



Blended Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the ideal blend of face-to-face and online learning for international postgraduate students in New Zealand. The study aims to determine the impact of blended learning on international students regarding pedagogical and technological issues. The paper considers whether international students prefer blending learning to more classroom-based traditional instruction. The research design of this study includes an analysis of students' involvement in an experimental task to understand their perceptions on blended learning with regard to the above issues. This study involved students from different countries, allowing significant room for diversity in student perceptions. The authors aim to develop suitable plans for implementing blended learning that enhances learning for international students. The study will support other researchers and educational institutions in developing appropriate strategies for implementing more blended learning.

Keywords: Blended learning; international students

Introduction

Technology has played a vital role in developing the concept of online education, and it is becoming a major source of business expansion for schools and universities across the world. More schools and universities offer courses that are delivered online or with a combination of online and face-to-face learning, otherwise known as 'blended learning'. The success of offering these courses is heavily dependent on the satisfaction of students. It is important to know whether students find this kind of approach useful. From an education provider's standpoint, understanding the satisfaction levels of their students will help them to assess whether blended learning

is a good strategy for growth.

“Blended learning at its simplest is nothing more than employing a variety of media and methods, most often a mix of online and face-to-face learning. However, this combination is subject to a range of permutations in technologies, pedagogies and contexts” (Graham, 2006; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). As compared to face-to-face learning, more preparation time outside the classroom is required by students for courses that involve blended learning. (Margolis et al., 2015). For students who have work commitments, it may be an ideal form of learning that will help them to balance their study commitments with their work.

Over the past two decades, New Zealand has seen a significant growth in international students, and it is therefore vital to see the perspectives of international students regarding blended learning. “The New Zealand international education industry earned just over \$1 billion in tuition fee revenue in 2015, an additional \$146 million compared to 2014 (+17%), and a record result for the industry.” (Education New Zealand, 2015).

The number of international students in Private Training Establishments throughout New Zealand reached a record of 42,594 in 2015. (Education New Zealand, 2015). Since these students come from various countries, their perceptions of blended learning might differ from those of domestic students. The purpose of our study is to suggest the ideal blend of online and face-to-face learning for international students. It has been observed that motivation is instrumental in students’ success. If they find that the blended learning strategy encourages them to study, then there is a high probability that it will also lead to their success. This blended learning approach has not been adopted completely in New Zealand schools and universities. Those schools and universities might benefit from understanding what strategies should be adopted to implement blended learning. This might help them with their future planning and forecasts.

Although this study might be useful for institutions that serve international students, the authors acknowledge that the study is based on the perceptions of international postgraduate students at one New Zealand institution.

Previous Studies

Blended learning has several advantages, such as cost reductions for providers. It can also assist those providers in their endeavours to enter new markets. It can also help schools and universities to make optimum use of technology and to have a wider reach, i.e. to cater for both domestic and international markets. The current study is inspired by several previous research articles which have attempted to determine the students’ perceptions of online learning.

The study undertaken by Kashif (2009) discussed the online learning perspectives of graduate students. The author's findings reflected that students have a preference for traditional, i.e. face-to-face learning when compared with online learning. Students found satisfaction with the learning outcomes in traditional learning, and only chose online learning when compelled by circumstances. On the other hand, international students in this study stated that the differences in accents were a hindrance towards their classroom learning. Both domestic and international students indicated that the interaction between the students and teachers was valued with traditional learning, as students have better access to the teachers and they can acquire more knowledge. Other findings from this study suggest that the expectations from the teachers are not very clear with online learning, and students find it difficult to collaborate with other students on group activities and projects.

El Turk (2015) conducted a study of perceived online educational barriers that obstruct the execution of online learning. The author found that the following eight factors were significant barriers to online education: cost-effectiveness analysis barriers, pedagogical barriers, interpersonal barriers, technical barriers, cultural barriers, epistemological barriers, psychological barriers and structural barriers. Pedagogical and psychological barriers were found to have the highest reliability coefficients, followed by cost-effectiveness analysis and technical barriers. The recommendations made by the study suggested designing a blended learning study programme for suitable courses. She suggested that this should run on a trial basis to determine its degree of success or failure; additionally that all stakeholders should work as a team in implementing the proposed solution, and that the blended learning programme would provide political, financial and pedagogical benefits to the institution.

Liu et al. (2010) undertook a study to understand the views of international students regarding how the differences in their culture have an impact on their online learning experiences in the MBA programme. This study found that cultural differences exist in the form of barriers such as language, communication, plagiarism, time zone differences and lack of multicultural content, and these barriers could hinder the online learning performances of international students. The suggestion made by the study is to design courses that include diversity in order to create a learning environment that is culturally inclusive and that could encourage total participation by international students. The recommendations from this study could be useful on a global platform for online learning programmes.

A study undertaken by Hannin & D'Netto (2007) articulated how online learning was encountered by students from various cultural backgrounds. The study found that the overall satisfaction level from online learning was approximately 67 per cent. The suggestions from this study are similar to those of other studies, i.e. that a culturally inclusive environment must be constructed for effective online education. The study

also scrutinised the challenges faced by culturally-diverse students with regard to organisational, technological and pedagogical issues. The study found that international students had more problems with organisational issues in online learning than did domestic students. Also, English language ability was an important factor with organisational challenges. Again, students whose first language was not English had less positive opinions about organisational issues compared with native English speakers. In addition, students who were well-versed with computers were more satisfied with organisational issues. With regard to the challenges with technological issues, the authors found that part-time students expressed more satisfaction with technology, and also local students and native speakers of English were more satisfied with technology compared to others students.

Filimban (2008) identified the factors that lead to the effective delivery of online learning technology. These are as follows: instructional design and delivery, student learning outcomes, assessment, student empowerment, social presence, critical thinking skills and alignment. Students in this study were least satisfied with the following aspects of their courses: student empowerment, instructional design and delivery, and alignment. In particular, students expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with course structure and materials, their freedom to express themselves, and their opportunities to share cultural backgrounds. There was also some dissatisfaction with the learning outcomes, indicating that these were not always in line with the course objectives. Overall, the evaluations from the students were positive, but there were requests for additional audio materials and video lectures.

A study by Edmonds (2010) identified elements that contribute to an effective online learning model. These include faculty teaching needs, reminding us that the needs of the faculty, not just the needs of the students, are critical for the success of online learning. In addition, aligning with the vision of the institution, and obtaining its support, is extremely important. Thirdly, having a sound instructional design is critical to success, bearing in mind that the design will depend on the learning outcomes, faculty and student needs. Lastly, research into the suitability of information technology is required for effective online learning.

The study done by Shantakumari and Sajith (2015) investigated student viewpoints on blended learning in order to understand their satisfaction levels and the usefulness of the courses that were offered. The results of the study reflected that students perceive blended learning and its contents in a positive way. Students found Moodle easy to use as an online platform. The perceptions of students regarding blended learning differed across different courses, suggesting that some modifications to the blended learning format might be required, depending on the course contents. The study also found that gender and age did not influence students' perceptions of blended learning.

Survey and Results

A questionnaire was distributed to 75 international students at an institution in New Zealand where all the students who participated in this study were international students. Responses were kept anonymous. The results suggest that, most of the students would be satisfied with blended learning. Overall, more than 64 per cent of the students expressed positive attitudes towards blended learning.

Several students expressed their support for receiving on-line feedback from their lecturers. This highlights the importance of the use of technology where students are willing to deviate from the traditional approach of having face-to-face learning only. Another important suggestion included the consideration of both individual and group assignments to be a part of their learning with the blended approach. More than half of them suggested having both forms of assignments. There appeared to be a huge demand for assignments compared to examinations, where more than 60 per cent of students stated their preference for this form of assessment.

Many students enquired about support with numeracy skills. With the blended learning approach, this could be provided by online numeracy workshops together with some supplementary face-to-face support for weaker students requiring additional help. More than 77 per cent of the students saw this as a very useful model for addressing their need for numeracy skills. Similarly, 74 per cent expressed the need for English learning assistance.

Students expressed their satisfaction with the ‘modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment’ and more than 60 per cent of them would like to have this embedded with blended learning. They would like on-line discussion facilities in order to have quick responses to their queries from their peers and/or their lecturers.

Conclusion

Implementing blended learning has positive practical benefits. However, schools need to have appropriate strategies in place for its execution. Having skilled leadership with clear policies and procedures is vital for blended learning. At the same time, developing infrastructure and resources and providing training to staff will enhance quality. Schools should also develop ways in which staff can work collaboratively and enhance communication.

It is also important to be aware of possible barriers to implementation. These include staff resistance to change, lack of staff knowledge, lack of technical skills, lack of support, lack of resources, lack of leadership and lack of time. International students’ preparedness for changing to this style of delivery can be variable. Flexibility and adaptation to changes can be heavily influenced by prior learning experiences and,

curiously, sometimes postgraduate students may be more change-resistant than undergraduate students.

With adequate planning, resourcing and committed leadership, blended learning will play an increasing role in the delivery of postgraduate education in New Zealand.

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