TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE WITH HYBRID/BLENDED APPROACH AS AN EVOLVING PARADIGM

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Abstract

Growing technological advancement and emerging digital environments have infused and swiftly changed the learning landscape globally. One such advancement that incorporates face-to-face learning with technological tools is the blended or hybrid mode of learning and teaching. Blended or hybrid learning is a seamless combination of online and face-to-face activities for classroom instruction for all and basically the demographically displaced. This research delves into a profound study of the perception of students and staff involved in a postgraduate educational leadership program offered in a blended mode. An interpretive paradigm using mixed methods approach adopting a survey consisting of Likert scale items and interviews were successfully implemented. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS while thematic approach using emerging themes were used for interpreting the interviews. Findings testify that blended approach has been liked and very well accepted by the students as it enables them to complete their qualifications and progress academically and professionally in their lives. This study sets a solid platform for further research as certain scholars and administrators are still sceptical and hesitant in fully implementing blended mode of learning and teaching. The study concludes by stating certain implications that subsequently can make blended mode more chronic and applicable to the needs of scholars, teachers and students especially in archipelagos like Fiji and beyond.

Keywords: Leadership, Blended Learning, Expanding globally, Faculty development, Student learners, Constructivist pedagogy, Distance learning

1. Introduction

‘Take out your books and read the first chapter.’ This is a sentence one must have heard a lot of times. Nowadays this sentence could be replaced by ‘click on the link and follow the instructions on your computer’.

The rapid emergence of technology in all facets of our lives has no doubt changed the educational landscape of our times. For the purposes of this study, “blended” or “hybrid” means a deliberate combination of face-to-face and online learning using appropriate learning platforms. Scholars have defined blended learning variously but they all mean a combination of online learning and face-to-face instruction [1]. Research suggests that the hybrid model is gaining popularity within institutions of higher education around the world, with more and more campuses adopting this model for their programs [2]; [3]; [4]; [5]. Flexible learning (Flexi-class) is another synonym often used for blended or hybrid mode of learning and teaching [6]. With the widespread advances of the internet, e-learning and m-learning technologies has led to blended mode of learning, which effectively combines them with traditional face-to-face learning [7]. Blended learning must be differentiated from distance education as well as online education. The former means that a package including text books and assignments are sent to students that they read and complete on their own while the latter means a course that is completely online.
Hence, integrating the online, distance and traditional face-to-face sessions leads to the blended approach. Blended learning is one of the fastest growing trends in colleges and universities globally the number of public institutions offering online programs have increased from 48.9% in 2002 to 70.6% in 2012 [8]. There is no doubt that rapid technological developments have changed the educational flora and fauna for many students. Carrying bags full of textbooks have become a thing of the past for many digital native tertiary students. Instead they now have access to smartphones, tablets, laptops, and computers [4]. The widespread access to the Internet brings along with it a myriad of learning materials and websites at the tip of their fingertips. These technological developments have opened up limitless pedagogical opportunities for students and teachers, and one such innovation is blended learning.

Blended learning combines the strengths or the positive aspects of traditional and online learning to provide a stimulating and effective learning environment for students. Previous studies in this regard have revealed that there is still, however, a lack of research that examines student participation and staff engagement in educational leadership courses delivered in a blended learning mode [9]; [10]; [11]. It is hoped that the current research will assist in filling in this gap in the literature. This study takes a comprehensive, in-depth study into students’ and staff members’ usage and perceptions about blended learning in a leadership course at a university in Fiji. Educational leadership is one of the first programs at the university that has been delivered using blended mode. By investigating students’ and staff members’ perceptions and engagement in this blended learning environment, the paper contributes to a better understanding of the usage of blended learning in tertiary education.

1.1. Background and Context

Master of Educational Leadership is an innovative, practice-focused and research based Postgraduate Degree that prepares teachers, aspiring leaders and school administrators for leadership positions in schools and other educational institutions. The leadership program consists of six course work units and two independent projects. Students graduate with a Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership upon successfully completing the four course work units and a Master of Educational Leadership degree upon the completion of all the eight prescribed courses. Each course introduces teachers and aspiring leaders to the importance of leadership in education and prepares them to take on the challenges of equity and access, and the introduction of new technologies to the teaching learning milieu. The leadership program also provides opportunities for participants to develop proposals, conduct research and present the findings in project form that can later be developed as research papers or book chapters for publication in journals and text books.

While blended learning can be implemented in any environment that is supported by basic technological tools of communication, it is an added advantage for the distanced and the displaced like those living in an archipelago like Fiji. According to the [12] there are over 300 islands with a total land area of 18,333 square kilometres spread over about 1.3 million square kilometres of the South Pacific Ocean.

The remaining six percent of the population is dispersed over smaller islands. This means that about a quarter (25%) of the population live away from the main island, which is Viti Levu. In such instances, the demographical location presents a challenging educational context for the students, especially those seeking higher education. [13] defines challenging educational contexts as environmental, social, and infrastructural impacts that prevent individuals from reaching their potential in educational achievement. The conditions reckoned earlier are common in many developing countries and Fiji is no exception. Such demographics call for interventions that recognize the need to address the constraints through deployment of appropriate pedagogies that take into account the contextual realities. Given the circumstances, blended learning approach best suits the students who are away from the University. In the current context the University is situated on the main island of Viti Levu and caters for stu-
dents staying in rural and maritime zones. The challenging educational context, sets the platform and provides the motivation for the current study.

1.2. Aim of the Study

Literature entails sparse empirical studies on blended learning and as advocated by [14] more research studies are needed to enhance a better understanding of blended learning. Indeed, blended paradigm is an emerging model however little research has been done into student and staff participation and engagement in such learning environment, regarding an educational leadership program. This paper intends to investigate students’ and staff members’ expectations and perceptions of blended mode of teaching and learning. The study is designed to allow the teaching staff to have a better understanding of what students need and what they want. Thus, this paper aims to contribute towards addressing this gap in the blended learning literature by studying a cohort of students who have successfully completed, or are on the verge of completing a leadership program and perceptions of staff members who deliver the program at a tertiary institution in Fiji. The expectation is that the findings of this study will highlight issues of concern for the staff members and students and how addressing them can contribute to the development of a better blended learning framework for the leadership program.

1.3. Research Questions

Given the paucity of research on global trends related to blended learning and the aim of the research, this study is guided by the following overarching question:

What are the perceptions and experiences of distanced leadership students’ and campus staff members’ in regards to the blended/hybrid mode of learning and teaching?

The study is further guided by the following underlying questions:

1. What are the students’ expectations and perceptions of the blended/hybrid mode of learning?

2. What are the staff members’ expectations and perceptions of the blended/hybrid mode of learning?

3. How does blended learning affect rural and remote students’ access to higher education?

It is hoped that the above 3 underpinning questions will assist in addressing the key research question and thus contribute towards giving new knowledge about blended learning in the Fijian context.

1.4. Significance of Study

There are several reasons why this research is considered to be significant. There has been a paucity of previous research regarding influence of blended learning and teaching on students and staff members. The present research will be significant because it will provide first-hand information about tertiary students’ perception of blended learning as an evolving paradigm in their online lives. This study will contribute to local literature on the subject, which in turn could be used by relevant authorities in improving their understanding and implementing it as a pragmatic approach to effective learning and teaching.

Notably, the findings will be of great value to the lecturers as they are in constant touch with the students and will be able to better understand and implement blended mode of teaching. Tertiary educators may realize the importance of undertaking studies in information technology and online modes as a means of up-skilling their teaching qualities. This study will provide important insights into tertiary teaching and professional learning enabling teacher education institutions to strengthen the pre-service teacher preparation programs to better prepare teachers to cope with varying demands of digital natives in the schools.

The study will also inform the students through relevant curriculum so that they are more aware about better usage of online learning applications. This knowledge will hopefully trickle down to parents and the community at large. The program can inform the curriculum developers in the preparation of relevant curriculum materials for students learning through the blended mode. It will also provide valuable information to the Education Ministries to give due recognition to the blended/hybrid mode as an emerging paradigm. The findings will inform the faculties to appraise
their understanding of the blended model to make learning more effective, applicable and enjoyable.

Hopefully, the finding will alleviate undue fears and fallacies associated with blended learning so that it can be well adopted in higher and postgraduate programs in colleges and universities. It will also provide clarification and inform teachers and administrators that blended approach is not an alternative for a ‘crash course’ or a ‘short course’ with any lesser significance as it is as rigorous and stable covering the stipulated contact hours and credit points as any normal course. It will provide firsthand information to administrators so that they can successfully implement blended/hybrid mode as an effective paradigm in meeting the needs of students in the new millennium.

1.5. Theoretical Framework

Having presented the introduction and the motivation behind the current study, it is vital to discuss the theoretical framework selected for the study. Subsequently, constructivist theory, one of the more prevalent frameworks associated with online and computer based technology in education was selected for the study [15]. According to constructivist learning theory, students do not passively receive knowledge but actively construct new knowledge based on prior experience or collaboratively by what they contribute. Obviously, for blended learning, the best choice is constructivism as the online mode of learning allows students to take charge of their own learning. Constructivism provides an appropriate foundation for the implementation processes and posits that knowledge is not passively received from the world or from authoritative sources but constructed by individuals or collaboratively [16]. Blended mode of delivery seems to be an effective paradigm to successfully implement constructivist pedagogy where teachers act as facilitators allowing students to take more proactive role in their learning [17].

In applying constructivist theory as the framework for this study enabled a better understanding of perceptions and experiences of educational leadership students and staff members in regards to blended mode of learning and teaching. It must be established that students do not learn from technology rather technologies support the learning process. For these reasons, constructivism has implications for pedagogical theory and research as well. Since its inception as an epistemology and philosophy, constructivist theory has prompted scholars to select a constructivist pedagogy. As such it needs to be mentioned that putting constructivist pedagogical ideas into practice effectively necessitates the willingness to embrace and practice principles of constructivist pedagogy [16]; [18] Fosnot, 1996). Subsequently, this research is entrenched in constructivism in light of student centred learning by incorporating emerging technologies in a blended mode.

The following section provides a robust corpus of literature on blended/hybrid mode coinciding with the digital revolution that is characterized as being at the heart of the new digital orientation.

2. Literature Review

The literature presented in this section discusses blended/hybrid mode as an emerging paradigm that can be effectively implemented by colleges and universities. The literature also discusses the importance and relevance of blended approach in education in Pacific societies and beyond.

2.1. Blended Approach

Higher education institutions have realized that holding onto past teacher centred teaching practices are no longer congruent with the needs of our knowledge society. As such, Universities globally, have been challenged to position their institutions for the 21st century and the adoption of blended approach is inevitable. There are many definitions of blended or flexible mode of learning and teaching. According to [19] blended learning is defined as a mixture of online learning and face-to-face instruction. Accordingly, blended learning refers to the hybrid of traditional face-to-face classroom lectures and e-learning. According to [20] blended learning is becoming progressively
prevalent form of learning in higher education institutions globally. On a similar note, [5] define blended learning as the fusion of online learning and face-to-face delivery of learning. It must be emphasised that there are certain conditions and realities for the implementation of blended mode effectively. Some of these realities are copious supply of electricity, sound internet connectivity, with availability of technological gadgets such as smartphones, computers and laptops [13]. Thus, in a context where there is lack of access to electricity, Internet and technological tools, blended approach may not be feasible or achievable.

Likewise, [13] defines blended learning as a meticulous amalgamation of random face-to-face session with a combination of online delivery of content followed by self-directed study. The author further clarifies that blended mode also takes into consideration offline content saved on servers that are accessed by students during their free time. Likewise, [21] defines blended approach as web-enhanced or web-based and face-to-face education. On a similar note, [6] define blended mode as a formal education program in which students learn part through online delivery of content and part through a face to face session away from the main centre and close to the location of the students. Considering that majority of the students are digital natives, they are able to intuitively use a variety of information technology devices and navigate the internet with ease [22]. In a survey undertaken in America about the lifestyle of the millennials, reveal they have exceptional attachment with technological tools. According to [23] it is the way students have fused their social lives into them which can make blended learning more meaningful and enjoyable.

On the same note, [24] supports the views of [23] that having multi-tasking ability and an instantaneous ability to move between the real and the cybernetic domain, make these students easily adapted to blended approach. Subsequently [25] assert that students not only check email and media messages daily for social reasons, they use their mobiles as a major mechanism for communicating with faculty and classmates. Accordingly, [24] asserts that digital native environment, as learner-centered can very easily accommodate blended learning [17]. Accordingly, [26] Ward and LaBranche (2003), determine that blended learning uses internet as the primary mode of instruction and integrates a limited number of face-to-face classroom sessions during the semester. On a same note, [27] describe blended learning as a paradigm using of a variety of technologies, pedagogies and contexts to create a strategic mix that increases student success irrespective of their demographical location.

Myriad of definitions exist of blended learning exist in literature but there is always a common thread evident amongst all. For example, according to [28] blended learning is characterized by a synchronous combination of face-to-face with Information and Communication Technology [ICT] based settings. Subsequently, [29] extend this definition to include "other combinations of technologies, locations or pedagogical approaches" (p. 12). There are many digital tools and applications like Facebook and Twitter that seem to have bridged the gap that had existed in communication for some time and can be easily adopted in blended approach [30]. Thus, smartphones and Applications [Apps] are inventions that can be downloaded to smartphones to keep individuals connected to society, including college and university students. Accordingly, [31] affirms that apps are a portable way to stay connected to social media and 97% of smartphone users use apps for social networking purposes. While there are benefits as well as demerits of using social media, if used with responsibility, the gains outweigh the limitations greatly [32]; [30]; [33] and they can be effectively used in the delivery of blended learning [34]. Indeed, digital environments have infiltrated and changed the lives of young people the world over and this alteration in them needs to be understood and utilized for meaningful learning purposes.

2.2. Challenging Contexts

Given that blended learning is a resource-effective methodology that has the potential to enrich student learning experience, it also has its fair share of challenges. [13] defines challeng-
ing educational contexts as “environmental, social, and infrastructural impacts that prevent individuals from reaching their potential and participating in both formal and informal learning” (p. 328). Foremost, students need to have access to basic technological tools like laptops and computers with unfettered access to affordable quality internet and electricity [13]. In the same vein, personal computers provide excellent opportunities for students in completing their assignments in the comforts of their homes [35]. Notably, previous literature shows that poor and slow internet connectivity can inhibit meaningful online learning as it causes frustration that can lead to poor student performance [36]; [37]. Likewise, literature entails that monopolies keep internet prices high and make it difficult for all residents to access digital services [13]. Given the benefits of digital technology, [38] insists the importance of expanding internet access to a wider range of people by reducing its costs and improving the network efficiency and infrastructure [38]; [13]. Addressing these issues will surely increase the digital inclusion greatly enhance the delivery of blended approach.

Apart from physical and hardware support structures, students also need to be mentally and socially prepared for blended learning. This is because studying in blended mode can lead to unrealistic expectations and feelings of isolation due to the reduced opportunities for social interaction [10] (Tosun, 2015). These views are also sustained by [39] who argues that at times students have poor management skills and are weak at accepting responsibilities for individual learning [39]. Given these points, students need some form of initial training and guidance for successful implementation of a blended approach. Previous literature further reveals that students often vary in terms of their readiness and comfort levels with the technology as they are being used to traditional means of education [37]; [40]; [41]. This lack of readiness may lead to increased dropout rates which may lead to lack of control due to the remoteness of the students when completing assessment activities [37].

In fact, the role and impact of technology and quality internet in blended learning cannot be undermined as they are the inevitable imperatives for blended paradigm. [42] stresses the importance of students to have access to technology to participate in current educational practices. As has been noted, the internet is deeply embedded into our daily activities and it has become an integral part of the lives of millions of people in modern world. This phenomenon has enveloped not only large developed countries but as well as small developing states [43]. Obviously, internet communication is used in all spheres of human activity and has become very popular amongst the students [44]. According to [45], many students are able to benefit from the use of the internet for research and communication purposes. Literature entails that the use of the Internet as an instructional tool in higher education is swiftly mounting with an immense increase in the development of academic websites entrenched with huge amounts of learning materials [46]; [47]; [48]. The Internet’s ability to provide students quick access to documents, scholarly articles and databases makes it a valuable prerequisite for blended learning.

As for tertiary institutions, they require time commitments from faculty as a lot of pre-planning and development is required with appropriate technological support [49]. There is no doubt the need for the presence of certain basic amenities in place for the implementation of blended mode effectively. Staff members also need the moral and technical support to effectively deliver lessons through the blended mode. It represents a significant shift from traditional teaching and learning, but has not been achieved without significant agony [50]. These trials include substantial investments of time by instructors in developing appropriate resource materials and management of response time to students’ enquiries as they frequently expect expedited responses [17]. In fact there is ample literature to suggest that blended approach is more demanding on part of the staff members especially in preparation and presentation of such classes as compared with traditional means of lesson delivery [37]; [51]. It’s naive to disagree that there’s significant amount of extra work involved in the delivery of lessons through
blended mode and for which staff should be allowed flexible working arrangement or compensated accordingly.

2.3. Strengths and Relevance

Despite certain challenges associated with blended learning, it brings along with it its share of benefits and strengths. According to [20] students have pointed out relatively positive perception of blended learning amongst them. Findings further revealed that blended learning leads to improved student satisfaction and performance in examination. In essence, most of the students praised the blended approach as it provided a more convenient access to education for those who could not study full time on campus [20]. An earlier study by [52] has reported that students have positive feelings of blended learning as they believed it as a more productive means of education as compared with traditional approach. Likewise, findings further revealed higher satisfaction levels among faculty members and students, better learning outcomes for students, and place of learning are all mentioned as strengths in blended learning courses as compared to traditional face-to-face sessions [52].

Evidence for in support for blended mode can be found in the work of [53], who ascertains that diversity and adaptability are some of the key benefits of blended learning. On a similar note, [4] supports the views expressed by [53] that blended learning caters for flexibility in assessment for both student as well as staff members. Previous research by [54] Davies and Graff (2005), further validates the findings of [53] by confirming that blended learning has a strong student centred and collaborative learning focus. Likewise, [55] is in acquiesce with [54] that blended learning allows for online collaboration where students are able to develop their own technical skills using online learning platforms that have space for feedback and discussion. She further establishes that blended learning has a high level of collaborative commitment in online learning as compared with traditional face-to-face mode [55]. For these reasons, students in a blended learning arrangement display greater ability to participate in terms of online discussions and posting of messages on discussion forums [17]. Flexible timing and learning environment are factors that empower students to actively control their learning environment and to engage in critical thinking at their own will and pace. In essence, blended learning should be understood in regards to the incursion it has made as an emerging paradigm in the intellectual halls of the education arena.

According to [39] blended learning has proved to directly impact and substantially enhance students’ learning experiences and eventually leads to better academic achievement. This pedagogical model encourages students to learn in an interactive and collaborative environment, and at their own pace and in their own time [56] ; [57]. Likewise, [58] are assertive that blended learning, thoughtfully combines the best rudiments of online and face-to-face education and “is likely to emerge as the predominant teaching model of the future" (p. 138). There is substantial evidence attesting to the fact that blended learning can positively impact student retention and student performance in examinations [36]. Later benefits were also found by Poon (2013a) who establishes that blended learning is beneficial to both students as well as the institution as it leads to better student performance, flexible accessibility, efficient utilization of resources. In like manner, there is profuse evidence in the literature that substantiates that courses offered through blended mode positively impact students’ performance [28] ; [36] ; Poon, 2013a; [27]. While exploring some of the benefits and relevance of blended learning [1] declare that it has the transformative potential by enabling institutions to adopt technology based learning and teaching leading towards active and inquiry based learning.

Likewise, blended mode is more economical for tertiary institutions as a lot of materials can be developed and placed online that could be just updated and used for some time [59]. By the same token, blended approach doesn’t need big classrooms as majority of the time students are learning through online mode. Moreover, implementing blended mode of learning can reduce staff and student classroom contact time and ac-
cordingly save staffing costs. Likewise, due to financial difficulties coupling with lack of reduced Government subventions in small and upcom-
ing institutions, blended approach seems most appropriate and timely [28]. This is because universities these days are managed like busi-
nesses and they need to make profits in order to survive in this competitive world that pro-
fesses internationalisation, inter-disciplinary, and academic-industry collaboration [60] ; [61]. How-
ever, [62] and [63] are sceptical with the previous comment and argue that while cost savings can be a valid benefit, it should not be considered as the primary purpose for implementing blended approach. Instead, they claim that student performance and improved learning outcomes should always remain paramount for implementing blended approach [63] ; [62] As advocated by Poon (2013a) blended learning has made its mark as it con-
tinues to inspire the development of critical thinking skills and provides them the motivation and satisfaction to learn in a flexible learning environment. Citing the relevance and the copious benefits, it can be assumed that blended learning is a con-
structive approach and is beneficial to students, staff and the institution at large.

2.4. Misconceptions and Fallacies

Substantial literature has evaluated blended learning from academics’ or developers’ points of view. Unfortunately, there are certain myths and misconceptions associated with blended learning leading to it not very well adopted in higher and postgraduate programs in many universities [7]. One major reason stated by [7] is unfamiliarity of the staff members in developing and delivering the courses in mix of face-to-face and online mode. Some teachers also believe that blended approach is a substitute for a ‘crash course’ or a ‘short cir-
cuit’ to usually semester long courses without realizing that the content and the learning hours are not compromised in this approach. Previous research has highlighted these concerns as adminis-
trations in certain institutions continue to remain skeptical about the academic quality and rigor of blended courses due to their preference of tra-
ditional approach (Ciabocchi, Ginsberg, & Piac-
ciano, 2016) or sheer ignorance. Another miscon-
ception associated with blended learning is that some teachers still do not consider blended learning as rigorous and stable enough as traditional means of learning. Conversely, recent studies il-
lustrate that students learn effectively by actively participating in the learning process offered by the blended approach [64]. In essence, while blended learning is quite new and an emerging paradigm, it has been well accepted and implemented widely along the intellectual halls of educational institutions globally.

3. Research Methodology

The forthcoming sections present the research paradigm and the research methods adopted for this research and articulate the research design and the method adopted for this study.

This paper explores students’ and teachers’ experiences in a blended learning course and ex-
amines them from their perspectives. Accord-
ingly, the research is anchored in a constructivist paradigm using a post-positivist stance due to the adoption of quantitative as well as qualitative methods [65]. The constructivist paradigm reflects one of the basic tenets of this theoreti-
cal paradigm, that is, that reality is socially con-
structed [66] On a similar note, the design al-
lows flexibility in exploring the blended learning experience in an inductive approach using data triangulation to ensure credibility and trustwor-
thinness. Hence the primary data sources for this study come from surveys while supportive data is obtained from teacher and student interviews. Subsequently, this research was conducted from within a constructivist paradigm, using mixed methods approach. As advocated by [67] mixed methods enhance the clarity of findings because of the increased breadth and depth of results. By the way, there are a number of similar stud-
ies where both qualitative as well as quantita-
tive approaches have been used effectively [68] ; [69] ; [70]. This study adopted a concurrent mixed methods approach employing appropriate research instruments as discussed in the subse-
quent section.
3.1. Research Instruments

Considering the research design, a survey seemed to be the most appropriate and manageable means of getting the views of the students and staff members about their blended experience. Accordingly, surveys have been a favoured tool for many researchers because it provides a cheap and effective way of collecting data in a structured and manageable form [71]. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were administered as part of the qualitative aspect of the mixed methods research. Several researchers support the use of semi-structured interviews. [72], for example, claims that the use of semi-structured interviews provide better access to informants’ ideas, thoughts and memories. Similarly, [73] recommend the use of semi-structured interviews as they assist in obtaining in-depth information about the informants’ perceptions and their experiences. [74] also used mixed methods approach using a survey and interviews in their study while evaluating a blended approach to patient safety education. Furthermore, the choice of a mixed methods research using a survey and semi-structured interviews has been supported by similar reported studies. For example, Poon (2013a) undertook a mixed methods research employing a survey and semi-structured interviews in studying students’ perceptions of blended mode of learning. Having considered previous literature and for ease of data collection, survey and semi-structured seemed most appropriate and were astutely implemented as research instruments in the current study.

3.2. Research Sample

Selecting a research sample is an imminent issue frequently raised by researchers and students as it is closely related to trustworthiness of the findings [75]. According to [76] researchers are always concerned with what can be labelled as an adequate size for a sample. They further suggest that despite considering shortage of time and financial constraints, it is advisable to obtain “as large a sample as they reasonably can” [76]. For the purpose of this study, five year graduates from 2014 to 2018 were purposefully selected. The target population is the entire group a researcher is interested in and in this case the graduates of the MEL program who completed their program through blended mode. The survey was administered to 51 graduates of the program and 12 current students 2018. From this cohort, 10 students and 39 graduates (total of 49) attempted the survey resulting in an overall response rate of 78% which is acceptable for discussion. As for the interview, 5 students were randomly selected for this study. Similarly, all 7 staff members involved in the delivery of the leadership course in blended mode attempted the survey and also responded positively for the interviews.

3.3. Reliability of the Survey Constructs

Diverse variables were considered for the various items in the survey to understand the hybrid or blended approach as an evolving paradigm for the distanced and disadvantaged students. The Cronbach’s coefficient alpha \([\alpha]\) was used to assess the reliability of the study constructs as it is widely used for assessing the reliability of measurement scales with multi-point items. Both the Student Survey as well as the Staff Survey had similar items and the overall reliability of the constructs for the former was .720 on 15 items and .917 for the later. Table 1 shows the Cronbach’s Alpha values of the study constructs. Cronbach’s alpha is a measure of internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group. The average value of Cronbach’s Alpha reveals that the constructs are at an acceptable level to address the research question.

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3.4. Trustworthiness

Having discussed reliability, validity is another important issue that needs to be addressed before research methodology is discussed in detail. The validity was achieved in data collection as there was significant congruency with reality in the research findings [77]. Since the study is conducted using a mixed methods approach, it is pertinent to mention how the trustworthiness of the research was enhanced. According to [78] Ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. Subsequently, credibility was achieved by adopting well established research methods as use of them in concert compensates the individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits. Member checks were also undertaken as [78] consider it as the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility. Likewise, use of iterative questioning and probing during interviews led to the rectification of contradictions and elimination of suspect data [79]. By and large, confirmability issues were also taken into consideration during the entire study as the data was analysed and discussed neutrally without any bias and preconception.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were taken into consideration throughout the course of this study since a number of commentators of educational research have stressed the importance of adopting set ethical procedures [80] ; [81] ; [82]. This action is in line with the views expressed by [83], that is, research should not exploit informants but enhance their confidence by voluntarily sharing worthwhile information with the researcher. That being the case, the participants have not been identified in order to maintain confidentially and anonymity. To further maintain the ethical etiquettes relevant information such as the aim and the purpose of the study were communicated well in advance to the participants of the present study. They also had the option of quitting their involvement at any time without any duress or fear of any type of victimization. Subsequently, the survey was administered by respective administrative assistant and no direct contact or interference was made with the participants in order to uphold ethical standards.

3.6. Limitations of the Study

There was a lack of local literature on blended approach as such international literature has been frequently quoted. Additionally, the time available for this research was very limited as certain deadlines had to be met but there is scope for more detailed research to be initiated in the near future. With the limited sample size in the selection of staff members for the survey and in the qualitative work may limit the generalization of the findings. However, readers may use the findings at their own will and accord. In future other staff members in other faculties offering programs through blended mode may be considered. In addition, a lot of data has been collected that cannot be analysed due to time limitations and writing further research papers focusing on more detailed blended learning aspects will be looked at in time to come.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings as per the research questions according to emerging themes combined with statistical analysis in a constructivist paradigm.

Findings indicate that despite the number of students enrolled through blended approach has remained consistent over a period of 5 years, students are continuously able to gain benefit in completing their programs. All these students either stay on Vau Levu or other small islands in the Fiji group. In fact, they would not have been able to complete their studies if the program was not offered in a blended approach. Comprehensive analysis and discussions in this regard are provided later in the paper. Table 3 shows the total statistics for student as well as staff items in the surveys that were implemented for the purpose of this study.

Total item statistics for both staff and students reveal a high item correlation and acceptable level
of Cronbach’s Alpha for presentation and discussion. On similar lines, semi-structured interview protocols having few key questions were developed for the students as well as the staff members (See Table 5). Unlike surveys, interviews provide the opportunity to probe and ask follow up questions and are generally easier for respondents, especially if what is sought is opinion or perception [84] ; [85] ; [1], [26].

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim and analysed to identify commonalities and key points raised by students.

5. Familiarity with Blended approach

It is no doubt that we live in a connected world with unparalleled access to a vast array of online information and experiences. Also, it must be established that majority of our students are digital natives, a term coined by Marc Prensky who defined them as young people who grew up surrounded by, and using computers, cell phones and other tools of the digital age [86]. Having grown up with widespread access to technology, the digital natives are able to intuitively use a variety of Information technology devices and navigate the internet with ease and suppleness. Subsequently, majority (86%) of the students affirmed that they were familiar with blended learning approach. Blended learning (BL) weaves face-to-face instruction into computer-mediated instruction in formal academic settings. Likewise, majority (59%) of the students indicated that they had 1-5 years of experience in learning through blended mode while some (33%) of them had 6-10 years of experience (see Table 6). Findings reveal that students are quite well versed with blended approach as according to [87] blended learning has made significant impact on recent teaching and learning models as the connection of face-to-face learning and e-learning expands the learning space and time.

As has been noted, majority of the students have had experience with blended mode of learning as they have even completed a few undergraduate courses in this mode. This is because of their location and financial difficulties completing courses in blended mode becomes a necessity for the distanced and disadvantaged students. Qualitative data revealed that attending university for the students was a challenge in itself as they could not meet the travelling, accommodation and tuition fees of the universities. Student E stated, “I have ample experience as I have completed 8 of my undergraduate courses in blended approach and this is my 6th course in the leadership program.” On a similar note student H expressed that “I completed all except 4 of my undergraduate courses using blended mode.” Findings reveal that most of the students are quite familiar with blended mode of learning as it was most appropriate pedagogy for them, especially in rural and remote areas. There is ample support in previous literature about the upsurge in blended learning for it has been estimated that 80–90% of college and corporate classes in China, South Korea, Taiwan, United States and the United Kingdom are conducted in blended mode with more than 1 billion prospective learners globally [88].

In like manner, all the staff members are familiar with blended approach and majority (71%) of them strongly agree that blended learning enhances student learning. Their views are supported by [89] who proclaim that the integra-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Scale Mean if Item Deleted</th>
<th>Scale Variance if Item Deleted</th>
<th>Corrected Item-Total Correlation</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha if Item Deleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How familiar are you with the blended learning approach?</td>
<td>60.47</td>
<td>22.338</td>
<td>.141</td>
<td>.720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your experience with blended approach as a student?</td>
<td>60.82</td>
<td>20.153</td>
<td>.404</td>
<td>.697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning is a method of combining face-to-face learning with online technology.</td>
<td>60.18</td>
<td>21.945</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which technological tool do you use for your blended learning?</td>
<td>60.10</td>
<td>20.510</td>
<td>.391</td>
<td>.700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor quality internet and associated data cost are major challenges I faced in blended learning.</td>
<td>59.65</td>
<td>20.565</td>
<td>.499</td>
<td>.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning is of great advantage for the distanced and the remote students.</td>
<td>59.67</td>
<td>22.683</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended mode of learning favours students as it provides easy access to education for those who cannot study full time.</td>
<td>59.92</td>
<td>20.285</td>
<td>.361</td>
<td>.702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The face-to-face sessions are scheduled during holidays and semester breaks for the convenience of the students.</td>
<td>59.92</td>
<td>18.993</td>
<td>.424</td>
<td>.693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The face-to-face sessions are held at centres convenient to the students.</td>
<td>59.88</td>
<td>20.443</td>
<td>.492</td>
<td>.694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning using blended approach is more rigorous and robust as it combines the strengths of traditional as well as online methods of teaching and learning.</td>
<td>59.86</td>
<td>20.000</td>
<td>.464</td>
<td>.692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without blended approach I would not have been able to complete my degree.</td>
<td>60.12</td>
<td>22.860</td>
<td>-.073</td>
<td>.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As compared with traditional means of learning how do you describe the quality of staff interaction?</td>
<td>59.98</td>
<td>17.729</td>
<td>.491</td>
<td>.682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As compared with traditional means of learning how do you describe the quality of student interaction?</td>
<td>60.31</td>
<td>17.342</td>
<td>.513</td>
<td>.678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I am satisfied with blended learning as a teaching method.</td>
<td>59.86</td>
<td>18.625</td>
<td>.474</td>
<td>.685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning is likely to emerge as the predominant teaching model of the future.</td>
<td>59.84</td>
<td>21.181</td>
<td>.206</td>
<td>.718</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Staff item statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How familiar are you with the blended learning approach?</td>
<td>62.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning enhances student learning.</td>
<td>61.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning is more student led rather than teacher centered approach.</td>
<td>62.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions need IT and other technical support to effectively deliver blended mode of learning and teaching.</td>
<td>61.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning is an added advantage for the distant and remote students.</td>
<td>62.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended mode of learning favours students as it provides easy access to education for those who cannot study full time</td>
<td>62.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended teaching allows teachers to develop their own technical skills using online learning platforms</td>
<td>62.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The face-to-face sessions are usually scheduled during holidays and at centres convenient to the students.</td>
<td>62.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended approach is more rigorous and robust as it combines the strengths of traditional and online methods of teaching.</td>
<td>61.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching using blended approach does not compromise on the learning hours for any course.</td>
<td>61.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended approach allows staff to spend more time attending to online postings, and attending to student enquiries.</td>
<td>62.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe the relationship between the face-to-face sessions and the online learning component.</td>
<td>62.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning reduces the ‘office hours’ but increases the online commitment of the staff members.</td>
<td>61.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are certain challenges of blended mode of teaching that needs to be addressed to deliver lessons effectively.</td>
<td>62.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended learning is likely to emerge as the predominant teaching model of the future.</td>
<td>61.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Staff and student interview protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Interview Protocol</th>
<th>Staff Interview Protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What do you like the most about blended learning?</td>
<td>1. What is your perception of blended mode of lesson delivery?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are some of the challenges you face in blended learning?</td>
<td>2. How supportive is the institution in the delivery of lessons through blended mode?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How has blended approach assisted you in completing your leadership courses?</td>
<td>3. What are some of the concerns you have in the actual delivery of blended approach?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Any other comment you would like to make about blended learning and teaching?</td>
<td>4. Any other comment you would like to make about blended teaching and learning?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tion of both the face-to-face and e-learning systems enhances the learning process. Their findings are further reinforced by [4], who are assertive that blended approach allows learners to actively participate in economically viable constructive learning environments. The staff members further confirm that blended learning is student centred approach and their views are in concurrence with [87] who is assertive that blended approach positively impact the learning process where the educational possibilities are multiplied. This is because blended learning effectively combines various learning techniques by employing face-to-face learning with relevant technological tools.

5.1. Experiences and Perceptions of Students

In like manner, blended learning in the standard educational model refers to the use of technology to strengthen the teaching process through the application of the concepts learned in classroom. With reference to the use of technology, findings reveal that majority (61%) of the students use their laptops as their major tool for communication while some (31%) of them use their desktop computers (see Table 7). A few (8%) of the students also make use of their smart phones for blended learning. Desktop computers have been used for decades but as time has passed, millennials have grown a liking for other mobile devices laptops and tablets [90]; [91]. Previous research entails that laptops and mobile devices can be used to enhance learning as there is a need to view these tools as academic resources, rather than as distractions [25]; [91]. This is because learning spaces within the context of higher education has extended beyond traditional and physical environments with the advent of technological tools, such as computers, laptops and tablets with internet connection [92]; [93]. According to [26] blended learning or mixed mode uses the Internet with technological tools as the primary instruction mode, but incorporates a limited number of face-to-face sessions held during the semester. Likewise, [27] define blended model as a learning pedagogy that incorporates a myriad of technological tools used in blended learning with face-to-face learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience with blended approach as a student</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 Years</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 Years</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 Years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technological tools used in blended learning</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid Desktop Computer</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laptop</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smartphone</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On a similar note, majority (71%) of the staff members strongly endorse that institutions need robust IT and other technical support to effectively deliver blended mode of learning and teaching. Previous literature reveals that blended learning education has manifested itself primarily through online learning, thus bringing along its share of challenges and opportunities. It represents a significant shift from traditional teaching and learning, but has not been achieved without significant agony [50]. In concurrence with the previous statement, majority (67%) of the students strongly agreed that slow internet reception, poor quality and high internet cost were some of the major problems they faced while learning through blended approach (See Table 8). The remaining students (33%) also agreed despite they may have thought that there were other issues such as lesson delivery and learning platforms. Previous literature reveals that students often
vary in terms of their readiness and comfort levels with the technology as they are being used to traditional means of education [37]; [41]. This lack of readiness may lead to increased dropout rates which may lead to lack of control due to the remoteness of the students when completing assessment activities thus increasing dropout rates [37].

Table 8: Slow internet reception and associated data cost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative data analysis revealed that while students are very appreciative of blended approach, it does bring with it certain disparaging conditions. Accordingly, student J stated, “I am staying about 120km in the interior of the island and have very poor internet reception, as such I have to climb a nearby mountain whenever I want to go online.” Similar sentiments were shared by student K, “I have to catch a boat to travel to nearby island to buy internet data” when probed why not buy ample data at one time her response was “Well, internet data has expiry dates and whether you use them or not they get expired.” This was a reasonable explanation as the internet data is usually time bound globally. Findings further reveal that majority (92%) of the students are satisfied with the blended mode of teaching and learning. Previous literature consisting of results from several tertiary institutions suggest that learner satisfaction and learning outcomes are superior in blended learning settings compared to traditional means [88]. Likewise, qualitative analysis reveals that there are a number of aspects that students like the most about blended learning in spite of certain limitations (See Figure 1).

Majority of the students have a positive view of blended approach. They like the personal approach, increased accessibility and flexibility of engagement the most. Blended learning caters to each student’s pace and learning style by creating a conducive learning environment. Accordingly, Student A states that “blended learning allows me to work and attend to my studies in my own spare time.” “I am able to access my studies even from a café shop or places where hot spots are available.” Stated Student B. Blended learning is seen as user friendly as students have round the clock contact with the tutors and peers and also if they are struggling with a particular topic, they can instantly reach out to complementary web resources. There is ample evidence in literature that confirms that students enjoy the flexibility that blended learning provides as it enables them to engage in both online and face-to-face interactions [94]. Likewise, qualitative analysis further reveals that blended learning allows students experience innovative learning tools and enhances collaborative learning. It facilitates student evaluations with comprehensive online testing and granular reporting as automatic grading is offered by many learning systems like Moodle. According to Student D, “blended learning is fun as it enables me to keep in touch with peers and I can easily share and discuss issues just like using Facebook.” Subsequently, blended learning involves online and digital resources making time limitations a matter of the past, provided one has access to a computer and good internet connection [88].

Undoubtedly, everything is not good about blended learning as there are certain pressing issues highlighted by the students. Blended learning comes at a price to the students as they have to meet the cost of internet and at times they also receive poor quality signals limiting their access to quality study time. Also, since blended learning is about technological dependence, there is a limitation with regards to technical skills of both the instructors and the learners thus calling for adequate technical support. Previous research entails that loneliness, isolation, lack of motivation, poor communication and lack of timely direction by teachers are reported as issues in online learning [11]. Earlier research by [95] point out that in online environment, students at times feel ne-
Figure 1: Students perception of Blended Learning

Unequivocally, all the students anonymously agreed (35%) or strongly agreed (65%) that blended learning is of great advantage for the distanced and remote students (See Table 8). A quick glimpse reveals Fiji is an archipelago of more than 330 islands of which 110 are permanently inhabited and more than 500 islets, amounting to a total land area of about 18,300 square kilometres (see Figure 1). Apart from Yasawa and the Lau Group, there are of number of small islands scattered in the periphery of the two major islands known as Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. There are 10648 school teachers in Fiji and about 40% of them teach in rural remote areas [97]. Blended learning approach suits teachers in such areas as they do not have to go to the main campus and at the same time they are able to assist students to upgrade their qualifications and contribute effectively towards building a knowledge society.

Despite certain demographical and technical challenges, benefits of blended learning can be identified for both the students and the institu-
tion. For the student these include the opening up of new opportunities for those who were previously excluded or disadvantaged due to geographic and social issues [87] ; [37]. Hence, gaining certified qualifications can be a route to improved job prospects in way of promotions and potentially increased job satisfaction. Previous literature entails that universities have embraced blended approach, given its potential for increasing student numbers without having to accommodate them physically [37]. In like manner, [87] is in concurrence with [37] about the increasing popularity of blended learning as illustrated by the increasing range of courses provided by this mode in higher education establishments. Likewise, majority (90%) of the students have a very positive outlook for blended learning as they see it as the emerging predominant teaching model of the future. There is ample support in the literature for the implementation of blended learning. Previous studies have revealed that blended learning can have a positive impact not just on student experience, but also on performance [36].

Findings further reveal that students either strongly agree (51%) or agree (39%) that blended learning provides easy access to education for those who cannot study full time on campus (See Table 10). Accordingly, blended learning also favours students who cannot study full time apart from those who are distanced and demographically displaced [98].

### Table 10: Access to education for those who cannot study full time on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the students in the current research are full time teachers as such it is not possible for them to upgrade their qualifications without study leave. Blended approach provides them the opportunity to work and study at the same time. This mode of study can give a good mix of learning from the expert teaches supported by online learning materials [37]. Likewise, most of the activities and assignments are accessed online supported by online interaction with fellow students via email, online forums, and virtual conferencing. After all, literature speaks volumes about the obvious benefits of flexible learning for people who are working or who have family/caring responsibilities. The flexibility it offers gives students more control over the time, place, and pace of their studies [10] ; [99], [100] are in concurrence with earlier findings that blended mode provides the best option for working class as well as for those who are looking for career progression or to change career direction. That being the case, the timing of the face-to-face classes is an important issue for working students and those based in rural and remote areas.

In light of the timing and scheduling of the face-to-face sessions, findings reveal that majority (91%) of the students were pleased with the timing of the face-to-face sessions as they were always during school holidays and when teachers were free. A few (8%) of the students disagreed as face-to-face classes cannot be held during all holidays and semester breaks as staff members also have other professional and personal commitments. This is because, students' views and attendance is sought in advance before face-to-face sessions are scheduled. Evidence for in support of this notion can be found in the work of [52] who emphasize that most students found face-to-face sessions and interactions with both the instructor and peers very effective and meaningful. Likewise [40] stresses the importance of face-to-face sessions as students' need them for clarification of information and personal interaction with the staff members. As such it can be established that although online discussion forums are effective at promoting reflective activities, face-to-face discussions enable students to learn directly from each other and from staff members.

Findings further reveal all the students are sat-
isfied with the venues or centres where the face-to-face sessions are held. Citing the widely dispersed nature of the students, face-to-face classes are always held in remote schools or on an island away from the main land. Setting a convenient location enables students from nearby schools to attend the classes without much difficulty and becomes economically viable for the students.

Table 11: Blended approach is more rigorous and robust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The advent of learning that combines online and face-to-face delivery is not merely a theory but it is already being implemented in schools in many countries [39] [40]. Similar sentiments are shared by [61] that many higher education facilities are systematically trailing and implementing various forms of “blended learning in order to improve their student centered learning experience” (p. 447). Majority (94%) of the students seemed pleased with the blended mode of learning as they believe it is more rigorous and robust since it combines the strengths of traditional as well as online methods of teaching and learning (See Table 10). In the current context staff members follow two major pedagogical practices as elicited from interviews:

· Lessons for the face-to-face and the online cohorts are delivered simultaneously followed by online support; and

· Lessons for the face-to-face and online cohorts are delivered separately followed by online support.

Hence, it must be recognized that blended learning has two components; the online and the traditional face-to-face mode. Moreover, both the components are essential for the effective delivery of blended learning and one cannot override the importance of one over the other [98]; [40]. On similar note, it must be realized that where online and face-to-face cohorts are taught simultaneously, learning design becomes more complex and demanding. In this context, the ‘blend’ is not just about use of traditional and technology-assisted teaching practices, but also about the mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences [61]. Initially, online students were only provided recordings of lectures but later staff members realized it was not enough and forum discussions and learning platforms like Moodle were effected, an idea that is supported by Verkroost, Meijerink, Lintsen & Veen (2008). Evidently, it is noticeable from students’ interview transcripts that discussion with peers is a key factor for motivation and satisfaction in their course. All of them stated that they looked forward to discussion forums that are placed on the Moodle which is a learning platform used by the university that is designed to provide learners a robust and integrated system to create tailored learning environments. However, these findings are contrary to [101] who conclude that the face-to-face learner group emphasize the learning community, whereas the online learners stressed the individualist perspective. The ability to learn independently is valued by all participants too, but the majority of students highlighted and looked forward to online peer collaborations and the face to face sessions.

Findings further reveal that as compared with traditional means of learning majority (71%) of the students have stated that the quality of student interaction has increased (See Table 11). Some (16%) of the students see no difference in quality of interaction while a few (12%) of them believe that the quality of interaction has decreased. According to [54], a key benefit of blended learning is that it promotes student-centred learning and inspires wider student participation. The latter benefit was also found by [2], who reported that engineering students in a blended learning accounting course displayed greater participation in a learning activity, than did students in a traditional course. Further-
more, [102] found a positive association between student participation, especially in terms of the number of online forum discussions and messages posted leading to enhanced student performance. Likewise, [62] identifies flexibility, variety and adaptability as some of the key benefits of blended learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12: Quality of student interaction</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased due to online interactions</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Increased</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Difference</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In essence, blended approach seems to be well liked by the students as they praised the pedagogy for enabling them to complete their programs. Majority (90%) of the students agreed that without blended approach they would never have been able to complete their programs. There were a few disagreements (6%) and uncertainties (4%) as they may be staying on the mainland and it would be reasonably easy for them to attend face-to-face classes. According to Waha and Davis (2014) students prefer blended mode as they find the mix of face-to-face and online mode beneficial for learning. Flexibility is helpful as it allows study to be fitted in around other commitments including work and study, while still having opportunities to engage with peers in synchronous activities whenever possible. Effective blended learning plays on the strengths of face-to-face and online learning and combines the best of both approaches to facilitate the best learning outcomes for students. It is an “organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies” [5] (D.R Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 148). Majority (82%) of the students in the current research consider the quality of staff interaction to have increased due to online interaction as compared with traditional means of learning (See Table 13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 13: Quality of staff interaction</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased due to online interactions</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat increased</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No difference</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Previous literature also reports particular aspects of blended learning that students enjoy, including flexibility in terms of scheduling, online interaction, and the teachers’ (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). On a similar note [5] also confirm that students appreciate the higher quality and quantity of interaction with teachers and peers that blended learning facilitates. Likewise, [103] also asserts that due to the almost 24/7 availability of staff members and the timely presence of them were found to be very beneficial to the students. However, qualitative data analysis reveals that while majority of the students prefer the online mode, they also look forward to the face-to-face sessions. According to one of the students, face-to-face sessions provided her the opportunity to seek clarification and remove any doubts about the assessment tasks and short tests. “Face-to-face sessions allows me to ask questions directly to the teacher in the class and the explanations make understanding the topics better” commented student E. Likewise, Poon (2011) is in concurrence with Sloman [104] about the im-
portance of face-to-face session, as they stress emphasis should be shifted from a purely technological focus where technology should be considered only as a means to facilitate students’ learning. As such, it can be established that both face-to-face as well as the online mode consolidate each other in creating meaningful blended learning environment.

5.2. Perceptions of Staff members

In like manner, quantitative data analysis reveals that majority (71%) of the staff members are quite assertive that blended learning is a pragmatic pedagogy for all students and especially for distanced and remote students. Having been in constant touch with such students, one of the staff members stated in the interview that “I am certain that majority of my students would not have been able to seek higher education had we not offered the program through blended approach.” On a similar note some (43%) of the staff members strongly agree or agree (29%) that blended mode favours students as it provides easy access to education, especially for those who cannot study full time on the campus. All the staff members anonymously agreed that teaching using blended approach is more rigorous and robust and the findings are well supported by literature as it combines the strengths of traditional as well as online methods of teaching [98]; [40]. At times administrations may feel that blended mode is sort of ‘crash course’ or a compressed course but all the staff members (100%) refute the claim and assert it to be a full semester long course. According to qualitative data analysis and Staff 2, “A course offered through blended learning has the same number of hours as a course offered fully through face-to-face mode.” Similarly, according to Staff F, “Blended lessons are more rigorous as it has the strengths of face-to-face as well as online learning and at no time does it compromise on duration of any course.” In other word, blended approach is viewed to be more thorough as it capitalizes on the strengths of both face-to-face as well as online learning. In fact there is ample literature to suggest that blended approach is more demanding on part of the staff members especially in preparation and presentation of such classes [37]; [51]. It’s naive to disagree that there’s a significant amount of extra teacher’s work involved in the delivery of lessons through blended mode. Paradigm shift is not exactly a trifle as teachers adopting blended learning have to undertake ample advanced planning, with continuous online engagement with students with the right ratio between face-to-face and online learning as there isn’t any universal recipe to it [11].

Moreover, according to staff members those who offer courses through blended approach spend more time attending to online postings, attending to forum discussions and attending to student enquiries. All (100%) of the staff members unanimously agreed that teaching using blended mode was time consuming as they all had to attend to students’ enquiries and do postings on the Moodle even after normal teaching hours. They regard this engagement as official after-hours commitment. The findings are in concurrence with [8] confirm blended learning as time intense taking more faculty time and effort to teach online has increased from 41.4% in 2006 to 44.6% in 2013. Findings further reveal that all the staff members either strongly agree (71%) or agree (29%) that although blended learning reduces the ‘office hours’, it consecutively increases the online commitment of the staff members. This after hours commitment needs to be acknowledged and appropriately adjusted either by flexible working arrangement or being remunerated accordingly. One of the staff members alleged that “more awareness needs to be created about blended learning so that the administration can understand the logistics and allow flexi-hours”. Another staff member stressed that “we go on our own to run blended classes in the interest of our students carrying the extra load without any monetary gain”. The findings are in concurrence with that of Ciabocchi, Ginsberg, and Piacciano (2016) who confirm that a number of issues related to workload, remuneration, and lesson delivery have at times led to confrontations between faculty and the administrators. Qualitative analysis further highlights some of the concerns the staff members have in regards to the delivery of blended class
Qualitative data analysis reveal that staff members delivering courses through blended approach start facing problems from the very initial days. They are not sure whether such classes will be approved or not. They may also not be able to relish the flexible working arrangement and the increased workload may not be remunerated. Under flexible working arrangement, ‘working from home’ concept can be successfully implemented but this option is not available for the staff members. This is because being online with the students and attending to their enquiries online and attending to the forum discussions is a time consuming and demanding task. Evidently, a large-scale meta-analysis supports the notion of allowing workers to perform their tasks while being remote from their office has many beneficial effects on job performance, and generally had no detrimental effects on the quality of output at work [105].

Henceforth, blended teaching also requires ample preparation time and a commitment on part of the staff members during the whole duration of the course. Findings reveal that these concerns are quite genuine and needs to be addressed to effectively deliver courses through blended mode. Previous research evidence supports the current findings as effective delivery of blended teaching needs to be valued and rewarded by the administration [106]. Likewise, [106] further assert that for successful implementation of blended learning administrators need to listen and address the concerns of the faculty as it is them who are finally responsible for the effective delivery of courses using blended approach. In essence, blended instruction has between 30 to 80 percent of the course content delivered online with some face-to-face interaction [11]. Hence, the results of this study does not provide direction on what the ‘right blend’ of online and face-to-face learning might be as it varies across different content areas, with different proportions of online and face-to-face learning being appropriate for different subject areas. The finding is affirmed by [3] and [11]. None the less, blended learning needs to be supported by robust instructional approach that takes advantage of the best elements of both settings. Online environments provide a level of flexibility that cannot be found in a classroom environment, while face-to-face interaction provides the social interaction that is important for learning [3]. Blended learning involves leveraging learning platforms in making education accessible to all irrespective of the distance and location of the learners.

There is no doubt that there exists a plethora of misunderstandings associated with blended learning [88], that if not addressed can inhibit the successful implementation of future blended projects. Previous research confirms that despite the fact that the demand for blended mode continues to increase in higher education institutions, the administration in certain institutions continue to remain skeptical about the academic quality and rigor of blended courses [106] due to their preference of traditional approach or may be because of sheer ignorance. The authors further argue that for the success of any blended teaching, administrators’ misconceptions needs to be addressed. Despite these criticisms, there is a growing body of evidence “which indicate that blended and online courses can result in student learning outcomes equivalent to those achieved in face-to-face courses” [106]. Likewise, a UNICON survey of business schools in America, Africa, Europe and Asia reveal that 71% of them offer courses through blended approach [107].

Hence, blended learning approach uses the best of both worlds, as they take the best of what traditional classroom learning and eLearning has to offer and blends them together in a value added learning experience. After all, 77% of academic leaders rate the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face classrooms [8]. In essence, blended learning experiences are incredibly effective as they offer students the benefits of both virtual learning and traditional learning. Findings further reveal that blended mode of lesson delivery allows staff members (86%) to develop their own technical skills using online learning platforms that has space for interactive tutorials, feedback and discussion. On this note, [28] endorses blended mode as a cost effective method where staff members just have
to make a few trips to the participants instead of having a full time classroom teaching commitment. Blended approach seems to have made its impact in the education arena and despite certain teething problems, it has been well adopted by the staff members.

5.3. Overall Opinion

Findings reveal that majority of the students (90%) and all the staff members are assertive that blended learning is likely to emerge as the predominant teaching model of the future. This is because blended learning is convenient for students as course materials are available at all times online for students to access and teachers to modify. Additionally, majority of blended learning systems offer e-mail services that allow students to contact their teachers at any time [106]. Likewise, [108] is in concurrence with [9] that with the combination of synchronous communication in the context of a cohesive community of inquiry, blended learning offers a distinct advantage in supporting higher levels of learning through critical discourse and reflective thinking. As such, understanding the effect of blended learning on students in a classroom setting is absolutely vital for the development of blended learning as an educational tool for the present and the future. While there have been mixed opinions in regards to the effectiveness of blended approach [108], previous studies have shown the efficiency of blended learning in raising the success of students with their academic endeavours [9] ; [10]. In essence, records show that blended learning leads to student satisfaction and the development of critical thinking skills with better student retention rates [98] ; [40]. They ascertain how blended learning has the transformative potential, by offering institutions the opportunity to embrace technology to support active and meaningful learning.

Whatever the case maybe, blended approach has made its mark and is here to stay as it serves a cohort of students who may otherwise not be able to pursue their studies due to demographic reasons. In future, other learning platforms and courses like MOOC will surely take centre stage and will serve as virtual mentors for every learner [28]. Previous literature provides numerous evidences of blended learning resulting in improved performance for students [2] ; [60] ; [109].
Although there are some mixed reactions, literature entails that students prefer online learning with new technologies [110]. Sharing similar futuristic sentiments [88] in a comprehensive study assert that blended learning will become a popular delivery method in the future of workplace learning not only in western countries but also in Asian and developing countries. This is because blended learning helps in breaking the barriers of distance and remoteness [13]. On a similar note, [88] unequivocally endorse the increasing importance of blended learning and predict that it will no doubt become a popular delivery method of future workplace and after hours learning. The endorsement of [88] is supported by [61] who found blended learning approach very flexible and preferable in many cases to traditional face-to-face learning. In essence, the message from the literature establishes that blended learning, if constructed carefully can become a very effective learning and teaching paradigm for all and especially those living in remote areas and on small scattered island nations like Fiji.

6. Implications

Students’ feedback from this survey and qualitative analysis provide new knowledge about their perspective on blended learning mode and aspects that drive their motivation. The basically positive feedback and the expressed expectations of participants to keep the blended learning approach for the programme illustrate that the mix of online and face-to-face learning meets students’ needs. It calls for a blended learning framework that clearly spells out the activities of the face-to-face sessions and extends the real classroom enabling students to actively participate from anywhere using appropriate learning platforms. Moreover, there needs to be a strong student as well as teacher support system that addresses technical issues swiftly. Students learning through blended approach need special care and if possible tertiary institutions should subsidise the internet cost or make appropriate arrangements with the net providers for cheaper rates. Staff members also need to be considerate about the remoteness of the students and be in constant touch with them to avoid isolation and loneliness. A framework consisting of interactive multimedia elements that addresses the concerns of the students and staff members will create a better blended model for all.

Likewise, staff members delivering blended classes should be morally supported with flexible working arrangement and remunerated as appropriate. Qualitative data analysis indicates that teaching using blended approach is more rigorous and robust as it combines the strengths of traditional as well as online methods of teaching. Blended approach should not be viewed as ‘inferior’ or substandard program as according to staff members they have the dual strengths of face-to-face as well as online support. Instead of putting ‘red tapes’ administration should appreciate the delivery of lessons through blended approach and appreciate staff members contributions accordingly. Even as the world is a global village today, some administrators and scholars still pay zero attention to international best practices. They seem to have certain preconceived ideas towards the development of education, and fail to understand the new dynamics in higher education. Current higher education goals and learning outcomes require a new paradigm of change and blended/hybrid approach is one such revolution that cannot be avoided in the 21st century.

7. Conclusion

Blended education is an increasingly common educational alternative as well as a key contributor to the increasingly ambitious landscape in higher education. This paper discusses the use of blended learning as an emerging approach that can enhance the effective delivery of the leadership program. Likewise, it also discusses students’ perceptions of the advantages of blended learning in enabling them to complete their studies. Despite certain shortfalls, blended approach has been very well liked by the staff members as well as the students living in distanced and remote areas. It also discusses factors for successful blended learning development particularly for part-time
and distanced students. This is because blended learning provides greater flexibility of learning for students and enhances their learning experience, in turn, this improves their achievement. As such, blended learning is viewed as a useful platform for simulated learning experience especially for part-time and distanced students.

In essence, blended learning market is becoming highly competitive, and universities are undergoing pressure to develop programs that are not only current, but also relevant and responsive to market needs of the time. The university concerned has already accepted the calling and implemented blended approach in the delivery of a leadership program basically for distanced and maritime students. However, other students who are unable to attend on campus classes are also able to take advantage of the blended mode and successfully complete their studies. It is envisaged that blended learning represents a wider pragmatic pedagogy as compared with traditional face-to-face learning especially in tertiary institutions. Finally, with increased value added benefits from blended approach, it must be established that it provides an advantage not to be missed by all and especially those who cannot study full time and the demographically displaced students, like those in Fiji, the region and beyond.

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