different abilities to achieve better.

The clustering-based approach uses clustering algorithms to group students based on their misconceptions. For example, in the programming course, the data collected containing the syntactical, semantical and logical errors in the summative assessment will be used as data points. The clustering algorithm will then generate student groups using similarity measurements. For other courses, the common misconceptions found in the data processing stage, will also be used as data points and compute for similarity measurement to form student groups with similar misconceptions. Clustering isan iterative process. After several iterations, the final clusters are obtained when the error (sum of square errors) remains unchanged. The common patterns of group of misconceptions can be deduced from observing the key features for each cluster. This will assist the faculty in preparing for intervention.

3.2.3 Tailored Instruction

Due to the substantial cost and effort in developing adaptive content, in the initial phase, the intervention is driven by the online facilitators. Once the students are clustered based on their misconceptions, the online facilitators will identify the appropriate intervention for the misconceptions. With small number of students, prior to the adoption of the proposed approach in this paper, the online facilitators will schedule a one-on-one student consultation with students to address the misconception(s). This approach is not scalable and resource intensive. As an initial intervention approach, the online facilitators will conduct a "targeted online session". Students within the same cluster are invited to attend the session where the online facilitatorsfocus on the specific needs and interests of the group of students and take them incrementally to the next level of learning. This approach is consistent with the concept of tutoring which exemplifies the essence of effective teaching (Coffey, 2016).

An example of how targeted online sessions are conducted includes the online facilitators engaging the group of students in activity-based methods where they are shown conflicting events or examples, which challenge each other's answers or the student's own misconception(s). This is consistent with Longfield's (2009) study showing that the approach described above results in more lasting learning. Another approach used in the online targeted sessions are carefully selected demonstrations to help students identify the causes of their misconceptions and correct them in a moreeffective manner. In addition to this, common misconceptions are revisited to help students reconstruct their conceptual framework.

3.3 Evaluation

Formative evaluation takes place during the implementation of the stages so that corrective action can be done as problems arise. Formative reports will be collected in each of the stages in the pilot project. Summative evaluation is performed once the project has been completed. Summative evaluation of the pilot trial will use the Context, Inputs, Processes, and Products (CIPP) Evaluation Model (Stufflebeam& Zhang, 2017). Figure 2 shows how CIPP Evaluation Model is used in the pilot project. When applied to this project, this model systematically collects information about the project to identify strengths and limitation of the process, to improve the project's effectiveness and plan for the next phase. Both formative and summative evaluations will be performed.

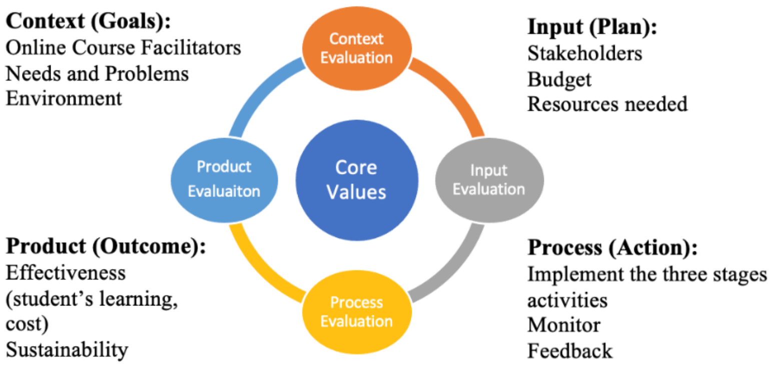

Figure 2. Implementation of Context, Input, Process and Product Evaluation Model.

In the context component, the goal is to define the relevant context, assess the needs of online facilitators underlying the needs and check whether the aim of this project responds to the assessed needs. A survey will be given to online facilitators identifying their views in personalised learning; how are they implementing personalised academic support; and what are the barriers for them in implementing personalised teaching. From the result, a comparison on how the project is responding to their needs. A needs-gap analysis (Upadhyaya, 2013) is performed to better fit the goal to the current needs and re-align the process with the strategy to meet the goal.

In the input component, the pilot trial involving the three stages is assessed. We look at resources needed, budget and cost to meet the needs and achieve the goal of this project. Process evaluation assesses the implementation of the plans. It determines whether the activities in all the proposed stages in the pilot trial have been implemented as intended and resulted inexpected outputs. The formative evaluation conducted throughout the implementation of the pilot project will assist in the review of the activities and expected outputs of the processes. Feedback is done throughout the implementation of the plan and then checks the extent of the plan that was completed. The fourth component is product evaluation. In education, an effective evaluation of new teaching practice is by looking at the student outcomes. The effectiveness of the three-staged approachin student's learning is evaluated by looking at the student's performance in the proceeding related summative assessments. Some examples include looking at student's performance in the final exam on the specific topic where intervention was applied; or at assessments that require the synthesis of skills and knowledge which is preceded by the summative assessment were the misconceptions wereidentified. In addition, the project is assessed based on impact, cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the approach.

The result of the evaluation will then provide a comprehensive review of the value of the project by having a report on the quality, positive and negative outcomes and impacts and cost- effectiveness.

3.4 Preliminary Findings

We have applied the three-stage approach to a fully-online introductory programming course for preliminary results and findings. Data was collected from the marking feedback of 163 students who submitted the first programming assessment. Coding errors that each student made were identified as either syntactical, logical and semantics errors. We fed the transformed data into the clustering-based approach (discussed in section 3.2.2) and obtained three clusters with the following details: the first cluster contained 35 students who performed below average in syntax area and poor in the semantic and very poor in logic; the second cluster contained 80 students who mainly performed average in syntax and logic areas but performed poorly in semantic area; and the third cluster contained 48 students who performed well above average in all three areas. Interventions were implemented based on the first two clusters. A revision online session was offered to the first cluster, which is an online tutorial on control structures, and discussion of logic and semantic errors found in the assessment. The second cluster group have been given additional resources on semantical errors and a few debugging exercises related to semantics. Since this is not a required activity, there were very few participants in the intervention activities. Comparing the performance of students in the first assessment against the final programming assessment developed on the same learning objectives, four of the nine in the first cluster had improved results, from F1 to HD, F2 to C, P1 to P2, D to HD, respectively. One of the two in the second cluster who attempted the additional exercises has shown improved result in the final assessment (i.e, D to HD)

Though the above findings indicate that to some extent, the proposed three-stage approach assists the online facilitators in addressing students' misconceptions through a clustering-based approach and providing tailored instructions to improve student performance, a solid conclusion is yet to be drawn due to the overall low participants in the comparative analysis.

4. Conclusion

This paper explored the current state of ALS in higher education and the need for its integration in fully online courses. Review of literature indicates that there are several issues, such as obstacles to data acquisition and availability, lack of usability, complexity, high cost and scepticism from stakeholders, that lead to the low adoption of ALS in the higher education industry. One of the principal reasons for low adoption addressed in this paper is buy-in from the faculty. We proposed a three-staged approach to the implementation of ALS using a case study and discussed how online facilitators can be involved to have faculty participation at the start and have increased support in the adoption of ALS. The three stages are data collection, student model and tailored instruction. The implementation of the proposed approach is evaluated using the CIPP evaluation model. The result of this evaluation identifies the value of the project and helps plan for the next phase.

In this pilot phase, data collection and processing are a combination of manual and automated process, student modelling used clustering and tailored instruction is driven by the online course facilitators. To prepare the dataset for generating student clusters, we converted the common misconceptions observed in the summative assessments into three types of errors, including syntax, logic and semantic. A clustering-based approach was utilised to group students based on their performance determined by the occurrence of errors and severity level. According to the error patternsderived from the clusters, online course facilitators then developed tailored instruction and provided each student group with more targeted intervention and support.

The next step for this study is to look at the evaluation results and investigate the implementation of fully automated data collection and processing. This requires looking at the both the usability and administrative requirements for online course facilitators and the technical feasibility of incorporating this in the current learning environment. The evaluation results will also report on the effectiveness of the clustering approach and identify if this is the best alternative option while adaptive content is still not fully automated, or if there is a need to individualise student modelling if the clustering approach is already effective. Given the data from the implementation of the pilot study, theinitial identification of learning materials for reuse and adaptation will be explored. The feedback provided to students in the targeted sessions will be analysed and translated to contents that can be used in automating and tailoring instructions. Notably, this study is part of a larger research that aims at the full adoption of ALS in the organisation described in the case study. As part of the proof of concept being developed to help the business case, this study is undertaken to secure the resources and institutional commitment.

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