Graduates perspectives on blended learning in the Maldives

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ABSTRACT   *Blended learning is the combination of both the advantages of online learning as well as face-to-face learning. This mode of education is increasing around the world today due to the advantages it offers. Prominent features including flexibility, collaboration, interaction and accessibility which make it possible for educators to create positive learning environments in order to meet the demands of students. As the Maldives strives to modernise and develop its higher education sector to meet the rising demand, blended learning is a very appropriate strategy. Centre for Open Learning of the Maldives National University, uses blended learning to create a flexible and interactive learning environment. This qualitative research investigated 10 graduates' perspectives on blended learning conducted at COL, aiming at three areas; content, tutorials and Learning Management System named as Gateway to E-Learning at MNU (GEM). It also explored the reasons for students joining blended mode of learning. From the data, it concludes that students are satisfied with the content, tutorials and GEM, yet there are few aspects which need improvements. Also, it is found that students prefer blended courses due to its flexibility and convenience since it allows being with their families and working, while completing their studies. The study also suggests that self- directed learning in this mode of studies also motivates students to blended learning.*

Introduction

The Maldives is a small country of about 1192 islands grouped into 26 natural atolls. The population of 341,256 excludes the foreign population of 58,683 residing in the Maldives are scattered around approximately 190 inhabited islands (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2015), about 38% of the population live in the Male' Region. As the other 62% of the population is dispersed to the islands, providing education especially higher education is very costly. With the aid from international organisations such as United Nations International Children's Educational Fund, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and other organisations, the government has been able to establish few government schools in the atolls to provide primary and secondary education. Yet, there has been no mechanism to provide higher education opportunities to the potential students living in remote islands because of the geographic disbursement of the island nation.

Later, some regional development centres in the north and south and some private organisations tried to cater the need for higher education.

Activities such as fishing—which has affected the sustainable progress of the broader Good quality education, including higher educational opportunities is still mainly available in the capital Male'. Therefore, a disproportionate division of educational opportunities has been generated in the capital Male' compared to the islands (Windham, 1991). A study done by The World Bank (2011) has found that higher education enrolment in the Maldives is extremely low for a middle-income country and the reasons include limited access to higher education opportunities and poor access to and completion of higher secondary education in the country.

In order to address these issues, higher education opportunities in outer islands have to be increased. For that to happen it had become important to look beyond the traditional classroom based face-to-face teaching that has been the primary method of teaching in almost all higher education institutions in the Maldives. Other modes of education such as distance education and e-learning had to be explored. In 1999, Centre for Open Learning (COL) was established under the then Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE) and conducted distance courses from international universities and courses developed by them. COL has improved its courses and with the implementation of a learning management system, COL currently offers 13 blended mode courses from Certificate level to Master's Degree level. Since its establishment more than 1000 students have graduated from COL (Centre for Open Learning, 2000; The Maldives National University, 2014,).

This research is aimed at increasing our understanding of the effectiveness of programmes conducted by COL and thus, improving the quality of blended mode teaching programmes. This study explores the question 'how do graduates perceive blended mode of learning conducted by the Centre for Open Learning?' This study examined graduates' perspectives on blended learning, focussing on the course content, the face-to-face tutorials and Gateway to E-Learning at MNU (GEM). Ginns and Ellis (2007) affirm that a better understanding of the perspectives of the students can help COL and other e-learning institutes to further progress this novel learning environment.

The next sections provide a brief institutional background before commencing on to the methods utilised and the findings.

Institutional Background

Centre for Open Learning (COL) was established in 1999 under the umbrella of the Maldives College of Higher Education which was later transformed into The Maldives National University (MNU) in 2011. COL's mandate was providing higher educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, those having difficulty in attending face-to-face classes and especially to those residing in the remote islands. The first courses offered at COL were from affiliated international universities including Indira Gandhi National Open University and The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) courses were also conducted for some time.

The demand for higher education escalated as employers in both the public and private sectors searched for graduates with good skills and competencies (The World Bank, 2011). Likewise, the Ministry of Education required to train the temporary 'contract' teachers working in the schools, especially in the outer islands, and requested COL to formulate a distance education teacher training programme. COL developed this teacher training programme called Advanced Certificate in Primary Teaching. This is the first in-house course conducted at COL which commenced in 2003, using printed materials and face-to-face tutorial study blocks. In this course students studied in their own time at home and attended the study blocks held in Male' and in the study centres in the atolls. By the end of 2008, more than 500 students graduated and due to the increase in demand for distance education courses, COL also conducted a foundation level English language course called English for Further Studies in 2005. This course which is still running has a high demand in every semester. COL introduced courses from other disciplines as well. This comprises human resource, management, language, nursing, social policy and business.

The transformation of the delivery of higher education programs and courses by global technological changes (The World Bank, 2011) and the growing demand for higher education required COL and MNU to seek other options and technological solutions. Also, The World Bank (2011) has specified that MNU need to develop along multiple paths to expand the programs and courses. This needs to include e-learning programs and courses to the various provinces and atolls. The World Bank (2011) report further identifies that such programs "will also require further development of the special types of student support required for e-learning within the MNU system", (p.E5). This e-learning environment was created by COL in 2008 using a free Learning Management System MOODLE. The availability of affordable internet access across the country has provided COL this opportunity to establish this Learning Management System LMS and expand its distance education and provide better access to prospective students in the islands. Using the learning management system named GEM, COL has created a better, more flexible, interactive and effective learning environment. Now, GEM provides students with access to study materials from 'anytime' 'anywhere', and connects students, lecturers and fellow course-mates to discuss their studies online and offline.

The demand for the courses offered at COL can be seen by the rising student numbers (Figure 1). Since 2009 the enrolments of COL has been increasing and COL has maintained a student population of over 12,00 in the last two years. This places COL in the top position, with the highest student population among the faculties and centres of MNU.

Literature Review
The inventions of new technologies and improvements in communication have paved the way for innovative techniques and methodologies in the field of education. E-learning or electronic learning is one of the modern technologies for teaching and learning though the definition of e-learning varies significantly. Some authors specifically define e-learning while others imply definitions which are more diverse. Becker (1991) explained that e-learning is web based

learning and Nichols (2003) argues that it is web distribution. Some definitions of e-learning takes account of all electronic media including internet or intranet, audio and video tape satellite broadcast and interactive TV. However, in some cases the emphasis is not only given to the delivery of the content but the instructional methods provided through a particular technology.

This technology based online delivery mode of learning is blended with traditional face-to-face learning (Nel & Wilkinson, 2006) to create blended learning environment. According to Singh and Reed (2001), blended learning is a learning program where more than one delivery mode is used to optimize the learning outcome and cost of program delivery. It is also defined as the convenience and benefits of e-learning mixed with the advantages of face-to-face learning and also known as "hybrid learning" (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008). Literature also describe blended learning as a combination of instructional modalities and methods, and combination of online and face-to-face instructions (Graham, Allen and Ure, 2003; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005; Rooney, 2003; Sharma, 2010).

This combination and redesign of instructional modalities allows a shift from lecture-centred to student-centred instructions, increasing active student participation and interactivity (Poon, 2013). Clark and Meyer (2003) also support this definition of diverse education model and further stress that it takes advantage from every sort of technology.

In recent years, rather than delivering course material through a single medium, the conjunction of both methods, blended learning, has become increasingly predominant (Graham, 2005; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Watson, 2008). As seen from the study done by Kistow (2011) at the Graduate School of Business, Trinidad and Tobago, students are on the move of learning from face-to-face classes to blended mode. Students do not want to continue their education with only traditional face-to-face learning environments or with a purely online learning environment 2009 (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008; Banci & Soran, 2008; Orhan, 2008). They want to have the best of both. Therefore, it is important to have a balance between online and face-to-face learning.

Why Blended Learning
Studies have identified numerous benefits of blended learning including flexible access to course content, lecturers and classmates. According to Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008), the most significant feature of e-learning is its flexibility. The technology used for e-learning enables a learning environment to be independent of time and place (Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal, 2004). Brown (2003) refers to this flexibility as time efficiency and location convenience. This feature of blended learning provides educational opportunities for potential students who are unable to attend traditional face-to-face classes due to the geography, time constrains, job and family responsibilities. Yang (2006) approves that information technology based learning is designed for individual and collaborative learning for geographically dispersed learners to provide knowledge and accomplish their learning goals. According to Spender (2001), e-learning is an ideal delivery for education due to a number of reasons, which includes providing teachers and students with 'anytime anywhere' access to the content and expanding education to a greater number of campus based

students. The main reason for COL to adopt blended learning is to provide higher education opportunities for the geographically dispersed population in the Maldives.

Blended learning also allows the designing of learning according to the need of the learners. Boyle and Nicol (2003) agreed that blended learning is an empirically-based approach that inspires learner-centred teaching and increases interaction and active learning among peers and instructors. Teachers can create collaborative instructional activities and assignments that give students the opportunity to work in groups, or participate in project-based and experiential learning. Fisher (2003) emphasises that effective collaboration is a distinctive requirements of an effective online course to create a meaningful and engaging learning environment. This environment is created using audio visual and interactive synchronous or asynchronous activities providing a platform for students to discuss their studies with the lecturers and other course mates online and offline.

Another significant aspect of embracing this methodology is the technology which has the potential to transfer content and instructions electronically. As Rovai and Jordan (2004) state, a blended learning design allows flexible content delivery to a large audience while still fostering face-to-face contact essential for a robust learning experience. This "anytime anywhere access" to the learning materials is an essential component for the students who are residing in the islands. Brown (2003) specifies that blended learning supports all the benefits of e-learning including cost reductions. The costs for institutions are saved as developed materials can be placed online and re-used for an extended period of time (Poon, 2013). Increasing the size of the cohort and decreasing the number of classes also help reduce the budget. Similarly, the use of blended learning can reduce the staff and student classroom contact time and consequently save on staffing costs. Furthermore, Owston, York, and Murtha, (2013) pointed out that the advantages of blended learning include efficient use of classroom space. This observation is supported by Spender (2001) and Vaughan (2007). Moreover, Blackboards Inc. (2009) have found that independence and experience with online tools have been associated with improved critical thinking. The same idea is proposed by Jamlan (2004) that e-learning creates avenues for new ways of thinking. This, in turn, will support developing lifelong learners.

Despite the advantages, it is important to remember that there are some challenges as well. Hienze and Proctor (2004) argue that lack of social interaction is the major disadvantage in an online learning environment. In order to overcome this drawback, there are teaching strategies and online features incorporated within the blended learning environment. This consists of online discussions such as synchronous chat sessions and asynchronous discussion forums. Also, the face-to-face tutorials sessions would provide the students with the opportunity to develop the lacking social interaction. There are further challenges encountered by some researchers. Studies at the University of Central Florida (Dziuban et al., 2004) and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002) indicated that students encountered four key challenges including the expectation that fewer classes meant less work, inadequate time management skills, problems with accepting responsibility for personal learning, and difficulty with more sophisticated technologies.

Community of Practice

Many higher education institutions around the world have been adopting blended learning and enjoying the benefit and convenience of this mode of education. A program piloted at the University of Wisconsin of USA where all faculty were involved found that the participants were happy with their first blended teaching experience (Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta, 2002). Also, 80% perceived the experience worthwhile and recommended the approach to others. Similar results were found in a survey conducted at higher education institutions across Britain where 85% agrees that technology improves access to education (Marquis, 2004). Likewise, the participants (94%) thought online and classroom based teaching is more effective than classroom teaching alone. A research conducted at University of Yildiz Technic in Turkey found that students like to come to campus and discuss the course content with instructors and friends but they also would like to use information technology as a learning tool (Orhan, 2008). This means they are satisfied with blended learning. A research at Notingham Trent University in the United Kingdom to examine students and tutor perspectives resulted similar views on blended learning and commented that its main advantage is flexibility (Poon, 2013). However, the students who participated in this research were concerned that the online materials can make the lectures redundant. This can be tackled with careful planning.

Numerous researches have been conducted to comprehend students' perception of blended learning environment. A study of third and fourth year students in Veterinary Science in Australia found that there is a need to understand the students' perceptions and the extent of support students receive in this learning context (Ginns & Ellis, 2007). In the same manner Abou Naaj, Nachouki, and Ankit (2012) insist that this type of research is indispensable as meeting students' expectations leads them to act as advocates and promotes the university. Thus the purpose of this research is to see whether students are satisfied with the learning environment at COL.

Research Method

This study followed a qualitative research approach to understand graduate students' perspectives on blended learning at COL. Ten graduates were recruited for the study using purposive sampling. In order to accommodate a maximum variation of the sample participants were chosen to include graduates from different blended programmes, both genders and from different geographical locations. Participants were selected from the blended programmes Postgraduate Certificate in Education, Diploma in Teaching Islam and Diploma in Divehi Language Teaching. Also, consideration was given to the availability and willingness of graduates to participate in the research.

Data was collected using an open-ended questionnaires followed by a semi-structured interview based on four guiding questions. Both instruments were designed to collect students' perspectives on blended learning. The questionnaire and interviews were based on the four guiding questions, given below.

1. What are your reasons for choosing a blended mode course from the Centre for Open Learning?

2. Are you satisfied with the content (Study Guides) delivered to you in different modules of the course? Please explain with reason.

3. Explain your ideas about the face-to-face tutorial sessions.

4. How do you feel about COL's Learning Management System (GEM) with regard to its benefits?

The open-ended interviews were used to probe further into the participants responses to the questionnaire and also clarify any uncertainties. The interviews also allowed the participants to talk about related issues that are not covered in the questionnaire.

The data collection was carried out with full ethical considerations where participants were fully informed about the study. Written consents were obtained from all participants. Participants initially filled the questionnaires and on return of these, a time for conducting the interview was scheduled to clarify and probe questions and get more information. The face-to-face and, in some cases, phone interviews which took thirty minutes to one hour were conducted in Dhivehi.

To enhance the trustworthiness and increase the credibility and reliability of this study, techniques utilised include sampling. In order to minimize bias, sample was selected from different courses, both genders and different geographical locations included. The other procedure includes formulation of the questions for the interview and for the questionnaire. The questions are based on a quantitative survey questionnaire from Open University Sri Lanka, after modifying to open ended questions required for a qualitative study. In addition there was triangulation of data collection which includes interviews, open-ended questions and researcher's reflexive journal. Member check was utilised during and after the interviews to add to the credibility of the research.

Data Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic framework is the first qualitative method of analysis which provides core skills and is used in different forms of qualitative research. In order to develop a thematic framework, it is important to familiarise the data through reading and listening. So, the first step was listening to the interviews and reading the questionnaires and researcher's notes. All the data were translated and transcribed. While doing the transcriptions, it was carefully observed for non-verbal cues and signs as they might convey certain meanings which could be vital to reflect during the analysis. The available data were cautiously read a number of times to match with the transcriptions. Then, for ease of retrieval and identification, the data were organised according to the interview questions. In the process, careful attention was given to keep the data anonymous. The next step was reading the data again looking for patterns and themes to organise them into meaningful segments. Then key ideas and chunks and phrases from the transcript were underlined and coded (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). After that the codes were categorised into themes and mapped into charts to visually represent the relationship of the data. This lead to the meaning making process.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of this research is grouped under six areas which include (1) the

reasons for choosing blended mode courses, (2) satisfaction of content/study guide, (3) opinion on face-to-face tutorials, (4) the learning management system GEM, (5) improvement needed for blended courses and (6) future studies with COL.

Reasons for Choosing Blended Courses

All ten participants have stated that flexibility and convenience are the main reasons they chose blended learning. The same idea is identified by Kistow (2011), McGee andReis, (n.d) and Shen, Reynolds, Bonk, and Brush, (2013). Researchers such as Garnham and Kaleta, (2002) define flexibility as the ability to control the pace of ones learning while others believe that blended learning primarily focus on addressing the issue of access. Singh and Reed (2001) also believe that a single delivery mode inevitably limits the reach of a learning program whereas a virtual classroom event is inclusive of a remote audience. Hence both controlling the pace of learning and access are aspects which applies to COL students as most of COLs students live in the islands and they need access to the study materials. Flexibility in this context, refers to (1) access to the learning materials from 'anywhere' 'anytime' which Vaughan (2007) refers to flexibility to work from home (2) the ability to control the pace of one's learning (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). COL students are given particular timeframes to complete assessment tasks so that students can control their learning and complete the tasks in their preferable time within the assigned timeframe. (3) The third aspect of flexibility refers to the convenience of scheduling coursework (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). While explaining flexibility, some participants clarified that "the intended time bands for block classes are a convenient means to learning with a full time job and a family". Another student also expressed that "I would always prefer this method over conventional face-to-face. I am an independent learner. So, I need minimal contact hours". Supporting this idea, Vaughan (2007) emphasized that blended learning offers students with more course scheduling options because of the reduction in face-to-face class time and Garnham and Kalet (2002) confirms that this decrease in face-to-face class time decreases time spent in travelling. In addition Owston et al. (2013) highlighted that increased flexibility in teaching schedule is an advantage in this mode of learning.

Many participants have stressed that the best advantage of blended learning is being with the family while studying. Most students studying at COL are adults who have families and wanted to continue their family responsibilities. Vaughan (2007) believes that convenience of scheduling is important due to the fact that there is a growing number of students with multiple responsibilities including family commitments. Ginns and Ellis (2007) have also argued that integration of (ICT) increased flexibility for students who need to balance studies and family commitments. As one student explains that "the time I save by doing this blended course can be used to do more useful stuff like job or family".

Another advantage of blended learning is that students can do a full time job while studying. A student stated that 'there is no barrier for the job due to block classes'. Another participant further explained that "we get release from the job for block classes." In addition, a student expressed that "this course provided

the opportunity to study while on the job. Another participant described "this was the only course I can do while doing my job".

Moreover, the encouragement of self-directed learning is also a factor that some participants prefer this mode of learning. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) proposed the adult learning theory 'Andragogy' which assumes that adult learner is usually self-directed and Brookfield (1996) claims that the adult learner is self-motivated and an experiential learner. A participant stated that:

Another motive for this modality was the form of self-directed learning that is encouraged. This makes you a better person than you would be from face-to-face learning. Without this discipline we are likely to fail. You are required to read widely and plan ahead more than you would if you had to attend face-to-face mode.

Self-directed learning will in turn lead to lifelong learning and critical thinking. Poon (2013) reports that both staff and students described that the online components of blended learning encourage the development of critical thinking skills.

In addition to that, participants have stated blended mode courses are affordable. One participant commented that "the course fee is cheaper" and another student added that "although it is a block mode course the course fee is cheaper". Brown (2003) supports the idea of blended course being affordable than face-to-face courses. Another participant further explained that "I would assume that in the long run, blended or even e-learning would become a cheaper option due to lower overheads". This notion of cost reduction is further reinforced by Singh and Reed (2001) explaining that combining delivery modes will balance out the learning program development and deployment of cost and time.

Satisfaction with the Content (Study Guide)

In blended learning courses learning resources or learning materials play a crucial role as students interact with the learning materials online and offline. Nel and Wilkinson, (2006) argue that learning resources can be regarded as a key ingredient for the successful completion of any project or any course and this can include people, materials and financial and physical resources. The learning materials which are referred to in this study include Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, hand-outs, worksheets and study guides which are used as the main source of student learning. These materials are printed and provided to the students and also made available online. According to Kistow (2011), the learning materials must be presented to the students in a well-structured manner. Most participants acknowledged that the study guides provide the required information covering major areas. They agree that the content is appropriate and PowerPoint's are well structured. A student commented that "generally, it is appropriate and the required information was provided." Another student stated that "I believe the study guides are very beneficial and much needed because information in those study guides are used in our teaching." A third student's idea is "in total, the study guides are designed to provide the necessary information and content in the areas of study".

However, they expressed concern that sometimes the study guides were not available at the beginning of the semester and one of the participants is discontented due to the readings being too broad and randomly selected. This caused unnecessary overlapping of the content as the student mentioned.

View on Face-to-face Tutorial Sessions
The face-to-face tutorial sessions or block sessions are conducted two to four times (depending on the course) during a semester and each block session includes ten hours of lecture and tutorials from every module. If students are having three subjects, then they have 30 hours of lecture and tutorial time in a block. For the tutorial blocks students attend the campus or an outreach centre. This means many students and lecturers travel for these block classes.

Some participants expressed that they enjoyed tutorial sessions which provided them with the opportunity of sharing rich experiences from students coming from different disciplines. Nel and Wilkinson, (2006) support that students will be given the opportunity to participate in small group discussions or group tasks during the face-to-face sessions. Also one student mentioned that "tutorial sessions were effective and encouraging". The word encouraging could refer to motivation and reinforcement. Many researchers, including Kistow, (2011), assert the importance of positive reinforcement from the instructors in adult learning. Also, Bolliger and Martindale (2004), believe that the instructor is not only a facilitator but a motivator for the students. In addition, it is reported that students pointed out that getting feedback and encouraging response from instructor in face-to-face environment encouraged them to study regularly (Orhan, 2008). Moreover, student satisfaction has a strong positive correlation with the performance of the instructor particularly with the availability and response time (Debourgh, 1999). Furthermore, Baker (2010) found instructor presence, in this case face-to-face tutorials, to be a statistically significant predictor of student motivation.

However, there are some issues students would like to bring to the attention of the course coordinators. Some students mentioned that "block sessions were too intensive for a weekend. Absorption time was very limited and students were very tired (including lecturers) for it to be effective as intended". It is also revealed that tiredness can be seen both from the lecturers and from students due to the length of time spent for each subject and due to the travelling. Also, according to one graduate sometimes the sessions did not start on time. Another issue a participant raised was some sessions were boring as lecturers were not fully prepared. The graduates recommended that COL should pay more attention when selecting lecturers.

Benefits of COL's Learning Management System (GEM)
COL's Learning Management System GEM provides access to the learning materials such as the PowerPoint presentations, hand-outs, worksheets and study guides and assessment from 'anytime anywhere'. Students found this as an advantage because most of them live in the islands. In the same manner, important announcements are made through GEM and students can see them within seconds.

Some students also highlighted that being able to do online quizzes and getting instant feedback as well as uploading assessments is a huge convenience.

In addition, graduates are contented due to the fact that they receive lecturers' feedback and marked assignment through GEM.

All participants acknowledged that GEM acts as a platform for receiving assistance from lecturers and peers. They agree that they discuss the course content with their lecturers and peers and this helps their studies. Orhan (2008) states that this is using information technology as a learning tool. These online discussions include asynchronous discussions such as forums and synchronous discussions such as chat sessions which are conducted in real time. These online discussions enhance cooperative learning which are structured. The online discussions not only help students to maximise their own learning but other learning as well. There are several studies revealing the benefits of cooperative or collaborative learning in blended teaching. Nel and Wilkinson (2006) emphasise that a successful online course greatly relies on effective collaboration to create a meaningful and engaging learning environment. In the same manner Baker (2010) states that communication tools such as discussion, email, chat, and messaging increase the level of interaction. These tools allows group work and immediate feedback in a virtual environment. In this case, students are able to share viewpoints and discuss with other students understanding their perspective as well (Abou Naaj et al. (2012). The interactions which include constructive feedback from both peers and lecturers help them to judge their progress and improve their work as well by collaboration within the group (Nel & Wilkinson, 2006). As effective collaboration can enhance students learning experience, it can be regarded as one of the determining factors in measuring the success of an online course.

Given the fact that online technology is a fairly recent phenomenon in education, adult students are not as familiar with the technology. Even though students are given a brief introduction of GEM at the beginning of the first semester, it is not enough for them to understand the important aspects of GEM. That is why some participants indicated that they have experienced some level of anxiety about using the online mode. Due to this inexperience, especially in the first semester students were not as active as they would like to be in the online discussions as stated by Nel and Wilkinson (2006). Hara and Kling (2003) found that a more significant source of stress was caused by confusion, anxiety, and frustration due to ambiguous instructions on the course website. With the same accord Brown (2003) found that students with limited experience of group work and the LMS, and no experience with online interaction/collaboration, were unlikely to possess the group/collaborative skills. Group collaborative skills is quite crucial in any online teaching (Brown, 2003).

Other issues that were identified include some lecturers not being online for some discussion sessions and their feedback being very slow. A participant commented that "So when lecturers do not respond in a timely manner, students are pressured a lot. Especially when due dates are set and when they need an answer". Shen et al. (2013) refer to such lecturers as unresponsive instructors.

In addition, some students have concerns regarding technical issues of GEM. As one participant stresses, there were initial hiccups with GEM in which login issues were frequent and some uploads were not being seen or downloadable.

Also, it is argued that instead of using only chat sessions, video conferencing could be an easy and additional mode which could be an improvement to the present version of GEM. Kistow (2011) advises to include multimedia presentations such as podcasts, narrated slides and video presentations. However, while implementing these strategies bandwidth performance needs to be considered.

Limitations and Further Research

As blended learning environment is a relatively new field in the Maldives and as there are not many studies done, a discussion of the limitations of this study is justified. This study is limited as the sample size is limited to ten participants from three blended courses. Due to this, the findings cannot be generalised to the whole population. The findings of this study were limited to a questionnaire, interview and researchers notes. This study could be extended through a quantitative research with a bigger sample size to include graduates from all courses conducted at COL. Also, further research of the present students would enrich the information gathered and would assist the improvement of the blended courses.

Conclusion

With the aim of exploring and understanding students perspectives about blended learning environment at COL, this research focussed on three areas; content, face-to-face tutorials and GEM. The study also examined the reasons for students joining blended mode courses for their studies. From this research, it can be concluded that students prefer blended courses because: (1) it is flexible and convenient; (2) it allows students to be with the family while studying; (3) students can do a full time job; (4) it encourages self-directed learning; and (5) it is affordable. It is found that students were generally satisfied with blended courses offered at COL. Students were satisfied with the content of the courses, the combination of face-to-face sessions and the advantages offered through online learning platform, GEM. Suggested areas of improvement include issues of availability of the content at the beginning of a course, the face-to-face sessions being too intensive, leading to tiredness from both students and lecturers and technical issues students faced in accessing GEM. These finding have implications for the advancement of the blended programs conducted at COL. The weaknesses and strengths being identified, the programs can be further strengthened by resolving with the issues recognised.

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