Blended Learning in Higher Education: Learners' Preferences and Insights

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ABSTRACT

This research study was conducted on the prevailing learners' perceptions and preferences towards Blended Learning in Higher Education. This was a case study involving one private University in Kenya. The purpose of the study was to assess the learners' perspectives of Blended Learning, identify their experiences and make recommendations for improvement of program design and delivery. The study design adopted a mixed research approach and was situated within Garrison (2008) theoretical framework of Community of Inquiry (CoL). The research addressed the following research objectives: What are the reasons for choosing the Blended Learning program? What are the learners' perceptions towards the quality of preparation and delivery of blended learning programs? How do learners compare the Blended Learning and traditional classroom learning? What are the suggestions for the future development of Blended Learning? Participants were drawn from cohorts of learners enrolled at different stages of study in the Blended Learning program at the University. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants. The participants responded to questionnaire that was emailed to them by their course instructors. The completed questionnaires were subsequently emailed back to the researcher. Analysis of data was done using descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson-Product moment correlation coefficient was used to describe relationships between variables. The findings from the study indicate that when there is greater social and teaching presence, learner's satisfaction increases. Provision of support in terms of teaching presence and instructional resources needs to be enhanced. Facilitators of Blended Learning courses have to be more proactive and initiate frequent online discussions to enrich their courses.

Introduction

Globally, education has been seen as a catalyst for social transformation, wealth creation, and national development. Nevertheless, demand for education, particularly in developing countries, continues to grow, and the gap between supply and demand widens (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006)**.** Distance education has therefore emerged out of social compulsion, the dynamics of change and new cultures. It was the failure of traditional systems to be able to meet the demand in countries, where the resources available for tertiary education are limited, which basically gave birth to the new trend of education known as open and distance education (Duncan, et al., 2003).

The demand for higher Education has experienced unprecedented growth in the recent years. The upsurge in social demand for continuous learning has led to open and distance education (Nyerere, Gravenir & Mse, 2012). This mode of learning utilizes the electronic platforms and has also been referred to as e-learning. The demand is driven by the need for a workforce with the technical and professional skills required for the expanding global knowledge based society. In Africa, the demand for higher education and technical skills to drive the developing economies has outstripped the supply to the labour force. Increasingly, many developing countries are experiencing strained resources in provision of education services especially at higher levels. The number of government sponsored students increased from 20,073 in 2009/10 to 32, 648 in 2010/11. In the Technical Vocational Education and Training Institutions, total enrolment increased to 81,114 students (GOK, 2012). Data from the Education Sector report (2012) indicate that:

"The number of universities both public and private increased from 28 in 2009/2010 to 58 in 2011/2012 comprising 7 public universities, 24 constituent university colleges and 27 private universities. Enrollment increased from 177,735 students (144,181 in public universities and 33,554 students in private universities) in 2009/10 to 361,147 students (271,143 in public universities and 90,004 in private universities) in 2011/2012 as a result of the upgrading of twenty four institutions to university colleges as well as expansion of physical facilities in various public universities." Pg.31

With this increased social demand and enrollment in Universities and tertiary institutions, the challenges of access and equity have become more real than ever. In order to meet this challenge, many Universities and tertiary level institutions have embarked on methods to expand access to higher education through decentralization and online learning programs. This has given rise to several University Campuses mushrooming in areas which were previously unprecedented. The expansion of public Universities has not been sufficient to meet demand as many qualified students leaving high school are still not able to secure admission in public universities. Open and Distance learning (ODL) has therefore emerged as an alternative approach to expand access to those who cannot join regular University programmes.

Open and Distance learning (ODL) emerged from the idea of correspondence course that were offered by Universities such as University of South Africa (UNISA). The success of UNISA

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"spurred" the establishment of other providers of distance education in other countries (Nyerere, et. al, n.d.). The Kenyan government's Sessional No. 5 of 2005 addressed issues of ICT in education but there is lack of a clearly articulated ODL policy. In January 2006, the Kenyan government formulated the National ICT policy that provides a framework to ensure access, efficiency and quality in delivery of ICT services (Ministry of Information and Communications (2006). The current policy places ICT in Education as national development priority (Republic of Kenya, 2012). Through this policy, the government intends to introduce an e-curriculum by 2015, review and implement the national ICT Policy. The government also envisages the development of an overall ODL policy and establishment of National Open University Satellite Centres in all counties. There are plans to introduce an ODL broadcasting station to widely disseminate ODL programmes and overcome challenges of accessibility especially in marginal regions of the country.

Statement of the problem

The choice of ICT as the medium for delivering distance learning programs has elicited success and challenges at the same time. ICTs have provided various options of imparting education which is an essential component of any system to succeed. As a result, distance educators today are equipped with a variety of means and methods of education and training to make the education resources accessible to all those who want to have it as per their needs and convenience. The existence of papers such as those by Jones et al. (2002) that survey the positions of faculty members towards distance education suggest, ironically, the existence of negative evaluations of distance learning among faculty members involved in distance and online learning. Making sure that higher education distance learning course meets student expectations is critical to ensuring the quality of the student experience (Gilroy, 2001). Distance education that allows using so many different alternatives for educational purposes enables distance-education institutions to design an educational process of a better quality.

ODL is considered a cost-effective model for delivery of education and means to expand access. Some of the challenges facing ODL include poor infrastructure, lack of trained personnel and lack of clearly defined national policies (Nyerere, et. al, 2012.) This study was intended to assess the learners' perspectives of the blended learning in a private University in Kenya. The rapid expansion in University Education and increased enrollment occasioned by liberalization of the Education sector has placed tremendous challenges upon Universities in their quest to increase their student numbers and provide greater access to various programmes. In this regard several Universities have opened satellite Campus across the country to reach out to students in the most convenient ways and to position themselves for the twenty-first century. Open and Distance Learning has emerged as a convenient alternative for those who cannot gain access to regular University programmes because of various reasons. Some of these reasons include lack of time occasioned by full-time employment, limited bed-capacity in public Universities and financial constraints.

Blended Learning combines the features of Distance Learning and face-to-face contacts. Garrisson & Vaughan (2008) define Blended Learning as a "fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences" (pg.5). Several Universities in Kenya have established institutes of Open and Distance Education. The implementation of Blended Learning programmes has been met with varying degrees of success.

There are few research studies that have been conducted in Kenya to assess the success of implementation and to suggest ways of improving programme delivery. This study was inspired by the need to know how successful the implementation of Blended Learning in Higher Education has been and recommend ways of improving program design and delivery.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions and preferences of learners enrolled in Blended Learning program at University. The researcher addressed the following research questions: What are the reasons for choosing the Blended Learning program? What are the learners' perceptions towards the quality of preparation and delivery of blended learning programs? How do learners compare the Blended Learning and traditional classroom learning? What are the suggestions and recommendations for the future development of Blended Learning program?

Theoretical Framework

The study was based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, 2008). The community of inquiry is a recursive model that presents a coherent and accurate account of what shapes educational processes and outcomes. The CoI model looks at an educational community as being constituted of individuals who come together to work collaboratively towards the achievement of learning goals and outcomes. There are three elements in the CoI framework i.e. social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) explain that, "each of the presences reflects categories and indicators that operationalize the elements used to study and design the teaching and learning transaction" (pg. 18). The interdependence between and across the presences influences the design of a blended learning experience.

The social presence refers to the students in a community who must be able to interact, express themselves and develop personal relationships that are necessary for the achievement of academic goals. The cognitive process describes the "pattern of learning from experience through reflection and conceptualization to action and further experience" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) Pg.21. Teaching presence is concerned with bringing all the elements together to ensure that the community of inquiry is productive. It provides for design, facilitation and direction to ensure the learning outcomes are achieved. The three presences interact with each other to create a worthwhile educational experience.

Method

Participant characteristics

The participants in this study were learners enrolled in the Blended learning program at the Institute of Open and Distance Learning at the University. These were students taking different courses delivered through the Blended Learning mode and were at different stages of progress in their respective courses. The Table 1 and Table 2 below show the participants demographic characteristics. Most of the participants (45.8%) in the study were fourth year students. These are students in their final year of study and the senior most in terms of program placement. A possible explanation for this is that these are senior students who are more experienced and confident in using ICT in Blended Learning. They were followed by third year students at 20.8%. It is important to note that second year students were not represented in this study. This is a rather unusual occurrence. In terms of age, 25% of the participants were between 35 and 36 years of age with 8% being 53 and 58 years as the eldest participants at 8%.

Table 1. Place in the program

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	first year	1	4.2	4.8	4.8
	third year	5	20.8	23.8	28.6
	fourth year	11	45.8	52.4	81.0
	Fifth year	4	16.7	19.0	100.0
	Total	21	87.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	12.5		
Total		24	100.0		

Table 2. Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	29.00	1	4.2	4.3	4.3
	30.00	1	4.2	4.3	8.7
	33.00	1	4.2	4.3	13.0
	34.00	1	4.2	4.3	17.4
	35.00	3	12.5	13.0	30.4
	36.00	3	12.5	13.0	43.5
	38.00	1	4.2	4.3	47.8
	41.00	1	4.2	4.3	52.2
	42.00	1	4.2	4.3	56.5
	45.00	1	4.2	4.3	60.9
	50.00	1	4.2	4.3	65.2
	53.00	2	8.3	8.7	73.9
	54.00	1	4.2	4.3	78.3
	55.00	1	4.2	4.3	82.6
	56.00	1	4.2	4.3	87.0
	57.00	1	4.2	4.3	91.3
	58.00	2	8.3	8.7	100.0
	Total	23	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	1	4.2		
Total		24	100.0		

The majority of the participants in the Blended Learning program are female students (54.2%) as depicted in the Table 3 below. Nyerere et. al (2012) contend that several factors particularly family commitments among women have contributed to an increased interest in distance learning. This can be a possible explanation for a larger proportion of women enrolled in Blended Learning than men. The development of e-learning has opened more educational opportunities for women as they can now study within the comfort of their homes while also giving attention to domestic matters of running their homes. Women in Africa have also been marginalized in terms of skills development, and so e-learning comes as a welcome reprieve and an opportunity for them to upgrade their skills.

Table 3. Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	11	45.8	45.8	45.8
	female	13	54.2	54.2	100.0
	Total	24	100.0	100.0	

Sampling procedures

The participants in the study were purposefully selected. A purposive sample was convenient because through this method, it was easy to locate the students enrolled in the Blended Learning course and include them in this study. Purposive sampling can be useful to the researcher in selecting participants to be included in the sample because of their typicality (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). A student survey questionnaire was emailed to course instructors who circulated the same to students enrolled for their Blended Learning course. Participants were asked to fill the questionnaires and email back the complete questionnaire to the instructors who forwarded them back to the researcher. A total of 25 questionnaires were returned. This represented a small sample size and therefore generalizability was not possible.

Research design

The research study adopted a mixed methods approach. Data was collected using a questionnaire which was emailed to all participants through their course instructors. The research instrument was adopted from Garrison & Vaughan (2008). This instrument was useful to the researcher because it captured the data relevant to the research and critical in answering the research questions.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson – Product moment correlation coefficients were used to describe relationships and make comparisons among variables. Qualitative data was organized and managed for meaning and interpretation. Emerging themes and categories were constructed that provided the basis for discussing the findings of the study.

Results

Factors determining the choice of a Blended Learning course

In order to determine the factors that influence learners' choice of Blended Learning course descriptive statistics were employed to establish the mean of the participants' responses. The following Table 4 summarizes the means of participants' responses.

Table 4

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Convenience of not having to come to campus often	24	.00	1.00	.2917
Flexibility of being able to complete assignments any palce/anytime	24	.00	1.00	.2500
It is a required course	24	.00	1.00	.1667
It was the only available option course that fit into my timetable	24	.00	1.00	.3750
I chose the instructor, not the course modality	24	.00	.00	.0000
Job responsibilities make it difficult for me to attend face-to-face	24	.00	1.00	.6250
I have a disability that makes travel inconvenient	24	.00	.00	.0000
Valid N (listwise)	24			

A look at the means of participants responses **(Table 4)** reveals that most of the learners chose to take the Blended Learning course because their job responsibilities made it difficult to attend face to face sessions (X=0.6250). This is collaborated by the fact that 95.8% of all students enrolled in the Blended Learning program worked full-time **(Table 5)**. A very small proportion (4.2%) worked part-time. The second most important factor in determining learners' preferences for the

Blended Learning mode is that it provides the only available course option that fit into their timetable (X=0.370). Blended learning becomes the only option when the students' schedules are very tight or they are unable to fit into the regular University timetable.

Table 5. Work status

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid part time	1	4.2	4.2	4.2
full time	23	95.8	95.8	100.0
Total	24	100.0	100.0	

Convenience is the third most important factor that motivates students to opt for the Blended Learning course (X=0.291). Due to the work obligations, most learners preferred the Blended Learning because of its convenience of not having to be on campus often. The other important factor in the determining learner's choice of blended learning program is flexibility (X=0.250). It is worth noting that the instructor or learner disability did not influence the learners' choice of blended learning course.

Table 6. Student status

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid part time	20	83.3	83.3	83.3
full time	4	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	24	100.0	100.0	

The work status and the student status are related. Since most of the students are full-time employees (95.8%), they also form the largest percentage (83.3%) of part-time students in the Blended Learning course.

Learners' perspectives of interaction in the Blended Learning

The learners' mean evaluation rating for the amount of interaction experienced with the instructor in the Blended learning course was X=4.150. Most learners felt that the blended learning course somewhat increased their interaction with the instructor compared to the interaction experienced with instructors in other courses. The learners' mean evaluation rating for the amount of interaction experienced with other students in the Blended learning course was X=3.739. Most learners felt that there was little difference between the amount of student interaction experienced in the blended learning course and other courses.

The learners' mean evaluation rating for the quality of interaction experienced with other students in this blended learning course was X=4.0. Therefore most learners felt that the quality of interaction experienced with other students in this blended learning course somewhat increased in comparison with the quality of interaction experienced in other courses. The mean evaluation rating of the quality of interaction experienced with the instructor in this blended learning course was X=4.3. Therefore, most learners felt the quality of interaction experienced with the instructor in this blended learning course somewhat increased in comparison with the quality of interaction experienced in other courses. Interaction among the students is a very important element in establishing a community of inquiry (Garrison & Vaughan 2008). It is through this interaction that learners share experiences, reflections and thereby able to construct meaningful learning experiences.

Satisfaction of Learners with Blended Learning

With an evaluation rating of (X=4.417), most learners agree that blended learning courses are sufficiently identified and expectations made clear in the University calendar. In terms of resource provision, learners agree that the University provides sufficient resources for this specific blended course (X=4.348). They confirmed that they would take another blended learning course in the future (X=4.391). This conforms to the fact that they have a high overall satisfaction (X=4.522) with this blended learning course.

The learners' felt that the workload in this course was moderate (X=3.217). It is worth noting that there is also no correlation between the workload and the students overall satisfaction with the course. At P=0.05 level of significance, there is a significant, moderate and negative correlation (r = -0.429) between the learners' overall satisfaction and the amount of interaction experienced with other students during the course. This means that the amount of interaction between the students moderately contributed to the learners' overall satisfaction with course. This is confirmed by the fact that the learners' rated student interaction in this course as having no difference compared with other courses (X=3.7). At P=0.05 level of significance. There is a significant, moderate and negative correlation (r = -0.438) between the learners' overall satisfaction and the quality of interaction experienced with other students in this blended learning course. This means that the quality of interaction between the students moderately contributed to the learners overall satisfaction with the course. This is despite the fact that learners strongly rated the quality of interaction with other students (X=4.0).

At P = 0.005 level of significance, there is a positive moderate correlation between the amount of interaction experienced with other students in the blended learning course and the quality of interaction experienced with the instructor in this course (r = 0.488). This means that the quality of interaction experienced with the instructor positively and directly influences the amount of interaction the learners experience during the blended learning course. This fact is confirmed when the influence of quality of interaction experienced with the instructor is controlled for and the result is that there is no correlation between overall satisfaction and the quality of interaction experienced with other students in this course.

Blended Learning Versus traditional Learning

In terms of the relationship between the online and in class learning, the learners felt that online and in-class work were relevant to each other (X=3.227). This concurs with the fact that they agreed that courses were sufficiently identified (X=4.417), sufficient resources were provided (X=4.348) and their overall satisfaction with the course (X=4.522). Blended Learning emerges as a complimentary alternative to traditional learning especially to those learners who for whatever reasons are not able to enroll into a regular learning programme.

Emerging Perspectives: Lessons for Educators
Instructional support

Learners felt that adequate time was provided for interaction between students during the course. When this happened the learners appreciated. There is a general agreement among the participants that the instructors were friendly and provided support during the course. This support came inform of regular communication through email and mobile phone calls. The face-to-face sessions were also highly beneficial and appreciated by the learners. There were clear expectations set out at the beginning of the course which the learners appreciated. Most of the course instructors were supportive and appreciated the fact that the learners were also full time workers with other responsibilities. They also appreciated the interaction

with other students and the peer learning that took place due to this interaction and exchange of ideas. This, they felt enriched the whole learning experience. Garrison & Vaughan 2008) through their extensive research have shown that students expect a strong teaching presence. Teaching presence establishes the curriculum and methods of inquiry. It facilitates the ongoing discourse and focuses inquiry to the learning outcomes.

Resources

The library provided a valuable resource for the learners. This was highly a appreciated factor. Learners also made use of soft and hard copies of the course manuals which supplemented the instructors' notes and materials. The e-library was a valuable resource. However, some learners especially those pursuing special needs education felt that resources in this area were inadequate. They also expressed disappointment that instructors were not readily available. Access to e-resources became a challenge to some learners. One participant said this, "apparently it is the most frustrating resource to use yet it is supposed to be the primary source of the blended learning." Such revealing statements raise questions of whether adequate support is provided for a resource that the students consider very important for their learning.

Convenience

Some learners expressed their appreciation of the convenience they experienced during the course. They had to make limited trips to the main campus unlike in the case of in-class work. This enabled them to balance study and work. However, they also expressed the view that blended learning required discipline and readiness to put in individual effort in their studies by researching for additional information. The blended learning course gave the learners more opportunity to explore and discover more knowledge and information on their own. Due to flexibility and convenience, they expressed willingness to take another blended learning course in the future.

Conclusion and recommendations

The learners attach a lot of importance on the instructor support. By have more quality support from the lecturers, the learners' overall satisfaction with the course will improve. There is need for blended learning instructors to be more prepared with rich resources and be willing to contact and communicate with learners more frequently and individually to address challenges they may be facing. One or two participants expressed concern that some instructors do not attend the face to face sessions and do not return marked assignments on time thus denying the students critical feedback. They recommended at least two face to face sessions and the university to decentralize the sessions to locations central to most students, not necessarily the main campus. The quality of course manuals was raised with students recommending regular revisions and updating of their contents.

Some participants expressed challenges in relation to the interaction with other students. Due to work demands and pressure to meet instructors' deadlines for handing in assignments, some students did not participate fully in the discussion forums. They suggested that an online platform for discussion be established and each member should be encouraged to participation in the discussions. This was a challenge to participants from areas with slow internet connectivity and limited access to the internet. Some suggested that future face to face sessions be conducted via video link.

As advice to students considering a blended learning course for the first time, they recommended commitment discipline and willingness to work hard and independently. They also recommended the necessity of having a computer and internet connectivity.

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