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This report summarizes the results of the teaching carried out by UK NETIS partner (Middlesex University) during the project period in UK.

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NETIS Teaching Report, United Kingdom

By Chris Sadler (Middlesex University)

London, September-December 2008

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Background

Owing to the extended quality assurance procedures imposed on Middlesex University courses, there was not time to implement the entire NETIS course on a trial basis within the scope of the project. Instead it was agreed that the Middlesex University teaching would focus more intensively on trialling aspects of the e-learning experience as given by the NETIS virtual learning environment (vle).

Course Details

A suitable level 1 (first-year/freshman) module (course) – ‘Discovering Interaction Design’ – was identified. The module leader took the view that the phenomenon of virtual social networking was germane to the topic of interaction design and so agreed that a double coursework assignment (accounting for 20% of the module assessment) could be set for his class. There would be no lecture time set aside – only a small introduction given in the computer laboratory. The students were allowed choose from a range of different assignments and this particular one would not be compulsory.

In the end, some 19 students out of a class of 31 chose the NETIS assignment and their performance was as follows:

	Total	Passing	Failing	PassRate
Class	31	18	13	58%
NETIS participants	19	16	3	84%
Percentages	61%	89%	23%	

It is probable that students who chose not to submit work for the NETIS teaching also did not submit work for any or many of the other optional assignments and hence one could expect a higher failure rate. On the other hand, one could conclude that the NETIS assignment was appealing to the conscientious students.

Teaching Aims and Approach

We needed to focus on the social networking aspect of Information Society and we wanted to give students some practical awareness of the phenomenon as well as some theoretical appreciation. In addition, these learning experiences need to be delivered through the NETIS Moodle (virtual learning environment – c.f. <http://netis.nyme.hu/>).

This was achieved by means of the following tasks (the full coursework assignment is given at Appendix A):

- (i) The students were directed to create their accounts on the Moodle and to complete the questionnaire *Attitudes towards thinking and learning* found there. This questionnaire has been designed to assess subjects' **connected** and **separate** learning preferences.
- (ii) The students were issued with copies of the NETIS coursebook *Information Society* and directed to read Chapter 4: *Social Networks and the Network Society*.
- (iii) Following this, the students were asked to write a brief synopsis of the chapter and, by a set deadline, post this on the Moodle discussion forum together with a list of all the social networking sites that they personally participated in. The idea behind this was that, having read the chapter, the students would be made aware of social networking as a phenomenon and begin to think about their own participation in it.
- (iv) Next the students were to read the contributions of their classmates and extract the list of networking sites contributed by each participant. Using this, each one was to construct a network diagram showing how they were connected with any other class members through social networking site usage. On the basis of this network they were to find, as a partner, the person with whom they were most intensely connected. The ideas behind this were firstly to get the students to construct a network diagram that involved their own interests and friends and second to see whether highly connected individuals worked together better or worse than less intensely connected ones.
- (v) Then, working to a set deadline, each pair was required to submit a sample examination question covering virtual social networking and structured in a given format, together with a model answer. The strategy behind this kind of learning task is twofold – firstly, to get the students to summarise and codify their knowledge, and second to encourage them to engage with examination questions and think about ways of answering them.
- (vi) Finally the students were asked to complete the *Reactions* and *Relevance* questionnaires embedded in the Moodle.

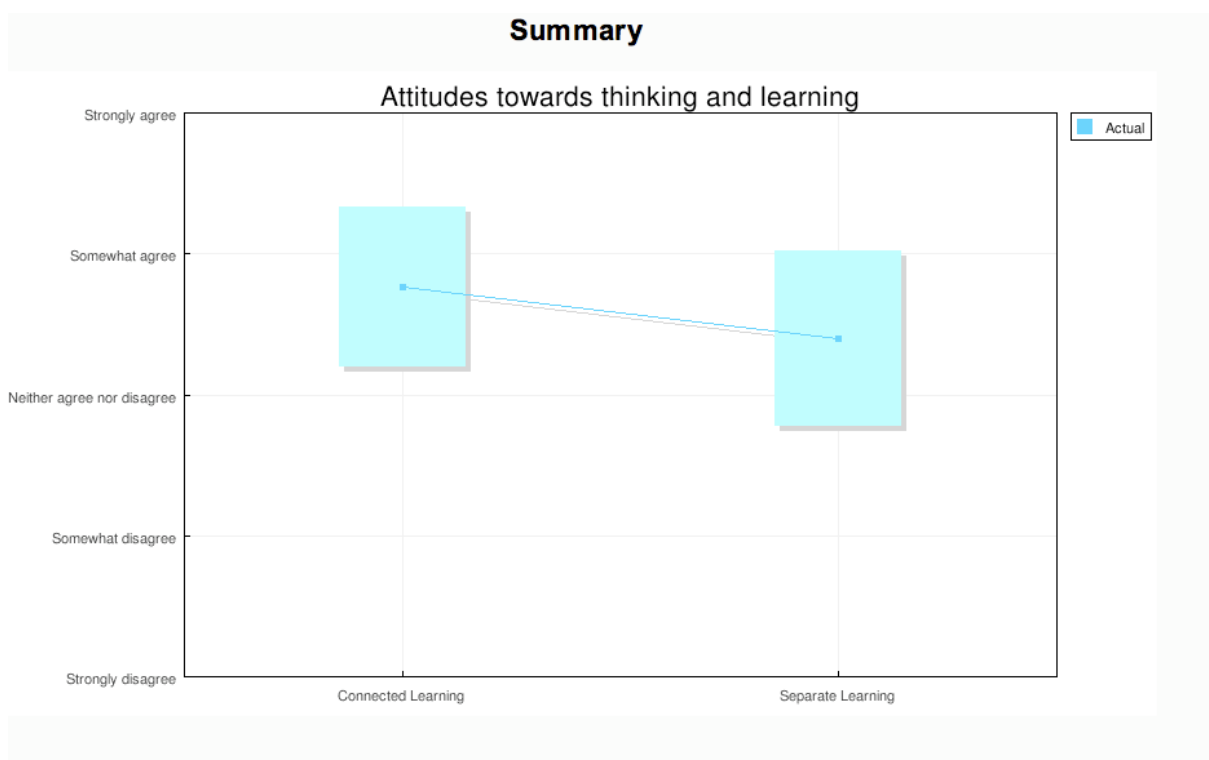
Results and Evaluation

I. Attitudes to thinking and learning questionnaire

The questionnaire reports the respondents' attitudes towards **connected** learning (learning undertaken collectively or collaboratively) and **separate** learning (learning undertaken individually or autonomously). Questions are answered on a 5-point Likert scale.

Several students responded to the questionnaire but did not continue with the coursework. As a group the cohort's response appears in Figure 1. This shows a slight preference for connected learning. In looking at individual scores, those showing a greater-than-average preference for connected learning have been regarded as connected learners with those with a less-than-average preference as separate learners.

Figure 1: Average Attitudes



2. Reactions and Relevance questionnaires

Some fourteen students completed the Reactions questionnaire. Broadly they found themselves engaged by interesting topics and distanced when the lectures were ‘boring’. (Since the NETIS session did not involve any lectures, we assume the students are speaking for the course as a whole). They reported that the discussion forums had been helpful in terms of interaction with classmates and occasional tutor support. None reported any confusion with the forums save two who stated that they did not understand the question, Several expressed ‘surprise’ at how interesting they found constructing their own social networks.

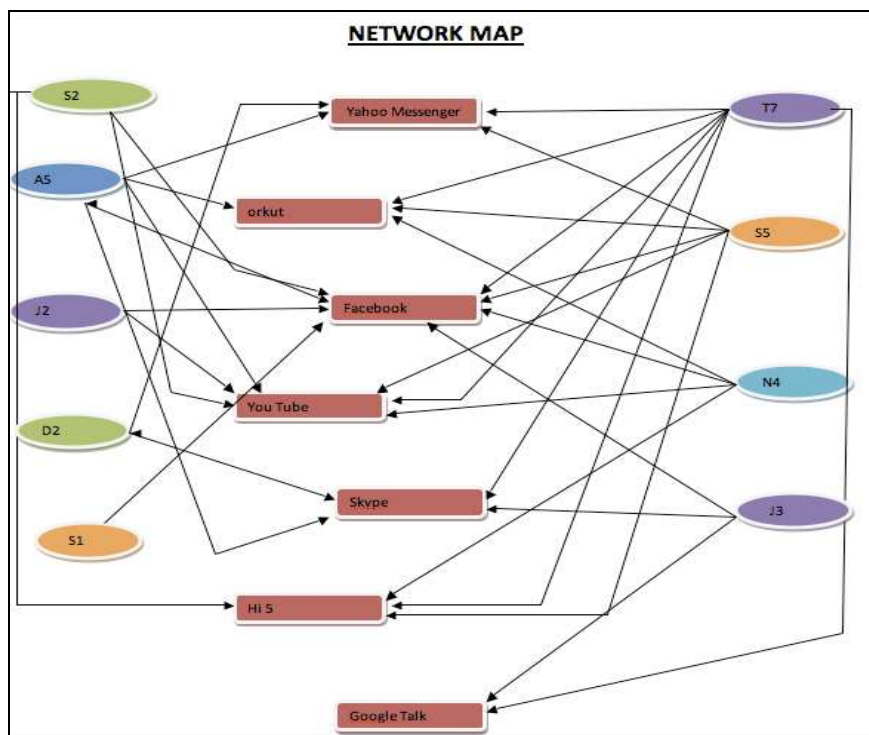
The students were asked only to complete the first Relevance questionnaire, and twelve of them did. On a five point Likert scale ranging from ‘Almost Never’ to ‘Almost Always’, the class centered around ‘Often’ in response to questions covering Relevance, Reflective Thinking and

Interpretation. They scored between ‘Sometimes’ and ‘Often’ on questions covering Interactivity and Tutor Support. On Peer Support their responses were close to ‘Sometimes’ which is the middle point of the scale. This seems to imply that they are not very familiar with collaborative learning tasks.

3. Network Diagrams

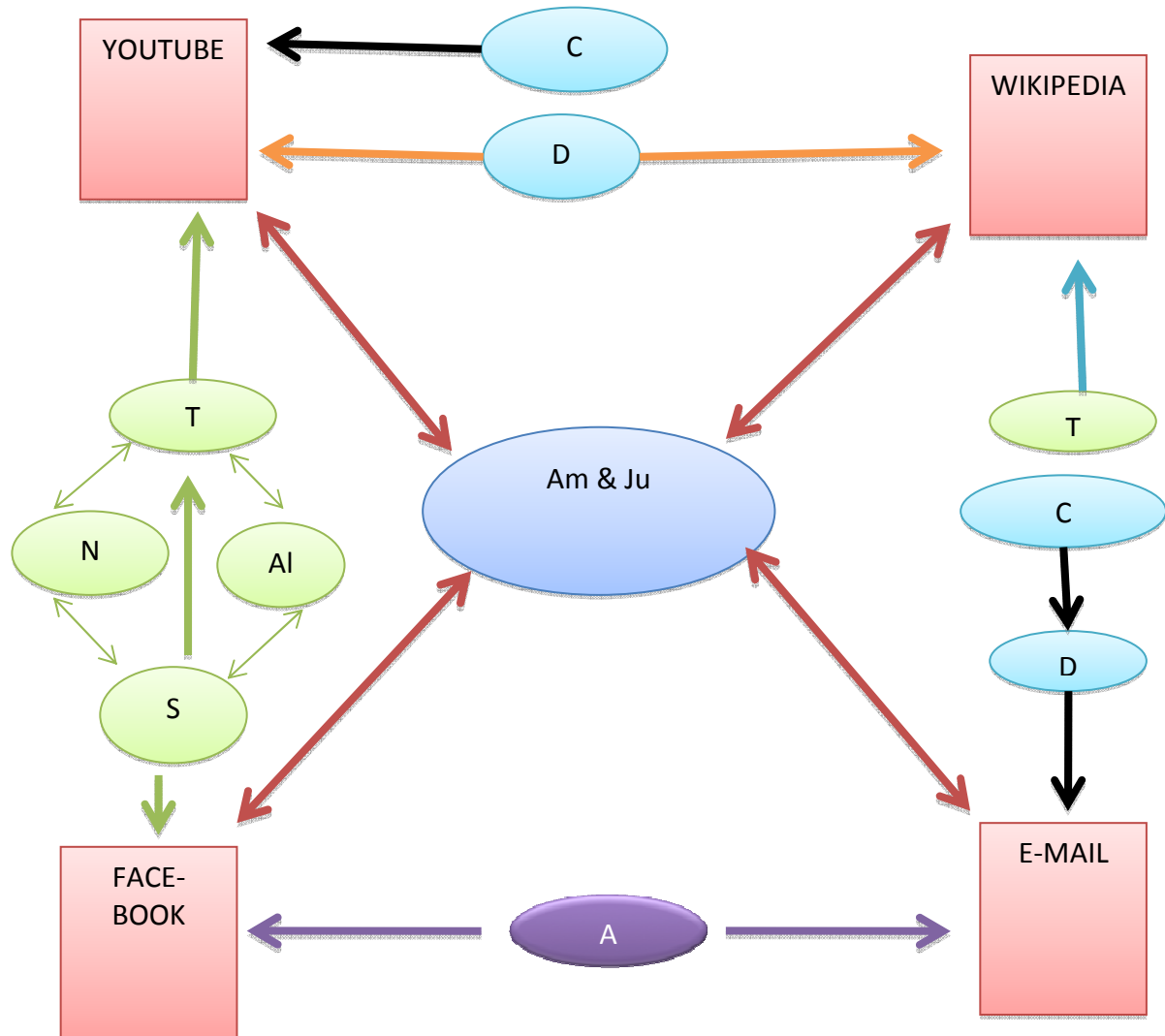
Students who did not use many social networking sites tended to submit simplified diagrams showing only the connections to themselves whilst some others (See Figure 2) attempted more comprehensive or imaginative diagrams.

Figure 2: A network diagram



The idea of using diagrams as a means of selecting a working partner was not a success, partly because the students produced their diagrams at different times and probably also because it was too complicated to implement. In the end most partnerships were pairs of friends, sometimes with rather unconventional networks!

Figure 3: Unusual network diagram



There is a weak correlation between a respondent's network connectivity (number of links) and connected learning preference.

4. Examination question setting

Level 1 students are not generally very good at setting higher education exam. questions, not normally having had much experience of answering them. This is one of the motivations for setting work of this type. In terms of the content matter, most students asked rather bland questions and answered them rather superficially. Figure 4 is an example of this type.

Figure 4: Typical Question and Answer

SOCIAL NETWORKS

What is social software, giving examples to illustrate the understanding of social software and a discussion about some aspects of social software: including positive and negative points.

- Social software is software that supports group interactions by allowing users to interact and share data with other users. It provides publishing in multimedia, researching and collecting tools.
- Social software allows users to communicate, collaborate and publish in a number of ways, in the media, and it also helps learners act together to build knowledge bases. For example social software sites such as face book, a user can give friends and family permission to check out their profile and photos; not just to add comments, but to also note and meta-tags. Another example is that weblogs and social bookmarking are of an interest in building people’s understanding. The social aspect of weblogs can be seen in the ability for readers to be updated on other blogs referencing their posts while social bookmarking is when users add bookmarks to their list, they also add a tag to the link meaning the users can search other people’s bookmarks through tags.
- It also enables people do things with the internet technology that they clearly want to do themselves.
- Social software satisfies most of our needs because what we gain comes from collaboration with others. It is inherently social because it tackles most of the activities in one’s daily social life.
- The disadvantage maybe specifically be to some people who do not wish to work as team members or not wish to share information with others.

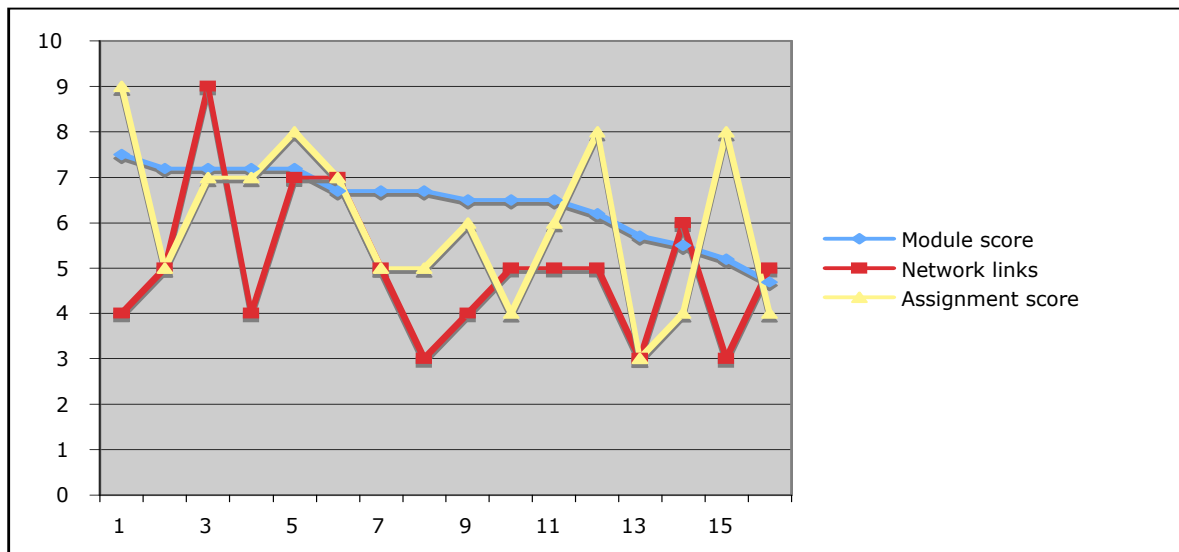
However, not all students fell into this category, with some showing more maturity in their appreciation of examination technique – the top-scoring answer is given at Appendix B.

5. Student Achievement

Broadly, the students who did well in the NETIS coursework also achieved good marks in the module overall. However, there were some exceptions – students whose performance in the NETIS coursework suggested a better result than they ended up with in the module overall. This can happen when students work in pairs and are assessed together, since an able student will put in enough work to carry his or her partner.

In terms of network connectedness, there seemed to be no correlation between high scores and multiple links nor between effective partnerships and multiple links. It is possible that coursework where more demanding collaboration than just working in pairs was required would result in a clearer distinction between highly and less connected participants, or show higher correlations with learning preferences.

All the results are collected in Figure 5, the data for which appears at Appendix C. Only passing students are recorded in the graphs. The scores have been normalised on the y-axis and each location on the x-axis records an individual student.



6. Evaluation

- (i) Our overall goal – to get the students to engage with the concepts of virtual social networking explicitly and reflectively instead of merely participating vicariously – was achieved. All participating students submitted meaningful network diagrams of one sort or another and they used the Moodle for communicating with one another and with the staff.
- (ii) In addition, students submitted written work which confirmed their appreciation and understanding of the topic at various levels of accomplishment, as could be expected from any assessment activity.
- (iii) However, the scope of the work done by this group was very narrow. Although they arrived at an appreciation of social networking, this is not the same as saying they received an appreciation of Information Society as a whole. To achieve this more time is needed in the curriculum.
- (iv) The method adopted for pairing students into working partnerships was not a success because it was too complicated. A more robust method would be an improvement and probably it would be better to have larger groups drawn up through prior collaborative work.
- (v) It was not possible to get other staff members in the Computing Science department to undertake a teaching trial even though there were several people who might have been interested. The main reason given was that the coursebook was pitched at too ‘academic’ a level for technically-oriented students in their first year. From their side, the students did appreciate receiving a free copy of the book, although none of them afterwards mentioned that they had read beyond the set chapter.

Recommendations

1. The Moodle site could be tidied up a bit. The students were uncertain where to submit their work and so it was found in several different places. Each chapter is presented as a separate ‘course’. Although this was not a problem for the Middlesex students because they only worked on one chapter, it results in some unnecessary duplication which clutters up the page for each chapter.
2. Although the website for Chapter 4 contained many activities including quizzes and assignments, not all of these would be suitable for using in a ‘pure’ e-learning mode because there is no online feedback. For example, there is a set task *What kind of social networks do you know in your native language and in English? When was the first such network formed?* In a class context or blended learning environment this can be a good basis for investigation and discussion, but for the individual student working alone who does not know how to get started, some hints or guidelines would be helpful.
3. Given what the other teachers said about the accessibility of the book for technically-oriented students and the importance of Information Society for all students, it may be useful to supplement the course materials with some other ‘way in’ for technical students – so that they would come to the theoretical and sociological parts via practical experiences on the web and in the classroom.

Appendix A

CMT1300

Spring Term 2007/8

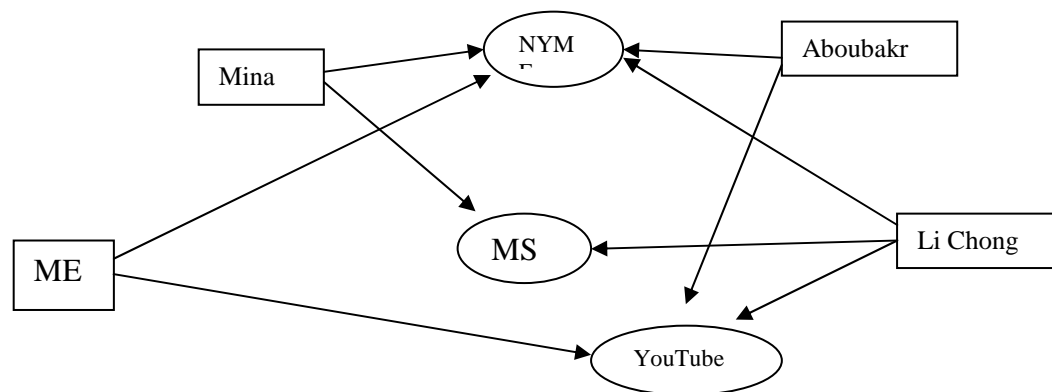
Social Networking Coursework

1. If you haven't already done so, register yourself on the NYME moodle (<http://netis.nyme.hu/>) and enrol on '4th Chapter'.
2. Find 'Surveys' (section 9) and complete the survey 'Attitudes towards thinking and learning'.
3. Now read the section VIRTUAL SOCIAL NETWORKS in the textbook (pages 74-77) and write a one-paragraph (up to 200 words) summary that captures your understanding of the passage.
4. Make a list of all the 'social software' that you use or have used and add the list to the bottom of your summary.
5. Now find SPECIAL FORUM in section 10 on NYME and post your summary on the VIRTUAL SOCIAL NETWORKS discussion board.

[DEADLINE: April 25, 2008]

6. Now read KEY CONCEPTS, KEY PROCESSES, KEY PROBLEMS (pages 65-71 in the textbook).
7. Next, look at all the entries in SPECIAL FORUM and create a network map connecting all the contributors to their social software.

Example:



8. Now order all the contributors according to how many connections they share with you.

For example:

Aboubakr	2	(Nyme and YouTube)
Li Chong	2	(Nyme and YouTube)
Mina	1	(Nyme only)

Your partner will be the person with whom you share the highest number of connections. If there is more than one in this category, it will be the first one in alphabetical order. Send your partner a message (you can find him or her in PAR-

TICIPANTS at the top of the web page – you need popups enabled to receive messages), saying “*You are my partner. Please confirm*”. If your partner is already matched, move on to the next possibility on the list (the next alphabetically or next highest number of connections). If you receive such a message first then you have your partner and you can stop looking. Please send a reply back saying “*I confirm*” . Then send me (Chris Sadler) a message saying “X and I are partners”.

9. Working with your partner, create an exam. question (see HELP FILE below) to test the things you have learned about Social Networks. Then write your perfect answer.
10. Finally, go back to NYME and complete the questionnaires REACTIONS TO LATEST EVENTS and RELEVANCE1 in section 9. **[We cannot mark your coursework unless you complete these.]**

11. HAND-IN

- i. The networks drawn by you and your partner **[Individual mark out of 30%]**
- ii. Your exam. question and answer. **[Joint mark out of 70%]**

[DEADLINE: May 30, 2008]

HELP FILE

For this assignment, an exam. question should consist of 3 parts as follows:

Part (a): Give a definition of something special or important in the topic you are testing. This part will be worth 5 marks.

Part (b): Give one or more examples to illustrate that you understand the definition. This part will be worth 5 marks.

Part (c): Have a discussion about some aspect of the topic, including positive and negative points. This part will be worth 10 marks.

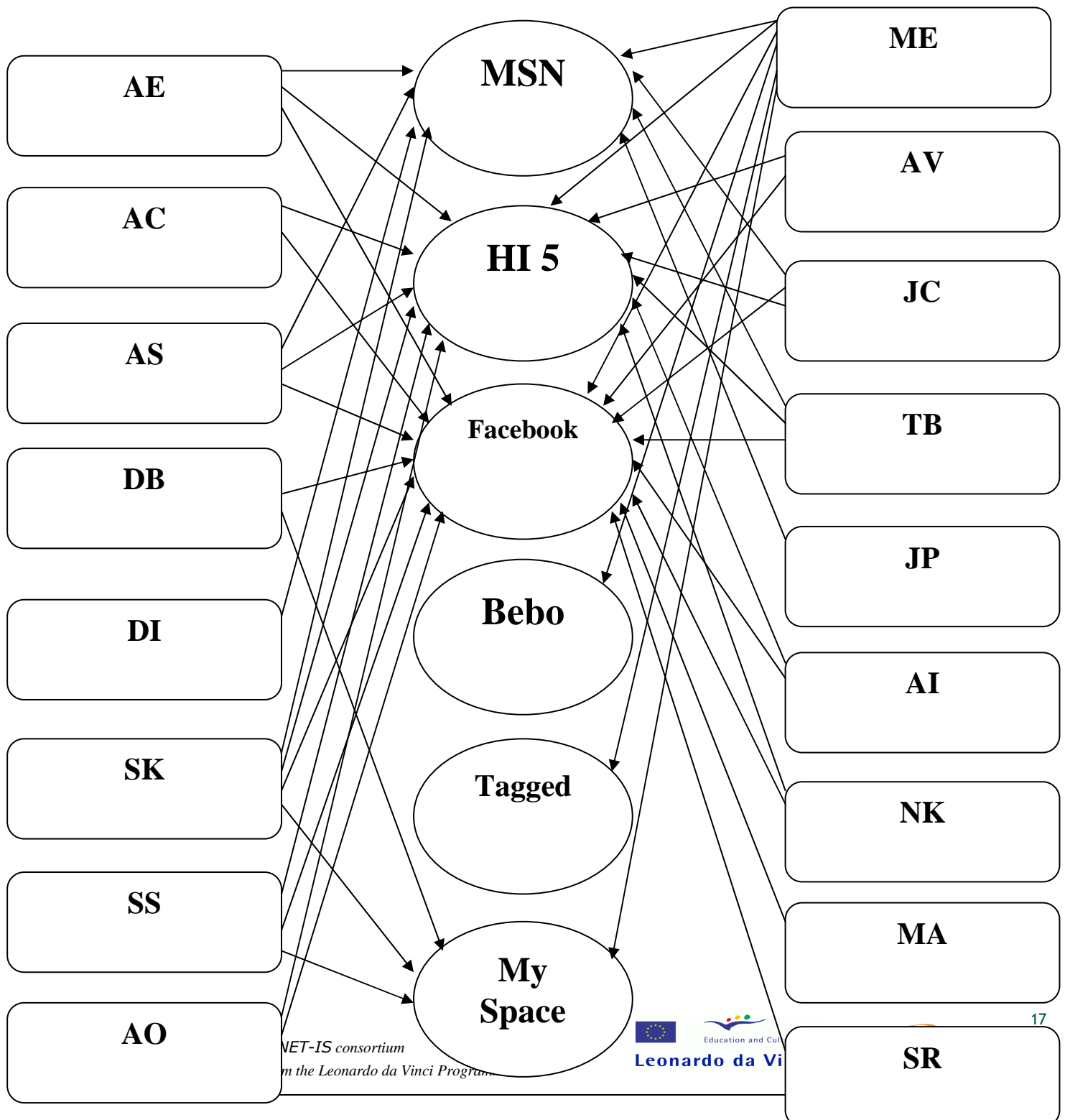
Example:

- (a) In the context of a Middlesex University degree programme, what do you understand by the term **coursework assignment**?
[5 marks]
- (b) Describe a coursework assignment which you have completed, mentioning the **purpose** of the assignment and the **outcomes** that you achieved.
[5 marks]
- (c) Do you think coursework is a good way to measure your learning? What are the alternatives?
[10 marks]

DO NOT ANSWER THIS QUESTION – you have to set and answer your own!

Appendix B: Best NETIS work

**Network map
(Social networks)**



EXAM

Part A

- A) In the context of Networking explain your understanding of what social Networking software is and the impact it has made in the field of networking. **[5 marks]**

Part B

- B) Give the name of a social networking software that you have used, mentioning how it works and why you use it. **[5 marks]**

Part C

- C) What are your personal thoughts on social networking? Can it evolve? Are there any alternatives? **[10 marks]**

Answers

Part A

- a) In the context of Networking, social networking software is the driving technology behind social interaction between people over a network, it is an interface what promotes user interaction by using visuals, sound and text which can be in the form of a online shop or a personal profile, where you can create, participate in forums, instant message, and put your personal opinions across in an online conversation. Social software's has a big impact on how we socialise online a great example of this is Facebook. Facebook is a social networking website which enables members to create a profile with a universal standard look, it enables you to create groups of interest, forums, upload photographs and create applications, this has revolutionised the way we use networking and increased the amount of people using social networking. It is not uncommon now for people to use social software as a primary way for communicating.

Part B

- b) A social networking software I use is MySpace. Myspace is a software which allocates to you upon becoming a member a personal profile page, which can be uniquely identified and modified in the way it looks and feels, it can be used to advertise or promote work of business, artists or just as a basic communication portal using music, video files or links that can be

added and downloaded. I use Myspace because it gives me the ability to communicate with my friends via my friends list, while enabling me to send messages, comments or views via a network and finally I am able to change the look and feel of my personal profile to my liking.

Part C

- c) I personally believe that social networks are a good thing because it enables me to communicate with a wide range of people globally were ever they may be. I am not always able to communicate with friends and family for geographical reasons. Social software is a way of resolving this because all you need is a device that enables you to talk over a network, so u can communicate with a person or persons they you wish to have a conversation with. It can also be a way of putting your personal views or join groups of interest to conversate and sharing, presenting music and videos. I believe social network can evolve and improve; it will do this by changing how we use it and were we use it; it will also be used within mobile networking devices which is becoming more common there are no direct alternatives in the market at the moment. In conclusion to the answer I believe social networking play a vital role in how I communicate with people and I believe more users friendly social software's will be common ground and the device we use with them will become more mobile.

Appendix C: Results

	Module Results	Network links	Assignment
HG	75	4	9
AA	72	5	5
BT	72	9	7
BD	72	4	7
OA	72	7	8
AV	67	7	7
PJ	67	5	5
SA	67	3	5
GC	65	4	6
KN	65	5	4
SV	65	5	6
EA	62	5	8
MY	57	3	3
SS	55	6	4
ID	52	3	8
KS	47	5	4
CJ	0	6	0
GE	0	5	0
IA	0	7	0