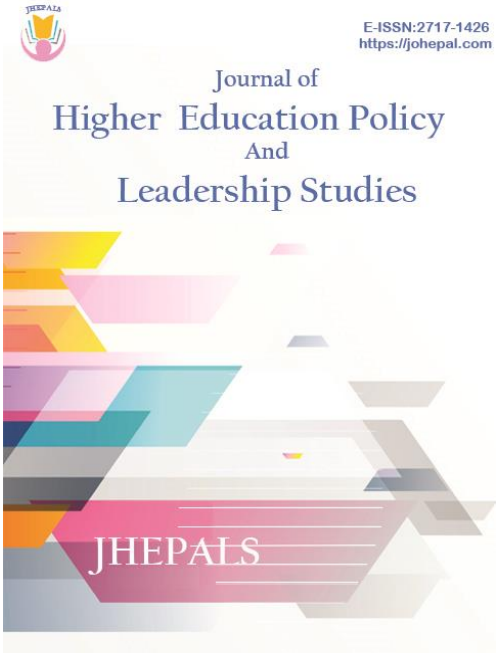
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Students' Satisfaction with Blended Learning in Higher Education Context amid an Exacerbating Crisis

Iman G. Freij *

Highlights

- Blended learning (BL) is promoted at the University of Sciences and Arts in Lebanon (USAL) as an ad hoc model with neither feasible planning nor adequate infrastructure facility. It was rather promoted as a cost-cutting solution that might endure the sustainability of the university's enrolment and operating abilities, precluding the meltdown of the students' financial capabilities by saving the extortionate transportation expenses.
- There is a considerable satisfaction of USAL's students with blended learning; which in turn reveals a bright image of USAL's skillful maneuver throughout a two-semester academic year bringing blended learning into action in no time.
- Low satisfaction rates are evident with the interactivity and engagement dimension in general and with the opportunities given to the students to collaborate, reflect their viewpoints, access information in particular, the offering of immediate feedback and the interactivity's influence over leading to positive learning outcomes.
- USAL instructors should pursue a professional development program to ensure a considerable proficiency in designing feasible digital tools and thus engaging the undergraduates and keeping up an interactive atmosphere within that will effectively promote the delivery of the online sessions.

Keywords: Blended Learning (BL); Student Satisfaction; Lebanese Crisis; Higher Education; USAL Undergraduates

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Introduction

The world is swiftly changing. The ubiquitous use of technologies in our daily lives has intensely changed not only the way we live, but also the flow of knowledge through its cycle of construction, distribution and reconstruction. Currently in Lebanon, because of the remission of the widespread COVID-19, many universities have restored their on-campus educational settings to deliver on-site face-to-face teaching. Alternatively, and as a result of the compounded economic and financial crises that have strafed and besieged the Lebanese currency, several universities have adjusted their policies saving their students' financial provisions by reducing the rate attending on-campus teaching-learning, turning to deliver blended learning instead and profoundly activating a variety of learning management systems to become handy in higher education context. On the other hand, students, encountering the aforementioned unprecedented conditions, have found themselves amid an awful lot that has restricted their opportunities for learning and eventually graduating in an attempt to seek a better future abroad.

At the University of Sciences and Arts in Lebanon (USAL), the implemented blended learning model is a deliberate fusion of the on-line (asynchronous and/or synchronous) and face-to-face contact time between teaching staff and students. Blended learning has essentially become adopted to keep up with the new financial reality represented by the plummeting rate of the Lebanese Pound (Lira) against the US dollar amid the dramatic rise of the fuel prices, and target three-fold reason of reducing the cost on the student, the staff, and the university's funds. In light of that, little is done at USAL to investigate the students' satisfaction with blended learning.

Few loosely informal recordings are tracked from individual students who have expressed themselves spontaneously to some staff members. In addition, in reviewing the literature for this paper, few studies were noted on students' satisfaction in blended learning context in higher education; however, they all highlight the pivotal role of students' satisfaction in learning generally and in blended mode specifically. Rienties et al. (2015) indicate that satisfaction with blended learning represents a key concern for higher education stakeholders. Woods (2002) finds a significant positive relationship between students' perceived course interaction and their satisfaction in blended courses.

Further literature on blended learning has conveyed that there are several factors that influence students' satisfaction in the blended-learning environment. Bollinger and Martindale (2004) have identified three key factors central to student satisfaction: instructor, technology, and interactivity. Other subordinate interrelated factors, such as course management issues and instruction, which contribute to students' satisfaction, are discussed in this study.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach with little qualitative data. It utilized quantitative and qualitative surveying to obtain the findings, conclusions and recommendations. A survey was developed and conducted online by the researcher on Google Forms. The researcher developed this survey making use of the works by Wang (2019), as well as Bollinger and Martindale (2004). Reliability checks using the Cronbach alpha statistics were conducted for

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the internal consistency and was determined to be α=0.875 which is considered to be a very good indicator of internal reliability (Creswell, 2014).

This study was conducted in the University of Sciences and Arts in Lebanon (USAL), a private developing university that has been founded since 2013 with one campus in Beirut. The survey was originally administered to all USAL's 780 undergraduates; 641 of them are English educated and had pursued a blended learning program throughout the academic year 2021-2022. It is worth mentioning that BL mode at USAL is a combination of on-campus learning on Mondays/ Tuesdays and online learning on Wednesdays/Thursdays/Fridays. While students who study on Saturdays only, will exist on-campus every other Saturday; and consequently, will have on-line learning every other Saturday. Eventually, 226 undergraduates from the three faculties completed the survey. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 26.0 for windows. On the other hand, theme-based analysis was utilized in order to synthesize undergraduates' views on how blended learning opportunities may be enhanced.

Findings

Results per Survey Dimensions

Table 1 reveals that USAL students are generally satisfied with the blended learning adopted by the university according to the obtained scores: M=3.04 and SD=0.625 for the technology dimension; M=2.87 and SD=0.673 for the interactivity and engagement dimension; and M=3.04 and SD=0.653 for the instructor and instruction dimension.

Table1.
Students' Satisfaction with Blended Learning

#	Dimension	N	Mean	SD
	Technology	226	3.04	.625
	Interactivity& Engagement	226	2.87	.673
	Instructor & Instruction	226	3.04	.653

Table 2.
Students' Satisfaction Level according to Age

Blended Learning Dimensions	Age Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Technology	23-30	43	2.92	.832	2.664	3.177
	31-40	32	3.13	.680	2.885	3.376
	above 40	5	3.20	1.272	1.619	4.780
	Total	226	3.04	.625	2.959	3.123
Interactivity & Engagement	23-30	43	2.79	.745	2.561	3.020
	31-40	32	3.05	.706	2.796	3.305
	above 40	5	3.65	.782	2.678	4.621
	Total	226	2.87	.673	2.786	2.962
Instructor & Instruction	23-30	43	2.86	.737	2.642	3.096
	31-40	32	3.19	.699	2.938	3.442
	above 40	5	3.72	.626	2.942	4.497
	Total	226	3.04	.653	2.961	3.132

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Moreover, Table 2 displays that students with the age group 31 and more have attained the highest satisfaction level in all the dimensions of BL; however, the age group [23-30] has attained the least level of satisfaction in all BL dimensions. In addition, the results have revealed that the relation between the age group and BL is statistically significant with (p-value=0.047<0.05).

Furthermore, findings show that the relation between the age group and the three dimensions of BL is statistically significant in two dimensions only; interactivity and engagement, and instructor and instruction with (p-value=0.017<0.05) each. To conclude, the older the students are, the more satisfied with blended learning they seem. Analysis of students' responses to the three open-ended questions is also provided in Table 3.

Table 3.
Thematic Analysis of the Three Qualitative Items

Item	Participants' Responses	N	Percentage %
What do you like the most about blended learning?	Contribute to low-cost education	196	86.7%
	Contribute to flexible study schedules	176	77.8%
	Save time and effort	89	39.3%
	Facilitate learning through tutorials & asynchronous learning	87	38.4%
	Contribute to digital learning	54	23.8%
	Promote student/instructor interaction	51	22.5%
	Develop independent learner	11	4.8%
What do you like the least about blended learning?	Lack of essential logistics(electricity, internet, suitable digital device)	193	85.3%
	Online classes	76	33.6%
	Attending on campus	74	32.7%
	Poor Quality of instruction	56	24.7%
	Absence of positive interaction	43	19%
	Nothing	18	7.9%
How can blended learning become a more efficient encounter to you?	Nothing- It's ok this way	153	67.6%
	Train the instructors on online strategies	87	38.4%
	Turn to on-campus learning exclusively	67	29.6%
	Deliver online learning exclusively	54	23.8%
	Provide households with electricity more often	49	21.6%
	Promote student/instructor interaction	28	12.3%

Discussion

There is a considerable satisfaction of USAL's students with blended learning; however, the launching of any BL program should be promptly supported by a plan, and curriculum designers should widen their scopes on strategies pertinent to BL (Medina, 2018).

The considerable level of general students' satisfaction resonates with Roff's (2018) study; however, the low-cost factor is a novel factor that can be easily claimed and perceived in the current Lebanese Higher education context. On the other hand, tutorials integrated in BL program are an impactful asset expressed by the participants.

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In fact, the lack of essential logistics expressed by 85.3% of the participants is alerting to the findings in Medina's (2018) research which suggested that varied digital devices are handy and easily accessible by the current generation of Higher education since this 21-century generation views information technologies as indispensable key components of their daily lives.

Low satisfaction with other BL aspects are practically assumed evident in further research that focused on effectively planned, fine-tuned and maintained practices in BL that simultaneously foster independent and life-long learners targeting learning outcomes and equipping them with necessary potentials for promoting student-instructor interaction (Mbati & Minnaar, 2015).

Likewise, in relation to the factors that contribute to BL, research findings confirmed that blended learning courses, being integrated with proper technology, will stimulate autonomous learning, and thus will bring up frequent students' engagement and a more genuine interaction with the instructor (Armellini et.al, 2021).

The lingering internet connection that affects the strength of the aerial signal hamper the flow of the online session and accordingly hinder BL's effectiveness; thus, it is one of the major factors that tremendously needs amendment and reconsideration once blended learning is being enforced (Roff, 2018).

USAL's prestigious decision-makers should make some financial statements to alleviate the drastic impact on their students; whereas the instructors have to spare no effort to record the session and make it available and spare some time on-campus to answer their queries if found before moving to new encounters. Subsequently, students can watch the recorded session and learn asynchronously with the readiness of the instructor for any further needed explanation and clarification.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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Human Participants

Necessary ethical guidelines are observed in accordance with the rules and regulations of USAL in terms of the confidentiality of the participants, and further considerations are taken based on JHEPALS's guidelines.

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