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Academic Staff and Students Perceptions and Attitudes towards Blended Learning

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Research Domain: The Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: Meta-analysis studies highlight that achievement outcomes are significantly improved with the presence of blended learning (Bernard et al, 2014; Means et al, 2013) although perceptions amongst students is mixed (Shantakumari et al, 2015). There is a dearth of research from the academic's perspective and therefore this study considered both sides during a significant pedagogic shift at a new University within the UK. 40 Psychology Level 5 students and 35 Academic Staff completed an online mixed methods survey. Responses highlighted student and staff concerns about increased workloads; student fears around decreased contact with staff and staff concerns about academic disengagement. Results are discussed in line with interventions to enhance perceptions of blended learning, engagement in activities and digital pedagogy.

Bernard, R.M., Borokhovski, E., Schmid, R.F., Tamin, R.M., & Abrami, P.C. (2014). A Meta-Analysis of Blended Learning and Technology Use in Higher Education: From the General to the Applied. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*.

Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., & Baki, M. (2013). The Effectiveness of Online and Blended Learning: A Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature. *Teachers College Record*, 115.

Shantakumari, N., & Sajith, P. (2015). Blended learning: The student viewpoint. *Annals of Medical and Health Sciences Research*, 5(5), 323-328.

Paper: The University of Northampton is developing, expanding and changing. With this is the move to a new campus and enhancing active blended learning techniques, flipped classrooms and reliance on technology. Blended learning approaches are becoming more prominent in UK Higher Education. Meta- analyses of empirical research have indicated the benefits of blended learning over both purely online learning and the traditional lecture-based learning strategy (Means et al, 2013). Additionally,

meta-analysis studies highlight that achievement outcomes are significantly improved with the presence of blended learning, although, the presence of interactions (student-student/teacher – student) enhances that level of student achievement (Bernard et al, 2014). The benefits of blended learning are well documented (Fong et al, 2005; Vaughan, 2007), however, some concerns remain. Vaughan (2007) argues that some students may have difficulty in coping with the responsibility of more independent learning as well as taking initiative in active engagement with course materials. These concerns also link with potential difficulties students may face in management of time and self-motivation (Fong et al, 2005). These concerns could lead students to become disenchanted and demotivated thus leading to a lack of engagement and achievement. Blended learning has shown several strengths, such as being compatible with working life, suiting differing types of learning and flexible attendance requirements. Despite these concerns, students hold positive perceptions of blended learning (Shantakumari et al, 2015 student perspective) although blended learning with collaboration is the most preferred as the peer interactions aid in course material processing and debate amongst peer perceptions (AlAbdulkarim et al, 2015). Of greater importance during such a transformation in HE pedagogy is students' readiness for the change. Tang and Chaw (2013) found in a sample of 201 students in a Malaysian Higher Education institution that student readiness for blended learning was related to students' attitudes towards online learning, classroom learning and learning flexibly. Although Aleswood (2013) found that students indicated significantly greater positive attitudes towards blended learning when compared to traditional and virtual' the attitudes of academic staff have rarely been considered. It is not just students who may be impacted by pedagogical shifts but academic staff also. Rolfe et al (2008) found that staff lacked consensual ideas on e-learning, although Benson *et al* (2011) study showed a more positive perception amongst business academics. There appears to be a dearth of research from the academic's perspective and therefore this study considered both sides during a significant pedagogic shift at a new University within the UK.

Methodology

40 Psychology Level 5 students and 35 Academic Staff from one Faculty took part in an online survey that aimed to capture knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of Active Blended Learning. Demographic information gathered related to years of teaching, years at the current university, confidence in technology usage, HEA fellowship and engagement in course and curriculum design for staff and attendance at lectures, commuting status, employment and dependents for students.

Using questions that were adapted and adjusted from two papers on Blended Learning the student questionnaire considered: attitudes towards classroom learning, attitudes towards online learning, attitudes towards study management, attitudes towards learning flexibility, attitudes towards online interaction and readiness for active blended learning (Ja'ashan, 2015; Tang & Chaw, 2013). For academic staff a survey was constructed from (Balci, 2017) and containing 16 Likert scale items focused on academic staff perceptions of students and ABL. The qualitative element of the questionnaire seeks to gain more in-depth information around staff and students understanding of what ABL is, perceived benefits and concerns of engaging in ABL with both groups answering the same questions.

Results

Initial descriptive analysis found no impact of any of the demographic variables on knowledge and attitudes of ABL for either staff or students and therefore the groups were treated as homogenous going forward. Exploratory analysis indicated that the students believe that ABL requires much more work with decreased interactivity with staff. However, students acknowledge the benefits of moving to this pedagogy with strong perceptions relating to increased interactivity, collaboration with peers and a deeper engagement with the course material. Similar perspectives were highlighted from academic staff who were concerned over the amount of time required to set up and monitor online activities. Staff were equally concerned about academic disengagement, did not believe students would be more motivated and were worried students would easily fall behind. However, staff did recognise that ABL could be an effective learning technique when integrated with other strategies and that ABL makes a course more interactive. Qualitative answers supported the quantitative responses with benefits focussing on depth of understanding, flexibility and engagement indicated by both staff and students; and both sets of participants discussing workload, engagement and IT failures as concerns. However, neither staff nor students would agree on what ABL was with many students wrongly stating that it was “all online” and several academic staff saying that they didn’t know.

Discussion

Results were in line with previous reports on student and staff attitudes towards blended learning. Both staff and students acknowledged the benefits of Active Blended Learning as a strong pedagogical model and significant shift to digital teaching, yet the concerns discussed by Vaughan (2007) remain. In support of Rolfe et al’s (2008) qualitative study the academic staff within this survey lacked consensus as to what ABL was. This misunderstanding appeared to feed into the students lack knowledge with many students believing that ABL was all online and that this style of learning simply wouldn’t suit them. This lack of knowledge is concerning because previous research highlights that attitudes impacts both readiness for change and engagement in the change (Tang & Chaw, 2013). It is therefore recommended that pedagogical shifts incorporate students in consultation, design and evaluation and that clear messages are passed to academic staff and students alike. The number of years teaching for academic staff and attendance to lectures for students did not have any impact on the attitudes and perceptions participants stated. Although this result was surprising it highlights the limited impact of demographics and that targeted information and interventions won’t be beneficial.

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