

Chapter 2

Blended Learning: Confronting the Challenges of Higher Education in Oman

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education in developing countries like Oman offers several unique circumstances that suggest curriculum delivery using Blended Learning is a rational choice. Research has been conducted to identify the factors affecting blended learning adoption and to determine whether the teaching and learning process is amenable to its adoption at HEIs in Oman. Based on the findings a model, Blended Learning Acceptance Model (BLAM), has been developed. It was inferred from the findings that there is a positive relationship among the demographic factors and behavioral Intention i.e. blended-learning adoption. In addition, the teaching and learning styles also had significant influence on adoption of blended learning. BLAM was primarily intended to be used at HEIs in Oman, but may also be used in other developing countries as a reference for the adoption of blended learning.

INTRODUCTION

Application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in teaching and learning has gained much popularity among practitioners in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Jones, Campbell, McNamara and Stanley, 2008). Today, ICT plays a major role in pedagogical methodology which enables flexibility and reinforces interactivity in the learning environment (Su, Bonk, Magjuka, Liu and Lee, 2005) both inside and outside the classroom. The integration of ICT such as wikis, course pages, blogs, discussion groups, emails etc. in learning and teaching in HEI significantly changed the design of the curriculum, and recently eLearning has gained a significant importance in teaching and learning experience, for both teachers and students. In addition to eLearning, the concept of blended learning (BL) has emerged, the combination of traditional classroom teaching and technology mediated instruction to be the “new traditional model” or “new normal” in the coming era of higher education (Ross and Gage, 2006; Graham, 2006; Norberg, Dziban and Moksall, 2011).

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Although the concept of blended learning is ambiguous in terms of its conceptual definition, its advantages offer various benefits to both students and teachers (Chan, 2011). For instance, studies conducted in developed countries reported that the blended format provides flexibility, motivation, idea sharing, interaction and better communication over traditional learning formats (Fearson, Starr and McLaughlin, 2011; Cohere, 2011; Chan, 2011). These studies also concluded that online education was an important component of their long term strategy (Allen and Seaman, 2010). Despite these findings, the results were inconsistent in relation to the student's acceptance and adoption level. Adoption is the key factor that would ensure a productive use of a system, therefore understanding the user adoption of new technologies is important to their use in education. However, this is challenging, as it includes many factors that would influence behavioural intentions.

This study aimed to investigate the challenges in the emerging field of blended learning in a developing country like Oman. The study was concerned with measuring the attitude and experiences of the faculty members and students at Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS) in Oman, as they explore the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS), as a supplement to traditional face-to-face delivery of the curriculum.

BACKGROUND

The introduction of online learning systems has increased access and flexibility in the curriculum, enhancing the communication and the learning experience; however, there are issues with fully online courses in relation to the lack of social contact, choices, and engagement (Singh, 2003; Holley and Oliver, 2010).

The concept of blended learning refers to the pedagogical paradigm of a proactive student's focus on curriculum delivery, rather than as a passive observer present in a classroom. Using the strengths of online and face-to-face learning, blended learning curriculum delivery combines the relative advantages of both the environments and research shows that blended learning is increasing in Higher Education (Chandra, 2004; Garrison and Vaughan, 2008; Graham, 2006, Picciano, 2009).

Blended learning may have different definitions (Matheos *et al.*, 2005). Allan (2007) states that there is agreement that the pedagogy is 'a mixture of face-to-face and eLearning', and according to Graham (2006), blended learning is 'the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed learning systems' (Figure 1). For the purposes of this study, Graham's (2006) definition is adopted, as it is general and ignores the complexity of blended learning (Stacey and Gerbic, 2009). As a logical development from both face-to-face and online learning, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) suggested that, 'Blended learning — a design approach whereby both face-to-face and online learning are made better by the presence of the other — offers the possibility of recapturing the traditional values of higher education while meeting the demands and needs of the twenty-first century'.

Blended learning is a fundamental redesign of pedagogical practices. In blended learning design there is a paradigm change in which the emphasis is more on learning than on teaching (López-Pérez *et al.*, 2011). Pedagogy can be transformed towards more active learning with wider use of learner-centred approaches through blended learning curriculum delivery (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008; Nunan *et al.*, 2000). Vaughan (2007) states that facility usage can be increased if a greater number of students can be accommodated with less campus attendance. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) and Garrison and Vaughan (2008) reported the challenges and complexities in administration and development of blended learning

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