Blended Learning in Saudi Arabia - A Review

Ali Alnahdi

Monash University, Australia

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review the available research studies on blended learning in Saudi Arabia. Blended learning has been adopted in many Saudi higher education institutions. This paper aims to review some of the research studies which have been carried out on blended learning in Saudi Arabia. For this paper, specific search terms were used in the Google Scholar search engine and the results were shortlisted according to the year of publication. From the review of the available studies on the subject, it was clear that even though students in Saudi Arabia are open to technological and ICT innovations, they are not completely ready for the independent learning facet characteristic of blended education. It was also clear that the government of Saudi Arabia is keen on integrating ICT into higher education in the country.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Blended Learning, Education, Review

Introduction

According to Rooney (2003), the American Society for Training and Development has identified blended learning as one of the top 10 trends to emerge in the knowledge delivery industry (as cited in Alebaikan and Troudi, 2010). Saudi Arabia has been using the blended learning model for a few years now. The government is also keen on integrating blended learning in the country's higher education system.

Methodology

In this paper, we will review research studies which have been carried out on the subject of blended learning in Saudi Arabia which have been carried out so far. Towards this end, search terms such as 'Saudi Arabia blended learning' etc. were used in the Google Scholar search engine. The results of these searches were shortlisted as per the year of publication. For the purpose of this paper, only studies published post 2008 were used in order to examine the phenomenon of blended learning in Saudi Arabia.

Results and Discussion

Saudi Arabia has been using the blended learning model for the past decade. It has been aided along by technological innovations and ICT development around the world. Many studies have been carried out on blended learning in Saudi Arabian universities, mostly targeting the readiness of students and faculty for blended learning.

According to Barry and Alhazmi (2018), understanding the importance of the role that education plays in a knowledge-based society, for its Vision 2030 plan, Saudi Arabia has made education as one of the pillars of Vision 2030. The Saudi Ministry of Education has instructed all educational institutions to develop new programs that bridge the gap between job requirements and education output and also meet global standards. The authors say that new programs are being developed within and across national institutions, as well as partnerships between Saudi and international institutions (Barry & Alhazmi, 2018). For example, such an international partnership exists between the Taibah University in Saudi Arabia and The George Washington

University in the U.S., for which the two institutions developed a blended learning model to prepare Saudi Arabian doctoral students for becoming knowledge-based educational leaders (Barry & Alhazmi, 2018). This blended learning model, developed by Taibah University and the .George Washington University, has incorporated all three learning experiences - course and training, development of relationships, and challenge assignments.

According to Alebaikan and Troudi (2010), the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education has encouraged the use of information technology (IT) for teaching and learning among faculties and students at higher education institutions. With this in mind, projects are continuously developed in order to provide adequate IT infrastructure as well as content development for higher education students (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). The Blended Learning format is being used throughout the country towards this end.

Definition of Blended Learning

Many authors have offered different definitions of blended learning. According to Sharma (2010), blended learning can be defined in three ways – "the mixing of two teaching modes; a mixing of two pedagogical approaches; and the combining of two technological tools" (as cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016). According to O'Byrne and Pytash (2015), blended-learning can also be termed as hybrid or mixed (as cited in Ekhmimi, 2018)

According to Kuo, Belland, Schroder, and Walker (2014) blended learning "as an approach is implemented through a combination of face-to-face interactions and the use of technology-based learning" (as cited in Ekhmimi, 2018).

Torrisi-Steele (2011) defined blended learning as an "enriched, student-centered learning experiences made possible by the harmonious integration of various strategies, achieved by combining face-to-face interaction with information and communication technology (ICT)" (as cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016). According to Alaidarous and Madini (2016), this definition by Torrisi-Steele focuses on dimensions of blended learning such as the student-centered learning experience, the learning strategies, and tools of implementation.

As per the authors Alaidarous and Madini (2016), the most widely accepted definition of blended learning is "combining online and face-to-face instruction" (Chen, Wei, Kinshuk, & Chen, 2008; Graham, 2006). According to Finn and Bucceri (2006), the blended learning environment "integrates the advantages of e-learning with some advanta-geous aspects of the traditional method, such as face-to-face interaction" (as cited in Naaj, Nachouki, & Ankit, 2012).

According to Alebaikan and Troudi (2010), in blended learning, "the face-to-face portion is conducted in an instructor-led classroom while the online learning portion could be provided as synchronous or asynchronous". As per the authors, online synchronous elements could be online chat, video-conferencing, and/or conference calls, whereas asynchronous elements could be online discussion boards, online tutorials, online self-assessments, electronic texts, and emails (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010).

According to Graham (2006), Blended Learning is an approach that utilizes both face-to-face (F2F) teaching practices as well as e-learning environments and tools which could be said to be a bringing together of two worlds (as cited in Al-Hassan & Shukri, 2017). Garrison and Kanuta (2004) stated that BL promotes extensive learning and progressively affects learning outcomes, lowers attrition rates, and enhance learners' satisfaction (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004 – as cited in Al-Hassan & Shukri, 2017). It is defined by Brew (2008) as "a means of integrating

the online component with face-to face formats to create effective learning experiences" (as cited in Al-Hassan & Shukri, 2017). Yilmaz-Soylu (2008) states the concept of BL is: "the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning" (as cited in Al-Hassan & Shukri, 2017).

According to the study by Al-Saleh (2018), blended learning positively affects the learning performance of students, but there is a lack of teachers' willingness to involve this technology in their teaching practices. Adaptation of the blended learning system within the educational institutions is considered as the most common barrier for the teachers. It is also a fact that most of the teachers are unable to adopt the features of blended learning system, which usually result in the poor performance of entire system (Al-Saleh, 2018).

Blended Learning in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, blended learning may be used in place of e-learning. Blended learning is a term usually used interchangeably with e-learning in the literature involving e-learning in Arab world; in fact, e-learning is commonly used in place of blended learning in Saudi Arabia (Alharbi & Drew, 2014).

In order to develop the country's education system, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education has established the National Plan for Information Technology which encourages e-learning and distance education in higher education. In 2006, the National Plan for Information Technology established a national centre called the National E-learning and Distance Learning Centre (NELC). This NELC provides technical support, and tools essential for developing digital educational content for higher education. The NELC is also a medium through which all university sectors can become standardized. Due to explosive population growth and limited qualified faculty, the National Centre for E-Learning has initiated various projects to enhance e-learning in Saudi universities. According to Alebaikan and Troudi (2010), the NELC provides multimedia resources to equip faculty members to facilitate the integration of blended learning that fits their course as well as the university needs. The NELC has established a learning management system ("LMS") called 'Jusur', promoting materials for introductory undergraduate courses. In 2007, the College of Application Studies at King Saud University started employing 'Jusur' in a blended learning application. The students of this college need to use the system to download and submit homework, and to participate via the discussion board of each course (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010).

In his study, Alseweed (2013) explored the effect of three delivery modes (traditional, blended, and virtual) on the attitude and achievement of 37 EFL students' at Qassim University. For the study, Alseweed collected two different types of data from pre and post tests and questionnaire. The author concluded that students' achievements and attitude both are positively impacted by the blended mode (as cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016).

In another study, Al Zumor et al. (2013) investigated EFL students' perception in relation to the benefits and limitations of a blended learning environment via Black Board, at the King Khalid University. The results of this study showed that students were positively inclined towards the advantages of learning English in such a blended environment. Al Zumor et al. also concluded that blended learning environments had the potential to contribute significantly to increasing reading opportunities for students. They could also increase their vocabulary, enhance learning strategy usages such as metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (as cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016).

In his study, Ja'ashan (2015) explored the perceptions and attitudes of students towards learning English through blended learning in the University of Bisha. The results showed that students are satisfied and are very positive towards blended learning environments for learning English in blended learning (as cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016).

Alebaikan's study (2010) is concerned with exploring students' as well as instructors' perceptions towards the benefits and challenges of blended learning on Arabic course, Islamic studies, and English language. For the purpose of this study, 7 lecturers and 68 students from the King Saud University. The study's results indicated positive views of both students and lecturers toward the blended learning experience (as cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016).

In their study, Alaidarous and Madini (2016) concluded that in a blended learning environment, students perceived their language learning positively. This conclusion is consistent with Ja'ashan's (2015) results, which proved that in a blended learning environment, students were positively disposed towards learning English language (Alaidarous & Madini, 2016).

In their study, Alaidarous and Madini (2016) found that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use were two factors which could be considered as predictors of students' positive perception and attitude. This result agrees with the conclusions of Lu, Zhao, and Jiang (2012) who found that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use affected students' satisfaction more significantly as compared to other factors (Alaidarous & Madini, 2016).

Alaidarous and Madini's study revealed more factors that influence students' perception of the blended learning experience in English language courses, including quality of instructor, course content, and types of activities. These factors had been identified by Lim and Morris (2009) as instructional and motivational factors. Authors Lu, Zhao, and Jiang (2012) considered a variety of factors which affect students' satisfaction in blended learning, including instructor and course characteristics (as cited in Alaidarous & Madini, 2016).

Yushau (2006) explored the effect of blended learning on students' computer and mathematics attitudes in a Saudi Arabian university (as cited in Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). According to Yushau (2006), during the study, two modes of learning were implemented - face-to-face learning, three times a week, and online learning consisting of a weekly computer laboratory session with availability of online learning resources in the intranet and Internet to the students. The results of this study showed that students have positive attitudes towards mathematics and computer, when taught in the blended learning environment (as cited in Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010).

Al-Jarf (2005) carried out a study in a Saudi Arabian university to explore whether or not the integration of online learning with face-to-face grammar instruction significantly improves the achievement and attitude of college freshman students studying English-as-a-foreign-language (as cited in Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). This study concluded that in learning environments where technology is unavailable to English-as-a-foreign-language students and instructors, the use of an online course from home as a supplement to in-class techniques helps motivate and enhance English-as-a-foreign-language students' learning and mastery of English grammar (as cited in Alebaikan and Troudi, 2010).

In his study, Almalki (2011) concluded that instructor and students valued the accessibility and flexibility advantages of blended learning design. The study also identified factors which may affect the adoption of blended learning at university; these factors may also be endemic due to

the rate of technological change. The participants of the study reported that they had concerns regarding the university's inadequate ICT infrastructure, resources, and technical support. Students added that there appeared to be a lack of commitment and reward for ICT use at the university (Almalki, 2011).

Teachers' Attitudes Towards Blended Learning

The attitude of teachers towards blended learning curricula is indicative of whether blended learning would be adopted and perceived positively by students. According to Crano and Prislin (2006), the attitude of teachers towards blended learning is defined on the basis of evaluative judgments that result in affective and cognitive reactions from the students (as cited in Al-Saleh, 2018). As per Larsen (2012), the attitude of teachers towards the implementation of blended learning is considered to be significant contributor towards the successful achievement of educational goals (as cited in Al-Saleh, 2018). In his study, Khalid (2009) concludes that a negative attitude is a serious challenge to integrating technology into education (as cited in Al-Saleh, 2018). According to Aldraehim and Watson (2012), teachers' positive attitude is important for the effective integration of newer technologies into education and due to this, teachers' experiences determine their application in classrooms (as cited in Al-Saleh, 2018).

Karmakar and Behera (2016) carried out a study, which showed that developments within the IT field have had a significant impact on educational settings. The findings of this study concluded that teachers' attitudes were neither favorable nor unfavorable towards e-learning system; but these attitudes were average towards the learning process (as cited in Al-Saleh, 2018). Alebaikan (2010) investigated Saudi female lecturers' and undergraduate students' perceptions of BL that most of them had positive attitudes. Another study in Saudi Arabia by Al-Otaibi (2010) investigated the degree of secondary school teachers' awareness of and attitudes towards BL in Tatweer schools in Makkah district. The findings demonstrated teachers' high degree of awareness of and positive attitudes towards the BL concept (as cited in Al-Saleh, 2018).

Challenges to Blended Learning in Saudi Arabia

According to Alebaikan and Troudi (2010), three main issues have been reported, which act as challenges to blended learning in Saudi Arabia. These include: adoption of blended learning in the traditional university culture; finding the appropriate instructional design; and the demands of time (as cited in Alshahrani, 2015). Another challenge to blended learning in Saudi Arabia, as per Alebaikan (2010), was the lack of pedagogical practice among learners as well as instructors (as cited in Alshahrani, 2015). This included factors like poor utilization of pedagogy, limited experience of developing web-based teaching methods and student-centered strategies in face-to-face time, and one-way system of presenting knowledge. There was also a lack of understanding of the new role of the lecturer in blended learning courses, as a facilitator (as cited in Alshahrani, 2015). As per the author, the role of the facilitator is to guide the shift from a lecture-centered environment to a student-centered one, and to promote interaction and collaboration between peers to foster engagement.

According to the study carried out by Chanchary (2011) at Saudi universities to gauge learners' readiness, from a technological aspect, the learners are almost ready, but there is a lack of readiness in relation to the independent learning aspect, which is an essential factor in any blended learning environment (as cited in Alshahrani, 2015).

According to a few studies, Ageel (2011); Al-Zahrani (2015); Alturise and Alojaiman (2013); Shaabi (2010), the Saudi culture seems to be a hindrance to the use of global ICT in Saudi higher education (as cited in Alzahrani, 2017). According to Al-Zahrani (2015), it is important to integrate ICT into educational levels mainly because of ICT development and global demand, but the cultural-religious conservatism inherent in the country acts as a factor behind the resistance to adopt the international best practices of ICT integration (as cited in Alzahrani, 2017). As per the author, this conservatism has led to traditionalism being practiced as the model for education in the country (as cited in Alzahrani, 2017). The study by Alzahrani (2017) justified the need for blended learning at Saudi universities, with additional training on using ICT more effectively for some academic staff and students.

Conclusion

From the research studies reviewed in this paper, it can be concluded that the Saudi government is interested in integrating blended learning in the higher education system. It was also observed that though learners showed readiness for technological and ICT advancements, they were not at the same level of readiness when it came to the independent studying aspect of blended learning. It was observed that there is a training need for using ICT more effectively for both students and academic staff.

References

Alaidarous, K., & Madini, A.A. (2016). Exploring EFL Students' Perception in Blended Learning Environment in Saudi Technical Education Context. *International Journal of Educational Investigations, 3*(6), 69-81.

Alebaikan, R., & Troudi, S. (2010). Blended learning in Saudi universities: challenges and perspectives. *Association for Learning Technology Journal, 18*(1), 49-59.

Alharbi, S., & Drew, S. (2014). Using the Technology Acceptance Model in Understanding Academics' Behavioural Intention to Use Learning Management Systems. *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications, 5*(1), 143-155.

Almalki, A.M. (2011). *Blended Learning in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: A Study of Umm Al-Qura University* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Alshahrani, S. (2015). Exploring the Ways in Which Learners Regulate Their Learning on a Blended Learning Course at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Southampton, Southampton, England.

Alzahrani, M.G. (2017). The Developments of ICT and the Need for Blended Learning in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Education and Practice, 8*(9), 79-87.

Al-Hassan, S. & Shukri, N. (2017). The Effect of Blended Learning in Enhancing Female Students' Satisfaction in the Saudi Context. *English Language Teaching, 10*(6), 190-203.

Al-Saleh, R.S.S. (2018). EFL Teacher's Attitudes Towards Blended Learning in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Information Research and Review, 5*(1), 5065-5071.

Barry, A., & Alhazmi, F.A. (2018). A Blended Learning Model Used to Prepare Saudi Arabian Doctoral Students to be Knowledge-Based Educational Leaders. In *Proceedings of the RAIS Conference,* (pp. 72-86). Princeton, New Jersey. Retrieved from

http://rais.education/proceedings-of-the-9th-international-rais-conference-on-social-sciences-2/

Ekhmimi, T.A. (2018). *Blended Learning Among Adults in Saudi Arabia* (Unpublished master's thesis). Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Washington.

Naaj, M.A., Nachouki, M., & Ankit, A. (2012). Evaluating Student Satisfaction with Blended Leanring in a Gender-Segregated Environment. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research, 11*(185-200).