Chapter 8

Closing the Distance Gap Through Adopting a Blended Teaching and Learning Model:
Lecturers and Students' Expectations and Perceptions at UKZN

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the expectations and perceptions of lecturers and students pertaining to blended learning as an emerging model for teaching and learning. Blended learning is considered a style of education in which students learn through the interface of online educational materials and technology as well as traditional face-to-face teaching. The research method used for this chapter is qualitative in nature and uses interviews and document analysis as the main data collection instruments. Views were drawn from the lecturers and students reading for Post-Graduate Diploma in Community Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Another challenge relates to the upskilling of lecturers in the usage of e-learning tools and accessing of computers by students, especially those in the rural areas. The transition from the traditional classrooms in a face-to-face environment to that of the online environment remains a challenge for most lecturers and students alike.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning, universities in particular are knowledge creators and disseminators in the knowledge/information age (Padayachee, Lortan, & Maistry, 2021). Universities are key constitutors of national and economic development as well as fostering social change and justice (Lefa, 2015; Padayachee, 2021). These responsibilities demand that universities seek creative and innovative pathways to pursue their core business of teaching, research and community engagement (Tshishonga, 2020). Such innovativeness is imperative in the areas of teaching and learning beyond traditional methods of student engagement and teaching. This chapter explores the expectations and perceptions of lecturers and students pertaining to blended leaning as an emerging model for teaching and learning. Blended learning is considered a style of education in which students learn through the interface of online educational materials and technology as well as traditional face-to-face (F2F) teaching. The emergence of digital communication technologies prompted a radical transition from blackboards and overhead projectors to PowerPoint presentations and the use of animations and voice recording (Mahesh, 2017). The use of technology-enhanced teaching and learning practices is prompted by the emergence of technology and currently by COVID-19 and its restrictive measure in accessing campuses (Fernandez and Shaw, 2022). In some instances, huge classes at universities, inadequate human resources (lecturers) and infrastructural facilities, demand for access and prevalence of digital e-learning. Ramraj & Marimuthu (2019) argue that the emergence of online learning has accelerating educational output through the provision of unlimited learning opportunities in the education fraternity. The chapter argues that blended learning does not only expand the learning spaces, but also provide platforms for virtual training and learning. Thus, online learning provides opportunities for students to take classes at times convenient to them, or even provide access to classes for students that have no other options. The growing demands for higher education and restrictions imposed by COVID-19 protocols, call for renewed alternative pedagogies in teaching and learning (Well & Edwards, 2015).

The research method used for this chapter is qualitative and makes use of interviews and document analysis as the main data collection instruments. Views were drawn from the lecturers and students reading for Post-Graduate Diploma in Community Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The majority of the students were adults and working in various sectors. As such, they brought with them a vast of work experiences to the classroom. Since the Diploma combines the distance and contact sessions, the chapter found that blended learning is relevant in closing the knowledge gap and sustain contact between lecturers and students. However, the challenge has been the emergence of COVID-19 and its restrictions on face-to-face teaching and learning. Another challenge relates to the upskilling of lecturers in the usage of e-learning

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