

The Impact of Blended Learning on Academic Quality in Lebanese Universities

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to show the importance of having a blended learning program in a university which affects greatly the quality of education given to students who will work in the future in companies, and how it can lead to the improvement of academic quality within a university, the successful students with a good educational background will be able to improve the work of the company. In fact, students need to have access to online learning tools which improve the quality of their learning and develop their capacities and talents, in order for them to be successful, up-to-date and well-informed, and therefore to be able to assume responsibilities in companies today and improve the work of these companies, which are facing a great competition and tremendous external and internal challenges due to globalization and modernization. Nowadays, using new technological online tools is not a luxury for a university to have. It's a must and a solution to the unfairness of the educational system, which doesn't allow students to receive educational information according to each one needs and weaknesses; this leads to a poor performance in students' outcomes. Therefore, this study will be guided by a central question which is: "How does a blended learning system in a university improve academic quality which in its turn helps producing better results: more successful students?" This study should give more importance to Blended learning as a key factor for the success of any educational institution. Leaders and CEOs may use this study as an environmental scanning tool. To achieve this research, a study will be applied on the University of Balamand, which uses the blended learning program in certain majors such as mass communication, language and business. A case-study will be used to evaluate responses. It's formed of a symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements. The respondent, in this case the professor, is asked to evaluate each statement in the survey depending of his level of agreement or disagreement Then, the total sum of the statements will be calculated.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Academic Quality, Online Learning Tools, Students' Outcomes

Introduction

Nowadays we are surrounded by a constant and rapid creation of new technological innovations which is affecting greatly our lives; hence, it has a great impact on the educational industry since there are also continual innovations of new technological learning tools. In order to compete in the world, it's necessary to improve the academic quality in Lebanese Universities. Otherwise, we will be outdated and our students won't be able to face an ever changing environment that demands a lot of abilities and capabilities. To acquire academic quality in Lebanese universities, we need new educational strategies, a creative educational program which can combine both the traditional face-to-face system with the new online learning system. Therefore, Lebanese universities need to have new up-to-date courses that have blended learning courses and a special training to professors who need to learn how to use online materials effectively and efficiently. If trained well, the professors can teach their students to use these materials correctly and to create an efficient plan for the course which will improve all the process of learning. In this way, through using a blended learning program, universities will improve their academic quality providing better educational services for students, who in their turn will give better educational outcomes. After finishing their studies, students will be able to get good jobs and will be successful employees in any organization: the successful students can help in the future in improving the work of any organization they are a part of it.

Blended Learning

Blended Learning (BL) has no specific definition; however, all its definitions contain its main characteristics which are: combining online learning with face-to-face learning. One of its definitions is given by Colis and Moonen (2001) who describe BL as "a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online learning so that the instruction occurs both in the classroom and online, and where the online component becomes a natural extension of "traditional classroom learning" (Rovai & Jordan, 2014). Since education is defined as "providing services for the students" (Ahmed, I. et al. (2011)), then Academic Quality is defined as "a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them" (Prondzynski, 2008).

Nowadays, learning- using the internet- changed the concept of education by implementing new models of learning which improve the quality of education and facilitate the transmission of information for the student, encouraging him to be more involved in his studies. In fact, the online learning is modeled to each student's needs and permits the student to do more reflection on his studies. However, there are some impediments for the good use of online materials: the teacher and the student should know how to use them; they should all be trained on using online learning tools (Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995). In fact, the advantages of learning using the internet are numerous starting from availability, flexibility, cultural exchange and independence of the student:

- Internet could be available almost anywhere and provides students with all kinds of information, helping them to depend on themselves. However, the students should be trained on how to use the online tools correctly and efficiently. It's good to note that the performance of students is influenced by the variety of the learning materials, and the quality of the training they receive; only an educational System, which provides diversified information, makes the transmission of the educational materials easier and the training process more effective, can lead to a higher managerial performance (Sife, et al. (2007)).
- Blended learning focuses on the student more than the teacher, making him much more active in the process of education; it gives the student many learning possibilities, by allowing him to do multiple tasks in different places and having flexible schedules. In this way, the classroom isn't anymore the only place where the student can learn from the teacher; the student can educate himself outside the classroom (Koper and Tattersall, 2004).

Moreover, students participate more, improve their capabilities to use technology and get a continual assessment of their work from their instructors more than in face-to-face courses. Moreover, BL offers students have many contexts to interact and work with each other; it's time-wise and improves communication between the instructor and his students, since the others interact with him/her more than in traditional courses (Weil & De Silva, 2014)

- Blended learning has four main advantages: first, it's flexible and can manage both the space and time; second, it improves the quality of the learning process by encouraging students to do some learning activities outside the classroom such as finding additional sources and references on internet and taking online quizzes or tests; third, it's tailored to each student needs; fourth, it minimizes the cost of learning. (Welker and Berardino, 2005).
- BL permits students to access diverse online resources giving students more chances to interact with other students and with their professors and to get a variety of points of view. In this way, they can improve their capacities, be more involved in learning and more able to fit in any learning context (Tsen & Walsh, 2016).

However, learning, using the internet, faces many impediments such as the necessity to have a computer, an internet connection and online materials; moreover, many students don't know how to use certain programs on internet; they are used as the traditional learning and most of the time the students aren't trained to communicate using the new tools of learning (O'Lawrence, 2007).

Moreover, the poor online materials are given sometimes to students, also the wrong usage of good online resources lead the students and professors to have negative opinions about depending on online resources and their impacts on the quality of education (Megeid, 2014). In order to really benefit from Blended learning, the course should be well-constructed, the professors and the students should be trained on using the BL software, and the Information Professionals using technology should create a BL hardware and software for each course. Moreover, professors and students should be well-trained on using online resources (Annan, 2008).

It's true that Blended learning increases the benefits of both traditional and online learning. However, in order for students to be satisfied, the course should be well-designed in sort that online materials could be accessed and used easily by students. Otherwise, students will feel unsatisfied and will lose motivation for studying. (Chen & Yao, 2016)

Research Conducted

In order to complete this research, a case-study was made on six professors in Balamand University, two professors using Blended Learning to teach these major courses: Mass Communication, Business Administration and Languages. The Likert scale of measurement was used in order to measure the impact of Blended learning on academic quality in Balamand University.

The survey questions were based on the study of King, S. and Arnold, K. (2012), who had investigated on five professors' opinion about Blended Learning. However, there is no study done before on the impact of Blended Learning on academic quality in Lebanese Universities.

The study was formed of these main questions:

- What is the idea that professors have on Blended learning?
- How do professors think a blended learning system is affecting their work within the university?
- How a Blended Learning System in a university does improve Academic quality?
- How do professors think that a blended learning course can give students more satisfaction?
- How supportive technologies should be used to support face-to-face learning?
- What strategies do they consider necessary for advancing in education at the university?

The results show that 83% of professors thought that Blended Learning has no specific definition. However, all its definitions contain its main elements, that's online learning (learning using the internet) and traditional learning. On the other hand, the results showed that 79% of professors think that Blended Learning is improving their work within the university. The results also showed that 74% of professors agree that a Blended Learning System within a university improves academic quality. Moreover, the results show that 83% of professors think that a blended learning course can give students more satisfaction. Furthermore, the results show that 83% of professors think that supportive technologies should be used correctly in order to support face-to-face learning. Finally, the results show that 67% of professors think that the “structure” of the university should be changed and that IT professionals should play an important role in the design of the Blended Learning course and in solving any problem encountered by professors. The overall results showed that 75,65% of professors agree that Blended learning has a positive impact on education.

Table 1: Blended Learning Has a Positive Impact on Education

	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	0,43
Somewhat Disagree	0,46
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	23,46
Somewhat Agree	50,43
Strongly Agree	25,22

Figure 1: Blended Learning Has a Positive Impact on Education

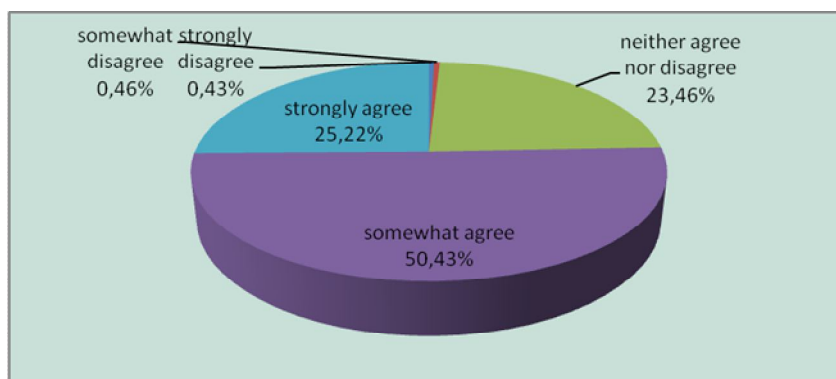
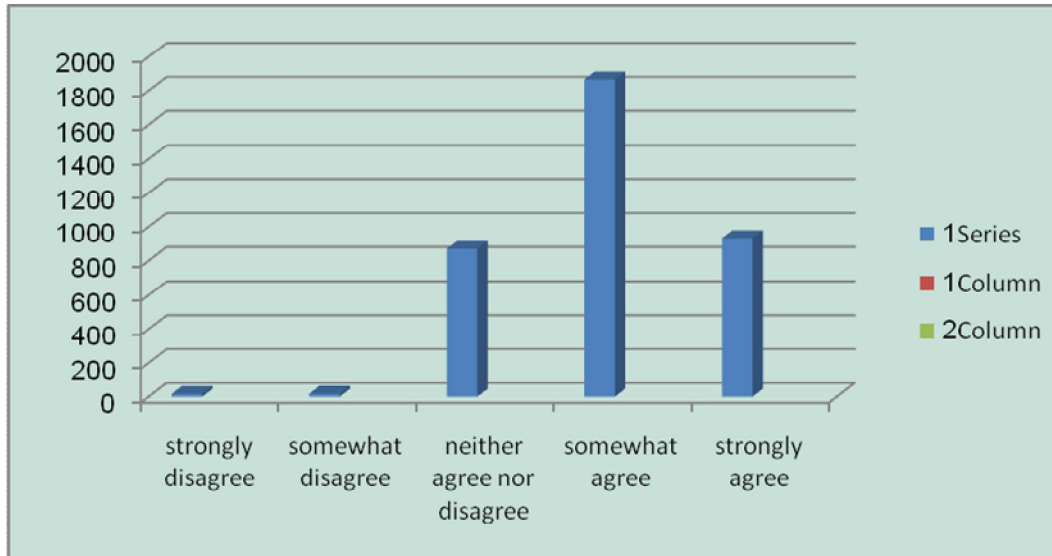


Figure 2: Blended Learning Has a Positive Impact on Education



To summarize, the results show that the majority of professors think that Blended Learning has a positive impact on academic quality in the University of Balamand. However, there were problems encountered while conducting this study. They are: First, the limited number of Blended learning courses. Second, most of the professors are teaching BL courses from two years only, what means they still don't have much experience in deciding about which BL model to choose and on how to integrate the model correctly to blend materials in their courses. Moreover, the university doesn't train professors on using online resources: either they enroll in a course in a foreign center or they learn by themselves. Since students aren't also trained, the professors don't use a big amount of online materials except for mass communication courses in which students are being trained by foreign channels. Finally the IT professionals don't implement the educational software and hardware necessary for any course; it's the professors who organize their courses. Finally, we have only Blended Learning courses in Lebanese universities but we don't have a Blended learning System to be able to assess its functioning.

Conclusion

Blended learning is well-recognized today. However, the main question is whether it's effective or not. The success of a blended learning program is related to how good it's planned while taking into consideration the goals of the educational institution. Moreover, creating a blended learning system should provide solutions for the problems facing educational institutions today. In order to plan a good blended learning program, the staff should be well-experienced, the professors have to be well-trained and the students' needs should be well understood. Blended learning is sometimes misused due to the ignorance of students' needs, lack of knowledge of which model fits the best for the educational institution and the failure to communicate well with different planners of the program. In order to succeed, a blended learning program has to take into consideration the educational goals and the organization strategy. In order to solve these problems, blended learning program designers can read books or take courses about the subject. However, it's still difficult to find information about designing a blending program that is formed by different types of blends (Harrison, 2013)

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