ESWATINI HIGHER EDUCATION COUNCIL

ADOPTING BLENDED LEARNING FOR QUALITY AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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The article highlights the challenges of implementing the blended learning approach in the teaching and learning process in higher education. It then recommends theoretically informed, logical, contextual and evidence based intervention strategies, drawn from Graham's et al., (2013) Blended Learning Framework, which could help in the effective implementation of blended learning in higher education. If effectively implemented, these strategies would ensure equitable and quality education that would scale up access and success for all students in higher education both in Eswatini and other similar contexts.

BLENDED LEARNING

As the world gears up for the Forth Industrial Revolution (4IR), which specifies the rapid change to digitization, technology and technology use, blended learning as a teaching and learning approach has been adopted and implemented by a number of higher education institutions globally. According to Muhuro and Kang'ethe (2020) blended learning is an educational approach that integrates physical classroom experience with online teaching and learning. It is an approach to teaching and learning in which the physical face-to-face classes are complemented or supported with technology (Kudrik, Lahn & Morch, 2009). Similarly, Colpitts, Usick and Eaton (2020) point out that blended learning is a flexible pedagogic approach where a portion of face-to-face time is replaced by online activity.

In blended learning, two separate paradigms are integrated: the classroom - synchronous, and online – asynchronous and synchronous (Laster, 2005). This approach to teaching and learning uses a variety of technologies, pedagogies, contexts and delivery modes to create a strategic

mix that increases educational access and success (Prinsloo & Rooyen, 2007) as students take advantage of and benefit from the best of both physical and online resources. Again, blended learning does not only open access and enhance flexibility in teaching and learning that transcends geographical distance (Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2020), but it also addresses different learning styles since it is an interactive learning environment (Kaur, 2013).

CHALLENGES OF BLENDED LEARNING

Despite the seemingly glossy and promising world of blended learning, its adoption and implementation is not without challenges, especially for resource scarce countries like Eswatini. The challenges that are common across many higher education institutions in the developing countries range from lack of infrastructural and financial support in the adoption and implementation of a blended teaching and learning policy (if, it is there), technical skills' deficit, intermittent internet access and/or connectivity (Muleya et al., 2019). For other institutions, the strategic objective to have blended learning might be in place, but the actual planning to implement it by providing the necessary infrastructure and upskilling academic staff seem to be another problem that is prevalent in many institutions of higher learning (Mahaye, 2020). Some of these challenges have to do with institutions not acting on identified initiatives in their strategic plans, decisions, proposals or policies in order to achieve their set objectives (Sibandze, Oloyede & Pereira, 2020), capacity limitations and attitudes among educators and poor policy implementation by institutions (Ngoasong, 2021). They also touch on the transition itself. That is, from conventional classes to blending them with online teaching, lecturers' motivation and understanding of their changing roles in the teaching and learning or the blended pedagogy itself (Mahaye, 2020).

For example, Irum, Bhatti, Abbasi and Dilshad (2020), reveal that in the University of Pakistan, lack of proper planning by the institution together with the lack of relevant infrastructure especially for the online component compromised educational access, and the quality and effectiveness of blended learning. Similarly, Mtebe and Raphael (2013) in the University of Dar es Salaam, found that blended learning compromised students' performances because the institution relied on outdated learning resources, and did not invest in capacitating lecturers and students in the use of online platforms. According to Vaughan (2010), in situations where educators are not inculcated to meet the demands of blended learning, they fail to rise up to its demands. Such lecturers could have challenges with technology, the changing pedagogical roles and also the additional demanding role associated with online content delivery. Some failures by academic staff to effectively adopt and implement blended learning could result from influences, such as negative attitude, lack of motivation, time or the increased instructional workload (Mahaye, 2020). In Zambia, Muleya et al., (2020) also found that blended learning transformed students into "digital immigrants". That is, online learning was so alien to the students, and without skills or resources, a number of students were demotivated, and this led to a number of failures in most courses. Mbodila (2020) refers to such students as

"digital strangers" or "digital natives". A characteristic that becomes an impediment to quality and equitable access to education. So, an institution may be implementing blended learning only to produce *digital immigrants* who would graduate without the necessary technical skills and less programme knowledge if the approach is not implemented properly

In Eswatini, Pitikoe, Ferreira-Meyers, Bhebhe and Dlamini-Zwane (2021) found out that in the University of Eswatini (UNESWA) and Southern African National University (SANU), the implications of COVID-19 not only presented, but also highlighted a glaring, significant and concerning digital divide in terms of who has access, and who can benefit from the online teaching and learning format prevalent in higher education institutions. Students from disadvantaged communities or families struggle to access online learning because of excessive data costs, access to technological devices (smart phones, laptops, tablets) or broadband internet. As a result, many students tend to miss online lessons or use the online platforms for shorter periods, and without support, educational quality for these students will remain a utopia and a farfetched dream.

Despite the challenges faced, blended learning has become an integral part of our academic life, without which education would lose its relevance in this digital age. Blended learning has become the latest educational feature in the development of globalization and technology. This highlights and calls for the immediate, meaningful and an urgent need for the effective adoption and implementation of effective blended learning within the higher education system in Eswatini. Hence, the next section discusses ways which higher education institutions could adopt in their deliberate application and adoption of blended learning into their curricular and institutional processes.

THE BLENDED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

In ensuring quality education through blended learning, it is important that institutions of higher learning consider Graham's et al., (2013) *Blended Learning Implementation Framework*. Graham et al., identify three stages that are imperative in the institutional adoption and implementation of blended learning: (1) the awareness - exploration stage, (2) the adoption or early implementation stage, and lastly, (3) the implementation or growth stage. Graham et al., (2013) argue that throughout these three (3) stages, the key markers of blended learning approach are; a clearly adopted strategy, structure as well as support which all needs to be continuously refined.

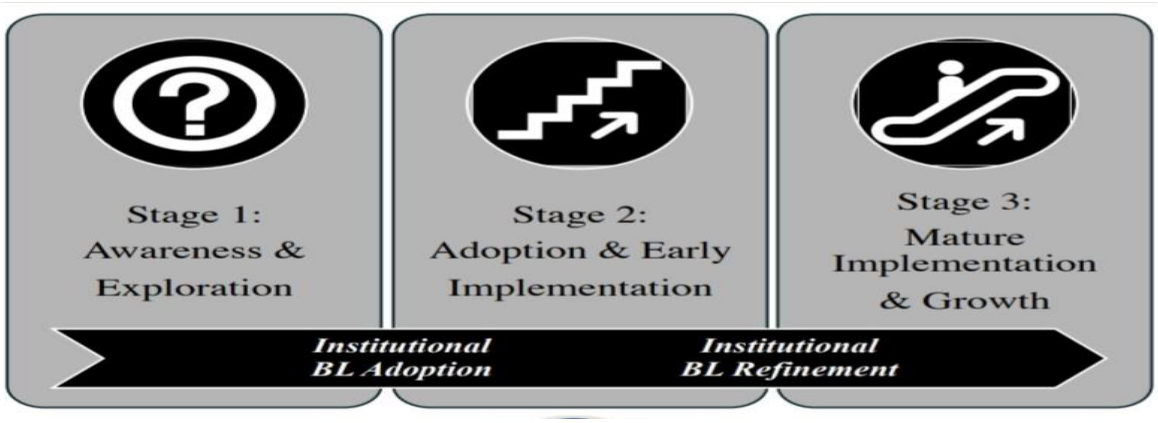

Figure 1: Blended Learning Implementation Stages: by Graham et al., (2013, p. 5)

The awareness-exploration stage calls for the institutional awareness and understanding concerning the efficient structuring of blended learning initiatives, and how blended learning techniques are effectively utilized and adopted into institutional processes. The second stage has to do with the early adoption and formal conceptualization of the blended learning approach into institutional processes, with tentative policies to support and guide its implementation. In the last stage, the institution should have adequate funding and clearly defined policies to guide the implementation process, and ensuring that it is accepted and well understood by all stakeholders. By stage three, the institution would now have well-established blended learning strategies and structure to support the integral operations of the institution. At this stage, intellectual and quality assurance mechanisms would be in place; the monitoring process would also be clearly defined to ensure it aligns with the institutions' vision and mission, the overall curriculum, and all the educational processes to ensure educational success.

BLENDED LEARNING: TOWARDS QUALITY AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION

The advancement of technology demands that every institution of higher learning should embrace the adoption of the blended learning approach in all academic processes. Graham et al., (2013) argue that before institutions adopt blended learning, they should ensure that it aligns to their institutional vision and mission, and also fits into the goals the institutions have set for themselves concerning their transition to blended learning. Some of these goals could be to enhance pedagogy, increase access and flexibility, or to improve cost effectiveness and resource use (Irum et al., 2020).

Institutions should also critically analyze the practicality to integrate blended learning into their existing curriculum and resources at a particular time frame (Irum et al, 2020), considering the institutions' contextual dynamics, enablers and restrictors. It is important for institutions to consider how online and face-to-face learning in their individual context could not only complement each other, but each should support learner diversity; learning style, proficiency, ability, contexts, socially combined and varied in order to meet learner needs (Mahaye, 2020.

To confront the observed glaring educational inequalities prevalent in the education system (Pitikoe et al., 2021), recommend that the implementation of blended learning should also consider the pre-existing socio-economic dynamics and realities of the enrolled students. Rather than devising "a one size fits all" kind of blended learning approach, and stereotypically constructing all students as one social group, institutions need to ensure that the new learning approach is designed in such a way that the online component, especially, is context-specific and equitability adopted and implemented in every institution (Ngoasong, 2021) to ensure that every student's educational need is met at their actual point of need (Mahaye, 2020). This could mean providing financial support to learners from poor family backgrounds, and those who cannot afford the technological devices or data bundles for online learning.

Institutions should also establish and invest on the necessary infrastructure and technology skills that would enable teaching and learning for both students and the teaching staff (Mahaye, 2020). That is, ensuring adequate facilitation of the learning environment and ensuring relevant technical, technological and pedagogical support in the form of expertise and resources. This could mean investing on the most suitable learning management system (LMS) and quality servers with sufficient bandwidth. For efficient blended learning, the adopted LMS should not only enable interface interaction (Hillman, Wills & Gunawardena, 1994), but also enable learner-content interaction, learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction (Moore, 1989).

Professional development for educators should also be prioritized. Whilst technology should not replace the need and requirement for good educators, a good lecturer who is also relevant in blended learning is one who is skilled in technology in order to be in a position to effect online learning. Without which, the migration to blended learning would be a futile, yet devastating exercise. For meaningful online teaching and learning, the academic staff, as transformational agents, should therefore be skilled with technological skills and new pedagogical assistance to teach in the blended format (Sibandze et al., 2020). That is, the expertise, control and organization skills for both the content and the medium used and also in mutually incorporating the two. Whilst pedagogical support is imperative as means to enable educators to fully investigate the variety of instructional methods unique to blended learning (Ngoasong, 2021), the technological skills enable them to design and maintain the online portions of each course (Philisen, 2019). Without which, many faculty members would likely fail to fully embrace a blended format, and might instead replicate their conventional teaching methods (Garrison & Vaughan, 2013); thus, compromising both educational quality and the effectiveness of blended learning. Educators' professional development therefore is of primary importance because the way learners relate and interact with technology in their learning is, to a certain extent, predicated on and also determined by the teacher's expertise in both content delivery and their own interaction with and the use of technology (Moore, 1989).

However, Philipsen (2019) points out that, besides the acquisition of new skills or the changing pedagogical roles, it is also highly imperative that lectures' beliefs and feelings about the two be also addressed. Educators' negative attitude, resistance and lack of motivation to adopt, implement and transition to online learning impact on their role as educators (Mahaye, 2020). Lecturers need to be emotionally and professionally prepared not to only engage with the students through the online platform, but also to handle the changes that come with their new role as educators. If not, they "are most likely to reject new ideas that conflict with their current ideas unless, as part of the professional learning, their existing understandings are engaged" (Timperley et al., 2008, p.17).

It is also highly important for educators to have a clear understanding that the shift to blended learning goes beyond transferring existing curriculum content online or the use of the Learning Management System (LMS), but it is about the integration of face-to-face and online teaching and learning format in a thoughtful, planned and pedagogically valuable manner (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Blended learning will also not fulfil its promise of better learning unless teachers can be encouraged to re-think and redesign courses that afford students more, and different learning experiences than those offered by either online or classroom alone.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted how Graham's et al., (2013) *blended learning implementation framework* could be effectively used by higher education institutions to effectively implement, identify gaps in its implementation and also to scale up the efficacy of blended learning. As the paper has shown, it is of paramount importance that each institution ensures that blended learning still aligns with its vision and mission, and that it still aligns every student to quality equitable education. The barriers of accessibility to the blended learning approach should be considered and addressed before it is adopted and while it is implemented. The process of implementation should also be continuously monitored and evaluated so that where there are gaps or limitation, such are addressed promptly. One way could be for higher education institutions to consider not only their contextual realities, but also the individual realities of the enrolled students. Again, this can only succeed when the educators provide the appropriate learning opportunities and have the requisite knowledge, skill, attitude, resources and capacity to facilitate such learning. Without which, blended learning in higher education will remain a dream and utopia, unfortunately at the detriment of quality and equitable education. It is important to note that the transition to blended learning is a process. Therefore, as it is implemented, institutions are likely to encounter gains and challenges. But the value of implementing the blended learning approach should motivate not only the academic staff and students, but also the policy makers of these institutions because this approach provides a positive response to technology advancement and an opportunity to upskill the students and staff with essential technical skills required by the world of the fourth industrial revolution.

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