Exploring Student Perceptions of Blended Learning in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine students' experiences of blended learning in a higher education institution (HEI) in South Africa. Blended learning is increasingly recognised as an approach that promotes learning environments that enhance students' self-directed learning and improve the overall learning experience. The Complex Adaptive Blended Learning System (CABLS) theoretical framework was used for this study, as it places the student at the centre of learning. This study explored the views of 28 students on blended learning, focusing on its benefits and challenges in the South African context. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews and document analysis, with themes identified through inductive coding. The conclusions emphasise the importance of blended learning for ensuring student success and their achievement of the learning outcomes. It also highlights the need for adequate and reliable technological access and infrastructure, as well as strong support systems to overcome the challenges facing students in South African HEIs.

Keywords: blended learning; CABLS theoretical framework; face-to-face learning; online learning; self-directed learning; technology-enhanced learning

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Introduction

The development of new technological inventions to facilitate teaching and learning has resulted in higher education institutions (HEIs) having to enhance the learning experiences of students through the implementation of blended learning—a combination of face-to-face and online learning methods. Blended learning, often referred to as "brick-and-click" instruction, hybrid learning or dual-mode instruction, involves the integration of traditional classroom teaching with online learning technologies. This enables the creation of flexible and more meaningful learning experiences. The use of terms such as "HyFlex learning," "targeted learning," "multimodal learning," and "flipped learning" reflects the diverse nature of blended learning approaches (Ashraf et al. 2021). Communication among students, and between students and their lecturers, is simplified through various online learning technologies, such as discussion forums, which foster asynchronous and cooperative learning (Geng, Law, and Niu 2019).

Despite the established use of blended learning, challenges persist. This highlights the need for further research into its effectiveness from the point of view of students, particularly in the South African context, where limited studies have been conducted to compare blended learning in European countries (Sanders and Mukhari 2024; Wittmann and Olivier 2021). The implementation of blended learning, especially in the local context, gives rise to unique challenges. For instance, access to technologies varies greatly among the student cohort, with many having to deal with erratic internet connectivity, or not having the appropriate devices for online learning.

These problems are exacerbated by failing infrastructure, which has resulted in nationwide load-shedding (intermittent power supply) and inadequate educational facilities, which hamper the successful implementation of a blended learning approach. In addition, the transition from traditional lecturer-centred teaching methods to a blended learning approach tends to be impeded by lecturers' resistance to change, and students being more familiar or comfortable with face-to-face teaching. For these reasons, the researchers sought to fill a gap in this specific field by investigating what impact blended learning has on HEI students' academic success. Specifically, this study investigated students' perspectives on blended learning, focusing on its advantages, associated challenges, and suggestions for enhancing its effectiveness. The researchers aimed to provide specific insights into how blended learning impacts students' academic success and to offer practical recommendations for improving its implementation in similar educational environments.

This study sought to explore the shift from traditional lecturer-centred teaching to blended learning, which involves more than simply infusing technology into a course. Blended learning, as discussed here, is viewed as a hybrid approach where face-to-face lecturing is combined with the latest technologies not only to ensure student success but also the relevance of the course content. The significance of this study lies in its investigation of a teaching and learning method, in seeking to understand students'

perceptions of a teaching technique that can assist in making their learning more relevant and meaningful, thereby contributing to their success in achieving specific learning outcomes.

The following primary research question guided this study:

- How do students perceive the role of blended learning in enhancing their learning experiences within a higher education institution context?

The following sub-questions were devised for this study:

- What are students' views on blended learning in a higher education context?
- What are the advantages and challenges students identify concerning the impact of blended learning on their academic progress?
- What recommendations do students have for improving the effectiveness of blended learning?

The next section discusses the literature review, starting by outlining the theoretical orientation of this study.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspective on Blended Learning

The chosen theoretical framework guiding this study is the Complex Adaptive Blended Learning System, usually referred to by the acronym CABLS. In this model, the learner is positioned at the core, with each component influencing the others. The system comprises six elements, namely the learner, teacher, technology, content, learning support, and institution, each having its distinct character and subsystems. It is important to note that these elements interact with one another, inducing dynamic and integrated relationships within the system. The adaptive nature of this blended learning system arises from the active interplay and effects of each element on the others (Cleveland-Innes and Wilton 2018; McGee and Poojary 2020).

The role of **learners** undergoes adaptation as they engage with the elements in the system. Learners must now transition from passive to active participants. This is a crucial aspect supporting the development of lifelong learners in 21st-century society.

Lecturers in blended environments also have different roles that co-evolve with students. The lecturers need to adapt to pedagogies suitable for blended learning and diverse learners who must be prepared to function in our 21st-century societies. Novel labels are now given to lecturers, such as "facilitators," "mentors," "advisers," and "moderators."

The subject matter remains, and **content** becomes very influential, whereby the delivery of learning is impacted by interactive, dynamic, and media-rich materials available online. This allows lecturers and learners to engage with content before, during, and after the course experience. The interaction among the learner, teacher, technology, learning support, and institution plays a pivotal role in shaping the selection and utilisation of content. Deep learning opportunities arise through this intricate engagement of various learning modes influenced by multiple elements (Cleveland-Innes and Wilton 2018; McGee and Poojary 2020).

In broad terms, **technology** encompasses any equipment or mechanism extending human capabilities. Emerging technologies undergo testing and are either adapted for new purposes or discarded if deemed insignificantly valuable. The integration of technology into learning necessitates new roles for both learners and lecturers, along with innovative approaches to accessing and interacting with content. Extensive studies have explored technology for learning across diverse settings and learner groups, yielding a wide range of outcomes. However, substantial testing and research are still required to fully understand the applications, challenges, and outcomes of technology for learning. Within this theoretical framework, technology is regarded as an integral component of the blended learning system, where all elements work in concert with each other (Cleveland-Innes and Wilton 2018; McGee and Poojary 2020).

Incorporating assistance for learners to master content and cultivate competency is integral to their education. The framework includes **learner support** to highlight the development necessary for becoming proficient in blended learning and the continual assistance required when the system introduces complexity. Support encompasses troubleshooting technology, ensuring access to materials, learning effective online communication, and providing typical assistance related to understanding content and assignments. Furthermore, online learning offers a degree of independence that, once acquired, becomes a lifelong asset, *albeit* necessitating ongoing support across diverse learners and over time (Cleveland-Innes and Wilton 2018; McGee and Poojary 2020). According to Wang, Han, and Yang (2015), learner support involves academic assistance, focusing on helping learners develop effective learning strategies, such as time management and collaborative skills, and technical support, aiming to enhance students' knowledge of technological tools and their proficiency in using them for specific learning tasks.

Similar to how traditional classroom-based learning necessitates physical elements such as buildings, desks, and lighting in brick-and-mortar institutions, blended learning demands technological infrastructure and digital support systems. **Institutional** backing is essential, if not conclusive, for the success of blended learning (Cleveland-Innes and Wilton 2018; McGee and Poojary 2020). The CABLS framework is intended to assist students in gaining a deeper and more accurate understanding of the dynamic and adaptive nature of blended learning (Wang, Han, and Yang 2015). This approach

empowers individuals new to blended learning to engage with crucial components while developing and presenting a blended learning course or programme.

The researchers chose the CABLS framework as it was felt that it would enable a comprehensive way to investigate the intricate interactions between students, content, and technology. This framework enables a careful exploration of how students engage with the various blended learning components, providing a structured approach to comprehending their experiences in the context of South African HEIs. It was discovered by the researchers, as confirmed by McGee and Poojary (2020), that there is a need for more research that specifically examines how individuals (students) perceive the non-linear relationships of the various components in a blended learning environment.

Enhancing Student Learning Using a Blended Teaching Approach

Blended learning enables students to participate in both online virtual classrooms and traditional face-to-face lectures. The flexibility and adaptability of the learning experience to align with individual student preferences and schedules are notable features of blended learning (Sanders and Mukhari 2024; Wittmann and Olivier 2021). This student-centred approach, initially designed for a specific module and its content, prioritises satisfaction and aligns with the primary goal pursued by all HEIs (Sanders and Mukhari 2024; Wittmann and Olivier 2021). Additionally, this methodology, applicable across various learning programmes and scenarios, promotes the development of lifelong and self-directed learners (Wittmann and Olivier 2021). Its potential to enhance student flexibility and accommodate diverse preferences has led blended learning to gain popularity in recent years (Wittmann and Olivier 2021). In this context, the CABLS theoretical framework, with its student-focused orientation, clearly integrates with the principles of blended learning. The framework, tailored to accommodate the complexities of blended learning, recognises the significance of student satisfaction and students' evolving roles as lifelong and self-directed learners in such dynamic and evolving educational environments. Therefore, the CABLS framework was chosen to guide this study as it serves as a valuable tool for comprehending and optimising the student-focused aspects of blended learning.

Nevertheless, despite its advantages, the current body of literature lacks a thorough discussion of how students' perceptions influence the efficacy of blended learning (Islam, Sarker, and Islam 2022). To address this knowledge gap, the present study explores students' viewpoints on blended learning, clarifying the practical implementation and outcomes of this approach within the HEI, which is the focus of this study.

Wittmann and Olivier (2021) describe blended learning as a practice that empowers students to assume responsibility for their individual learning experiences. This enables the achievement of the learning outcomes specified for a course of study. The increase in the popularity of blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was driven by

educational institutions seeking secure alternatives to continue their teaching and learning (Adel and Dayan 2021; UNESCO 2020). The blended learning system proved advantageous as it enabled students to continue their studies uninterrupted.

To achieve successful self-directed blended learning, it is crucial to realise that this approach depends on continuous communication between lecturers and students. It is not intended to function without the lecturer's direction (Adel and Dayan 2021). Various strategies can be utilised to realise this objective, including maintaining regular communication and providing timely and relevant feedback. Lecturers need to explain concepts using various methodological approaches to ensure the attainment of the learning outcomes. Students highly value lecturers' efforts to involve them in class discussions, which clearly demonstrate that their perspectives are valued and respected. Such practices contribute to an environment where students perceive themselves as actively involved in the learning and teaching experience. The effectiveness of this communication is maximised when it is perceived as shared rather than hierarchical. Lecturers who welcome feedback from students and change their approach accordingly are viewed as developing positive, mutually beneficial learning environments (Armellini, Teixeira Antunes, and Howe 2021).

Utilising a combination of technologies such as video clips, audio recordings, practical problem-solving activities, synchronous/asynchronous discussion forums, and online lessons can enhance students' connection to their lecturers (Nortvig, Petersen, and Balle 2018). Students commonly connect engaging learning experiences with their perceived "entertainment value." They predominantly attribute this value to the personal characteristics of the lecturers rather than the instructional methods developed for the course or lesson. For some students, engaging teaching encourages a sense of belonging and involvement in the actual learning experience and demonstrates interest in students' contributions and ideas. Actively participating in meaningful, interactive tasks within the context of the course and lesson is highly valued by students, as it enhances their comprehension of the content (Armellini, Teixeira Antunes, and Howe 2021). Frequently, there is insufficient infrastructure, including outdated laptops and unreliable internet connectivity. It is, therefore, crucial for HEIs to enhance their technological infrastructure and make it easily accessible for students to use. This enhances the efficacy of the blended learning approach (Ashraf et al. 2021). These obstacles are particularly evident in developing countries, where ensuring stable internet connectivity proves challenging.

Blended learning enables higher education institutions to stay abreast of technological advancements while maintaining the quality of teaching and learning provided to students. It promotes the formation of communities of practice (COP), defined as groups of individuals with shared goals and outcomes collaborating for success in teaching and learning programmes (Nicolini et al. 2022). As a result, learning experiences become more meaningful, relevant, and successful. This, in turn, develops a sense of connectedness and encourages collaborative and interdisciplinary work (Azukas 2019).

Such collaborative efforts contribute to increased confidence for both lecturers and students as they acquire new competencies, expand their knowledge base, refine their technology and facilitation skills, and engage in collective problem-solving (Azukas 2019). The existence of warm and constructive relationships between students and lecturers plays a significant role in influencing students' eagerness to participate in tasks and actively participate in the learning process.

Against this background, the chosen methodology is outlined in the next section.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore students' perspectives on blended learning. Such an approach involves an in-depth exploration and understanding of phenomena through non-numerical data and by emphasising context, meanings, and subjective experiences (Islam and Aldaihani 2022). The researchers deemed this method most suitable for obtaining the relevant information, given its exploratory nature. Focus group interviews were used, as the discussions between a small group of participants enabled the researchers to explore and gather insights on the topic, as recommended by Islam and Aldaihani (2022). The researchers also applied the research technique of document analysis—in this case, by analysing the study material, assignments, and discussion forum posts between a small group of participants, to obtain their views on the phenomenon under study (Morgan 2022). This enabled the researchers to examine the participating students' experiences and opinions, focusing on their knowledge and experiences of blended learning.

The research design involved a single case study (usually a single participant or unit of analysis that is investigated intensively), as suggested by Allan (2020). This allowed for an in-depth examination of the perceptions of those students who had enrolled in two specific modules in a particular department in the College of Education. These modules were "Teaching Home Language in the FET (Further Education and Training) Phase" and "Information and Communication Technologies in Language Education." The researchers chose these modules to glean insights from students who were actively engaged in the ever-changing technological domain, and who were thus required to adapt technology for teaching and learning.

Population and Sample

The researchers chose a homogeneous purposeful sampling technique, which enabled them to select a group of participants who shared specific characteristics or traits (Andrade 2021). The participants were chosen purposefully for their ability to supply information deemed relevant to meeting the research objectives.

The higher education institution used for this study is one of Africa's largest distance-learning institutions, with a student population exceeding 350,000. It offers various

qualifications, including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, diplomas, and certificates across various fields such as arts, business, education, law, and science. The college in which the participants were enrolled for this study was the College of Education. The institution has recently begun implementing blended learning approaches to enhance the learning experience for its students. This transition aims to integrate traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning technologies, thereby providing students with flexible and accessible educational opportunities.

In this study, a group of participants enrolled in the same department, and registered for two specific modules, were selected (see Table 1—Population demographics below). The selection criteria included the students' approachability, and their willingness to engage in the study and answer the interview questions. Their responsiveness to discussion forum posts, and the comprehensiveness of their responses, enabled the researchers to gain in-depth data. This together with an analysis of the study material and assignments ensured that the document analysis was successful. These participants, who were actively involved in the university and its teaching and learning programmes, thus provided relevant information that supported this study in achieving its aims.

Table 1: Population demographics

Participants	Gender	Age	Year of Study	Technology Access	Participation in Blended Learning Modules (Yes/No)
Student A	F	20	4	Yes	Yes
Student B	F	39	3	Yes	Yes
Student C	F	23	1	Yes	Yes
Student D	F	19	1	No	Yes
Student E	F	19	1	Yes	Yes
Student F	F	20	1	No	No
Student G	F	21	2	No	No
Student H	M	20	1	Yes	Yes
Student I	F	19	1	No	Yes
Student J	F	25	4	Yes	Yes
Student K	M	27	4	Yes	Yes
Student L	F	20	1	Yes	No
Student M	F	29	5	Yes	Yes
Student N	F	20	1	No	No
Student O	F	21	2	Yes	No
Student P	F	19	1	No	No
Student Q	F	20	2	Yes	Yes
Student R	F	22	3	No	Yes
Student S	F	33	5	Yes	Yes

Student T	F	30	5	Yes	Yes
Student U	F	22	1	Yes	No
Student V	M	29	5	Yes	Yes
Student W	F	23	1	Yes	Yes
Student X	F	20	1	Yes	Yes
Student Y	F	24	4	No	Yes
Student Z	F	23	3	Yes	Yes
Student AA	M	32	5	Yes	Yes
Student AB	F	24	2	No	Yes
Student AC	F	10	1	Yes	Yes

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through focus group interviews with student participants. This was supplemented with information gathered from the discussion forums and the participants' interactions with their peers. Thus, the researchers collected relevant information reflecting the participants' real-world perceptions of blended learning. Using open-ended, semi-structured focus group interviews and document analysis allowed for a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the participants' views. The thematic analysis helped the researchers to identify recurring themes within the collected data.

To gauge the success of self-directed blended learning, the selected students participated in focus group interviews during which they responded to a set of open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The discussion forums and study material were used by the researchers to gain relevant information (see Appendix B). These made use of thought-provoking prompts to gain pertinent, well-considered answers from the larger cohort of students, who were required to think about and answer several questions, and to respond to their fellow students' posts.

Data Analysis

To derive meaningful insights from the information gathered from the interview questions, the study material, student discussion forum posts, and assignments, the collected data needed to be carefully analysed and interpreted. This enabled the researchers to answer the research questions. Being actively involved in the interpretation, consolidation, and synthesis of the student cohorts' interview responses meant the researchers were able to synthesise the data and decide whether these were appropriate for the study or not. This process involved transcribing, comparing, and analysing the interview responses and discussion forum posts.

An inductive approach—specifically, axial coding—was used to analyse the collected data. This method required a systematic comparison of the collected data to identify codes, categories, and subcategories. This comparative analysis allowed the researchers to compare the data collected and correlate those with the literature review. By adopting

these methodologies, the researchers were able to triangulate the findings, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the data.

Trustworthiness in Data Collection and Analysis

Every qualitative researcher has to guarantee the credibility and trustworthiness of their research findings. In this study, the researchers established a longstanding, trustworthy, and open relationship with the participants. This ensured their willingness to participate in the study and share their personal experiences and views on the topic of blended learning. In addition, the student participants were invited to review the field notes and provide feedback on the researchers' summary of the interview responses. This confirmed that all the data had been captured correctly, which strengthened the trustworthiness of this undertaking.

To enhance the credibility of this study, the researchers selected students who actively participated in the modules, engaged with the lecturers' questions and posts, and demonstrated a willingness to share their experiences. Their wealth of experience and knowledge of being tertiary students allowed the researchers to compare findings across the two semesters of both modules and reach certain conclusions from the literature study, interviews, and document analysis.

Ethical Issues

The chair of the department in which the researchers lectured secured umbrella ethical clearance for the entire department from the Research Ethics Committee of the HEI in question. This clearance granted permission to the researchers to complete their academic investigation.

The researchers undertook to use codes (for example, Student A, Student F, Student A1) to safeguard the identity and privacy of the participating students. The study participants were explicitly informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any point, without fear of being penalised.

Research Findings

This section outlines the findings derived from the participants' interview responses. The following main themes emerged:

Participants' Knowledge of Blended Learning

All participants understood what "blended learning" means and grasped that it is a merging of "traditional" and "online learning." In the words of student C:

> Blended learning is a combination of learning or studying in a traditional classroom and online. With blended learning, students can study face-to-face while using traditional methods of using hardcover books and notes being handwritten.

As Student D stated:

> Blended learning is a style of learning which is online and also face-to-face.

Student S added:

> Blended learning has to do with the mixture of other forms of learning into one. We are learning online, and then maybe we have a contact class where we sit in class and the lecturer teaches in front of us, while we're sitting in front of the lecturer.

Participants' Views of the Advantages of Blended Learning

All the participants expressed the view that blended learning is advantageous as it helps them succeed. They felt that such an approach was student-centric and could accommodate diverse learning styles. This was confirmed by Student C, who stated:

> Blended learning accommodates diversity. Students learn many things in different ways, so blended learning accommodates both styles. Blended learning gives opportunities to all students to acquire information [at their own pace, in their own space].

Many of the student participants mentioned that the flexibility and enjoyability of blended learning made this approach highly appealing and effective. Student F referred to this fact:

> To me, the biggest advantage is flexibility. I can go through my course at my pace … giving myself enough time to research [and] understand the course materials and obtain the support that I might need.

Student A added:

> It means that I do not miss any part of learning. I learn anywhere—even while I am travelling on the road or cooking. In other words, I can do activities at my own convenient time, especially for people like me who are full-time moms and working.

A notable advantage of blended learning, as mentioned by the participants, is the establishment of CoPs, which makes it easy for students to exchange relevant information and collaborate. In this regard, Student F stated:

> I can share my opinions and get answers, maybe not from my lecturer but from my fellow students who have faced similar experiences. So, I feel that blended learning has opened a community where students from different places can interact and share information.

An interesting point mentioned by the participating students is that HEIs are now faced with a technologically advanced generation of digital natives, and that necessitates new and innovative teaching approaches to meet their unique learning needs. In this respect, Student C said:

> Since this new generation is more technologically advanced and enjoys the new way of learning with technology, students enjoy this way of teaching and learning. Students get time to do their research, and blended learning also supports different learning styles, using videos.

The blended learning approach was also deemed beneficial for its almost instantaneous feedback. Student G expressed this view:

> I will get the feedback immediately. I will know where I did wrong and where I need to improve immediately and, if I have queries, they will be clarified right away.

Student O stated:

> Colour coding can help teachers ensure that the feedback is meaningful, that it is then done quickly, and that students can now respond and work on the feedback so that they improve.

Participants' Views of the Disadvantages of Blended Learning

Certain disadvantages were highlighted during the focus group interview. The first major obstacles identified were network-related challenges. As Student M stated:

> Internet problems and load-shedding are the two most common challenges. For example, when I visit my hometown, I do not have internet access because there are no internet service providers that have installed network towers and no infrastructure to support connectivity.

Student T added:

> Although I do have the data from the university, I still cannot access the internet because there is no network where I stay. Some students do not have a smartphone, or they have a phone but they cannot access the course content. So, if […], for example, there was a PowerPoint presentation, they cannot access it.

Self-discipline and being motivated to engage with technology were among the other interesting aspects that the participants highlighted. As Student O indicated:

> For me, the move to blended learning required a significant amount of self-discipline, especially when it came to managing my time effectively. Initially, I struggled to keep up with my work. I found that I had to develop a very strict study schedule and ask others around me to help me keep to it.

Student E opined:

> The biggest challenge for me was finding the motivation to consistently engage with the course. With no physical class to attend, it was tempting for me to keep putting off completing my work. It was easy to distract myself.

Participants' Recommendations for the Implementation of Blended Learning

The importance of being coached in this teaching methodology was something numerous participants mentioned. In this respect, Student M said:

> I would have found it much easier if there had been some pre-training that explained exactly what was expected before I began with the blended learning modules.

Students need to be taught that this is a teaching and learning approach, not a substitution for teaching and learning. In this respect, Student F opined:

> Most of the time I have noticed that lecturers substitute the ICT [information and communications technology] tools in the classroom for the traditional ones. For example, a lecturer stops using a chalkboard, and the lecturer now only starts using a PowerPoint presentation to teach and to present the notes.

Student M discussed continuous assessment:

> It is important for the lecturer to design small, formative tasks that act as checkpoints or self-diagnostic tools that are spread over the course, and have deadlines, which then force students to engage with the learning content.

The need for the Department of Higher Education and Training as well as management of the higher educational intuition to assist in such an approach was debated in depth. Participant N opined:

> I firmly believe that a blended learning approach needs the active involvement and support of the Department of Education. The department must provide the necessary resources, training, and infrastructure.

Participant C supported the above, adding:

> Management must be the leader in ensuring the success of such an approach. They must be supportive of the necessary changes, and in any way that may be necessary.

Building on the above research findings and literature review, the next section discusses the implications thereof, which enabled the researchers to draw certain conclusions.

Discussion

The research findings highlighted the participating students' perceptions regarding blended learning at a specific South African HEI. In the literature consulted, Ashraf et al. (2021) explain that blended learning merges real-time learning with technology to achieve the envisaged learning outcomes. This was confirmed by the student participants who concurred that "blended learning is a combination of learning or studying in a traditional classroom and online."

Participants A, F, and I indicated that blended learning allows them to study at their own pace, grants them greater flexibility, and allows them to study at any time. This view correlates with the findings of Wittmann and Olivier (2021) and Sanders and Mukhari (2024), who note that blended learning can be adapted to each student's unique learning style and schedule. This reflection between students' experiences and the views found in the literature is a central tenet of the CABLS framework, which places the student at the centre of educational activities, while different elements (technology, lecturer) work together in an interconnected system.

Student M's concern about internet problems and load-shedding hampering access to online learning resources correlates with the findings reported by Sanders and Mukhari (2024), who discussed the challenge of inadequate and unreliable infrastructure that limits the success of blended learning for students. This highlights the need for infrastructure and internet access that is reliable and accessible to overcome related challenges, since without adequate technology, a central component of the CABLS system—in which all elements work together to offer a blended learning approach—will be missing.

Moreover, the importance of student training to ensure the successful attainment of learning outcomes is emphasised by Cleveland-Innes and Wilton (2018), who discuss the integrated support systems within the CABLS framework. This emphasises the importance of adequate pedagogical assistance for students so that they are able to understand what is expected when adopting such a teaching methodology. This relates to the work of McGee and Poojary (2020), who emphasise the need to prepare students for the unique demands of blended learning, and aligns with Student M's suggestion that pre-training is essential and would make adapting to blended learning so much easier.

The importance of establishing successful CoPs in a blended learning course was emphasised by Student F's remark on the value of sharing opinions and obtaining feedback, advice or assistance from fellow students, even though they may live in different countries or far-flung places. This is consistent with the view of Azukas (2019), who stresses the importance of collaborative learning, and discusses how blended learning creates an educational environment that encourages community building and collaborative learning with lecturers and fellow students.

Finally, Nortvig, Petersen, and Balle (2018) point out that rapid and appropriate feedback is one of the main benefits of effective learning in blended environments. This sentiment was expressed by several participants, particularly students G, J, C, and O, who mentioned that the prompt feedback received from the lecturer and their fellow students helped them succeed in achieving the learning outcomes of the module.

Considering these findings, it became clear to the researchers that the insights gained from this study contribute to the broader understanding of how blended learning can be

effectively implemented in higher educational contexts. By understanding the specific advantages and challenges students identify, educational institutions can adapt their blended learning approaches to better meet diverse learner needs. The discussions on the importance of infrastructure, training, and community building provide practical recommendations for educational leaders and policymakers aiming to enhance student engagement and success. These findings authenticate existing literature while also serving as a reference for future research exploring blended learning, particularly in contexts with similar challenges, and offering actionable strategies for addressing issues such as technological access and infrastructure limitations.

Summary

This study, which investigated the blended approach to teaching and learning, was based on the perceptions of 28 students registered for two specific modules in a single department at one HEI. The students' views enabled the researchers to gain insight into their knowledge of this approach, its benefits, the challenges they encountered, and their specific suggestions for improving such an approach.

For this study, the researchers chose a qualitative research design to gauge the views and experiences of the participating students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysis of participants' interactions on the module site. The findings revealed that students perceived blended learning as enhancing their learning experiences by providing flexibility and promoting self-directed learning. These insights were consistent with the existing literature, highlighting the benefits of blended learning in improving student engagement and academic outcomes. However, significant obstacles were identified, such as limited access to technology, load-shedding, and outdated infrastructure, which hinder the effective implementation of blended learning in the South African context. This correlation between the literature review and the research results allowed the researchers to draw meaningful conclusions about student perceptions of a blended approach.

The findings of this research show the significant potential of blended learning to improve student success and participation in their studies. This is achieved by ensuring greater flexibility in learning, promoting self-directed learning, and facilitating timely feedback from lecturers. In addition, blended learning enables collaborative opportunities among students through interactive platforms that enhance peer learning and critical thinking. However, for this to be achieved, certain obstacles need to be overcome, especially in the South African context. Notable hindrances include limited access to technology, load-shedding, and outdated infrastructure (devices and gadgets). Furthermore, the findings highlighted the importance of a supportive learning ecosystem that provides students with academic and technological support. Access to academic resources and timely technological assistance enables students to overcome learning barriers and engage more effectively with their studies. Such an environment also creates a sense of community and belonging among students and between them and their lecturers. This provides students with a supportive and emotionally supportive

learning environment, encouraging them to participate actively in learning activities and persevere in academic endeavours, thereby promoting their emotional well-being and sustained motivation. Together, these factors contribute to improved academic performance and overall success. Consequently, the researchers believe the findings of this study might assist future researchers in this domain and may be used by educational institutions around the world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Guide on Student Perceptions of Blended Learning

Understanding of Blended Learning

How would you define blended learning based on your experiences? What does it mean to you?

Perceived Advantages

What do you see as the main advantages of blended learning in your educational experience? How has it impacted your learning?

Challenges Faced

Can you share any challenges or difficulties you have encountered while engaging in blended learning? How have these affected your studies?

Self-Directed Learning

How has blended learning influenced your ability to learn independently? What skills have you developed as a result?

Technological Access

How adequate is your access to technology and the internet for participating in blended learning? Have you faced any barriers in this regard?

Support Systems

What kind of support (from peers, instructors, or the institution) have you received while engaging in blended learning? How effective has this support been?

Recommendations for Improvement

Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you make to improve the effectiveness of blended learning in your institution?

Appendix B: Document Analysis Guide

Content Themes

Identify recurring themes or topics discussed in the forums related to blended learning. What are the main subjects students are engaging with?

Student Engagement

Assess the level of student participation in discussion forums. How frequently do students contribute, and what is the nature of their contributions (e.g., questions, answers, support)?

Perceptions of Blended Learning

Analyse the language and tone used by students when discussing blended learning. What positive or negative sentiments are expressed regarding their experiences?

Collaboration and Interaction

Examine instances of collaboration among students in the forums. How do students support each other in their learning, and what collaborative strategies are evident?

Feedback and Responses

Review the feedback provided by instructors or peers in the discussion forums. How do these responses influence student understanding and engagement with blended learning?