

Evaluation of the Blended Learning System in Higher Education: AOU – Kuwait

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Abstract—The Arab Open University (AOU) implemented the blended learning system since 2002 in its seven branches: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain and Oman. Within a decade of its operation, it is a conventional practice to examine this new approach and evaluate the convergence between Internet-based and traditional education. A questionnaire has been adopted along with interviews and empirical observations targeting faculty members in three different programmes. Raw data has been generated to evaluate the status quo of the blended learning at AOU using radar charts. Six-area radar chart was used in order to measure quality in the system's development. Variations in the related variables lead us to where decisions should be taken to improve a shortcoming or to sustain a good practice.

Index Terms—Blended learning, open learning, evaluation, radar chart, qualitative research

I. INTRODUCTION

Technological Revolution brought about a paradigm shift in instruction. Recurrent changes in the educational system over the past two decades created controversies among scholars. The old school clung to the traditional system, while more laissez-faire embraced the e-learning mode. Between these two polarized systems, a more moderate educational system rose. It is a blend of the first two systems that is both pragmatic and flexible. The popularity of the latter spread throughout the continents till it reached our doors at the turn of the century. What are the criteria that govern this system? How appropriate is it for us? Where do we stand within the local and international paradigms? To answer these questions, an evaluation of the blended learning system is crucial to ensure its currency and its alignment with educational trends.

II. RATIONALE

Design and implementation of the blended system have been undertaken within the last decade. However, evaluating it has not been tackled till now. In a study conducted by Sharafuddin and Allani, the extent of AOU students' satisfaction with the blended system was explored and it averred to be quite high. This paper seeks the tutors' views of the blended learning experience at the AOU. Findings of this research will eventually pave the way for adoption of strategies of a more tailored system to the needs of our students.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this paper we will use a practical approach to evaluate the Blended learning courses and examine how the features of blended learning are used in teaching courses in three different programmes: Business Studies, English Language and Literature and Information Technology. A radar chart is used to examine the extent of e-learning as opposed to the traditional learning at AOU. This radar chart shows graphically the size of the gaps among five performance areas. The statistical concept used in this paper is the Radar chart (also known as cobweb chart) produced by Excel which allows one to frame the 'Big Picture' at a glance.

Sharafuddin and Allani tackled the efficiency of blended learning at the AOU using SWOT analysis. However, the present paper adapts a more appropriate measurement concept that has been developed by Dan Kaczynski¹, Leigh Wood² and Ansie Harding³, (2008). It uses a radar chart with six identified radials each with a question to quantify a measure. A questionnaire was distributed to the faculty staff in the Business Studies, English Language and Literature and Information Technology programmes. The sample size is 40 cases out of 60, which accounts for over 50% of the total number of academic staff members at AOU-Kuwait.

IV. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"Both quality assurance and quality enhancement are now considered essential components of any quality management programme" (Brookes and Downie, 2002). According to Cullen, Joyce, Hassall, and Broadbent (2003) "The challenge is to produce a performance evaluation framework that permits the equal expression of legitimate voices, though they may conflict or compete in some ways".

The AOU – Kuwait branch is applying a blended learning system. It essentially involves the application of e-learning techniques and tools along with face-to-face tutorials. In spite of the controversial exposition on e-learning, the educational trend of the new millennium has a strong penchant towards a blended approach to learning. Garrison & Vaughan, (2008) asserted that one should make use of the advantages of both systems to promote the learning outcomes. Having defined the blended system, however, Marc Rosenberg (Barbian 2002) argued: "The question is not if we should blend. Rather the question is what the ingredients are?"

Head, Lockee, & Oliver, (2002) indicated the research in the area of online learning has focused mostly on the relative effectiveness of online and traditional education in areas such as student learning outcomes and satisfaction.

There are several investigations in which radar chart of

blended learning is adopted to evaluate the impact on learning. These investigations have been implemented for University of Pretoria, University of Technology, Sydney and University of West Florida. Radar charts have been used in these universities to compare the extent and components of blended learning from an instructor perspective. In addition, The American Society for Quality states that "Radar charts, which are used extensively in the field of institutional development, are commonly used to measure quality." Therefore, we believe that the innovative use of a radar chart for educational assessment fits our purpose as well.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire used in this paper provided valuable information concerning the status quo of blended learning experience in the three programmes at AOU-Kuwait. The result is explained in the following figure which suggests the amount of blending that takes place. The smaller the shaded area, the less blended the modules are. The chart suggests an image of a tiny island within an ocean.

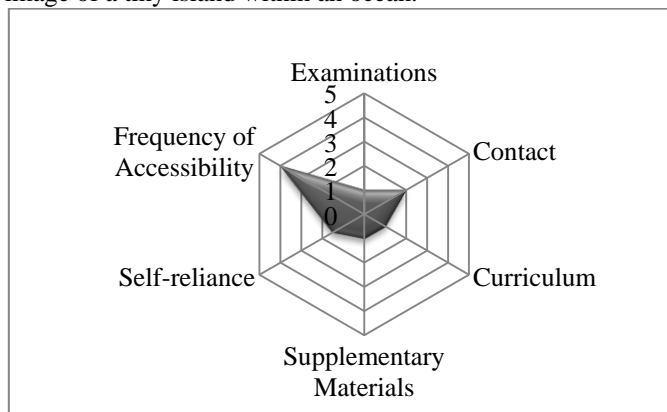


Fig. 1. Radar Chart for blended learning for AOU- Kuwait.

This explains the cautious steps with which blended learning is approached at the AOU in spite of the Kuwait's ex-Minister of Higher Education, Prof. Moudhi Al-Humoud's statement, during the opening of the Regional conference on e-learning, that the time is high to recognize the paradigm shift in higher education, and the importance of transformation from traditional to the electronic education.

The findings for the above chart can be explained as follow:

Frequency of accessibility: The majority of faculty staff agrees that their students access the Learning Management System (LMS) on daily basis. They browse through the system for a multitude of activities such as getting information about the site news, participating in forums, downloading supplementary material, uploading their assignments, accessing the e-library, accessing their grade record sheet, etc. The responses vary from one discipline to another and range from 3 to 5 in the five point scale, making an average of 4 out of 5 throughout the disciplines. This is the highest variable that occupies the lion share of the cobweb.

Examination: Tutor Marked Assignments consist of 20%

of the Final grade at the AOU. This is the only form of assessment that is done online. Students upload their TMAs on the LMS; tutors grade them and upload them with e-comments that justify the marks given. Midterm Examinations and Final Examinations constitute 80% of the final grade. They are paper-based and are conducted on campus. This explains the shrinking of the examination variable in the radar chart to around 1 out of 5. The subjectivity of the exam type of questions elucidates the heavy reliance on paper-based examinations.

Contact: Students' contact of their tutors on the LMS for academic queries is limited. It occupies 2 out of 5 in the contact variable. Each tutor at the AOU has face-to-face tutorials along with office hours where he is physically present in his office to answer students' academic queries. Students prefer the synchronous contact during office hours to the asynchronous communication through the LMS. Those whose professional or familial duties prevent them from attending the office hours have the convenient alternative of contacting their tutors through the LMS. The latter respond within 24 hours to the students' academic queries.

Curriculum: The curriculum packages in all the three programmes are very rich.. However, apart from the Study Guide, the Course Calendar or specimen exam papers, the online part of the material is very limited and students rely heavily on the text book material whether in class or during their revisions. Being affiliated with the UK Open University, the AOU has the privilege of using its state-of-the-art curriculum. According to Miller & King (2003), curriculum design is more important than its platform of delivery. The latter is rather a tool. Despite the scarcity of online material as the radar chart shows, this does not really pose an impediment to quality tuition.

Supplementary materials: Contrary to most open universities, the AOU does not have much supplementary course material. For instance it has no recorded online lectures. CDs come along with their packages and are used by the students on individual basis.

Self-reliance: Despite the fact that the Open University, with which we are affiliated, offers no face-to-face contact, the Arab Open University demands attending no less than 75% of tutorials. Attendance is taken electronically during the tutorial sessions and absentees may even be prevented from sitting the final exams. For local accreditation purposes, mandatory attendance is implemented. Though the contact is regular, it is not sufficient to fully cover the courses material. Therefore, students are neither entirely spoon fed nor wholly self-reliant. The blend is swerving towards the traditional rather than the open learning as the radar chart illustrates. Unlike other universities where the move to blended learning is for financial and staffing reasons (Sadik and Riesman, 2004), the main reason behind implementing blended learning at AOU is to introduce new teaching methods and to seek different learning outcomes, but more importantly, it is to satisfy the local higher education accreditation authorities. AOU branches awarded full accreditation after fulfillment of standards set forth by the local authorities (ministries of higher education in the AOU host countries). Some of these standards are face-to-face tutorials.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present paper tried to evaluate the status quo of blended learning experience at the AOU-Kuwait. Using radial diagram statistical tool has shown that we are adopting more traditional than e-learning educational system. Although we bear the name of Arab Open University, we are not really 'that open'! For a more balanced blend between the two systems, it is recommended to have more e-content. However, reducing face-to-face tuition is not an alternative. The AOU is capable of adhering to the UKOU open educational system, be it in e-content or in infrastructure. Yet, AOU also has to satisfy the local accreditation norms and standards.

The co-authors call for further research of a more comprehensive evaluation of the blended learning system which encompasses not only tutors' view but students, technicians and administrators.

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