Blended Learning: The perceptions of Postgraduates in Malaysia Higher Education Institution (HEI)

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to explore on the perceptions of the Postgraduates towards blended learning used in the Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Malaysia. This paper will try to identify on the postgraduate’s initial perception and attitudes towards the successful of the type of e-learning which the blended learning is. The new method of classroom learning such as e-learning has been discussed profusely in the education and teaching field for the past decade. However in this study the new form of teaching and learning of blended learning will be discussed. A total of fifty postgraduates from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) participated in this research study. A mixed method methodology was employed. The findings from the study clarify that the perception of the postgraduates was mostly neutral about the method of learning. As for the challenges of the blended learning include the lack of prior familiarity towards the application, the connection problem, the server and technical issues were the prominent issues concerning the learners. Apart from that, the findings from this study suggest that the blended learning was suitable to those postgraduates who are working adults, as it is a platform used as distance learning medium.

Keywords: blended learning, postgraduates, higher education institution, e-learning, perceptions

Introduction
There has been an increasing need of technology knowledge and more and more countries around the world have been adapting to new approach of classroom learning. The role of ICT in the field of education has seen an increasing demand, as there has been a demand towards the incorporation of e-learning. Malaysia is unexceptional on this. The higher education institution (HEI) now have a pivotal role to play, the process of education and learning has been through the paradigm swift with the evolution of time. The current need of change has been a determining factor for the higher education institution to adopt and...
adapt to new learning methods. According to Bates and Poole (2003) who affirms that there is a definite need to restudy the current education system from time to time to best adapt to the growing trends and demands from the learners themselves, to overall improve the learning and method experience. Other factors to be taken into consideration are also the current demand supply chain reaction to the current education methods being provided in the Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Malaysia. The ICT savvy culture has promoted the views of education as a potential market (Poster 2005) among the stakeholders.

Traditional classroom teaching approach that incorporates both e-learning and also face to face lectures. Teaching and learning is being rapidly replaced with the blended learning. In a normal traditional classroom learning would require the teacher or the educator to be present, able interact, discuss, demonstrate and communicate with students face to face in a physical space. As well as the students interact and communicate with each other face to face. The instructor has to distribute all the hands on, assignments and exercises to the students all by her or himself. In a relate study by Raja Maznah (2004) found that many of the higher educational intuition (HEI) in Malaysia and engaging in certain strategic plan for implementing pure electronic based education instruction and learning. She further adds that such educational reform swifs would be an added advantage to the current learning approach available to learners. This also provides some insights that the current higher educational institutions in Malaysia are ready for change and are open for new ideas.

Blended Learning in Malaysia

In Malaysia almost all of the higher education institutions (HEI) has acknowledge the benefits of blended learning (BL) which is designed accommodate the current student’s needs, also to improve their classroom learning (Puteh & Hussin 2007). Blended learning is seen (BL) rapidly being replaced with the traditional approach of teaching and learning the classroom. The blended learning (BL) method utilizes on the student-centered teaching and framework principle approach which focuses on the learner achievement as an individual (Pérez-López & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011). According to a study by Bleffert-Schmidt (2011) followed by Risner,
(2011) claim that there is no statistically significant difference between the current teaching methods available namely face-to-face, Blended, and fully online. There also been supporting evidence that the online learning classroom approach conducted in the educational institutions such as the higher educational intuitions (HEI) proven to be more student-centered (Ruckws 2012).

Shroff and Vogel (2010) have also reported that more learners showed positive attitudes such as interest and determination towards online discussions, e learning forums and actively participated more compared to the face-to-face discussions in the normal classroom. Although the rising demands and also the beneficial side it has on the learners learning experience, several studies still showed the negative connotation being held by the educators who play an important role as moderators (Embi 2011). Recent study by Grosz (2012) as well as Moukali (2012) seems to contradict as their findings showed that educators now are more incline to show positive attitude and perception towards the blended learning approach in the classroom.

This paper intends to further investigate these issues by employing a mixed method methodology to gain insights on the perceptions of the postgraduates at the higher education institution have towards the newly introduced blended learning. A series of questionnaire guided with interview session seeks to explore the following research questions,

1. What are the perceptions of the postgraduates towards blended learning?
2. What are the challenges faced by the postgraduates?

Objective

This study aims at identifying and exploring on the issues concerning the learner’s perception towards the implementation of blended learning approach in the higher education institution (HEI) in Malaysia in the perspective of the postgraduates. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify what are the postgraduates perception towards the implementation of the blended learning in higher educational institutions (HEI)
2. To determine the challenges and the benefits of the postgraduates with
the blended learning teaching and learning method.

Methodology
In this present research paper, the methodology employed was a mixed method ideology that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative techniques to gain a better understanding of the learners experience towards ICT as a supporting medium, and the blended delivery approach for the lesson module. In particular, methods were used were a survey of that compromised open and closed questions, and also discussion group. Both the survey and discussion groups have seen to have gathered the most relevant findings of the postgraduate’s perceptions of the e-learning process at the core level. The methodological process will be discussed and elaborated further in the following sections.

End-of-semester questionnaire
In this study, there was an end of the semester survey done which comprised total of fifty postgraduates participants from the faculty of education, from the National University of Malaysia (UKM). At the end of the semester of the course, the postgraduate’s students were given a set of paper questionnaire to measure different aspects of their experience, including general feedback on their attitudes towards the use of ICT and their overall perceptions towards the blended and their overall perceptions towards the blended learning approach. The instrument consisted a likert-type with the scale from 1 to 4 (strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly disagree)) was used. Open-ended questions were also distributed in attempted to receive learner’s spontaneous feedbacks and responses.

Discussion groups
The main objective of this paper is too provide some clear indication on the current perception of the local postgraduate’s personal experience and views towards the implementation of the blended learning educational approach in Malaysia. It is believed that discussion groups were the best approach to gather such authentic emotional findings and also observe the interaction between students, along with their attitudes, and understandings. Discussion groups were carried out with five groups of 4 to 6 students from the module, for thirty minutes. The discussion groups were videotaped and transcribed for further
analyze and coding findings. Analysis of the discussion group showed a wide range data from a variety of sub themes such as influence on students’ involvement with ICT for this module. These factors can be grouped into the following subthemes namely factors, support factors, module, and course factors.

**Sampling**

A total number of fifty postgraduate students were involved in this current study, irrespective to their prior knowledge on the ICT and technology. The sampling method employed for this research study is purposive sampling to enable the researcher is able to carry out the study in according to the targeted group of the whole population. The whole population was made up of Malaysian postgraduates students who are currently pursuing their tertiary education at the higher educational institutional in Malaysia.

**Findings**

The findings of this paper analyzed the qualitative data from the discussion groups and the open-ended questions of the survey, to identify the major factors that influenced the learning experience, with particular reference to the e-learning tasks. The closed-question responses and were gathered to provide additional data to support these qualitative findings. The findings of this paper are divided into major subthemes factor that were seen dominant. The themes that were found important was further elaborated and discussed in the current contextual meaning. These main themes were categorized into individual factor and also environmental factors.

**Individual factors**

The individual attributes and characteristics towards the perceived level of acceptance to the change of medium instruction is a reflection on the readiness of the learners. It was found in this paper that the learner’s acceptance towards the blended learning approach in classroom learning was overwhelming. Although the finding may derive a mixed state of responses and feedbacks, overall majority of the participants showed positive outlook towards the blended learning implementation in the higher educational institution (HEI). This may be due to the fact that the learners were comfortable and confident with the method of blended
learning, and also may be influenced by their prior knowledge on the use of ICT.

Prior knowledge of computers
It was found from the data gathered that 78% of the postgraduates in the end-of-year survey had a good knowledge on the application and is familiar with computers. The majority claimed to have some prior experience with computers (78%), on the contrary of the less computer savvy peers of them who recorded at the percentage (22%) in using computers.

Motivation & attitude
The learners intrinsic factors such as the motivation and attitudes perceived towards the learning process highly influences on their subsequently shapes their overall perception towards the learning process itself.

Technical issues
Support through peer encouragement, perceived tutor and lecturer support were crucial in predicting the students’ motivation to use the ICT supports provided in this course. The technical issues that were seen prominently discussed in the discussion group includes the wifi availability, server down, low connection speed and also the weather that influences on the poor quality
of virtual classroom. Almost 70% percent of the participants showed negativity towards the poor maintenance and technical issues regarding the carrying out of the blended learning in their classroom.

Lecturer—module factors
The role educator plays in a classroom is crucial towards the learning outcome at the end of the day. The educator-learner factor is seen successful towards the successfulness of the blended learning to be implemented in the higher education institution (HEI) in Malaysia. The lecturers at the higher educational institution have a huge responsibility on their shoulder, not only to be as an educator but as a moderator and facilitator at the same time. The emerging feedbacks from the postgraduates were issues concerning the lack of knowledge and the inexperience towards the ICT usage among the lecturers were seen as a contributing factor towards their blended learning experience. Apart from that the fact that almost 80% of the lecturers who are in tertiary education are from the older generation thus making them incapable to carry out ICT based activities for the classroom. Most of the lectures still prefer the old fashioned way of lecture face to face as it seen in their comfort zone.

Time and Cost
It was found from the data collected from the postgraduate’s feedbacks and responses are that they have a mixed perception towards the cost and time factor. Many of the participant involved describe that the cost factor is irrelevant as they are able to bare the additional cost needed for blended learning. This is due to the fact that 60% of the postgraduates are from a high to middle income group, so the cost factor is seen minimal to them. Whereas, as for the 40% of the postgraduates voiced their concern on the additional cost as there are from the middle to lower income household group. For the time factor, most of them agreed that the flexible time is seen beneficial to the learners, as it would provide them to access the online learning materials and tasks via online at the comfort of their time and place.

Discussion
The findings of this paper reports that although the perception of the postgraduates are positive towards the blended learning approach at the university’s level, there were still some challenges being faced by these
Challenges and barriers that were seen prominently discussed among the learners included the individual factors and the environmental factors. Individual factors such as the prior knowledge on the usage of ICT and motivation were dominant in the discussion group among the learners. As for the environmental factors, factors such as the lecturers’ role at the university, technical issues and also the time and cost were discussed seen as contributing towards the challenges being faced towards the blended learning approach. The main objective of this paper was aimed at exploring on the learners perspective and their experiences towards the concept of blended learning. It is important to take into their account as learners as they are the main mechanism towards the classroom teaching and learning. Learners should be given the freedom to express themselves towards the variety approaches to gain their attention in experimentation different teaching methods and approaches (Berlyne 1965, Kopp 1982).

Limitation

There are still room for improvement as the current research study still unable to provide clear indication of the graduate’s perception towards the blended learning at the higher educational institution (HEI) worldwide. Thus is the future research related to the current study, it is recommended the consideration of using a bigger scale for sampling and incorporating statistic data to support the research data collection, Research in the future should also be able to include the socio cultural factors of the society of the country. Finally, future research should be able to contribute towards the available current literature review.

REFERENCES


