

HYBRID/BLENDED APPROACH AS AN EVOLVING PARADIGM FOR THE DEMOGRAPHICALLY ISOLATED TERTIARY STUDENTS

Dr. Wahab Ali
The University of Fiji, Fiji.
Corresponding Email: wahaba@unifiji.ac.fj

Abstract

Evolving technological advancement and emerging digital environments have permeated and swiftly changed the learning landscape globally. One such advancement that incorporates face-to-face learning with technological tools is the blended or hybrid mode of learning and teaching. Blended or hybrid learning is a seamless combination of online and face-to-face activities for classroom instruction for all and basically the demographically displaced. This research delves into a profound study of the perception of students and staff involved in a postgraduate educational leadership program offered in a blended mode. An interpretive paradigm using mixed methods approach adopting a survey consisting of Likert scale items and interviews were successfully implemented. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS while thematic approach using emerging themes were used for interpreting the interviews. Findings testify that blended approach has been liked and very well accepted by the students as it enables them to complete their qualifications and progress academically and professionally in their lives. This study sets a solid platform for further research as certain scholars and administrators are still skeptical and hesitant in fully implementing blended mode of learning and teaching. The study concludes by stating certain implications that subsequently can make blended mode more chronic and applicable to the needs of scholars, teachers and students especially in archipelagos like Fiji and beyond.

Keywords: Leadership, Blended Learning, Expanding globally, Faculty development, Student learners, Constructivist pedagogy, Distance learning

1. Introduction

'Take out your books and read the first chapter.' This is a sentence one must have heard a lot of times. Nowadays this sentence could be replaced by 'click on the link and follow the instructions on your computer'.

The rapid emergence of technology in all facets of our lives has no doubt changed the educational landscape of our times. For the purposes of this study, "blended" or "hybrid" means a deliberate combination of face-to-face and online learning using appropriate learning platforms. Scholars have defined blended learning variously but they all mean a combination of online learning and face-to-face instruction (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Research suggests that the hybrid model is gaining popularity within institutions of higher education around the world, with more and more campuses adopting this model for their programs (Abraham, 2007; Akkoyunlu & Soyulu, 2008; Dickfos et al, 2014; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Flexible learning (Flexi-class) is another synonym often used for blended or hybrid mode of learning and teaching (Staker & Horn, 2012). With the widespread advances of the internet, e-learning and m-learning technologies has led to blended mode of learning, which effectively combines them with traditional face-to-face learning (Porumbet al, 2013). Blended learning must be differentiated from distance education as well as online education. The former means that a package including text books and assignments are sent to students that they read and complete on their own while the latter means a course that is completely online.

Blended learning combines the strengths or the positive aspects of traditional and online learning to provide a stimulating and effective learning environment for students. Previous studies in this regard have revealed that there is still, however, a lack of research that examines student participation and staff engagement in educational leadership courses delivered in a blended learning mode (Obiedat et al., 2014; Tosun, 2015; Waha & Davis, 2014). It is hoped that the current research will assist in filling in this gap in the literature. This study takes a comprehensive, in-depth study into students' and staff members' usage and perceptions about blended learning in a leadership course at a university in Fiji. Educational leadership is one of the first programs at the university that has been delivered using blended mode. By investigating students' and staff members' perceptions and engagement in this blended learning environment, the paper contributes to a better understanding of the usage of blended learning in tertiary education.

2. Background and Context

Master of Educational Leadership is an innovative, practice-focused and research based Postgraduate Degree that prepares teachers, aspiring leaders and school administrators for leadership positions in schools and other educational institutions. It endeavors to provide practicing teachers with the theoretical understandings and practical skills needed to become better leaders in the school system. While blended learning can be implemented in any environment that is supported by basic technological tools of communication, it is an added advantage for the distanced and the displaced like those living in an archipelago like Fiji. This means that about a quarter (25%) of the population live away from the main island, which is Viti Levu. In such instance, the demographical location presents a challenging educational context for the students, especially those seeking higher education. Onguko (2013) defines challenging educational contexts as environmental, social, and infrastructural impacts that prevent individuals from reaching their potential in educational achievement. The challenging educational context, sets the platform and provides the motivation for the current study.

3. Aim of the Study

Literature entails sparse empirical studies on blended learning and as advocated by Shaw and Ignneri (2006) more research studies are needed to enhance a better understanding of blended learning. The study is designed to allow the teaching staff to have a better understanding of what students need and what they want. Thus, this paper aims to contribute towards addressing this gap in the blended learning literature by studying a cohort of students who have successfully completed, or are on the verge of completing a leadership program and perceptions of staff members who deliver the program at a tertiary institution in Fiji. Given the paucity of research on global trends related to blended learning and the aim of the research, this study is guided by the following overarching question:

What are the perceptions and experiences of distanced leadership students' and campus staff members' in regards to the blended/hybrid mode of learning and teaching?

The study is further guided by the following underlying questions:

1. What are the students' expectations and perceptions of the blended/hybrid mode of learning?
2. What are the staff members' expectations and perceptions of the blended/hybrid mode of learning?
3. How does blended learning affect rural and remote students' access to higher education?

It is hoped that the above 3 underpinning questions will assist in addressing the key research question and thus contribute towards giving new knowledge about blended learning in the Fijian context.

4. Significance of Study

There are several reasons why this research is considered to be significant. There has been a paucity of previous research regarding influence of blended learning and teaching on students and staff members. The present research will be significant because it will provide first-hand information about tertiary students' perception of blended learning as an evolving paradigm in their online lives. This study will contribute to local literature on the subject, which in turn could be used by relevant authorities in improving their understanding and implementing it as a pragmatic approach to effective learning and teaching. This study will provide important insights into tertiary teaching and professional learning enabling teacher education institutions to strengthen the pre-service teacher preparation programs to better prepare teachers to cope with varying demands of digital natives in the schools.

Hopefully, the finding will alleviate undue fears and fallacies associated with blended learning so that it can be well adopted in higher and postgraduate programs in colleges and universities. It will also provide clarification and inform teachers and administrators that blended approach is not an alternative for a 'crash course' or a 'short course' with any lesser significance as it is as rigorous and stable covering the stipulated contact hours and credit points as any normal course. It will provide firsthand information to administrators so that they can successfully implement blended/hybrid mode as an effective paradigm in meeting the needs of students in the new millennium.

5. Theoretical Framework

Having presented the introduction and the motivation behind the current study, it is vital to discuss the theoretical framework selected for the study. Subsequently, constructivist theory, one of the more prevalent frameworks associated with online and computer based technology in education was selected for the study (Arnett, 2002). Constructivism provides an appropriate foundation for the implementation processes and posits that knowledge is not passively received from the world or from authoritative sources, but constructed by individuals or collaboratively (Crotty, 1998). Blended mode of delivery seems to be an effective paradigm to successfully implement constructivist pedagogy where teachers act as facilitators allowing students to take more proactive role in their learning (Weil, De Silva, & Ward, 2014). Subsequently, this research is entrenched in constructivism in light of student centred learning by incorporating emerging technologies in a blended mode. The following section provides a robust corpus of literature on blended/hybrid mode coinciding with the digital revolution that is characterized as being at the heart of the new digital orientation.

6. Literature Review

The literature presented in this section discusses blended/hybrid mode as an emerging paradigm that can be effectively implemented by colleges and universities. The literature also discusses the importance and relevance of blended approach in education in Pacific societies and beyond.

6.1 Blended Approach

Higher education institutions have realized that holding onto past teacher centred teaching practices are no longer congruent with the needs of our knowledge society. As such, Universities globally, have been challenged to position their institutions for the 21st century and the adoption of blended approach is inevitable. There are many definitions of blended or flexible mode of learning and teaching. According to Picciano (2009) blended learning is defined as a mixture of online learning and face-to-face instruction. Accordingly, blended learning refers to the hybrid of traditional face-to-face classroom lectures and e-learning. According to Hsu (2011) blended learning is becoming progressively prevalent form of learning in higher education institutions globally. On a similar note, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) define blended learning as the fusion of online learning and face-to-face delivery of learning. It must be emphasised that there are certain conditions and realities for the implementation of blended mode effectively. Some of these realities are copious supply of

electricity, sound internet connectivity, with availability of technological gadgets such as smart phones, computers and laptops(Onguko, 2013). Thus, in a context where there is lack of access to electricity, Internet and technological tools, blended approach may not be feasible or achievable.

Likewise, Onguko (2013) defines blended learning as a meticulous amalgamation of random face-to-face session with a combination of online delivery of content followed by self-directed study. The author further clarifies that blended mode also takes into consideration offline content saved on servers that are accessed by students during their free time. Likewise, White et al., (2014) defines blended approach as web-enhanced or web-based and face-to-face education. On a similar note, Staker & Horn(2012) define blended mode as a formal education program in which students learn part through online delivery of content and part through a face to face session away from the main center and close to the location of the students. Considering that majority of the students are digital natives, they are able to intuitively use a variety of information technology devices and navigate the internet with ease (Corrin, Bennett, & Lockyer, 2011). In a survey undertaken in America about the lifestyle of the millennials, they have exceptional attachment with technological tools. According to Taylor and Keeter (2006), it is the way students have fused their social lives into them which can make blended learning more meaningful and enjoyable.

6.2 Challenging Contexts

Given that blended learning is a resource-effective methodology that has the potential to enrich student learning experience, it also has its fair share of challenges. Onguko (2013) defines challenging educational contexts as “environmental, social, and infrastructural impacts that prevent individuals from reaching their potential and participating in both formal and informal learning” (p. 328). Foremost, students need to have access to basic technological tools like laptops and computers with unfettered access to affordable quality internet and electricity(Onguko, 2013). In the same vein, personal computers provide excellent opportunities for students in completing their assignments in the comforts of their homes(Becker, 2000). Notably, previous literature shows that poor and slow internet connectivity can inhibit meaningful online learning as it causes frustration that can lead to poor student performance (López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011; Lotrecchiano, McDonald, Lyons, Long, & Zajicek-farber, 2013). Likewise, literature entails that monopolies keep internet prices high and make it difficult for all residents to access digital services (Onguko, 2013). Given the benefits of digital technology, Mori (2011) insists the importance of expanding internet access to a wider range of people by reducing its costs and improving the network efficiency and infrastructure(Mori, 2011; Onguko, 2013). Addressing these issues will surely increase the digital inclusion greatly enhance the delivery of blended approach.

Apart from physical and hardware support structures, students also need to be mentally and socially prepared for blended learning. This is because studying in blended mode can lead to unrealistic expectations and feelings of isolation due to the reduced opportunities for social interaction (Tosun, 2015). These views are also sustained by Poon (2013a) who argues that at times students have poor management skills and are weak at accepting responsibilities for individual learning (Poon, 2013a). Previous literature further reveals that students often vary in terms of their readiness and comfort levels with the technology as they are being used to traditional means of education (Lotrecchiano et al., 2013; Poon, 2013b; Tseng & Walsh, 2016). This lack of readiness may lead to increased dropout rates which may lead to lack of control due to the remoteness of the students when completing assessment activities (Lotrecchiano et al., 2013). In fact there is ample literature to suggest that blended approach is more demanding on part of the staff members, especially in preparation and presentation of such classes as compared with traditional means of lesson delivery (Lotrecchiano et al., 2013; Wong, Tatnall, & Burgess, 2013). It's naive to disagree that there's significant amount of extra work involved in the delivery of lessons through blended mode and for which staff should be allowed flexible working arrangement or compensated accordingly.

6.3 Strengths and Relevance

Despite certain challenges associated with blended learning, it brings along with it its share of benefits and strengths. According to Hsu(2011), students have pointed out a relatively positive perception of blended learning amongst them. Findings further revealed that blended learning leads to improved student satisfaction and performance in examination. In essence, most of the students praised the blended approach as it provided a more convenient access to education for those who could not study full time on campus (Hsu, 2011). An earlier study by Edginton & Holbrook (2010) has reported that students have positive feelings of blended learning as they believed it as a more productive means of education as compared with traditional approach. Likewise, findings further revealed higher satisfaction levels among faculty members and students, better learning outcomes for students, and place of learning are all mentioned as strengths in blended learning courses as compared to traditional face-to-face sessions(Edginton & Holbrook, 2010).

Evidence for and in support for blended mode can be found in the work of Trasler (2002), who ascertains that diversity and adaptability are some of the key benefits of blended learning. On a similar note, Dickfos et al.,(2014) supports the views expressed by Trasler (2002)that blended learning caters for flexibility in assessment for both student as well as staff members. Previous research by Davies and Graff (2005), further validates the findings of Trasler (2002)by confirming that blended learning has a strong student centered and collaborative learning focus. Likewise, Akhras (2012) is in acquiesce with Davies and Graff (2005) that blended learning allows for online collaboration where students are able to develop their own technical skills using online learning platforms that have space for feedback and discussion. She further establishes that blended learning has a high level of collaborative commitment in online learning as compared with traditional face-to-face mode(Akhras, 2012). For these reasons, students in a blended learning arrangement display greater ability to participate in terms of online discussions and posting of messages on discussion forums (Weil et al., 2014). In essence, blended learning should be understood in regards to the incursion it has made as an emerging paradigm in the intellectual halls of the education arena here.

6.4 Misconceptions and Fallacies

Substantial literature has evaluated blended learning from academics' or developers' points of view. Unfortunately, there are certain myths and misconceptions associated with blended learning leading to it not very well adopted in higher and postgraduate programs in many universities (Lotrecchiano et al., 2013; Porumb et al., 2013; Wai, Seng, & Kok, 2015). One major reason stated by Porumb et al., (2013) is unfamiliarity of the staff members in developing and delivering the courses in mix of face-to-face and online mode. Some teachers also believe that the blended approach is a substitute for a 'crash course' or a 'short circuit' to usually semester long courses without realizing that the content and the learning hours are not compromised in this approach. Previous research has highlighted these concerns as administrations in certain institutions continue to remain skeptical about the academic quality and rigor of blended courses due to their preference of traditional approach (Ciabocchi, Ginsberg, & Piacciano, 2016) or sheer ignorance. Another misconception associated with blended learning is that some teachers still do not consider blended learning as rigorous and stable enough as traditional means of learning. Conversely, recent studies illustrate that students learn effectively by actively participating in the learning process offered by the blended approach(Horzum, 2014). In essence, while blended learning is quite new and an emerging paradigm, it has been well accepted and implemented widely along the intellectual halls of educational institutions globally.

7. Research Methodology

The forthcoming sections present the research paradigm and the research methods adopted for this research and articulate the research design and the method adopted for this study. This paper explores students' and teachers' experiences in a blended learning course and examines them from their perspectives. Accordingly, the research is anchored in a constructivist paradigm using a post-positivist stance due to the adoption of quantitative as well as qualitative methods (Merriam, 1998). This study adopted a concurrent mixed methods approach employing appropriate research instruments as discussed in the subsequent section. Considering the research design, a survey seemed to be the most appropriate and manageable means of getting the views of the students and staff members about their blended experience. Accordingly, surveys have been a favoured tool for many researchers because it provides a cheap and effective way of collecting data in a structured and manageable form (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Moreover, semi-structured interviews were administered as part of the qualitative aspect of the mixed methods research. Several researchers support the use of semi-structured interviews. Having considered previous literature and for ease of data collection, survey and semi-structured seemed most appropriate and were astutely implemented as research instruments in the current study.

8. Research Sample

Selecting a research sample is an imminent issue frequently raised by researchers and students as it is closely related to trustworthiness of the findings (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). According to Fraenkel & Wallen (2006) researchers are always concerned with what can be labelled as an adequate size for a sample. They further suggest that despite considering shortage of time and financial constraints, it is advisable to obtain "as large a sample as they reasonably can" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 104). For the purpose of this study, five year graduates from 2014 to 2018 were purposefully selected. The target population is the entire group a researcher is interested in and in this case the graduates of the MEL program who completed their program through blended mode. The survey was administered to 51 graduates of the program and 12 current students in 2018. From this cohort, 10 students and 39 graduates (total of 49) attempted the survey resulting in an overall response rate of 78% which is acceptable for discussion. As for the interview, 5 students were randomly selected for this study. Similarly, all 7 staff members involved in the delivery of the leadership course in blended mode attempted the survey and also responded positively for the interviews.

9. Reliability of the Survey Constructs

Diverse variables were considered for the various items in the survey to understand the hybrid or blended approach as an evolving paradigm for the distanced and disadvantaged students. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha [α] was used to assess the reliability of the study constructs as it is widely used for assessing the reliability of measurement scales with multi-point items. Both the Student Survey as well as the Staff Survey had similar items and the overall reliability of the constructs for the former was .720 on 15 items and .917 for the later. Table 1 shows the Cronbach's Alpha values of the study constructs. Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group. The average value of Cronbach's Alpha reveals that the constructs are at an acceptable level to address the research question.

Table 1
Survey Reliability Statistics

| | Cronbach's Alpha | Number of Items |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Student Survey Reliability Statistics | 0.720 | 15 |
| Staff Survey Reliability Statistics | 0.917 | 15 |

9.1 Trustworthiness

Since the study is conducted using a mixed methods approach, it is pertinent to mention how the trustworthiness of the research was enhanced. According to Lincoln and Guba (1994) ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. Subsequently, credibility was achieved by adopting well established research methods as use of them in concert compensates the individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits. Member checks were also undertaken as Lincoln and Guba (1994) consider it as the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility. Likewise, use of iterative questioning and probing during interviews led to the rectification of contradictions and elimination of suspect data (Shenton, 2004). By and large, confirmability issues were also taken into consideration during the entire study as the data was analysed and discussed neutrally without any bias and preconception. Ethical issues were taken into consideration throughout the course of this study since a number of commentators of educational research have stressed the importance of adopting set ethical procedures (Kuper, Lingard, & Levinson, 2008; Punch, 1994; Walker, 1986). To further maintain the ethical etiquettes relevant information such as the aim and the purpose of the study were communicated well in advance to the participants of the present study.

10. Limitations of the Study

There was a lack of local literature on blended approach as such international literature has been frequently quoted. Additionally, the time available for this research was very limited as certain deadlines had to be met but here is scope for more detailed research to be initiated in the near future. With the limited sample size in the selection of staff members for the survey and in the qualitative work may limit the generalization of the findings. However, readers may use the findings at their own will and accord. In future other staff members in other faculties offering programs through blended mode may be considered. In addition, a lot of data has been collected that cannot be presented due to time and space limitations and writing further research papers focusing on more detailed blended learning aspects will be looked at in time to come.

11. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings as per the research questions according to emerging themes combined with statistical analysis in a constructivist paradigm.

Table 2
Record of survey students in the blended learning program

| | Current Students | Completed PG | Completed Masters | Total |
|------|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| 2018 | 10 | | | 10 |
| 2017 | | 9 | 2 | 11 |
| 2016 | | 9 | 4 | 13 |
| 2015 | | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| 2014 | | 4 | 0 | 04 |
| | | | | 49 |

Findings indicate that despite the number of students enrolled through blended approach, it has remained consistent over a period of 5 years, students are continuously able to gain benefit in completing their programs. All these students either stay on Vanua Levu or other small islands in the Fiji group. In fact, they would not have been able to complete their studies if the program was not offered in a blended approach. On similar lines, semi-structured interview protocols having few key questions were developed for the students, as well as the staff members. Unlike surveys, interviews provide the opportunity to probe and ask follow up questions and are generally easier for respondents, especially if what is sought is opinion or perception (Brenner, Brown, & Canter, 1985; Gilbert, Watts, & Osborne, 1985; Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim and analysed to identify commonalities and key points raised by students.

11.1 Familiarity with Blended approach

It is no doubt that we live in a connected world with unparalleled access to a vast array of online information and experiences. Also, it must be established that majority of our students are digital natives, a term coined by Marc Prensky who defined them as young people who grew up surrounded by, and using computers, cell phones and other tools of the digital age (Prensky, 2001). Having grown up with widespread access to technology, the digital natives are able to intuitively use a variety of Information technology devices and navigate the internet with ease and supinity. Subsequently, majority (86%) of the students affirmed that they were familiar with blended learning approach. Blended learning (BL) weaves face-to-face instruction into computer-mediated instruction in formal academic settings. Likewise, majority (59%) of the students indicated that they had 1-5 years of experience in learning through blended mode while some (33%) of them had 6-10 years of experience. Findings reveal that students are quite well versed with blended approach as according to Lam (2015) blended learning has made significant impact on recent teaching and learning models as the connection of face-to-face learning and e-learning expands the learning space and time.

11.2 Experiences and Perceptions of Students

In like manner, blended learning in the standard educational model refers to the use of technology to strengthen the teaching process through the application of the concepts learned in classroom. With reference to the use of technology, findings reveal that majority (61%) of the students use their laptops as their major tool for communication while some (31%) of them use their desktop computers. A few (8%) of the students also make use of their smart phones for blended learning. Desktop computers have been used for decades, but as time has passed, millennials have grown a liking for other mobile devices laptops and tablets (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Valk, Rashid, & Elder, 2010). Previous research entails that laptops and mobile devices can be used to enhance learning as there is a need to view these tools as academic resources, rather than as distractions (Kurkovsky & Syta, 2010; Valk et al., 2010). This is because learning spaces within the context of higher education has extended beyond traditional and physical environments with the advent of technological tools, such as computers, laptops and tablets with internet connection (Ross, Morrison, & Lowther, 2010; Smith, Sachs, Carss, & Chant, 1988). According to Ward and LaBranche (2003) blended learning or mixed mode uses the Internet with technological tools as the primary instruction mode, but incorporates a limited number of face-to-face sessions held during the semester. Likewise, Prinsloo and Van-Rooyen (2007) define blended model as a learning pedagogy that incorporates a myriad of technologies with face-to-face learning.

On a similar note, majority (71%) of the staff members strongly endorse that institutions need robust IT and other technical support to effectively deliver blended mode of learning and teaching. Previous literature reveals that blended learning education has manifested itself primarily through online learning, thus bringing along its share of challenges and opportunities. It represents a significant shift from traditional teaching and learning, but has not been achieved without significant agony (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Pérez, & Schuler, 2007 & Schuler, 2007). In concurrence with the previous statement, majority (67%) of the students strongly agreed that slow internet reception, poor quality and high internet cost were some of the major problems they faced while learning through blended approach. The remaining students (33%) also agreed despite they may have thought that there were other issues such as lesson delivery and learning platforms. Previous literature reveals that students often vary in terms of their readiness and comfort levels with the technology as they are being used to traditional means of education (Lotrecchiano et al., 2013; Poon, 2013b; Tseng & Walsh, 2016). This lack of readiness may lead to increased dropout rates which may lead to lack of control due to the remoteness of the students when completing assessment activities, thus increasing dropout rates (Lotrecchiano et al., 2013).

Qualitative data analysis revealed that while students are very appreciative of blended approach, it does bring with it certain disparaging conditions. Accordingly, student J stated, "I am staying about 120km in the interior of the island and have very poor internet reception,

as such I have to climb a nearby mountain whenever I want to go online.” Similar sentiments were shared by student K, “I have to catch a boat to travel to nearby island to buy internet data” when probed why not buy ample data at one time her response was “Well, internet data has expiry dates and whether you use them or not they get expired.” This was a reasonable explanation as the internet data is usually time bound globally. Findings further reveal that majority (92%) of the students are satisfied with the blended mode of teaching and learning. Previous literature consisting of results from several tertiary institutions suggest that learner satisfaction and learning outcomes are superior in blended learning settings compared to traditional means (Kim, Bonk, & Teng, 2009). Likewise, qualitative analysis reveals that there are a number of aspects that students like the most about blended learning in spite of certain limitations.

Majority of the students have a positive view of blended approach. They like the personal approach, increased accessibility and flexibility of engagement the most. Blended learning caters to each student’s pace and learning style by creating a conducive learning environment. Accordingly, Student A states that “blended learning allows me to work and attend to my studies in my own spare time.” “I am able to access my studies even from a café shop or places where hot spots are available,” stated Student B. Blended learning is seen as user friendly as students have round the clock contact with the tutors and peers and also if they are struggling with a particular topic, they can instantly reach out to complementary web resources. There is ample evidence in literature that confirms that students enjoy the flexibility that blended learning provides as it enables them to engage in both online and face-to-face interactions (Prece, Yoram, & Yael, 2009). Likewise, qualitative analysis further reveals that blended learning allows students experience innovative learning tools and enhances collaborative learning. It facilitates student evaluations with comprehensive online testing and granular reporting as automatic grading is offered by many learning systems like Moodle. According to Student D, “blended learning is fun as it enables me to keep in touch with peers and I can easily share and discuss issues just like using Facebook.” Subsequently, blended learning involves online and digital resources making time limitations a matter of the past, provided one has access to a computer and good internet connection (Kim et al., 2009).

Accordingly, blended learning approach provides opportunities to those disadvantaged and remote students to complete their studies successfully. Blended approach is seen as a blessing by these students as without it many of them would have never been able to complete their studies. Unequivocally, all the students anonymously agreed (35%) or strongly agreed (65%) that blended learning is of great advantage for the distanced and remote students. A quick glimpse reveals Fiji is an archipelago of more than 330 islands of which 110 are permanently inhabited and more than 500 islets, amounting to a total land area of about 18,300 square kilometres. Apart from Yasawa and the Lau Group, there are of number of small islands scattered in the periphery of the two major islands known as Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. There are 10648 school teachers in Fiji and about 40% of them teach in rural remote areas (Ministry of Education, 2017). Blended learning approach suits teachers in such areas as they do not have to go to the main campus and at the same time they are able to assist students to upgrade their qualifications and contribute effectively towards building a knowledge society.

Previous literature also reports particular aspects of blended learning that students enjoy, including flexibility in terms of scheduling, online interaction, and the teachers’ (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). On a similar note Garrison and Vaughan (2008) also confirm that students appreciate the higher quality and quantity of interaction with teachers and peers that blended learning facilitates. Likewise, Pinto de Moura (2010) also asserts that due to the almost 24/7 availability of staff members and the timely presence of them were found to be very beneficial to the students. However, qualitative data analysis reveals that while majority of the students prefer the online mode, they also look forward to the face-to-face sessions. According to one of the students, face-to-face sessions provided her the opportunity to seek clarification and remove any doubts about the assessment tasks and short tests. “Face-to-face sessions allows me to ask questions directly to the teacher in the class and the explanations make understanding the topics better” commented student E. Likewise, Poon

(2012) is in concurrence with Sloman (2007) about the importance of face-to-face session, as they stress emphasis should be shifted from a purely technological focus where technology should be considered only as a means to facilitate students' learning. As such, it can be established that both face-to-face as well as the online mode consolidate each other in creating meaningful blended learning environment.

11.3 Perceptions of Staff members

In like manner, quantitative data analysis reveals that majority (71%) of the staff members are quite assertive that blended learning is a pragmatic pedagogy for all students and especially for distanced and remote students. Findings further reveal that all the staff members either strongly agree (71%) or agree (29%) that although blended learning reduces the 'office hours', it consecutively increases the online commitment of the staff members. This afterhours commitment needs to be acknowledged and appropriately adjusted either by flexible working arrangement or being remunerated accordingly. One of the staff members alleged that "more awareness needs to be created about blended learning so that the administration can understand the logistics and allow flexi-hours". Another staff member stressed that "we go on our own to run blended classes in the interest of our students carrying the extra load without any monetary gain". The findings are in concurrence with that of Ciabocchi, Ginsberg, and Piacciano (2016) who confirm that a number of issues related to workload, remuneration, and lesson delivery have at times led to confrontations between faculty and the administrators. Qualitative analysis further highlights some of the concerns the staff members have in regards to the delivery of blended class.

Qualitative data analysis reveals that staff members delivering courses through blended approach start facing problems from the very initial days. They are not sure whether such classes will be approved or not. They may also not be able to relish the flexible working arrangement and the increased workload may not be remunerated. There is no doubt that there exists a plethora of misunderstandings associated with blended learning (Kim et al., 2009), that if not addressed can inhibit the successful implementation of future blended projects. Previous research confirms that despite the fact that the demand for blended mode continues to increase in higher education institutions, the administration in certain institutions continue to remain skeptical about the academic quality and rigor of blended courses (Ciabocchi et al., 2016) due to their preference of traditional approach or may be because of sheer ignorance. The authors further argue that for the success of any blended teaching, administrators' misconceptions need to be addressed. Despite these criticisms, there is a growing body of evidence "which indicate that blended and online courses can result in student learning outcomes equivalent to those achieved in face-to-face courses" (Ciabocchi et al., 2016, p. 70). Likewise, a UNICON survey of business schools in America, Africa, Europe and Asia reveal that 71% of them offer courses through blended approach (Eiter & Woll, 2011). Hence, blended learning approach uses the best of both worlds, as they take the best of what traditional classroom learn and eLearning has to offer and blends them together in a value added learning experience.

12. Implications

Students' feedback from this survey and qualitative analysis provide new knowledge about their perspective on blended learning mode and aspects that drive their motivation. The positive feedback and the expressed expectations of participants to keep the blended learning approach for the programme illustrate that the mix of online and face-to-face learning meets students' needs. It calls for a blended learning framework that clearly spells out the activities of the face-to-face sessions and extends the real classroom enabling students to actively participate from anywhere using appropriate learning platforms. Moreover, there needs to be a strong student, as well as teacher support system that address technical issues swiftly. Students learning through blended approach need special care and if possible tertiary institutions should subsidise the internet cost or make appropriate arrangements with the net providers for cheaper rates. Staff members also need to be considerate about the remoteness of the students and be in constant touch with them to avoid isolation and loneliness. A

framework consisting of interactive multimedia elements that addresses the concerns of the students and staff members will create a better blended model for all.

Likewise, staff members delivering blended classes should be morally supported with flexible working arrangement and remunerated as appropriate. Qualitative data analysis indicates that teaching using blended approach is more rigorous and robust as it combines the strengths of traditional as well as online methods of teaching. Blended approach should not be viewed as 'inferior' or sub-standard program as according to staff members they have the dual strengths of face-to-face as well as online support. Instead of putting 'red tapes' administration should appreciate the delivery of lessons through blended approach and appreciate staff members contributions accordingly. Even as the world is a global village today, some administrators and scholars still pay zero attention to international best practices. They seem to have certain preconceived ideas towards the development of education, and fail to understand the new dynamics in higher education. Current higher education goals and learning outcomes require a new paradigm of change and blended/hybrid approach is one such revolution that cannot be avoided in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Blended education is an increasingly common educational alternative, as well as a key contributor to the increasingly ambitious landscape in higher education. This paper discusses the use of blended learning as an emerging approach that can enhance the effective delivery of the leadership program. Likewise, it also discusses students' perceptions of the advantages of blended learning in enabling them to complete their studies. Despite certain shortfalls, blended approach has been very well liked by the staff members as well as the students living in distanced and remote areas. In essence, blended learning market is becoming highly competitive, and universities are undergoing pressure to develop programs that are not only current, but also relevant and responsive to market needs of the time. The university concerned has already accepted the calling and implemented blended approach in the delivery of a leadership program basically for distanced and maritime students. However, other students who are unable to attend on campus classes are also able to take advantage of the blended mode and successfully complete their studies. It is envisaged that blended learning represents a wider pragmatic pedagogy as compared with traditional face-to-face learning, especially in tertiary institutions. Finally, with increased value added benefits from blended approach, it must be established that it provides an advantage not to be missed by all and especially those who cannot study full time and the demographically displaced students, like those in Fiji, the region and beyond.

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