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Exploring the reasons behind student's choice of study modes

Abstract

Universities are increasingly offering courses to be studied in a multitude of ways, from

online to mixed mode/blended learning method to face to face offering. Yet limited research

has explored the types of student characteristics that underpin each mode, which impacts

design and may impact student learning if not recognized. This developmental paper begins

to unpack the characteristics of the learners that exist within each mode which may assist

academics develop courses that improve retention. In this paper, an initial literature review

is presented and it is anticipated that data will be analyzed and presented at the conference to

further the theoretical and practical contributions this paper brings to the community. It is

intended to spark conversation and all insights into the phenomenon are welcome.

Tightening funding arrangements of a neo liberal environment means that there is a heightened need for higher education institutions to attract a wider student market (Laurillard, 2008). Complementing this push is the desire from students for universities to offer more variety in the choice of how they study, which has brought about changes to the traditional face to face mode of delivery globally (Laurillard, 2008). While face to face modes are still popular, online learning continues to be considered a long term, sustainable strategy by higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2014;; Margalina, De-Pablos- Herdero & Montes-Botella, 2017) with some universities having a niche in offering online modes of delivery, such as Open Universities (Kaatrakoski, Littlejohn & Hood, 2016).

In addition to online learning, mixed mode has begun to be implemented in some universities which blends the traditional face to face method with online components. In fact, online and blended learning are the fastest growing modes of education in both the developing and developed world (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Consequently, face to face, online and mixed learning modes are now all equally important in the university ecological system (Caswell, Henson, Jensen, & Wiley, 2008; Sutton & Nora 2008). However, there is only an emerging body of evidence that explores the rationale behind why students study in certain modes and explore the differences between the cohorts (Frederickson, Reed & Clifford, 2005; Wladis, Conway & Hachey, 2017). This study adds to this literature by exploring the research questions:

1) Why do students choose to study in online, face to face and mixed mode environments?

2) What student characteristics are similar between students who enroll in online, face to face and mixed mode environments?

3) What characteristics are different between students who enroll in online, face to face and mixed mode environments?

Individual differences contributing to the choice of study mode

A growing amount of evidence suggests that different people are attracted to different modes of delivery, however evidence that helps to unpack these similarities and differences is still needed. Consequently, this study explores the similarities and differences in age, learning styles, goal orientation, personal responsibilities such as number of dependents and committed working hours, on enrolled mode of delivery and overall engagement in the course.

Age and gender

Studies of adolescents and young adults show that females and individuals with higher prior educational attainment tend to be more self-directed (Reio & Davis, 2005) and may therefore prefer online studies over other modes (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). In addition, Harris and Martin (2012) found that the number of students who identified as either fully or mostly online tended to sharply increase with age, with the majority of students in the 18-22 range self-identifying as fully or mostly on-campus students. Although this is not always the case, as college-aged students have also been found to enroll online in large numbers (Mann and Henneberry, 2012). In addition, previous studies have found differences between traditional students (18-21 year olds) and their motivation levels as well as how they react to the teaching environment (Van Doorn, & Van Doorn, 2014). Consequently, further investigation to explore any age differences in the type of students who choose to study online, mixed mode and face to face is needed. Specifically, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: There will be a difference in ages and gender of students choosing to study online, mixed mode and face to face delivery methods.

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Learning styles

Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh, (2004) found that students with better time management skills found the online learning experience more pleasurable compared to students with poor time management skills. This may be because online learning requires students to be more autonomous with their learning, whereas face to face and mixed modes has scheduled lectures and tutorial times each week, which require students to attend on a set day at a set time. It is therefore not surprising that previous studies have found that flexibility and convenience are crucial factors influencing whether students choose to study face to face or online (Carnevale, & Fry, 2000; Wojciechowski, & Palmer, 2005). For example, a review of over 100 studies found that to be successful, online students must have higher levels of self-motivation and self-directed learning skills than other deliver modes (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). There are limited studies that explore the attraction of mixed mode delivery within universities and no studies that examine differences in innate learning styles with the attraction of the mode of delivery. Despite anecdotal evidence that suggests students will be attracted to the mode that best suits them. Therefore, this study extends the literature in this area by hypothesizing:

H2: There will be differences in learning styles of students who are attracted to different modes of delivery.

Personal responsibilities – study and family responsibilities

The growth of online students maybe a result of increasing personal responsibilities from the cohort of students. One study found that online students typically study part-time, participate in full time employment, are mature aged, are financially independent, have dependents, are a single parent and/or have not attained a high school diploma (Aslanian, 2001; Layne, Boston, & Ice, 2013). Therefore, the direction required and resources provided

must be different to cater for these individual differences. In addition, Harris and Martin (2012) found that students chose online courses due to place bound or time-bound issues, such as work or family commitments or distance from campus. As a consequence, we expect,

H3: Students who enroll in online, mixed mode or face to face delivery modes to have different individual characteristics and circumstances

H4: Students who enroll in online, mixed mode or face to face delivery modes will have different reasons for choosing that delivery mode

Expected Contribution

This study is expected to shed further light into the characteristics of students who choose to enroll in online, mixed mode and face to face study. This is important from a university perspective because providing a better understanding of the student cohort who enter these programs will better equip teachers prepare classes to cater for these students. For example, at present online courses tend to hold their online tutorials at night (after 7pm), however if we find that students are from predominately single, full time employed status, it may prompt a change to the delivery of online tutorials to weekends rather than after hours where students may be tired. As no study has compared the characteristics of students within these modes of delivered, this research is the first of its kind to do so.

Where are we up to?

In this study we conducted a pilot exploration of these variables in 2018 across a first year foundation course and third year capstone course, which was offered in online and face to face modes. That study had 89 respondents who completed the questionnaire. This year we are continuing unpacking students who are enrolled across face to face, online and blended learning offerings across the entire Bachelor of Business offered at our university. It is envisioned that by the time this paper is presented in September, some initial results would also be able to be presented in order to help theorize and position this study in the literature.

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