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Issues of Quality and Accessibility in Blended Learning Methodology: A quest

Qualitative analysis of participants' tale on blended learning experiences

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown the investment on human capital has brought positive results as people were committed to upgrade their professional qualification and job related skills (Day and Newburger, 2002).

Specific trainings brought in far better result as compare to general training programs for the employees and staff. this phenomenon has proven more productivity and ownership of employees that resulted in long serving and controlled drop out ratio of workers. (Becker, 1964; Lynch and Black, 1995; Blundell, Dearden, Meghir and Sianesi, 1999)

The debate is whether distance/online learning is better or worse than traditional Face to face (f2f) learning has been continued for last few decades. Opponents as well as supporters of online mode of learning concluded that any method that suits learners' learning style enable him/her to achieve highest score.

This study aims to explore how the blended learning methodology enabled the mid- career professionals from Cohort I, II & III to complete their two and a half year study from Institute of Education - University of London. It invites critical reflection from the participants about the quality of participation as this was an investment from Higher Education Commission UK . This study further explores the issues of quality and accessibility using blended learning methodology and how it had an impact on their personal and professional lives.

Keywords; blended learning methodology, Common Wealth Scholars, Higher Education Commission UK, interpretive paradigm, qualitative analysis, South Asian countries

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays an important role in nurturing the cadre of people who aims to lead their country in challenging times. Having skilled human resource is not only needed in developed countries but there are more crucial for developing countries today especially with the emergence of knowledge economy. In order to equip the younger generations with required knowledge base, skills and value set for 21st century, it is important to invest in higher education.

Bates (1984: 223) recommends '*new technologies promise a wider range of teaching functions and a higher quality of learning, low costs, greater student control, more interaction and feedback for students.*'

The debate is whether distance/online learning is better or worse than traditional Face to face (f2f) learning has been continued for last few decades. On one hand the opponents of distance mode of learning (Garrison, 1987; Jeffries, 1996; Fox, 1998; Phipps and Merisotis, 1999; Fitzpatrick, 2001); on the other hand, the supporters of online mode of learning (Beare, 1989; McCleary and Egan, 1989; Kabat and Friedel, 1990; Souder, 1993; Freeman, 1995; Mortensen, 1995; Heines & Hulse, 1996; Schutte, 1996; Gubernick and Ebeling, 1997; Bartlett, 1997; McKissack, 1997; Bothun, 1998; Sonner, 1999) concluded that any method that suits to learner's learning style enable him/her to achieve highest score in learning. According to Sherry (1996:7), '*students' preference for a particular mode of*

learning is an important variable for the effectiveness of their learning, it is therefore important to be aware of their learning styles and accommodate their choices for the desired outcomes.

Contextual details

This unique qualitative study represents the responses of 20 mid-career professionals who were awarded Common Wealth Scholarship from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, who went through their graduate studies for two and a half years using blended learning mode i.e. on-line/distance learning as well as Face to face (f2f) learning at the Institute of Education (IOE) University of London.

This study intended to explore the impact of investment made on participants from developing countries especially South Asian Countries i.e. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. It could further be insightful as how it would benefit all 20 participants and how would they envisage their roles in inspiring and developing their fellow workers who have not got an opportunity for undertaking such studies.

Qualitative Design

In the words of Kiernan (1999: 43) *'the goal of qualitative research is quite explicitly to 'ground' studies in the experience and views of respondents'*. This study aims to capture participants' experiences of blended learning methodology that motivated them to partake in the study for two and a half years. it is interesting to explore their learning journey as 'distance learners' and later for one semester they visited England to do their face-to face (f2f) modules.

Objectives of the study were

- to explore scholars' motivation, their perceptions, initial hiccups and overall experience of undertaking the postgraduate study through blended learning program;
- also to identify and appreciate the impact of new learning on their personal and professional lives.

2. METHODOLOGY

The nature of main research problem and related subsidiary questions led towards 'interpretive paradigm' that is more concerned with individuals (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It fosters individuals' interpretations rather than generalizations. Denscomber, (2002: 19-20) elaborates that *'Interpretivists tend to focus their attention on the way people make sense of the world and how they create their social world through their actions and interpretations of the world'*.

There is a scope for alternative and competing explanations, each of which can claim validity. As Myers, Michael D (1997: 23) mentioned, *'Individuals are not in a vacuum but a whole life context'*.

Participants views were collected through self-administered questionnaires and focus group interviews because they were scattered in three different countries, and even within a county they were situated in different geographical territories and provinces. Further to look for the impact of blended learning methodology it was essential to use similar medium for data collection, despite the fact that only 20 participants out of 31 were able to participate.

For data analysis, self-administered questionnaire and detail narratives from the focus groups were read and reread many times then coding strategy was employed to eliminate the factor of losing important data. There were three cohorts involved in this study thus for coding purpose, the researcher chose 'C' represented 'Cohort', followed by numerical i.e. 1, 2 or 3 that represented batch and later each participant was given an alphabet i.e. A, B or C. Henceforth the coding 'C3E' could mean that representative thoughts belong to a participant 'E' who is from third cohort.

3. DISCUSSION

This study aims to present the critical reflections from 20 participants about the quality of their participation in the study because as this was linked with educational investment from Higher Education Commission UK in partnership with Aga Khan University and Institute of Education-London.

Participants' responses and lengthy narratives would inform about their achievements, constraints and coping mechanism to ensure quality and accessibility while engaging in postgraduate study through blended learning methods. It would also highlight the unique experiences of their learning which none of them were familiar with and finally, it informs how the learning has had an impact on their personal and professional lives.

Online/distance learning mode

Achievements:

Most of participants those stated using online mode of learning appreciated as it enable them to learn the skills of ICT, they were they exposed to virtual learning environment that was certainly a new concept as most of them had traditional learning background.

In the midst of career as managers, school principals, coordinators, researchers etc they were investing their time and energy to learn new skills thus were very excited. As many participants commented that:

'use of internet as a learning tool and learning resource was indeed enriching experience, especially interactive online activities where we got a chance to access to the huge resource that makes study and learning so much enjoyable'.

'Such experience enable us to become independent learners which otherwise was not valued. We all had to spend hours and hours in front of computers to assemble our thoughts and write them on the taught software'.

One participant told that, *'I had to learn the basics of word processor as how to make and save files, where to copy and paste, choosing fonts, line and paragraph spacing etc. all were to learn before one could upload the assignment online'.* Another said, *'I learned the new technology of learning from distance and enjoyed the session's activities and tutor's feedback'*

'Intellectual discussions, group learning, weekly submission of activities in the module and getting feed back from tutors during distance learning mode was indeed real learning opportunity.' Another participant commented that *'Group learning while doing the module through distance learning was great opportunity'.* Other said that, *'We realised that the distance learning component was also very challenging but enjoyable experience'.*

Online/distance learning mode

Constraints:

Despite above mentioned positive aspects about online/distance learning methodology, participants were critical about certain problems which they confronted while doing their studies in their home context. The list of issues presented by them had had an impact severely on their learning. The administrative issues such as internet connectivity and regular power problems were persistent throughout the year.

' Because of the unavailability of Internet for days and sometimes for weeks, it was not possible to read activities or uploaded assignments. Similarly sometimes, it was not possible to submit assignments on time, which created restlessness in the course participants'. Despite electricity issue, a participant complaint about the lack of resources, as she said, *'I wouldn't call it a constraint but more of a suggestion that during the distance component I can not access many books from the library. Hence the number of electronic books that the university subscribes should be increased'.*

Commenting on the academic issues, participants complained that: *'There were no clear explanations regarding the module assignment as the tutor was available through distance only'.* Another commented that *'Sometimes we felt for discussion regarding activities that were to be completed and we wanted to seek tutor's perspective but it was not possible as of distance component'.*

On a serious note participants said, *' In online activities every course participant could not get individual feed back, collective feedback was not much help to identify my individual weakness'.* Few added that *'the delays in feedback and the lack of proper communication or maybe understanding of the feedback because of the distance learning mode had adverse effect on our performance'.*

Few participants critiqued on the overall structural design of the program that was spread on two and half years. *'structure is confusing particularly just passing whole year only participating in one module'* then second year two modules were taught but *'for last six months all were burdened with modules and research work- it was too difficult to manage all the things for just six months'.*

Face to face (f2f) mode**Achievements:**

Face to face (f2f) mode of learning has all its positive aspects; as all the participants undertook their bachelors and masters degree in their respective countries using face to face (f2f) medium. In this study participants were based in London for a short while along with administrative and financial assistance thus all participants appreciated and reported the same.

One participant commented that *'Learning environment at the University and cultural diversity was great opportunity to attend Face to face mode'*. Another participant said that *'Face to face component was more effective and useful as I explored that there so many venues and opportunities of learning'*.

There were other responses such as *'Face to face sessions helped to clarify my some of the alternative frameworks about education'*.

Another achievement was *'interaction with international faculty and classmates brought in about different international perspectives'*.

The whole experience was worthy and enriched their learning, as one participant said, *'This was an excellent study opportunity, discussion on various debatable global educational issues on the net as well as in the classroom during the Face to face session at IOE'*.

Face to face (f2f) mode**Constraints:**

It seems that participants confronted many issues in face to face (f2f) component also. This method was unique for all of them in the sense that they got an opportunity to explore learning in an international environment which most of them had not experienced earlier.

In Face to face (f2f) component, participants' major concern were less interaction with tutors, supervisors, and lack of planning at institutional level as those three and half months were extreme burdened for them.

Many participants said. *'In a limited time of Face to face learning too much was expected; 2 ½ modules and three chapters of dissertation in 3½ months were humanly not possible. This did not allow us to get broader exposure of development other than visiting and sitting at IOE library till 10:30 pm every day'*; the similar assertion from another participant is *'In a limited time of Face to face learning too much was expected'*.

Other said, *'getting adjusted in short period of time during Face to face mode was not planned by the institution'*. A participant from Bangladesh shared by stating *'I think it was too stressful. During online course, the participant should be working part- time.'*

'There were too many courses going on during Face to face session; during that module, one online module to continue and we had to think and make decision of the dissertation- all during the 3 months time of stay in UK. The other regular students get two years to think, read, plan and organize the essays and the dissertation. The level of stress on all participants was too much to function properly'.

It is usual that not all human get satisfied with an endeavour, despite appreciating the effort of the donors, both the universities for engaging them to obtain their international postgraduate degree, and they openly shared all the achievements and constrain face during two and a half years of study.

Quality and accessibility via blended learning methodology: A quest

In response to the quality and accessibility via blended learning methods, participants commented the following:

A participant said, *'balancing job as well as studies with little support from the organization was extremely difficult'* as none of the participants had experience working online in virtual learning environment, thus it was not very easy option to begin with. Initially, with lots of excitement, participants started the program. There were few among them who were not even IT proficient thus, it really took a lot time to get strong hold over learning the skill etc. Later, they started responding the course instructions and activities that aimed for.

Consequently, participants took more time to complete their tasks, could not pace with the tutors' instructions, and could not upload the backlog work on instructional software once the deadline was passed. Simply they straggle and lag behind in first module but later many tried to catch up with the speed, though some remained slow pacer till the end.

Even the internet systems caused hindrance as one participant said, *'The Internet system here in Pakistan especially at my workplace remained very inconsistent and thus hindered in producing and submitting qualitative work, activities and assignments'*.

Another said *'Because of the unavailability of Internet for days and sometimes for weeks, it was not possible to read activities or uploaded assignments. Similarly sometimes, it was not possible to submit assignments on time, which created restlessness among course participants.'*

Participants from above three developing countries complained about non-availability of local supervision, which affected their performance. They said, *'The non-availability of local supervisor/guide for the dissertation as this was the first one I did'*. Another one said, *'The pressure and the load faced in the UK because a lot of things had to be done there simply because in Pakistan the supervisor would not be there nor the library facility'*.

Secondly, it took a lot of time to understand tutors' instructions and meeting their expectations as most of the participants found weak in constructing critical analysis related to academic discourse. It was indeed a paradigm shift for all the participants i.e. questioning the authors and seeking critical opinions etc was not very common in their own educational system thus confronted critical feedback from the tutors. This entire learning was real *'cultural'* as well as *'academic shock'* for them.

This resulted in disruption and chaos as *one cannot become critical in a short while*, because it is a gradual process. Participants expected lot more instructions from the tutors on both online and Face to face (f2f) components that was not given, because it was difficult for tutors to manage. This affected participants overall performance and motivation at professional as well as personal level. Also, few of them got health problems due to unnecessary stress and pressure for completing the tasks and meeting the demands of the academic staff etc.

A participant from Bangladesh complained that *'Instructions were not very clear or the guidance seemed to lack and it was hard to carry on-line study. There was not enough feedback for online contributions'* Face to face session was for a short duration. *While planning it seemed they did not consider the cultural shock of the participant and adjustment time. The education background of the participants had not been taken into account while selecting them. My experience of this had impacted on me and even had affected my ability to work at least'*.

Another said *'There were no clear explanations regarding the module assignment as the tutor was available through distance'*. One participant commented few reasons of not performing well because *'The delays in feedback and the lack of proper communication or maybe understanding of the feedback because of the distance'*.

Other participant complained that *'In online activities every course participant could not get individual feed back, collective feedback was not much help to identify my individual weakness. It will be better if every individual will get individual feedback on activities. It will help us to clarify our mistakes and improve our writing and perform better both at studies and work.'*

On the other hand, the blended learning methodology enable them to manage job, family and studies that many agreed, a participant commented that *'this online component despite of its many critics was good for me as I have my family and cannot leave them for two years or so'*.

Despite the challenges shared above for both distance/ online learning and Face to face (f2f) components, students not only learnt through it but also able to qualify the degree program from Institute of Education (IOE). Participants commented that:

'I think that it not only made the Masters a whole lot more enjoyable but also knowledgeable'. Another shared that, *'I thoroughly enjoyed going through all the literature which was provided to us during online as well as face to face components. This is a resource that I will cherish the most and will refer to often in my work life'*.

Praising the whole endeavour, one commented, *'This was an excellent study opportunity, discussion on various debatable global educational issues on the net as well as in the classroom during the face to face session at*

IOE'. Another participants shared, 'Learning environment at the University and cultural diversity was great opportunity to attend face to face mode'.

Concluding on self development, one participant said, 'It has contributed enormously for my personal development by enhancing my knowledge and skill level'. 'It helped me to develop my potential further and was an invaluable and cherished experience'.

4. CONCLUSION

However, it will be difficult to comment on the quality of delivery of those methods in such universities, and more importantly, national and/or international acceptance of credential from these institutions is still uncertain.

Though Wegner et al., (1999), Dellana, C., and West, (2000) and Russell (2002) presented 'no significant difference phenomenon' between online and Face to face (f2f) components; but Bangert-Drowns and Rudner, (1991); Fox, (1998); Gallagher and McCormick (1999); Spooner et al. (1999) and DeSantis, (2002) have raised question on 'quality assurance in distance learning'.

This can be used as vital phenomenon if virtual universities are linked with international universities that enable them to ensure quality assurance at higher education level.

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