

Blended Learning Environment in Management Education: Opportunities, Challenges and a Way Forward

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Abstract

This paper is purely based on the review of related literature which was categorised under (a) drivers of change in learning environments, (b) opportunities and issues in blended learning and (c) strategies to overcome these issues. It was noted that new learning environments like 'online only' and 'blended learning' are rapidly becoming integral parts of globalizing management education. Better reach and flexibility were identified major advantages of these new environments. However, on the issues of quality control and development of soft skills like interpersonal and communication skills blended learning environments were identified better than 'online-only'. Scholars in this area identified that blending emerged as a middle way between modern 'online' and traditional 'face-to-face' learning. Later, some studies also indicated that hybrid learning environments were not free from challenges. These challenges were mainly categorised under environmental, institutional, instructor and learner personality related issues. It was interesting to note that considering the strengths of blended learning environments, studies done so far seem to be optimistic about the growth of blended-learning environments. Therefore, from the review it can be inferred that proactive approaches and consistent efforts in managing challenges in blended learning ensures its effectiveness and bright future prospects.

1. Introduction

Literature indicates that business environment for management education is changing and blended learning environment is gaining popularity over time. The review also identifies technological advancements, changing learner profiles and needs as major drivers. Besides these drivers blended learning environment emerged as a result of efforts to combine advantages of 'face-to-face' and 'online

only' learning environments. However, blended learning environments are not free from its challenges. This paper intends to discuss blended learning environments in management education, opportunities, challenges and a way forward in these environments.

2. Changing business environment and Learning

Growing globalization, availability of technology intensive learning options, need for lifelong learning and competition has contributed to the emergence of online and blended learning environments [1]. The study also identified growing life expectancy and increasing number of women in jobs as main demographic drivers which contributed to the need for more flexibility in education. These new learning environments (both online and blended) were considered superior in terms of cost effectiveness, time flexibility, accessibility and higher reach [2].

However, emergence of online learning environments also contributed to the debate about maintaining quality in such environments. It is interesting to observe that the 'Online only' mode was identified short on development of interpersonal, team management and oral communication skills [3]. The study also indicated that online only learning environments require higher faculty time commitment and are susceptible to the technical difficulties. Literature reviewed so far supported that the issues related to 'face-to-face' and 'online only' environments have contributed to the emergence of blended learning environments.

Blended learning environments incorporate both 'face-to-face' and 'distance' delivery modes [4]. The study also highlighted motivations behind adopting blended learning environment which mainly were (a) ensuring pedagogical richness, (b) access to varied set of information, (c) imparting of satisfactory interpersonal and group interaction skills, (d)

opportunities for learners to exercise their choices, (e) cheaper education option, and (f) ease of revision.

Different educational institutions go for various degrees of blending which contributes to the variations in quality of blended learning environments which can be measured on four major criterions of (a) communication, (b) structure, (c) access, and (d) flexibility [5]. These variations also affect quality and effectiveness of learning.

3. Opportunities and challenges in blended learning environment

Review of literature indicated that major driving forces like reduction in funding, growing competition and time pressed learners will remain part of coming scenario and hence will contribute to the demand and growth of blended learning environments.

Blended form of learning environments was identified more effective and satisfactory by many researchers. Blended learning environments were appreciated for ensuring higher level of learning due to its potential in developing critical and reflective skills [6]. It is important to mention that these environments have challenges to face as well. Literature reviewed suggested that these challenges were related to internal educational environment, external business environment for education, challenges related to instruction and learner profiles. Internal educational environment related challenges were categorised under (a) administrative and development challenges and (b) organizational and leadership challenges [6]. Besides these internal issues, many external factors were identified barriers like work environment support to learner, interaction with peers, assistance provided by technology help desk and program coordinators [7]. Besides these, instructional and learner variables were also identified as influencing variables [8].

4. A way forward

To overcome these barriers, researchers suggested several strategies. To make such learning environment effective, it is important to ensure quality in communication, structure, access and flexibility aspects of blended learning environments [5]. To ensure flexibility and effectiveness in such environment, it is essential to have equal attention to all steps which includes design, development, implementation, evaluation and revision [9]. Training the faculties and orienting the learners were also identified helpful in improving effectiveness of blended learning environments [10]. The study also

indicated that the business schools should ensure quality in blended learning and try to reduce risk associated with such learning environments. Taking such proactive steps will ensure that blended learning environments provide quality business education.

5. Conclusion

The review clearly indicates that the changing business environment is contributing in transforming the field of management education. Emergence and growing popularity of blended learning environments is one such trend. Review so far also highlights that besides some barriers in designing and implementing blended learning environments, the potential of such environments in providing effective management education is beyond any doubt.

6. References

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