

An exploration of students' perceptions on the blended learning mode in management education: A case of selected colleges in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of an exploration of student perceptions of blended learning in next normal management education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning became the normal mode of teaching and learning in higher education. The changing landscape of higher education needs an innovative approach for teaching and learning. In the current circumstances, a combination of online and traditional learning may be assuming a place as the right learning model. This model is commonly known as "blended learning" which can be considered as the next normal learning process in higher education. The focus of this exploratory study is to present the perceptions of management students towards blended learning. Data were collected from 375 respondents from different institutes in India. Descriptive analysis of the responses has been presented. The results of the study show that the students support blended learning in next normal management education. The study also found that students are ready for blended learning as the next normal learning process.

Keywords: *online classes; next normal; blended learning; management education*

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning in education has again been in the limelight due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Blended learning has been defined by several scholars in different ways. Qiang (2016) noted that blended learning usually consists of two main components: face-to-face (f2f) learning and online learning. So blended learning is a learning approach that combines both online learning and traditional face-to-face learning to improve students' learning experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the use of information communication technologies for maintaining the social distancing norms and nationwide lockdowns. Organizations and their employees all over the world were forced to adjust to new ways of work and life. The education sector was amongst the first few badly affected professions that encountered the sudden shut down of all its activities. Thousands of schools and higher education institutions and millions of students were affected by the COVID-19 lockdown. Almost all the educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities) in India were forced to switch to remote learning quickly and subsequently online teaching became a normal situation in education overnight.

As every institution is approaching the time of a new normal situation post COVID-19, there is a need for rethinking education provision in light of emerging opportunities and challenges. The landscape of management education is also changing in the present situation. The then Union Education Minister of India Mr. Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' noted "online mode of teaching won't vanish with the COVID-19 pandemic. The government would prefer a blend of online and offline", Sharma (2020).

Zhao & Watterston (2021) identified three big changes that education systems should make post COVID-19. These changes involve curriculum that should be developmental and evolving; pedagogy that should be student-centered and purposeful; and delivery of instruction that should capitalize on the strengths of both synchronous and asynchronous learning. The student-centered learning approach will be the future of the next normal learning paradigm. Blended learning is one of the student-centered learning approaches which facilitates student access to learning materials and resources anywhere, anytime, with anyone and with anything using information technologies. In cognizance of this, Dziuban et al., (2018) argued that blended learning has heralded substantial change in higher education. In their article Sneader & Singhal (2020) used the term next normal that will emerge in the post COVID-19 era. Some educationists such as Bozkurt & Sharma (2020) are also discussing this phenomenon by referring to it as the next normal from the educational perspective. Cahapay (2020) has also explored the concept of a 'next normal' post COVID-19 era for higher education in the Philippines.

Therefore, the idea of blended learning is very relevant for the reopening of educational institutions and ensuring learning continuity in next normal teaching and learning. Bozkurt & Sharma (2020) also predicted that there will be adoption of blended or hybrid modes of education, blending of the strengths of one type of mode and "neutralizing" weaknesses that may be found in other modes.

Spring & Graham (2017) compared themes of the top blended learning articles from seven different regions of the world (North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Australia, the Middle East and Africa). They concluded that the majority of the research (27.6%) focused on students' perceptions on blended learning. Among the top articles, 19.7% were exploratory. Descriptive data analysis (60.5%) was the most common type applied in the most-cited articles. Therefore, a study of exploring students' perception is an important topic of research not only to know their feelings but also to examine the successful implementation of pedagogical systems of learning in higher education.

Objectives

The presentation in this paper explores management students' perceptions of blended learning, its readiness among them and proportion of its implementation. The related objectives are as follows:

1. To recognize the relevance of blended learning in management education in next normal learning.
2. To study the perceptions and readiness of management students towards blended learning.
3. To know the management students' opinion about the proportions to be studied remotely and in-person learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have been conducted by various researchers to understand the perceptions of students from different streams, but no study is available in the field of management education. Cahapay (2020) has noted the need for rethinking education in the new normal post COVID-19 era from the perspective of curriculum studies and further, the curriculum in the new normal era should develop preparedness competencies among the students. Medical education is one of the sectors where blended learning is more challenging. Suryawanshi & Venugopal (2020) conducted a study to understand the perceptions and preferences of medical students during the pandemic lockdown in India. A total of 296 students in year II and the pre-final year of the MBBS participated in the study and identified blended learning as an acceptable method of learning for the medical curriculum.

Radhika (2021) compared and evaluated the opinions, preferences, and experiences of undergraduate medical students during continuous online classes at the time of the pandemic

lockdown. A sample of 115 undergraduate medical students from the Sardar Patel Medical College of Bikaner, Rajasthan, India participated in the study. Most of the students preferred the traditional mode of teaching for better understanding of concepts and details of topic. However, many of them also agreed that they are getting more time to study with online teaching. The study concluded that students support current ways of online teaching and are ready for blended learning in the upcoming post COVID-19 new normal life.

Khan et al., (2020) examined students' perception and readiness for online learning adopted at the university level during the ongoing pandemic. 184 university students of National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi completed online questionnaire and the findings showed that students have a positive perception towards e-learning and are ready for the acceptance of this new learning system. On the other hand, Hariharan et al., (2020) in a study that investigated students' thought processes during the extended COVID-19 lockdown, examined their views about online education, their main understanding and worries, their stress levels, and their view of an eventual post COVID-19 return to college. More than 300 students at the PSG College of Pharmacy, India participated in the study and the findings indicate that the students were extremely keen on resuming practical labs but showed mixed feelings towards resuming traditional examination methods.

Maguire et al., (2020) presented a research report in which the findings clearly show that blended learning is the preferred model for university students, staff, and leaders. The students expressed preference for blended learning that incorporates extensive online components alongside in-person learning. Muthuprasad et al., (2021) also investigated the preferences and perceptions of agricultural students in online classes. 307 students participated in an online survey and the results indicate that most of the respondents (70%) were ready to opt for online classes during the pandemic. They also expressed their concern about the agricultural education system where many courses are practice oriented, therefore, shifting completely to the online mode may not be possible and there would be need to devise a hybrid model in the new normal.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses a descriptive survey research design. Survey design is used to provide quantitative descriptions of trends, attitudes, and opinions of the respondents (Creswell, 2014).

The research instrument is an online questionnaire that was sent via Google forms to the different students of business studies at the various colleges across cities in India. The link to the instrument was shared via WhatsApp groups and email. The survey instrument was available to the students over a period of approximately 20 days in the months of March to April 2021. The instrument comprised a total of 11 items in which 6 of the items covered students' perceptions of adapting to blended learning on a 5-point Likert Scale, with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The sample consisted of a total of 375 respondents comprising graduate and undergraduate students (MBA, BBA and B.Com) from three private and three government colleges spread across five cities in four of the states in India. The study attempts to explore the answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the students' perceptions regarding learning mode in next normal management education?
- RQ2: What are students' opinions/views on the proportions of Blended learning in formal management education in next normal education?
- RQ3: What are students' perceptions regarding adoption of Blended learning in next normal management education?
- RQ4: How ready are the students for Blended learning?

Reliability of the Instrument

The Cronbach alpha test was performed to measure the internal consistency and reliability of the instrument. The Split-Half Reliability test with Spearman-Brown Adjustment was also calculated to obtain inter-item reliability. The Cronbach alpha for the section related to the preference for blended learning in management education was 0.89 and 0.90 with Split-Half Spearman-Brown Adjustment as shown in Table 1. The instrument was considered reliable for the study.

Table 1: Instrument Reliability Test

Section	Cronbach's Alpha	Split-Half with Spearman-Brown Adjustment
Students' perception on adapting blended learning	0.89	0.90

RESULTS

The data in Table 2 below shows the characteristics of the respondents including their gender, and the type of college they attend. As shown in the table, most students attended government colleges, and most of the respondents were males.

Table 2: Respondents' Data

Gender	Number and %	Colleges	Number and %
Male	191 (51%)	Private	108 (29%)
Female	184 (49%)	Government	267 (71%)
Total	375		375

(Source Primary data)

RQ1. Learning during Covid-19 and Post Covid-19

The management students were asked two questions regarding their understanding of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and their preferred choice of teaching-learning post COVID-19. In response to the question on whether online teaching was a temporary mode of teaching during COVID-19, 78.13% said "yes". Further, 44.53% of students preferred to continue with the online mode of learning as their preferred choice of teaching and learning post COVID-19, and 29.07 % selected hybrid or blended learning for their preferred choice. The results are shown in the Table 3.

Table 3: Students' opinion about learning mode during and post COVID-19

Item No.	Item	Responses		
		Yes	No	Can't Say
1.	Do you think online teaching was a temporary arrangement mode of teaching during Covid-19?			
	Frequency	293	46	36
	Percentage	78.13	12.27	9.6
2.	After Covid-19, your preferable choice of mode of teaching-learning will be?	Offline	Online	Both (Hybrid)
	Frequency	99	167	109
	Percentage	26.4	44.53	29.07

RQ2. The proportions of Blended learning:

The students were asked their opinion about the inclusion of blended learning in formal management education in the future. At the lowest level 7.73% favored less than 20% blended learning in the future while 34.13% of the students favoured blended learning constituting between 60% to 80% of the formal learning in management education in the future. In response to the question on the proportion of online and in-person components for a viable model in the future, 38.5% expressed the opinion that an equal proportion (50-50%) of both online and in-person learning components would be viable. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Students’ opinion about the proportions of Blended learning

Item	Responses				
	20% to 40%	40% to 60%	60% to 80%	Less than 20%	More than 80%
In your opinion, Blended learning would constitute what percentage of formal learning in management education in the future?					
Frequency	58	117	128	29	43
Percentage	15.47	31.2	34.13	7.73	11.47
In your opinion, what proportion of in-person and online components should be combined to make blended learning a viable model for the future of management education?	Both equal (50%-50%)	More online and less in-person	More in-person and less online	Can't say	Any proportion Depends on subject
Frequency	144	45	84	74	28
Percentage	38.4	12	22.4	19.73	7.47

RQ3. Perceptions about adoption of Blended learning:

In this section of the questionnaire, students were given options on the Likert scale to rate their preferences from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This section contained six items. When “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” are combined, most of the students agreed on the adoption of blended learning. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Students’ responses about the perception of adopting Blended learning

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Is blended learning the next normal in management education?	43 (11.47%)	56 (14.93%)	40 (10.67%)	196 (52.27%)	40 (10.67%)
Should blended learning be made a part of business management course curriculum	38 (10.13%)	63 (16.8%)	42 (11.2%)	193 (51.47%)	39 (10.4%)
Should management education permanently be shifted to a hybrid model of learning	41 (10.93%)	59 (15.73%)	48 (12.8%)	185 (49.33%)	42 (11.2%)
Will it (Blended mode) accomplish the core concept of management education	43 (11.47%)	62 (16.53%)	55 (14.67%)	172 (45.87%)	43 (11.47%)
Blended classes help comprehend the course materials compared to traditional Classroom learning	39 (10.4%)	77 (20.53%)	47 (12.53%)	171 (45.6%)	41 (10.93%)
Do you think you can be benefited from Blended environment facilities to increase your creativity	40 (10.67%)	61 (16.27%)	43 (11.47%)	185 (49.33%)	46 (12.27%)

RQ4. Students' readiness of Blended learning:

In response to the item about the readiness of business studies students towards blended learning in management education post COVID-19, 48.53% of the students agree on readiness and 9.87% strongly agreed. The results indicate that more than half of the students are ready to adopt blended learning in management education. The responses are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Students' readiness for Blended learning

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Do you think, students are ready for Blended teaching-learning post Covid-19	40 (10.67%)	66 (17.6%)	50 (13.33%)	182 (48.53%)	37 (9.87%)

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the preference and perception of management students regarding blended learning.

The students' perception is a most fundamental criteria for implementing any innovative teaching-learning idea. This is supported in previous research by Khan et al. (2021). Students expressed positive perceptions toward blended learning in management education in the present study and most of them selected hybrid or blended learning as their preferred choice of teaching-learning mode after COVID-19. The studies conducted by Maguire et al., (2020) and Radhika (2021) also support this finding. Further, most of the students opined that proportions between 40 to 60 % and 60 to 80% in the form of blended learning should be included in formal management education in the future. Interestingly about 2 in 5 of the students were of the view that an equal proportion of modes (50-50%) should be combined to make blended learning a viable model for the future of management education .

The majority of the students that participated in the study accepted that blended learning is the next normal in management education. They also agreed that blended learning should be included in the curriculum of management education and management education should be shifted to blended learning mode. As far as the readiness of the students for blended learning, there was agreement by just under 60% that they are ready to adopt blended learning in management education. This finding is similar to that in the study conducted by Suryawanshi & Venugopal (2020) for medical students in India, in which 48.2% students preferred the blended mode of teaching.

Overall, this study was able to produce results on acceptance in blended learning among management students in India. The study findings confirm that the students are ready for blended learning as a better choice in a post COVID-19 next normal learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The educational system post COVID-19 is in a transition stage. To meet the challenges of continuation and for fulfilling students' need, the adoption of new methodologies and exploring new paths in achieving the goal of quality education are very important. Blended learning is an innovative concept that includes the advantages of both traditional classroom teaching and ICT supported online learning. In this mode of learning, students can still learn in the traditional face to face classroom and combine it with online learning as a complement.

The main objective of this paper was to present the perceptions from the perspective of management students on adopting blended learning. The results show that the students support the adoption of blended learning in post COVID-19 management education.

The study concludes that blended learning has the potential to be adopted in management education. The study also finds that students are ready for blended learning as the next normal learning process. The findings of the study will help educational institutions in a developing country like India, to take the teaching-learning process to the next level as a new way of learning post-COVID-19 and other such situations in the future.

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