Evaluating Blended Learning Initiatives: An Institution-wide Approach

Key Words

Blended Learning, Evaluation, Higher Education

Abstract

Against a backdrop of falling student satisfaction, course progression and retention, much has been touted about the "transformative potential" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004) of blended learning to deliver deep, meaningful and worthwhile learning experiences. However, this mixing of personable face-to-face instruction with purposeful uses of technology is not without controversy. Representing a radical shift from the way teaching and learning is typically carried out, blended learning reconstructs teacher-and-student, student-and-student and perhaps even teacher-and-teacher interactions. How can institutions then tell if their Blended Learning Initiatives are indeed delivering on its promises? The answer lies in a systematic, structured and more pertinently periodic evaluation. Evaluating a blended learning initiative at specific junctures has several advantages. End-of-semester evaluations will enable institutions to re-assess the impact of financial and human resource investments on educational outcomes, possibly leading to modifications of strategic trajectories. Contrary to popular notions, evaluation is not summative but formative. In the light of this, an honest evaluation will surface areas for improvement, which can be addressed at subsequent iterations. Notwithstanding, identified strengths stemming from blended learning practices can be scaled across the institution thereby triggering higher returns on investments. Data-informed dialogues surrounding valuable pedagogical lessons at various platforms such as the Academic Language and Learning Conference will also promote a culture of learning across institutions.   In 2016, our University embarked on the Blended Learning Project with a quest to have all course units in blended mode by 2020. The evaluation of the first iteration of the Project is underway and will be completed in July 2017. The Questions-oriented approach has been adopted to guide the evaluation of the Project (Stufflebeam, 2001) with four key evaluation questions (KEQ) governing the evaluation: 1.How does the Blended Learning Project enrich the quality of student experience? 2. How   does Blended Learning Project develop the capacity of staff? 3.How does the current suite of Technology Enhanced Learning systems impact the Blended Learning Project? 4. What are the lessons learnt, and recommendations for improvement? To ensure that the evaluation's governing questions are responded to comprehensively, the Concurrent Triangulation Research Design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) has been adopted to dictate data collection and interpretation. This design involves the collection of different but complementary data in a strategic way that capitalizes on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data.   The Evaluation has been divided into a larger scale quantitative phase and a smaller scale qualitative phase with both phases running concurrently. For a viable conclusion to be formed, data from both phases will need to be analysed together. Data collected include the views of students and teaching staff from focus group discussions and interviews, analytics from the learning management system and survey data. At the presentation more details will be provided on the rationale and justification for choices relating to the Evaluation Framework, Evaluation Design, data collection methods and analyses. Processes and structures relating to the implementation of the evaluation, challenges faced and key findings of the Blended Learning Project will also presented.

References

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