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Students and Instructors Perceptions of Blended Learning in the First Electronic University in the Arab World (Saudi Electronic University)

by

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Abstract

Colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia are confronted with challenges to improve the quality of education and to make higher education available to a vast and increasing number of students. The Ministry of Education identified distance learning as one possible answer to the challenge, but research has shown students prefer regular face to face contact with teaching staff. The significant presence of web-based instruction over the last few years has led to the emergence of the term Blended Learning, which is also called hybrid learning or mixed- mode learning. Traditionally online (web-based) learning and face-to-face learning have remained largely separate in the past due to the differences in their methods and audience needs. With innovations in technologies, however, facilitating human interaction in synchronous and asynchronous learning has encouraged the integration of face- to-face learning with the online environment.

The responsibility for leading development in the use of technologies in HE is with the Saudi Electronic University (SEU) which is the first electronic university in the Kingdom and in the Arab world. SEU has sought to remodel its educational system to integrate blended learning and the aims of this proposed research study are to identify the perceptions of students and academic staff of the advantages, challenges and future presented by this model of learning. This paper seeks to establish the mechanisms by which the effectiveness of these proposed changes to the learning environment can be evaluated. The empirical research design is intended to identify issues, solutions to problems, complexities encountered, strengths and weaknesses of the move to blended learning at SEU.

Introduction

In the 21st century there have been substantial developments in the field of digital technologies, most importantly the Internet, which have had an important effect on education. These have the potential to significantly improve student learning opportunities including through developments in

Blended Learning (BL), an approach which combines both Internet-based and face-to face learning. As the editor of The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks Young (2002) foretold: "nearly 80–90% of courses at higher education would become blended in the future". By 2004 it was noted that 46% of U.S. undergraduate institutions had available blended courses (Allen & Seaman, 2004). By 2011, it was suggested that the "explosive growing of BL [made] it possible to become the "new normal" in higher education" (Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011: 207–208).

Blended learning is a development of distance learning (DL) where there was minimal or even no contact between teacher and student. Distance learning, although cost effective and convenient to the provider, often has challenges which disaffect learners, particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) where it had proved unpopular. Al-Mousa (2004), for example, states that "despite these technological advances, the absence of direct contact between the student and teacher is considered to be a major shortcoming in Internet-based DL", going on to argue that "direct contact is usually vital for students who have not had any experience of Internet-based self-teaching or experience of learning without physical interaction with their teachers". Al-Taheeh & Marzouk (2004) suggested this is particularly true of Saudi students and concludes that absence of direct contact is among the most negative aspects of DL, with most Saudi students lacking the requisite skills to make use of such learning methods. Seemingly this problem becomes even more acute if the course requires the teacher and students to undertake practical activities.

The implementation of BL may be one of the best ways to resolve possible drawbacks of DL by converting them into positives. In BL, according to Collis & Moonen (2001), education takes place both on-line and in actual classrooms and can thus resolve problems such as lack of direct contact and cheating. Typically with traditional classroom-based learning there is little or no student-teacher interaction outside the classroom. BL, however, facilitates both direct physical contact between the teachers and students and indirect

contact between them using the Internet and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs).

It is important to note that BL is still a novel concept to many and is in its early stages of implementation in Saudi Arabia. As a result, some of the drawbacks are still in the process of being addressed. This study described here aims to evaluate BL in the Saudi Electronic University by synthesising original studies, data from journals and other forms of literature on similar higher education institutions in other countries, together with planned empirical research. The aim of the research will be to examine how BL is perceived by a group of male instructors and students in SEU so as to discover their perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, difficulties and challenges of BL. The study also intends to seek the viewpoint of these instructors and students on possible solutions in order to make the use of BL efficient and effective.

The Concept of Blended Learning

Many universities have embraced or are actively exploring BL "because it merges the traditional methods with modern ICT-based learning to support the needs of the learners amidst the changing education environment characterized by issues such as the increasing number of learners, the needs for flexibility and inclusivity in learning, and increasing demand for learning to align with the needs of a future knowledge economy" (Alhajeri, 2005). According to Littlejohn & Pegler (2007) BL refers to teaching a course or programme using a mixture of traditional teaching styles and E-learning. Collis & Moonen (2001) argue that BL refers to the incorporation of both on-line learning methods and physical classroom methods in the learning process. Osguthorpe & Graham (2003) have expanded the definition further and assert that BL refers to a situation where the communication between the learner and the educator is mixed so that they interact both through the Internet and in face-to-face classroom sessions.

The definition of BL subscribed to in this study, therefore, is that BL is a form of teaching and learning which combines modern electronic and Internet-

based methods with traditional classroom methods, while minimising time spent in the conventional classroom. In BL, students engage in learning activities such as online educational discussion; they carry out and submit assignments over the Internet, and they receive feedback using a learning environment facilitated by the use of Internet tools such as VLEs (e.g. Blackboard). However, they must also attend conventional classes where they can interact with their instructors as well as other students.

Blended Learning Around the World

The evolution of BL around the world has been driven initially by technology coordinators and computer literate teachers who sought new ways of providing students with enriched content while at the same time extending beyond the boundaries of the education centres (Ross & Gage. 2006). Universities outside KSA provide evidence of BL in the world. In the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for example, a group of lecturers participated in a pilot programme of BL conducted by Garnham & Kaleta (2002) who found that the lecturer's perception of BL was that it was a better learning environment. There was also agreement from the University of Glamorgan in the UK on the better understanding of different pedagogies and learning styles, making BL a great move (Jones & Lau 2009). Chou (2004) also studied the interaction forms of students in higher education in Japan and demonstrated that through the use of online tools BL provided students with interaction opportunities and enhanced student learning.

With recent developments in technology and equipment the global use of ICT in learning curricula has become popular and the Saudi government has made a commitment to improving the perceptions of students of ICT and increasing public acceptance of that technology. Where universities have changed from the traditional concepts of face-to-face learning BL there has been a significant transfer of professional skills and knowledge to student graduates, designed to facilitate success in the job markets.

Background to the planned study:

BL has been introduced by several Arabic universities to solve several challenges threatening educational quality. The trend is driven by many factors, such as the need to update the educational system, competition among universities, the rapid increase in the student population, teacher retention, and other related factors that may need to be further studied in the future. The modernization issue has affected educational policy and universities in KSA are confronted with the challenge of improving the quality of education they can give to their students to ensure enrolment rates will be sustained or increased annually. Moreover, it has been observed that the number of secondary-school graduate students who want to enter universities and complete their college degrees has outstripped the supply of university places available to them (Alsharq News, 2013). This problem is evidenced by the university acceptance rate in 2012, which was only 86% of the eligible population. This is despite the fact that several universities reported that their enrolee totals surpassed their maximum capacity, including Imam University and King Saud University, with capacity rates of 127 % and 110 %, respectively. These rates crystallize the very real problem of accommodating all aspiring university students who seek higher education. This challenge was one of the reasons to establishing SEU, as BL is seen as an innovative solution.

As Collis & Moonen (2001) recommend, whenever a significant educational innovation or technological development is sought for implementation at universities, empirical research should be conducted to gain knowledge of both the potential positive and negative consequences of such change to the learning process. However, despite the fact that BL has been adopted at SEU in all colleges and departments for the first time in the Arab world and SEU intends to launch e-learning centres all over the kingdom there is a lack of exploratory research in relation to the perceptions of male instructors and students taking BL courses. Their opinions, experiences, perceptions, responses, and learning reactions are crucial to the development and improvement of BL, especially in Saudi Arabia.

SEU can be considered to be somewhat behind some Western and Asian countries when it comes to the formulation of successful blended-learning instruction. Other countries have existing strategies to implement BL to improve the quality of higher education (see, for example: Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Owston, Garrison & Cook, 2006; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). It is still not known, however, whether students and instructors at SEU can integrate such strategies. This study should prove to be a help when it comes to understanding the positive and negative consequences of the innovations, learning experiences, and recommendations for future development of the strategy in KSA. This study thus aims to help in the decision-making process taken by university leaders with regard to improving higher education at SEU and potentially other universities around the world (especially in the Arab world) that aim to integrate BL. The significance of this study is its contribution to the improvement of BL by gauging the perceptions of students, instructors and leaders at SEU. Results from this study are expected to provide evidence of how students and instructors react to change and how BL has affected the quality of learning and university experience.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its Higher Education System

The territorial size of KSA is the largest of any country in the Arabian Peninsula. To the north it borders Jordan; Iraq is on the northeast and to the east, are several countries including Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar; to the south is Yemen and Oman borders the country to the southeast (Ministry of Economy & Planning, 2014). In 2014, the country's population stood at c31 million with a growth rate at 2.3% every year, one of the highest in the world (Ministry of Economy & Planning 2014). According to these statistics, the country's population is likely to double within the next five decades and this will see an increase in youth demographics whereby 65% of the entire population will be people aged 30 years and younger (Ministry of Economy & Planning 2014). Due to the high rate of births and youthful population the country's education system is normally under pressure to meet its development goals with the Ministry of Education trying to find solutions, such as the BL programme.

The number of public institutions of higher education in KSA has rapidly increased from the initial eight in 2004 to the current 25 public and 8 private universities distributed in all regions of the kingdom (Ministry of Education, 2014). The majority of these newly established universities were upgraded from college status.

Today the number of Saudi students and those on government scholarships taking further studies in HE has greatly increased and stands at about 900,000 (Ministry of Education, 2014). This is huge change since 1970 when the number of students stood at just 7,000. The current number excludes about 150,000 students taking undergraduate programmes and postgraduate studies in international institutions of higher learning all over the world. Saudi students are allowed to take specialised graduate and postgraduate degrees overseas through self-sponsorship or government scholarships and thus thousands of these students enrol in institutions outside the KSA.

Blended Learning in the Saudi context

BL has rarely been used as a learning strategy in higher education in KSA, a reflection of the culture (Al-Keaid, 2004). The typical method of learning is in a classroom setting with the teacher in front of the students presenting information from notes or using the board to emphasise key words. Therefore, with the introduction of online learning to blend with the classroom learning, there will need to be changes in behaviours and understanding.

Since it is still an emerging trend in Saudi Arabia, more research on BL is needed in order to identify the strengths and challenges of implementation. Research studies have examined BL practices in some Saudi universities. Asiri (2009), for example, conducted a study to establish how male postgraduates at King Khalid University perceive e-learning where the participants of this study had registered for only one online Arabic language course. They had a positive mind-set regarding the e-learning course, particularly because, in their view, it was more flexible and it offered a better learning experience. The participants also showed improved outcomes and

praised the quality and attractiveness of the course content. E-learning was preferred over traditional classroom learning to a higher degree by those students who had some computer skills.

A separate study conducted in King Saud University looked into how the future of BL was perceived by 12 female postgraduate students and 7 female lecturers in just one course (Alebaikan, 2010). The student participants had registered for a BL course where one week of classroom-based lectures was followed by two weeks of online lectures. Qualitative data were collected through observations, diaries and reflective essays, interviews and focus groups. The study concluded that BL could offer a successful learning experience for students. The study revealed that both lecturers and students had positive mind-sets regarding BL because it had been designed to be in harmony with the unique nature of Saudi culture, particularly in matters regarding the education of women. However, the study raises questions as to whether its conclusions could be generalised to all learning contexts, considering that it focused on only female postgraduate students and lecturers in only one course.

The study of BL undertaken by Almalki (2011) in Umm al Qura University included 504 students and 9 instructors. He concluded that the lecture time could be used more effectively by those instructors who had built and supervised their websites. All materials of the course were distributed via their websites and the study showed that most of the respondents considered the flexibility of access to be the most useful advantage of instructors' websites, which supplemented the instructional resources.

Mohandes et al. (2006) conducted a study in Saudi Arabia at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals to examine the views of students on using BL in comparison to purely online model. Their results indicated that the main preference was for BL. The conclusion that Mohandes et al. (2006) brings out is that BL is best for use in higher learning.

There are however challenges associated with BL (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010) including: culture, finding the right design and environment. Culture is seen as a barrier against BL since students in KSA are used to didactic lecture-based learning, yet students going through BL need high levels of responsiveness and discipline. The identification of optimum designs of BL, needs consideration of delivery media and technology (Picciano, 2009). Furthermore, there is a belief by faculty and students that online activities and tasks need more effort and time (Lee & Tsai, 2011). Time management that complies with the BL curriculum is an issue since the online activities and instructions are supplements to the traditional face-to-face learning. Stafford (2005) examined the motivations of Internet usage by technology students who were enrolled in an internet-enabled educational course in KSA where social alienation proved to be the main problem of BL due to the separation of the students from instructors and colleagues. The study demonstrates that BL as distance education requires strong social motivations for Internet use. This is especially in KSA, where e-learning has not been widely utilised due to social alienation.

(Al-Harthi, 2005) found that students perceived a sense of anonymity in online learning due to the lack of physical contact with other students and teachers. His findings showed that students were likely to participate in the online course activities with less communication initiated. The students expected their teachers to initiate all communication and preferred one way communication. For such reason it has been suggested that, having a culturally diverse online environment for learning needs to be in a context that offers respect and responds to cultural sensitivities and differences of Saudi Arabia (Nieto & Bode 2012).

Despite this, Saudi higher education has begun the move towards international trends of BL in the development of new educational processes (Alzamil, 2006). The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia recognised the advantages of BL and saw it as solution to the challenge in the provision of higher education as the student population grows (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). The MOE combined with King Saud University in providing BL and finding out

the challenges of providing higher education. This has proved to be a possible solution to the problems of the insufficient numbers of qualified lecturers and room space.

In KSA, because of the rapid population growth, one of the most important objectives of the implementation of e-learning programmes (including BL) has been to expand access to higher education for those students who, for whatever reason, have been prevented access. It was considered, for example, that DL could help to facilitate the education of women who live outside urban centres as they will have difficulty accessing university campuses because they are barred from driving and those without male relatives able or willing to drive them to campus are left without access.

The Ministry of Education initiated the implementation of BL by establishing the National Centre for E-learning and D-learning (NCEL) which is linked directly to the Minister because of the extreme importance attached to this centre (MOCIT, 2012, 2015). The Director of NCEL has said that Saudi universities have been encouraged by the Ministry of Education to adopt BL so as to minimise student hours in traditional classes (Almegran, 2008). According to him students would not need to attend class sessions because they can access the lecture materials from the Internet and can also communicate with faculty mentors online. According to Graham (2006) higher education institutions all over the world are implementing BL programmes, therefore, because they offer efficient solutions to the challenges faced by those institutions. In Saudi Arabian universities, however, e-learning is not attractive because most universities are short of the tools and skills to conduct competent online learning courses (Alenezi, 2012).

The Ministry of Education view of BL corresponds to the common definition as the integration of face-to-face learning and online learning (Almalki, 2011). As a result Saudi universities adopted this concept, with King Saud University, the oldest university in KSA, being the first institution to implement some courses using BL. It was seen from this experience that BL provided flexibility as, for example, it enabled access to female students who have many family

commitments and inflexible work and to those who could not afford attending regular face-to-face classes. The development of online learning gave female students in particular enhanced interaction opportunities for learning.

Online learning was seen to enhance interaction between lecturers and students and develop more efficient learning processes (Alebaikan, 2010). Subsequently King Khalid University adopted and rapidly developed BL in 2009. NCEL started providing a Certificate in BL teaching to lecturers in 2009 and in 2011 SEU began offering a combination of regular (traditional face-to-face education) and online education in both undergraduate and graduate degree programmes.

In a speech made in the fourth International Conference on e-learning and DL held in Riyadh in 2015 the Saudi Deputy Minister for Education Affairs, Al-Ouhali, indicated that the number of students interested in taking e-learning courses in KSA was high and constantly rising. Al-Ouhali argued that this trend could be attributed to the fact that Saudis wanted to work at the same time as studying. He also noted that around 65 % of the students who were taking e-learning courses were male and 33% were female. He confirmed that the Ministry of Education had agreed the decision to require e-learning courses and programmes to have greater quality and accuracy (MOE, 2015). Another reason for the huge increase in students taking e-learning courses, according to Yassir Bahadur (a professor in the Faculty of Medicine at King Abdulaziz University) is because students wanted to improve their academic profile based on the Saudi curriculum (MOE, 2014).

The Saudi Electronic University (SEU)

The government set up its first electronic institution of higher learning in 2012, the Saudi Electronic University (SEU). It was also the first in the Arab world and offered specific prerequisite courses as demanded by the labour market. (Al-Arabiya News, 2012)

A unified educational style has been followed in SEU's use of BL. 25% of the total course time is meant for face-to-face classroom learning with the

remaining 75% online whereby students interact with virtual classroom-book contents, participate in educational forums or make use of the Learning Management System (LMS). Teaching and learning in the foundation or preparatory year at SEU is in English in order to build and enhance skills in the English language (Almousa, 2013; SEU, 2012a). The LMS makes use of Education First (an online system for learning English in the preparatory year) and Blackboard (a VLE) to enable courses to be flexibly managed and delivered on the web (SEU, 2012a). Many video tutorials, available on the SEU website, explain to the academic staff the usage of various features of the LMS. For example, they can use it in building content for courses, grade centre and assignment, operating under the course environment and application of journals, discussion board and blogs (Almousa, 2013; SEU, 2012a).

SEU programmes are intended to blend sophisticated techniques into the student's learning with the aim that they will become skilled enough to practically solve specific workforce needs up to the international level (MOCIT, 2012). For undergraduate degree students, there is normally one class every week while the Master's degree students have a class every three weeks. The students normally agree on these classes and virtual classes are attended through the internet as scheduled by the same students. Additionally, these students schedule interactive classes on a weekly basis, where they meet their lecturers physically or online (SEU, 2012b). The university has three colleges:

- The College of Administrative and Financial Sciences;
- The College of Computing and Informatics;
- The College of Health Sciences. (SEU, 2012a).

According to SEU's Director, Abdullah Al-Mossa, the institution offers regular certificates recognized by the country's Civil Service Ministry, since it is a public institution just like any other in the country. Al-Mossa further stated that Master's degree students in the university require at least 500 points in

TOEFL, and an IELTS score of 5.5 or a similar qualification from the National Centre for Assessment in Higher Education.

An executive meeting attended by officials from 25 public institutions of higher learning in December, 2012 was held in SEU headquarters, with the Deputy Minister for Education Affairs - Muhammad Al-Ouhali in attendance, to deliberate on methods of implementing the ministry's decisions. For the academic year of 2016-17, universities were advised by Al-Ouhali not to accept any further students in DL and e-learning courses. Instead, SEU was to utilise this period to develop centres for e-learning throughout the country with the assistance of other universities.

Al-Moussa announced a five-phase programme to be followed by SEU for the intake of students. The first stage was to monitor the trends of students along with the requirements of the job market. A compatible learning atmosphere was to be developed in the second stage before admission of students was started. The remaining stages will concentrate mainly on review and modification. Al-Moussa emphasised the role of the university in the development of the economy in the Kingdom based on knowledge and has further asserted that the needs and requirements of the labour market and the development of Kingdom will be satisfied by SEU. According to him, the university will be able to increase its student intake with the help of the ministry's decision on e-learning courses which many Saudi students now want to join. Al-Moussa has further stated that the aim of the decision is to unify the national policies concerning e-learning and to improve the service quality and various academic fields of specialisation in Saudi universities. (SEU, 2012b).

The objectives of SEU are:

1. To acquire national representation and enhance expertise in the qualified field;
2. To offer higher education in a flexible yet unique structure, encourage self-learning while providing advanced technological skills, and

promote general development coupled with responsible labour through a virtual environment;

3. Use E-learning to give technically structured higher education, transfer knowledge acquired from other universities and international institutions through world-class faculty members, offer refined studies originating from international sources and finally the students according to Saudi society's needs;
4. Promote the E-learning concepts and link the education acquired with the needs of Saudi's society (SEU, 2012b).

SEU has entered into partnerships with a number of universities from other countries to ensure that not only is provision flexible and unique, but also to ensure quality and support for the skills acquired by students to be relevant to the global job market. The partnerships foster the exchange of knowledge through collaboration, sourcing of information from multiple sources and transfer of information accordingly by ensuring it is compatible with the Saudi society.

The Minister of Education opened SEU in Riyadh in 2012 and three branches were subsequently opened in Jeddah, Dammam, and Madinah. Initially the institution offered undergraduate studies to about 7000 students from both genders and a MBA (Masters in Business Administration) to about 100 male learners. Currently, it has 9 branches in Almandine, Aljouf, Al Taif, Abba, Alqassim, Dammam, Jeddah, Jazan, and Tabuk. The future plan of the institution is that by 2016, it should have opened 20 branches across the KSA and serve up to 100,000 students (SEU, 2012b).

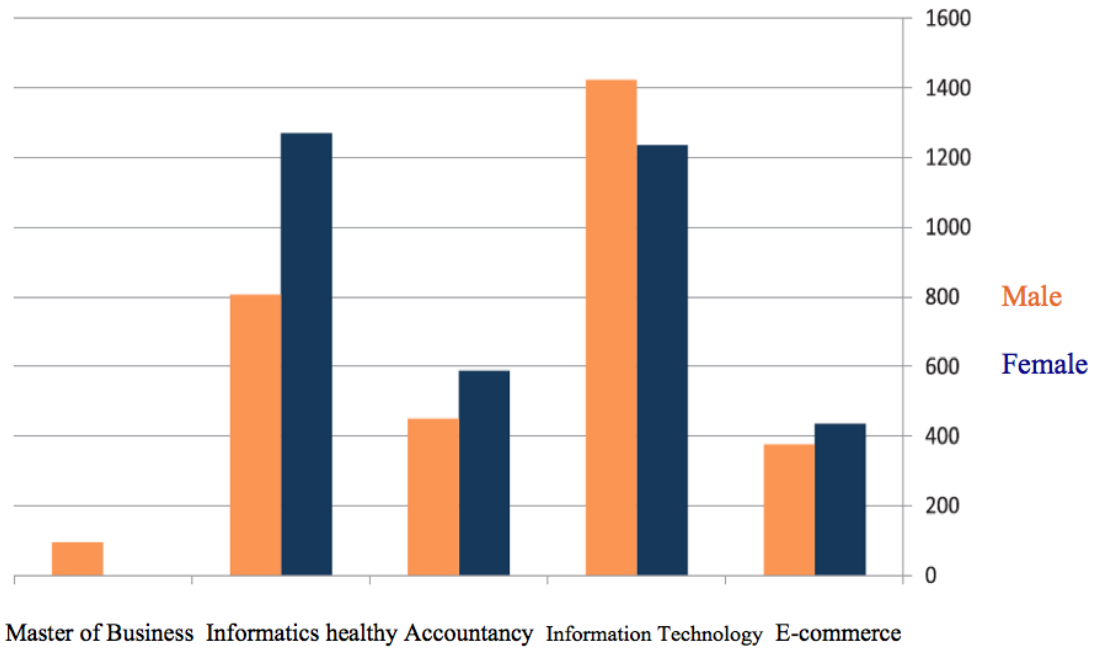

Figure 1: Distribution of SEU students by programmes pursued (MOE, 2014).

Purpose of the Planned Research

The purpose of this planned research is to contribute to the development of a framework that will serve as a better foundation for universities opting to implement BL to improve the quality of education. The framework could facilitate perceptions of possibilities and decision-making processes with regard to planned innovations. Consequently, it is hoped to seek solutions to current educational challenges that confront SEU as an educational institution within Saudi Arabia, and to give the Ministry of Education and university administrators a chance to maximize the advantages of BL.

According to a report in Alwatan News (2014), however, more than 90% of students who enrolled in SEU foundation year at Al Medina city have failed to continue study. They refer to a number of difficulties during their study, asserting that success in the high level material cannot be achieved and accused the university of failing to solve the difficulties they face during study, especially with regard to the lack of communication, as well as frequent changes in some curriculum. SEU considered the high rate of dropout from the foundation year to be natural, however, since the university accepts all high school graduates unconditionally. Consequently new students may be

deficient in a number of disciplines such as mathematics, English and computer science, with some of them not being in the right place at enrolment. At that point, it is argued, students begin to leave their course of study. Successful implementation of the blended-learning programme in its initial phases through a proper understanding of its impacts should, however, lead to an increasing trend in quality of education, as well as student satisfaction. SEU, as well as other relevant universities implementing this type of learning or similar to it, can also benefit from this study by taking advantage of the framework formulated to enhance the educational system and its effectiveness.

It is anticipated that these purposes can be achieved by gauging the views of participants toward the blended-learning process. The aim is to identify crucial factors that affect learning effectiveness in order to create a picture of the learning environment when BL is integrated. The institution needs to understand what students and teachers in the programme require and if their needs are met.

This research is expected to disclose a number of important issues to the whole learning institution, as the main benefactors to the project are both the students and the teachers. The project will also be considered successful only if the students feel contented with the provisions of the programme. On the other hand, instructors will only be satisfied if the students complete the programme with adequate understanding and the necessary ability to develop themselves and the community. Furthermore, the research will establish the demands and challenges faced by both the teachers and students. Finally, the contribution of both parties towards the activities of the programme will be analysed so as to understand the situation.

Research Questions

To achieve this goal of this study, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. **How is BL perceived by SEU students?**

a. How do students at SEU perceive their ability to learn independently under the BL programme?
b. Are there benefits to be gained from BL from the SEU students' perspective?
c. What are the perceived challenges experienced by SEU students?

2. How is BL perceived by SEU instructors?

a. What do SEU instructors understand about BL?
b. Are there benefits to be gained from BL from the SEU instructors' perspective?
c. What are the perceived challenges experienced by SEU instructors during the implementation of BL?

Understanding the Term Perception:

Considering the focus on studying the perception of instructors and students regarding BL, it is important to understand the implications of 'perception'. The concept has been widely defined as a means by which people recognise and interpret information (Kim & Malhotra, 2005). According to Higgins, Hartley & Skelton (2002), perception further entails the ways in which people respond to information in a 'meaningful way'. Thus, perception can be described as a process in which people recognise and interpret information as well as the way that they respond to the information.

In the context of BL, understanding the perceptions of the instructors and the learners is crucial because it would reflect the nature of this learning approach, depicting crucial elements such as importance and weaknesses, based on participant's experiences. By understanding these perceptions, their antecedents can be manipulated to achieve desirable learning goals.

Researcher Positionality:

The first named author, and the researcher, has a connection with the NCEL in Riyadh and Deanship of e-learning and DL at Imam University in Riyadh city and has had the opportunity to follow the development of blended learning (BL) and e-learning and DL in Saudi universities, with a particular focus on BL in Saudi Electronic University (SEU). He is thus motivated to explore the effects of BL on the quality of the education in terms of learning and teaching

in the Saudi context.

Such a history also places him in the 'insider' role as a researcher so care will need to be given to research design and data analysis to ensure, as far as possible, outcomes are trustworthy and authentic and do nor display researcher bias.

Research Methods

For this research, the questions raised will be answered through questionnaires for students and interviews for the instructors. This is because the main focus of the study is on BL in the education system and it is most likely that the instructors have greater knowledge about this issue. In this regard the instructors will be interviewed in order to get their perceptions towards the advantages, problems and forthcoming impacts of BL in the institution. The students do not have the authority to influence the decisions made on the BL process, but they are the end users of the ICT facilities. Therefore questionnaires will be used to determine their views on the benefits and challenges of the BL.

Instructors are the people most likely to be affected by the ICT programme compared to the students, since such processes require large financial resources, administrative and technical support. All in all, students are the main beneficiaries of the education process and should be frequently consulted. However, they are exempted from the decision making, policy designing, and planning processes. For these reasons, evidence should be gathered from both parties.

The objective of the study is to evaluate the current effects of BL on the students and its challenges to the education process from Saudi students and instructors. Face-to-face interviews have a number of advantages, including flexibility where interviewees express themselves freely, and researchers are able to clearly understand the root of the information. Due to the large number of students, a questionnaire approach is the most appropriate for the students (as beneficiaries of the process). Besides, students' information will help to

understand their perceptions towards the whole process and thus they will complete the questionnaires on their own.

The research will thus employ both quantitative (questionnaire) method with students and a qualitative method (semi-structured interviews) with instructors. The quantitative survey questionnaires will firstly be conducted with SEU students and if any important response arises related to the lectures and leaders, new questions will be designed and asked during the interview. Secondly in-depth qualitative interviews will conducted with teachers and leaders. In terms of data analysis, the quantitative data will analysed using descriptive statistics to inform responses to the research questions. As for the qualitative data, a thematic analysis will be used along with a content analysis, in which themes and patterns emerge from the collected data.

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