Evaluation of a global blended learning MBA programme

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A B S T R A C T

This paper evaluates the design and implementation of a UK university's global blended learning MBA programme which combines e-learning with face-to-face teaching. The primary aim of the research was to investigate the learning experience and perceptions of the students, and to use the findings to evaluate the effectiveness of the course design and delivery system. Action research was used, with longitudinal data collected over a three-year period (2008–2010). Three survey rounds were conducted focussing on Oman, one of the UK University's main overseas learning collaborating centres. The three rounds yielded 116 valid responses in total. The first survey showed a fairly high level of student satisfaction with the programme but also indicated areas that needed further improvement. The impacts of subsequent changes in the programme were investigated in the second and third surveys. Feedback from these helped develop further changes in the learning content and delivery approach of the programme. The study contributes to a better understanding of global blended learning initiatives, and offers insights to managers on improving course management, enriching learning content, enhancing teaching quality, and improving students' satisfaction levels.

1. Introduction

Blended learning is a form of learning that combines the features of e-learning with those of classroom teaching. According to Singh (2003) blended learning provides various benefits over using any single delivery medium alone. However, the creation and implementation of effective quality assurance for blended learning processes has been identified as one of the more challenging tasks. Jara and Mellar (2010) and Martínez-Argüelles, Castán, and Juan (2010) point out that the collection of student feedback should be a central part of strategies to monitor the quality and standards of teaching and learning for both conventional learning and e-learning. Jara and Mellar (2010) also note that while research into e-learning abounds, studies that focus on the effectiveness of the provision of such learning (including blended learning) are limited, and that this is a gap to be filled.

E-learning and blended learning continue to develop rapidly, supported by increasing sophistication of information technology and by better understanding of how to make course content and delivery more effective. In addition, new forms of e-learning support systems are being introduced to higher education institutions in an effort to meet the student-centred learning paradigms recommended by UNESCO (UNESCO, 1998).

The research reported here discusses the evaluation of a global Executive MBA blended learning programme provided by a UK University, and focuses on one of its main overseas partnering centres – that of Oman. The research aimed to investigate the learning experience and perceptions of the students on the course, and use the findings to evaluate the effectiveness of

the blended learning support system in place. The research was aligned with the four quality dimensions identified by Martínez-Argüelles et al. (2010) - the learning process, administrative processes, teaching materials, and resources.

The primary research method was action research, within which the main data collection was by questionnaire surveys of students taking the course over a three-year period. Three survey rounds were conducted, resulting in a total of 116 valid responses.

This paper begins with a review of relevant literature, including e-learning and blended learning, quality evaluation and enhancement, and the blended learning situation in Oman. An overview of the MBA blended learning programme is then provided, followed by a discussion of the research methodology adopted. Findings from each of the three survey rounds are then presented, and discussion of these is set in the context of improvements made to the course. Finally, research limitations are listed, and conclusions are drawn.

2. Literature review

2.1. E-learning and blended learning

The rapid growth of online academic course provision worldwide has changed the learning environment for both students and teachers (Landry, Payne, & Koger, 2008; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Williams & Williams, 2010). E-learning takes many forms, such as fully online, mixed mode or hybrid, blended learning and web-assisted (Buzzetto-More, 2008). It is claimed that e-learning overcomes many drawbacks that are inherent to traditional classroom teaching, especially its lack of flexibility in the use of resources (for example, Lam & Bordia, 2008; Williams & Williams, 2010). Goold, Craig, and Coldwell (2007) indicate that the online learning environment enables a greater number of students of diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, as well as of modes of study, to come together within the one virtual classroom. However, they warn that many of the clues that help enable staff and students to be culturally sensitive in physical classrooms are missing in the online world. For this and other reasons, it has been suggested that students need better preparation for learning in an online environment than in a traditional classroom.

One particular implementation of e-learning is blended learning. According to Singh (2003: 52) 'blended learning combines multiple delivery media that are designed to complement each other and promote learning and application-learnt behaviour'. Typically, blended learning includes face-to-face classroom teaching, live e-learning, self-paced e-learning, and structured off-line study including set readings and assignments.

2.2. Quality evaluation, assurance and enhancement

The research described here is based on analysing student feedback on a wide range of aspects of course provision. The findings thus relate to issues of course quality evaluation and assurance, as well as to course enhancement.

Saunders (2003: 39) defines evaluation as the 'purposeful gathering, analysis and discussion of evidence from relevant sources about the quality, effectiveness, and impact of provision, development or policy'. Because of the remote nature of e-learning, quality evaluation, assurance and enhancement is a particular issue.

Rajasingham (2009) and Guri-Rosenblit (2009) note that e-learning evolved from distance education and is still struggling to gain full recognition and accreditation within mainstream education as an approach for high quality provision. Moreover, as Pillay and Kimber (2009) point out, globalisation, trans-national provision of higher education, and the 'use of market mechanisms' have all increased the complexity of issues concerning accountability, authority, and responsibility within quality assurance.

In terms of quality assurance, Zygouris-Coe, Swan, and Ireland (2009) note that instituting a well-structured assurance process can be expensive and time consuming, but that it can be worth the effort. The study undertaken by Kidney, Cummings, and Boehm (2007) supports this. The latter state that the merit, quality and success of the e-learning programme they investigated was mainly due to the proper application of the quality assurance strategies. Moreover, Rajasingham (2009) notes that new educational paradigms and models that challenge conventional assumptions and indicators of quality assurance are becoming possible with the help of increasing sophistication in information technology.

Deepwell (2007) draws a distinction between quality assurance and quality enhancement, and views student evaluation as an instrument of quality enhancement rather than quality assurance. In a narrow sense this is correct, as quality assurance as this relates to course content, adequacy of delivery, and quality of exams and marking, must be covered by procedures implemented by the originating and partnering institutions to ensure that agreed standards are met.

Though student evaluation often gives information about the above issues, here we accept the concept that student feedback primarily affects the wider quality issues identified by Moore (2006), who lists the five 'pillars of quality' for on-line programmes as learning effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and institutional commitment, access, faculty (employee) satisfaction, and student (customer) satisfaction. In this sense, student evaluation has less to do with quality assurance, and more to do with quality enhancement.

However, even within this definition there are mixed reports as to effectiveness. For example, Gurău and Drillon (2009) state that analysing users' perceptions regarding an e-learning system can provide valuable data to evaluate and improve its functioning and performance. On the one hand, Jara and Mellar (2010) report from their research findings that student