Higher education in emergency situation: blended learning prospects and challenges for educators in the developing countries

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Abstract

Purpose – Blended learning (BL) is becoming more popular as a method of welcoming a progressively diverse range of students while adding value to the learning environment through the integration of online teaching resources. However, BL’s approach of combining online instruction with conventional classroom strategies has received attention and expressed reservations over the years. While several research works have been conducted and draw attention to the global challenges of the BL mode of delivering instruction in BL’s entirety, there is still no full idea of the challenges and prospects that exist regarding teacher educators’ usage of the approach in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the context of developing countries. As a result, this study investigates the prospects and challenges of BL implementation in HEIs from the perspective of educators.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing from the technology acceptance model (TAM), qualitative research methods and semi-structured interviews were used to gather insights from 10 educators. The data were analyzed using a thematic data analysis technique to arrive at the outcome of the study.

Findings – The findings reveal that educators deeply comprehend the BL approach and perceive the approach’s effectiveness in delivering instruction and student learning. Conversely, educators’ challenges are inadequate technology resources, poor internet connections, inadequate professional development training and a dearth of incentives. The study has implications for theory, research, policy enactment and practice regarding the improvement of the BL agenda in HEIs.

Originality/value – The explanatory framework presented here is the qualitative approach to the study of themes regarding the perceptions, prospects and challenges educators experience in their use of the BL approach in teaching and learning in the HEIs.

Keywords Blended learning, Higher education institutions, Challenges, Prospects, Educator

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) strive to provide equal admission to diverse prospective students as well as quality tuition for all. It faces severe challenges amid an emergency, given the fact that emergency occurrences are never planned. However, it is believed that plans can be made to survive or tackle the situation as it happens. Emergency or difficult conditions such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) brought in concerns, exposing the deficiencies in the systems of HEIs that exist in developing countries. For instance, schools

This paper is generated from an unpublished PhD thesis of Brenya, B. (2022), Teacher Educators’ Perceptions and Practices of Teaching in a Blended Learning Mode in Ghana, from the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. http://hdl.handle.net/11660/12034.

Ethical considerations: Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State (No: UPS-HSD2021/0140/21) on 10 JUNE-2021.
and the entire education fraternity experienced serious challenges as most of their staff and students did not know how to transition from the conventional setting to the online, virtual or remote platforms. Educators, being the drivers to push the agenda, were not left out as they became novices in the direction of that swift transition. This affirms Jeffrey et al.’s (2014) and Benson et al.’s (2011) findings that educators find it difficult to transition from conventional classroom teaching to online teaching in a blended learning (BL) setting. It is, therefore, important to subject educators to frequent professional training, conferences and workshops to grasp the knowledge, skills and competency needed to lead and teach students on these new platforms.

Although fully online or remote teaching and learning is the first option to be adopted during such emergency conditions, BL could be chanced on to avoid the hardships educators and students encounter. This is because, with the BL, both prospects for traditional classroom teaching and the online method of delivery are achieved. According to researchers, BL is a teaching method where conventional and face-to-face interactions are combined with the support of technology, the Internet or web-based resources (Anthony, 2021; Brenya, 2021; Graham and Halverson, 2023). BL is believed to be a teaching strategy that gives room for student-centered, active, critical, problem-based and collaborative learning (Fu and Wang, 2021; Azizah and Aloysius, 2023; Mielikainen et al., 2023). Other scholars explain that it employs a constructivist approach to impart knowledge and skills needed for career development (Admiraal et al., 2017; Youde, 2020). According to research, educators believe BL fosters individualization, teamwork, association, engagement, meaningful applicability and student-centered learning (Chiu, 2021).

Despite the potential a BL application brings to the HEI community, educators who engineer to see the implementation of such technological innovations on student recipients are unwilling to accept and apply it to teaching practices, which can create apprehension (Benson et al., 2011). This could be due to the fundamental factors about educators’ perceptions and practices in BL coupled with role change, uncontrolled time, the complexity of designing a curriculum or instructions and anxiety about skills or experience requirements in the use of technology as well as inadequate technical and institutional assistance for BL application (Brenya, 2022; Ying and Yang, 2017). Farjon et al. (2019) also argue that the reluctance of educators is a direct consequence of a dearth of belief in technology, a lack of infrastructure to create or poorer quality expectations, which will affect the implementation of a BL strategy. Academic personnel also have to face the question of how to successfully introduce technology into classroom instruction, thus the reluctance to introduce and implement BL in HEIs.

Several studies have discussed the overarching challenges of the BL mode of teaching, but there is a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities of BL that exist among the education fraternity in developing countries. The problems identified in earlier studies on BL need further investigation to improve educators’ teaching and knowledge of HEIs. As a result, this study investigates HEI emergencies in the context of a developing country (Ghana), taking into account BL challenges and opportunities. To fill practical and theoretical gaps, five semi-structured interview questions were asked to ascertain educators’ perceptions, experiences, prospects and perceived challenges about BL practices. The findings contribute to the theory, practicality and effectiveness of BL practices among students and educators in HEIs.

**Literature review**

**The concept of BL**

Generally, BL is an instructional approach that enables students to learn through physical classroom instruction methods and digital learning, including elements of student
influence over time, location, guidance and/or speed (Graham and Halverson, 2023; Taylor et al., 2018). The combination of physical and digital components in learning environments is an important approach for HEI (Madsen et al., 2018), primarily due to its cost-effectiveness (Maloney et al., 2015) in meeting learning goals. BL can be in a context and mode of synchronous or asynchronous learning where effective teaching and learning take place. The BL approach is determined by institutional policy structure or educators’ plans of teaching activities, curriculum design for instruction and interest in using the approach.

**Educators’ perspectives on teaching in BL mode**

According to recent research, educators’ perceptions of teaching influence the use of ICTs in the classroom (Scherer et al., 2019; Anthony, 2021; Brenya, 2022). Perceptions, beliefs and experiences influence educators’ behavior (Farjon et al., 2019), which ultimately affects teaching practices in a BL setting. More specifically, integrating technology into educators’ activities (Madsen et al., 2018) can facilitate or hinder BL adoption and implementation despite their perceived affluence of use and perceived efficacy of that innovation. Graham and Halverson (2023) identify risk factors that educators perceive about blended education as apprehension of losing control of the situation, poorer grades of students and an awkward way in which this whole type of educational model aligns with the teaching culture, study and service.

The educators’ personal beliefs and past experiences influence their attitude and behavior (Farjon et al., 2019) toward activity in a particular BL environment. Thus, the application of technology to implement BL requires academic support and individual competence. To Noh et al. (2019), some educators are not using technology creatively and effectively because of their attitudes. Educators’ attitudes toward technology acceptance are influenced by factors such as their level of trust in the benefits of technological innovation, compared to existing technology, suitability with current practices, usability and performance characteristics or perceived ease of use.

**BL’s impact on educator’s teaching and student’s learning practices**

The research argues BL empowers educators to optimize quality teaching time, distinguish learning, meet individual student needs and generally feel more successful. Different studies have confirmed that one of the approaches worth promoting and improving teaching methods is BL as the initiative promotes student-centered learning, quality-achieved learning and ability-oriented learning (Fu and Wang, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Yet, Fu and Wang (2021) argue that to certify effective strategies for cultivating critical thinking skills in BL mode, educators must break socially constructed teaching concepts, improve critical reasoning skills, establish clear teaching objectives, perfect the teaching process, optimize learning resources and develop a complete evaluation system.

BL is perceived as a reflective process that enhances classroom instruction by integrating interactive online instruction through various education platforms to achieve the objectives of teaching and learning within a specified, established environment (Brenya, 2022). As a reflective practice, BL allows educators to ruminante on teaching practice, make amendments where necessary and improve on future activities (Brenya, 2022), as well as allow students to revisit recorded course lectures and resources for further studies.

The BL strategy offers students self-regulated learning due to the convenient access to numerous course contents and resources available online. According to the university’s one-five-one instruction booklet for BL, Zhang et al. (2022) suggest that one of the prerequisites for a course online, including assessment, resources and content, is that self-regulated learning is allocated 20–50% of the course hours outside the classroom. There is higher student
satisfaction, and overall, students enrolled in blended classes outperform their colleagues in fully online or face-to-face courses (Ying and Yang, 2017).

**BL perceived challenges**

Digital transformation is a difficult process that is influenced by both external and internal obstacles (Hur et al., 2016). Extrinsic factors are environmental factors that prevent educators from integrating technology, such as technology availability, technical support or education funding. Internal factors are personal factors that hinder educators from incorporating digital innovations, such as educator beliefs, characteristics or perceptions (Brenya, 2022; Cheng et al., 2020). Research links educators’ preconceptions and practices of teaching in BL failure to a paucity of institutional and/or technical support, unavailable resources, uncontrolled time, complex BL instructional design and inadequate skills to use the system, among others (Antwi-Boampong, 2021; Anthony Jr, 2021; Brenya, 2022). The implications are that educators experience more workload, more time and difficulty in transitioning from the conventional method of teaching to online classrooms (Jeffrey et al., 2014). Zhang et al. (2022) suggest that offering educators motivational support such as promotions, awards, funding, limited time, training, etc. could probably solve some of the challenges they perceived using the BL method.

**Addressing educators BL concerns**

BL supports borders on issues of technology, technical, pedagogical and motivational packages institutional managers provide to educators to enhance teaching (Tuiloma et al., 2022). To motivate educators to use BL, the training program heavily relies on pedagogy, learning experiences and educator-implemented education resources. HEI administrators must work to raise educators’ scholarly awareness through promotions, the preparation of technical facilities, continuous support and practice, the creation of a digital learning culture and the recognition of educators who are committed to making BL a success (Graham et al., 2013).

Digital literacy skills are crucial for educators to be conversant about teaching roles and make a smooth transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online learning. Pedagogical support is another essential factor regarding educators’ effective use of the BL approach. It demands educators be skillful, knowledgeable and competent when it comes to teaching students. Studies have found that educators need new pedagogical skills to design materials and apply new educational tools for effective BL practices (Rahmi et al., 2022). However, some BL design challenges are identified as combining adaptability, encouraging engagement and collaboration, facilitating learning activities and promoting an effective learning environment (Boelens et al., 2017). As a result, nonmonetary rewards such as digital devices, awards of honor and employee-of-the-year accolades should be utilized to recognize educators who use BL at HEIs productively and efficiently.

**Technology acceptance model and the BL approach**

Using the technology acceptance model (TAM) as a theoretical basis, this study investigates how educators in a higher education setting create knowledge and make BL practice beneficial for students’ learning and career growth. As an interpretive paradigm to grasp an understanding of teaching and learning phenomena, TAM explains how ICT systems and applications are accepted and implemented by users. TAM proposes that users’ perceived affluence of usage and perceived helpfulness predict the reception of ICT (Davis, 1989; Lazim et al., 2021). The perceived ease of use implies the degree to which educators perceive that using BL comes without any difficulty. However, educators might experience challenges with
the BL strategy and corresponding applications if found complex and difficult to use. This could be attributed to the educator’s lack of knowledge, skills or competency in technology use. Or this situation could also be associated with perception, belief, attitude, etc. which have been described as internal factors to BL challenges found among educators (Cheng et al., 2020). The TAM construct of perceived usefulness implies the degree to which educators perceive that there are benefits surrounding using the BL strategy (Lazim et al., 2021). Thus, where educators find it easy to use BL technologies and perceived that it enhances teaching and learning and makes their work productive, then BL stands the chance of being accepted and implemented. Therefore, limiting the challenges BL brings to educators and students in the HEIs. For instance, a meta-analysis study conducted by Ma and Liu (2005) found that the correlation between both usefulness and affirmation, as well as utility and ease of use, is moderately strong.

Methodology
The present study employs a qualitative research approach and interview technique to investigate educators’ perceptions and practices regarding the BL opportunities and barriers to teaching and learning in HEIs. Qualitative research is used to help explain occurrences in their situational settings by focusing on the experiences and viewpoints of individuals that cannot be explained by statistical measures (Kyngas et al., 2020). The qualitative research design selected for this study is a case study that focuses on educators from one HEI. From the interview, the study relies heavily on narrative accounts, descriptions and interpretations to make sense of the educators’ perceptions and responses to BL’s prospects and challenges. Interviews were employed because it is an imperative technique to create a better understanding of BL prospects, challenges and practices among participants in HEI (Seidman, 2013).

Participants and settings
The research was carried out at one public HEI in Ghana (UCC) that has various institutes and colleges. Hence, educators who teach in the college of distance education and the college of education studies are precisely made up of the target population for the study. This population teaches professional courses for professional teachers in the areas of science and technology education, humanities and social sciences and education outreach. A purposive sampling technique was applied to select the sample from the population on the basis that participants had taught in the colleges for over five years; used the institution’s learning management system and had the experience teaching in blended mode; ready to share the challenges faced and the strategies used to overcome them and responsible for teaching those who are studying to be teachers.

Data were gathered through interviews after approval by the research ethics committee (UFS-HSD2021/0140/21). A preliminary list of prospective participants was made available by the gatekeepers from the two colleges (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). After receiving a list of names of prospective participants from the colleges’ gatekeepers, I contacted the participants via email and explained the study and requirements.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on five broad areas. The first question aimed at soliciting participants’ understanding of BL. The second and third sought to elicit educators’ perceptions of BL and its impacts on teaching practices and student learning, respectively. The fourth inquired into the activities educators perform in blended teaching. They were also asked about the most difficult challenges they faced in implementing effective blended teaching strategies. Lastly, the educators were asked about the training support they received for teaching in a BL mode.
To ensure the validity of the interviews, two colleagues who had expert knowledge in the area reviewed the interview guide. The interview protocol guided the interviews to prove that each question posed during the conversation was related to the study’s goal; participants \( n = 10 \) were asked the same questions in the same order. Each 45-min interview section was, with consent, recorded for later transcription and all were conducted in English. The conversations were audio-taped and later transcribed. Following content analysis and coding of the interview transcripts, several themes emerged regarding participants' perceptions and practices, benefits and challenges of BL.

Data findings and analysis
Thematic analysis was employed to develop codes, categories and themes for the data collected. To explore the data for important phrases and sentences from the participants' responses, codes were assigned to them. The codes that appeared several times were highlighted and collapsed into categories. The patterns developed from the dataset’s codes and categories were then used to identify themes. Patterns of meaning that repeated themselves from the text were found, grouped and analyzed as the researcher probed the datasets. This entire analysis process was for the researcher to ensure trustworthiness in a qualitative study, which has been discussed as the systematic thoroughness of the research design, the authenticity of the researcher, the validity of the findings and how appropriate the research methodology is to future research by Rose and Johnson (2020). To further increase the trustworthiness of the data collected, the researcher ensured there was a methodical research design, data credibility and confidentiality. Hence, for methodical thoroughness, the researcher ensured there was a clear connection between the theory (TAM), data gathering and analysis procedures, the study’s discussions, conclusions and practical implications. To maintain credibility, data and codes were examined repeatedly to ensure that participants' opinions were accurately captured and analyzed and that the codes analyzed reflected the main ideas from the interviews as well as the findings. To confirm confidentiality, participants were informed that the study was solely for research purposes; not to provide personal information that could connect their answers to the data; how data will be processed, stored and discarded and participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms (Table 1). The four themes that emerged from the narrative data analysis are presented and discussed further down.

Comprehension of the concept of BL
The concept of BL is understood by the majority of participants as a combination of traditional teaching practices and the use of online applications. Notwithstanding, BL implies the integration of technological innovations and conventional classroom activities that aim to deliver instructions for student learning (Graham, 2019; Anthony, 2021). After responding to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Experience in teaching BL courses</th>
<th>College of teaching</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Highest age 25–45 years</td>
<td>0–5 years 70%</td>
<td>College of Distance Education 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Above 5 years 30%</td>
<td>College of Education Studies 79%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Above 46 years 35%</td>
<td>0–5 years 20%</td>
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Table 1. Interview participants’ demographic information

Note(s): The researcher assigned pseudonyms to every participant, such as “educator 1,” “educator 2,” “educator 3” and “educator 10,” to represent Ec1, Ec2, Ec3 and Ec10

Source(s): Author’s own creation
a question about their understanding of BL, the participants agreed that BL implies a combination of face-to-face teaching and technology. Participants agreed that BL and teaching must be embraced to avoid the various challenges associated with face-to-face instruction as well as the use of technology alone. Here are some of the responses:

BL is an approach where we use both face-to-face and virtual approaches in teaching students. A mode of learning in which face-to-face is mixed with online teaching That’s supplementing online teaching with face-to-face teaching. Using traditional classroom methods and technology in teaching [Ecl, 2, 5, 7, 8, and 9].

Again, educators’ views were sought on their perceptions of teaching in a BL mode. Participants see BL as a helpful, good and innovative approach that has come to stay. Responses were given as follows:

It’s great because you have so many options when you’re not available to meet students face-to-face; you can reach out to your students via Zoom wherever they may be [Ec 3 and 4].

BL approach is very good; its effectiveness will be facilitated by whether the requisite resources are there to be used to make it work, but the challenges are also there. [Ec 2, 8, and 10].

It is good in the sense that it even helps you as a lecturer in that wherever you find yourself, you can still do your teaching. You are not restricted; you can move about, and even when you travel, you can still be in contact with your students, which makes it convenient to complete your syllabus within time. So I think it is a good approach [Ec 3, 5, and 8].

Participants continue to explain that BL is an innovative approach that enhances teaching and learning even in an emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yes, we are in a new era, and BL is normal; it has become part and parcel of our lives; it is good and has come to stay with us [said Ec1, 3, and 4].

These responses corroborate a study conducted by Gyampoh et al. (2020) that the entire world is in a “new normal,” and thus, something significant must be done if colleges of education are to join the rest of the world. BL is expected to be the “leading educational model” in the future (Dziuban et al., 2018).

**BL identified to impact teaching and learning practices**

Educators’ responses to how BL impacted teaching and learning practices were bordered on positive ways the approach had improved educators’ teaching and students’ learning. The presence of internet resources was cited by nearly all participants as a profound contribution of BL to their teaching. Responses are as follows:

Positive in the sense that when the pandemic struck, we did not stop teaching; it would have been very difficult for us even delayed academic activities so much, but the final year students were able to complete and graduate even in that same year [Said Ec5].

Not bad the impact is positive because of the feedback from the students you get to know that many of the students are even happy this has come to stay looking at the hassle and bustle they have to go through coming for lectures, meeting deadlines, and the things [Ec2, 6, 7, 9, & 10].

The influence of BL on students was perceived differently by educators. The majority of participants believed that BL had empowered students to take active responsibility for their education. The participants claimed that the interactive digital apps and internet sites used increased learner engagement with the subject matter (Chiu, 2021). Ten participants believed BL offered new ways of communicating and collaborating as students are directed to use other educational innovation platforms such as YouTube, Google Scholar, etc. to finish their assignments. Comments made were as follows:
Well, there are some students who are shy, and you engage and allow them to express themselves. But, errr, I don’t like assessing them online because of cheating, but when it comes to assessment, I do that face-to-face.

The success rate is satisfactory. Even though I don’t frequently assess them online, assessing my students once was satisfactory. Yes, it has given me adequate knowledge about how virtual learning works using Google Meet, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc. It has also given me a lot of knowledge about how to assess students using the online approach and then how to communicate information to students in a variety of ways[Ec 3, 5, 6 . . ].

**Provision of adequate resources for BL usage**

Question 4 of the interview sought to elicit the difficulties that educators face when implementing the BL method in the classroom. Educators identified a diverse range of technology-related concerns as challenging elements of BL, including system integration, limited network connectivity, insufficient access to high-speed internet and inadequate computer literacy of both educators and students. While students had grown up with modern technology, many students, as well as educators, lacked fundamental technological skills, according to participants. Hence, such educators consult either their colleagues or the management support desk for assistance. Feedback was as follows:

Okay, the internet is available in the office, so the assumption is that you can come here and work, but if you are in the office, people will come in to disturb you. Rather, we wish to stay at home and buy our internet data bundle to feel comfortable and ensure students are given the tuition they need [Ec1, 6, & 8].

The main problem has to do with the Internet infrastructure. If the internet issues are solved, the BL approach shouldn’t be a problem. Lack of internet access and gadgets such as projectors to use for BL classes are a problem.[Ec 4, 9].

I don’t have a problem using it, but the problem has to do with the students because they don’t have access to the internet. This is a big problem if you have to teach, say, 150 students and you go online to meet only 20 or 30 of them. If you don’t take care, you will have to repeat the same lesson during the face-to-face meeting, but if everybody has access it won’t be a problem. There is low student participation due to internet challenges.[Ec1, 3 & 4].

Sometimes the barriers are many. It has to do with the cost of data; you have to buy data, and even on campus, the internet system cannot guarantee that you will have continuous internet service; you see breakages and the like, and these things affect your morale. Yes, that is an issue, and also the fact that you are not given any gadgets and you have to acquire them yourself, and most importantly, on the part of your students, if they don’t have smart gadgets, some are still using old phones, which does not help them, and those things demotivate you. [Ec2, 3, 6, 9, and 10].

The basic challenge is the internet infrastructure. Internet connectivity is a problem, and technological gadgets like projectors and others are an issue for us. I was forced to cancel my class one of these days because of the internet challenge [Ec4, 5, 8 &10].

Also, training is required for one to use the BL approach. This is because the majority of educators find it difficult to use the system. After all, they are not young like us and belong to the BBC (born before the computer) age. So internet and computer literacy skills are lacking among most elderly educators. Apart from that, noise during interaction is an issue; as you can see, we share offices and are three in a room, so imagine delivering an online lecture and students knocking and coming in here and there, other lecturers coming in, your colleagues coming in; that is a challenge, and I wish we had a special studio where we could do recordings. [Eco 7 & 9].

The insufficient infrastructure and technical support hinder user acceptance and sustained utilization of BL in educational settings. These concerns raised by participants emphasize
that there are inadequate technology resources, a poor Internet connection, a higher cost in purchasing data bandwidth, a noisy environment for teaching and learning and an increased workload that are part of the challenges experienced in using the BL approach. Wireko et al’s (2021) study identified the high cost of paying for internet infrastructure as a challenge that students in developing countries experience. The leadership of the institution must allocate a comprehensive budget for ICT infrastructure that accommodates long-term interest in using the BL at HEIs.

Provision of frequent BL training and motivational package

Educators’ pedagogical skills are sharpened and better enhanced as frequent training, workshops, seminars and professional development programs are organized by school administrators in HEIs. This way, students are well imparted due to educator-acquired digital literacy skills. In a quest to ascertain if educators have been trained to incorporate the BL approach in teaching practice, about eight participants stated they had participated in professional development training, though it has not been frequent. Participants gave responses as follows:

- We have a center for teacher support, and they normally spearhead the running of workshop programs, but it is not frequent, so we normally rely on other colleagues to assist us. [Ec1, 6, & 8].
- Yes, we were given some training some time ago. For us, the course we teach mostly requires using the computer, so at least we had prior knowledge of some of these things, and when the pandemic came, the university and the department gave us training. [Ec2, 4, 5, & 7].
- Yes, a few of them. The university organizes training for us on how to make use of the LMS. But if you should ask me if that training is enough to prepare me to use the approach, I will say no, but as a person, I also learn on my own. [Eco 3].

Probing to find out if educators receive other motivational support apart from the training from the institutions, participants had these to say:

- As for support, it is only in the area of workshops or training. We have also been given nice wifi, which is a white elephant because you cannot use it at home; it is only in the office that you can use it. Even in the office, there is a poor internet connection, so most of the time we use our credit card [Eco 1, 2, 5, & 9].
- Support, no; apart from the training they gave us, we do not receive any support. We have ICT support personnel, and they are doing so well; they are our colleagues, and as soon as you call them, they will just come to you on time to assist. [Eco 3, 4, & 10].
- As for support, it is only in the area of workshops or training. Aside from the training they provided us, we received no incentives or motivation as support [Eco 6].

Providing frequent training and assistance will enable teachers to be equipped with the relevant information and pedagogical skills to incorporate the BL approach into the teaching environment in HEIs. Support incentives such as nonmonetary packages, technological gadgets, documentation of honor and employee of the year awards should be used to recognize educators that are employing the effective and efficient application of BL in teaching and learning.

Discussion

The understanding of BL in HEIs is peculiar to a group of educators. The lack of a widely agreed-upon concept is one of the main obstacles for higher institutions seeking to establish good practices in BL. As a result, different interpretations of the term have emerged among
higher education teaching staff as have various design approaches. The concept of BL is understood by the majority of participants as a combination of traditional teaching practices and the use of online applications. Notwithstanding, BL implies the integration of technological innovations and conventional classroom activities that aim to deliver instructions for student learning. This understanding confirms Graham’s (2019) and Anthony’s (2021) BL definitions. BL courses can be put on a spectrum somewhere between fully-online and fully-face courses (Raymond, 2019; Brown, 2016).

From the findings, participants identified the effectiveness and benefits of BL’s impact on educators’ teaching and students’ learning. Thus, it was recorded that BL enables student-centered and self-regulated learning at any place, time and convenience. Hence, confirming Taylor et al. (2018), BL is an aspect of the instructional approach that enables students to learn through digital space, which includes elements of student influence over time, location, guidance and/or speed. BL creates opportunities for both educators and students to access diverse online resources, materials, methods and tools for teaching and learning. Again, the potential benefits derived from both remote and conventional classrooms enhance skills and professional and expertise development. This is because new ideas can be acquired from online searches, peer reviews, reflective decisions and observations (Canaran, 2023).

Despite all the potential benefits BL renders to educators and students, it is perceived to impose challenges. The majority of the study participants emphasized that inadequate technology infrastructure, an inadequate internet connection, a bad internet network, a noisy environment for delivering BL instruction and the high cost of internet data bundles (Wireko et al., 2021) are challenges they experience. These concerns are related to Truss and Anderson’s (2023) study, which discovered that educators face challenges in delivering BL instructional content due to a lack of vital resources such as access to digital tools, technical and learning instruction support, career development training and preparation time. Despite the differences in these concerns, other studies have identified resources, educator knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs as major barriers to technology integration (Anthony, 2021; Teo, 2011).

Although participants reported receiving professional development training from the institution’s administration, it appears that this was insufficient to impart the skills required for effective instructional delivery to students. Meanwhile, educator skill development in ICT and new educational technology resources is a prerequisite to driving the BL agenda in higher institutions (Rahmi et al., 2022).

Motivation as a crucial factor is also required to encourage educators to accept the deployment of the BL method effectively in teaching and learning. Such, according to Zhang et al. (2022), could be awards of certificates, monetary or nonmonetary packages and scholarships, among others, to educators. This will not only motivate educators who seriously use BL, but also can entice other colleagues to do the same or more (Bervell et al., 2021). For instance, TAM constructs of perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU) (Davis, 1989), TAM 2 subjective norm (Venkatesh et al., 2012) and blended learning acceptance scale (BLAS) social influence (Bervell et al., 2021) are likely to influence others to accept technology innovations like the BL approach.

Conclusion
BL continues to demonstrate various advantages for hybrid learners as well as the advantages of integrated teaching for HEI educators. For instance, BL offers pedagogical tools, flexibility and increased cost-effectiveness for the education fraternity (Graham, 2019). BL is well defined as a learning strategy that removes barriers to time, place and context while maintaining high-quality teacher–student interactions. However, BL has challenges that prevent educators from accepting and implementing it fully so that teaching and learning
goals can be achieved. For instance, where educators perceive and doubt the usefulness and ease of the BL initiative to achieve learning objectives, they might hesitate to accept it.

It is clear that educators comprehend the BL approach deeply and perceive its effectiveness in the delivery of instruction and student learning. However, educators emphasize that BL challenges include inadequate technology resources, poor Internet connections, inadequate professional development training and a dearth of incentives to promote BL initiatives in HEIs.

Limitations
The study used a sample of only educators to ascertain their perceptions about BL practices, prospects and challenges in HEI. Hence, generalizing the findings to students will be difficult, although both use the same BL environment and share some commonalities. Again, because only one HEI was used as a case study, it will not be prudent to generalize the results to all institutions, colleges and K-12 schools.

Recommendations
For effective BL initiatives in HEIs, the administration requires a policy to govern and raise educators’ scholarly recognition through promotions, prepare physical and technical facilities, provide unwavering support and practice, foster an online learning culture and give innovation and affirmation to educators who are committed to making the BL agenda a success. Again, the administration must organize conferences and seminars regularly to enhance the educator’s skills and knowledge of the use of BL in the HEI environment.

It is advocated that stakeholders provide studious and very strong internet facilities so that going forward, educators and students can zoom into using the BL approach for effective teaching and learning. Also, Internet facilities should be extended to all HEI campuses so both educators and students can fully benefit from the BL initiatives. Management must ensure the allocation of huge funds from the government subventions for the efficient running of the BL program.

References


Further reading

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