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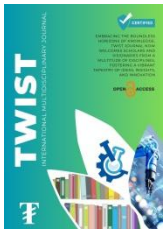

Perceptions of Lecturers on Blended Learning at a Comprehensive University in South Africa

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to analyse the support that lecturers need to be able to implement a blended learning approach successfully. Blended learning is now seen as an approach that can create engaging learning environments, to enhance students' self-directed learning and improve the whole learning experience. The study used technology-enhanced learning model. The study adopted quantitative research approach with the survey as the design. The sample for the study included thirteen lecturers, purposefully selected in one higher education institution, regarding the advantages and challenges of blended learning in their respective disciplines within the university. A questionnaire was used to collect the necessary data from the lecturers. The data collected were analysed using Google docs. The findings of the study revealed that for blended learning approach to be successful and effective, lecturers require support from management, more training, improved professional development, as well as reliable, stable technology and internet connections. In addition, lecturers would require additional time to implement such an approach. Based on the findings above the study recommends that professional development needs to be provided, SLP online be developed and registration for online courses, like, Teaching with Technology.

Keywords
Blended learning, Pedagogy, Technology-enhanced learning, Online learning, Face-to-face learning

INTRODUCTION

Education is undergoing a paradigm shift towards blended learning models in technology-enhanced learning (TEL). In recent years also, there have been developments in supporting lecturers to enhance their teaching methods with the aim of improving the learning experiences of their students by using a blended learning approach to teaching and learning. Notwithstanding the latent benefits of blended learning, it also requires extra intricacy on monitoring, awareness and reflection, as learning transpires across various environments and modes. According to Wittmann and Olivier (2021), blended learning, a teaching approach that encourages students to take responsibility for their learning experiences, it gained popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic as educational institutions sought safer, alternative teaching methods (Adel & Dayan, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

Riel, Lawless, and Brown (2016) define blended learning as environments that provide students with online and face-to-face places to meet, collaborate, and work on meaningful projects. Blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online learning, has been developed to improve teaching methods and student experiences. It involves various terms like "brick and click" instruction, hybrid learning, dual-mode instruction, blended pedagogies, targeted learning, multimodal learning, and flipped learning. In addition, Zhang and Zhu (2018) noted that finding a suitable environment for all students is a difficult task, but the blended learning approach facilitates an "accessible, flexible, active, interactive,

encouraging, and inspiring" teaching and learning environment. Therefore, online learning technologies facilitate communication among students and teachers, promoting asynchronous and cooperative learning. Kumar, Krishnamurthi, Bhatia, Kaushik, Ahuja, Nayyar and Masud (2021) reveal that blended learning incorporates online learning experiences and helps students for meaningful learning through flexible online information and communication technologies, reduced overcrowded classroom presence, and planned teaching and learning experience. Engagement is crucial for students, as it can improve learning achievement but not motivation. However, challenges persist, necessitating further research into its effectiveness, including technological tools, learning approaches, and overall quality of teaching and learning experiences. Hence lecturers need to be supported on the implementation of blended teaching and learning to ensure students find learning relevant and meaningful, enhancing their success in achieving specific learning outcomes.

OBJECTIVES

- To explore lecturers' perspectives on using blended learning to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- To identify the challenges experienced by the teachers in the implementation of blended teaching and learning.

Theoretical perspective on blended learning

This study adopted technology-enhanced learning model as a theoretical framework, which focuses on the application of information and communication technologies in blended learning contexts (Lin and Hwang, 2018). The model is based on six factors: subject area, learning models, participants, outcomes and issues, research methods, and adopted technologies (Sanders and Mukhin 2023). This model enhances the blended learning approach (Daniela, 2021) as it utilizes technology to augment learning. Various learning platforms, tools and software can be used but only if it is fit for purpose i.e. assists the lecturer to facilitate student learning for better achievement of set outcomes of the module and programme. Hence, the term smart pedagogy which is used to describe the adoption of digital technologies to support teaching and learning, helping academics decide on the most suitable activities and technologies for successful learning outcomes (Daniela, 2021). Pedagogy is a science field that focuses on teaching and learning processes, while smart refers to the use of digital technologies to enhance these processes (Borawska-Kalbarczyk et al., 2019; Daniela, 2019). Its adoption in higher education sector is an innovation as well as a distraction to conservative learning devices. A distraction to those who do not like change but an innovation to lecturers who are creative and life-long learners. Pedagogies are gradually dynamic as they have to instinctively advance with innovative teaching and learning tools with the help of ICT. Technology enhanced learning involves various teaching methods, including remote, face-to-face, and online learning. It enables teaching beyond time and space, teaches students to confidently use technology and software, and ensures access to course content for successful use, thus strengthening the learning process.

Literature

Learning in higher education involves the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and intellectual abilities that can be effectively applied to solve problems. Blended Learning is facilitated with virtual learning management systems such as Blackboard WebCT, Moodle, and other Web 2.0 platforms which are employed to facilitate collaborative learning between students and lecturers (Edward et al. 2018; Anthony et al. 2019). In higher education, blended learning is a prevailing approach to create a more collaborative and welcoming learning environment to curb students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes (Wong et al. 2014). Similarly, Ja'ashan (2015) investigated students' perceptions and attitudes toward the use of blended learning in an EFL English course in Bisha University, Saudi Arabia. The findings of the study showed that though blended learning was advantageous to use, there were also some disadvantages. Using blended learning mode requires long time to prepare and implement blended lessons (Ja'ashan, 2015). Additionally, teachers have to apply teaching and learning activities for two modes (face-toface and online). Ja'ashan (2015) also stated that blended learning is more convenient than traditional face-to-face teaching, and that it increased their motivation to learn and develop their skills accordingly.

Ashraf, Yang, Zhang, Denden, Tlili, Liu, and Burgos (2021) were of the opinion that blended learning enhances students' problem-solving skills and promotes deeper thinking. However, concerns persist about lecturers' competence in implementing blended learning. Challenges include designing high-quality learning materials, following a specific teaching style, lecturers' resistance, time constraints, and overburdened workloads. Additionally, lecturers may find themselves overworking on specific module aspects, causing a lack of overall learning experience. Despite its popularity, blended learning faces numerous challenges, including time constraints and excessive focus on one aspect of the module (Coyle, Chambers, Anderson, Firpo-Triplette & Waterman, 2019). Blended learning is a versatile approach that combines the benefits of both environments, the physical classroom interaction and the flexibility and resources offered by digital tools. Additionally, models for blended learning vary on how they blend the elements, like the Traditional Blended, Blended Online, and Blended Synchronous (McGee & Reis, 2012, Lakhal & Bélisle, 2020; Lakhal et al., 2020). Bentley et al. (2012) also noted that while there are studies related to the adoption of blended learning, research that emphasise on its effectiveness in teaching and learning are limited, hence this gap needs to be filled. Furthermore, given the important role of lecturers in blended learning, there are limited studies that explores on the effectiveness of BL in teaching training (Wong et al. 2018). Hence, the study explored the effectiveness of training blended learning in learning and teaching in rural universities.

Researchers Halverson & Graham, 2019; Halverson et al., 2014; Manwaring et al., 2017; Serrano et al., 2019; Spring et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2018) are of the opinion that implementing blended learning effectively requires thoughtful planning, ensuring that both online and face-to-face components complement each other and contribute meaningfully to the learning objectives. Therefore, blended learning is identified as a fertile ground to optimise student engagement. Furthermore, it focuses on learning-centered satisfaction, goal higher education institutions strive for. Therefore, the approach focuses on learning-centered satisfaction, fostering lifelong self-learning and adaptability across various learning programs. Blended learning has gained prominence for its potential to enhance learning flexibility (Wittmann & Olivier, 2021). This study explores lecturers' perceptions of blended learning in a South African comprehensive institution, aiming to understand its effectiveness and practical implementation outcomes so that we close the gap in literature on how lecturers perceive blended approach.

Blended learning requires constant contact between lecturers and students, with the lecturer's guidance being crucial. Strategies include constant communication, timely feedback, and a combination of technologies like video clips, audio recordings, practical problem-solving activities, discussion forums, and online lessons. These strategies aim to ensure successful blended learning experiences. The study explores how lecturers maintain a sense of connection with students, preventing feelings of disconnection from their lecturer, classmates, and the course. It focuses on the strategies employed by lecturers to maintain this interaction, particularly in a South African institution. The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of effective interaction strategies by exploring how lecturers foster communication, timely feedback, and a sense of belonging within blended learning environments.

Furthermore, blended learning in higher education enables institutions to stay current with technological advancements without compromising services to students. It fosters communities of practice, where individuals with similar goals work together to ensure success in teaching and learning programs. This online element enhances the learning experience, making it more meaningful and relevant. Blended design promotes collaborative and interdisciplinary work, enhancing both teacher and student confidence. This approach helps teachers learn new competencies, increase their knowledge base, improve technology and facilitation skills, and begin problem-solving together (Azukas, 2019).

Ashraf et al (2021) are of the opinion that blended learning reduces in-class time by allowing lecturers to teach course content online before face-to-face lectures, allowing in-class time for practical exercises, problem-solving, and active learning. This approach complements both teaching and learning environments, ensuring student motivation and success. Instantaneous feedback in blended learning systems makes it more worthwhile and relevant for students, making it more worthwhile and relevant (Nortvig et al., 2018). Hence, Higher Education Institutions should upgrade their technological infrastructure to improve the success rate of blended learning approaches, especially in developing countries where stable internet connectivity is challenging. Rasheed et al., (2020) mention that for the blended learning to be effective academics should be upskilled in recording video clips, uploading them to module sites, and using online learning platforms. Furthermore, academics often lack proper design techniques for blended learning courses, a concern that requires professional development to emphasise the importance of stable education systems. The researchers aim to expand their research on blended learning by examining lecturers' perceptions, interaction strategies, community formation, and challenges. This will provide a comprehensive understanding of how blended learning can enhance student learning experiences, adapt to evolving educational needs, and shape future pedagogical approaches.

METHODOLOGY

Approach and design

The study adopted quantitative research approach with the survey as the design. The purpose of quantitative research is to generate knowledge and create understanding about the social world, (Coghlan & Brydon 2014). Quantitative research is used by social scientists, including communication researchers, to observe phenomena or occurrences affecting individuals. Survey research design means collecting information about a group of people by asking them questions and analyzing the results. They are a respectable choice when the researcher needs to find out about the characteristics, preferences, opinions, or beliefs of a group of people.

Participants' selection

The population of the study included lecturers in a comprehensive university. Thirteen lecturers were purposefully selected as information rich participants.

Instruments for data collection

The data was collected using questionnaires composed of mainly multiple-choice questions and a few short answer questions. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics analysis in which p**ie** charts that **s**how proportions of a whole by dividing a circle into sectors that correspond to the relative size of each category were developed.

Ethical considerations

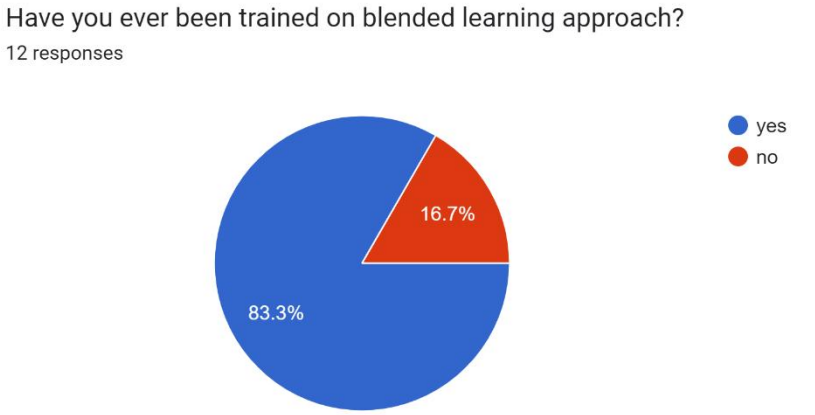
The researchers made sure that every aspect of the participants' vulnerability, protection from harm, informed consent, and rights was taken care of.

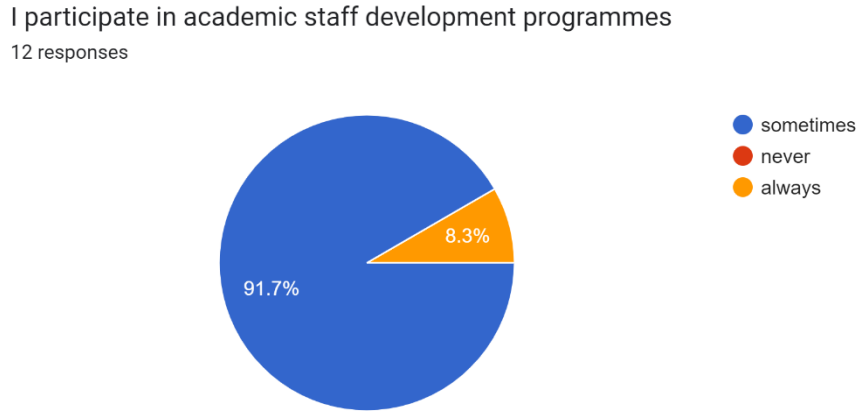
FINDINGS

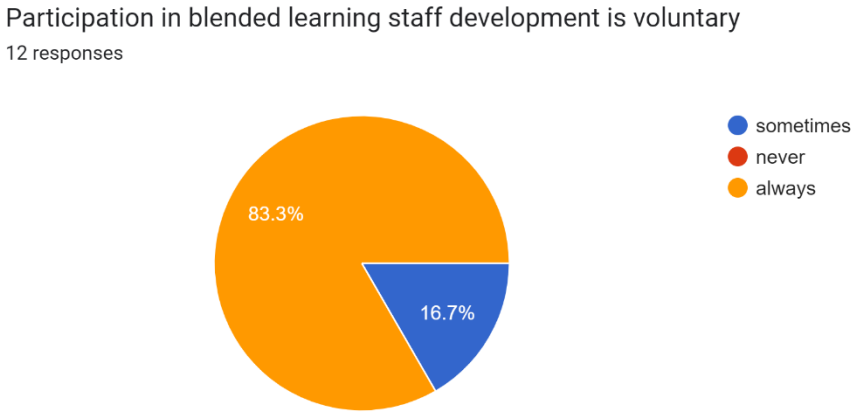
This part of the study includes the analysis and interpretation of data collected during the research process.

Theme 1: Lecturers' perspectives on using blended learning to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The lecturers agreed that they have been trained on blended teaching and learning. The pie chart below shows that 83% of the lecturers were trained on blended teaching and learning. On staff development 83,3% of the lecturers agreed that they received training on blended teaching and learning. 97% of the lecturers participated in the staff development programmes that include blended learning.

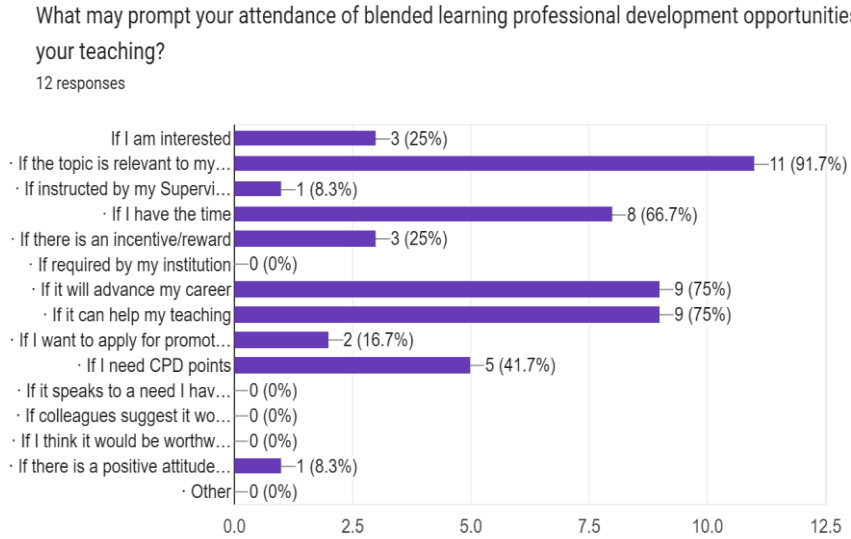




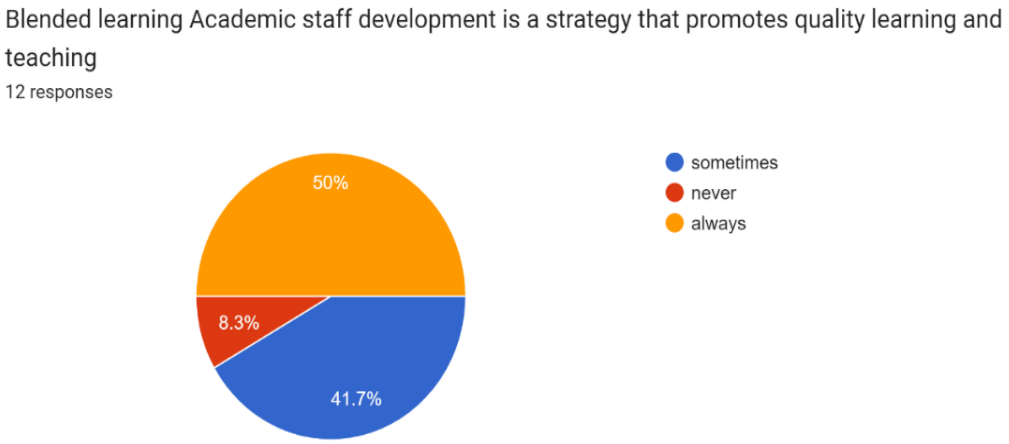


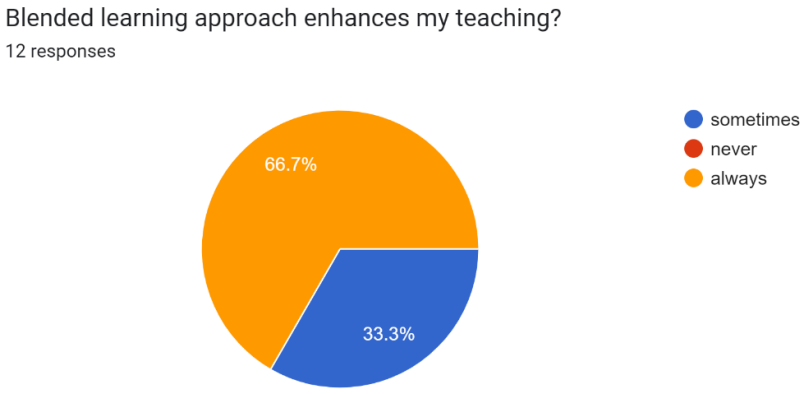
Blended teaching learning professional development opportunities

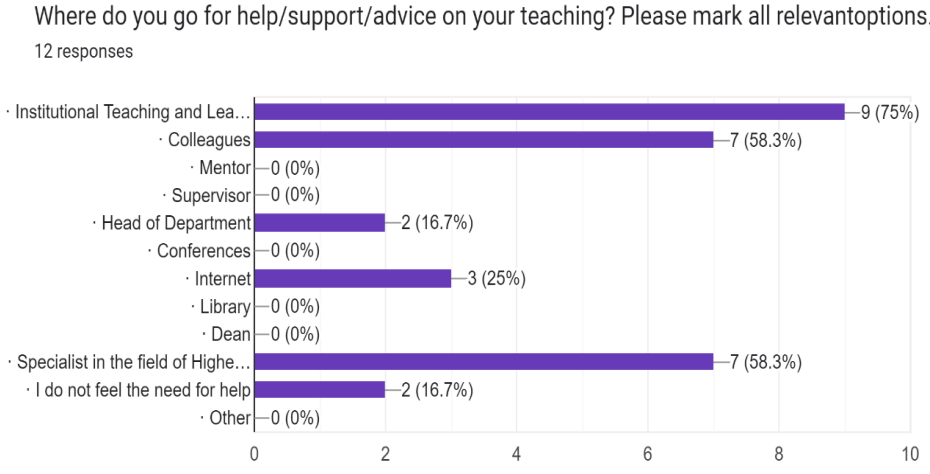
Most lecturers indicated various reasons that prompted their attendance of blended teaching and learning. Among the reason they included relevancy of the topic to their teaching and learning (91,7%), availability of time for attendance (66,7%), advancement of their careers (75%) and if it can help in their teaching (75%).

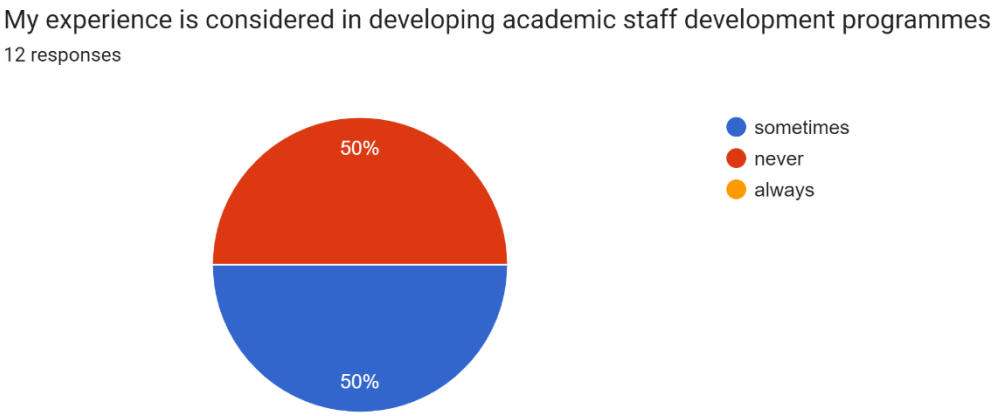


Lecturers felt that staff development on blended learning is a strategy that promotes quality teaching and learning. 50% of the lecturers always view it positively and 41,7% felt that sometimes it promotes quality learning and teaching. Additionally, 50% of the lecturers also understood that their experiences are considered in the staff development programmes.

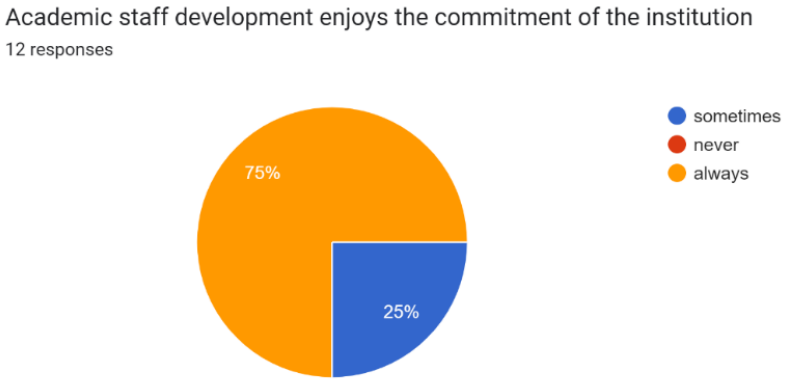


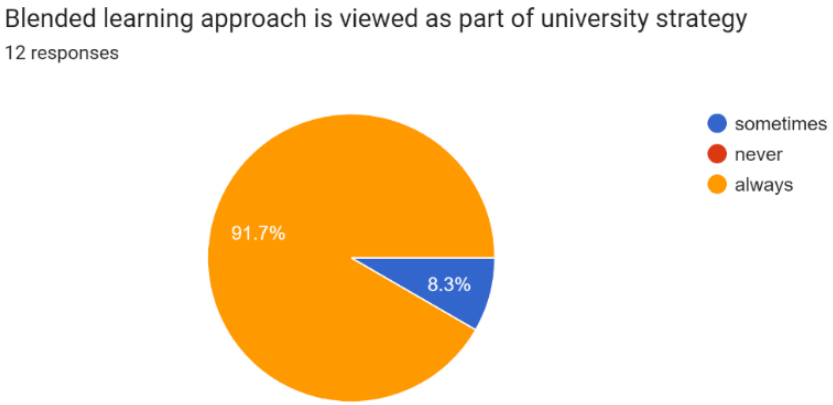




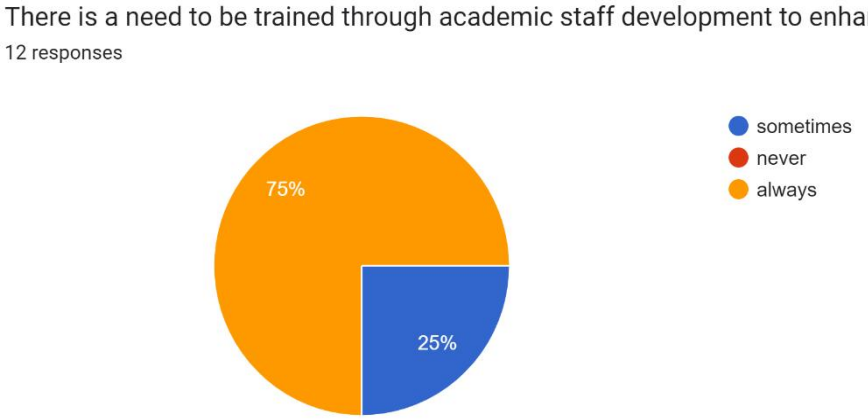


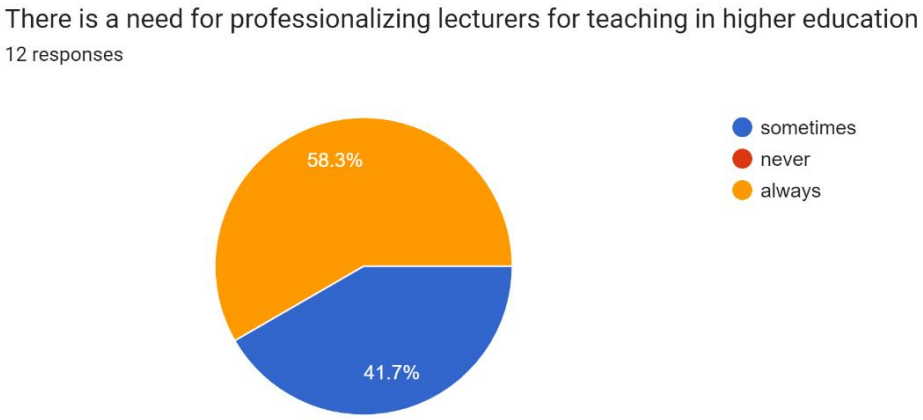
The lecturers also believed that it was the institution's responsibility to provide staff development on blended learning. 70% percent were pleased to discover that the institution values their professional growth. Furthermore, 91,7% of lecturers understood clearly that blended learning forms the part of university strategies.





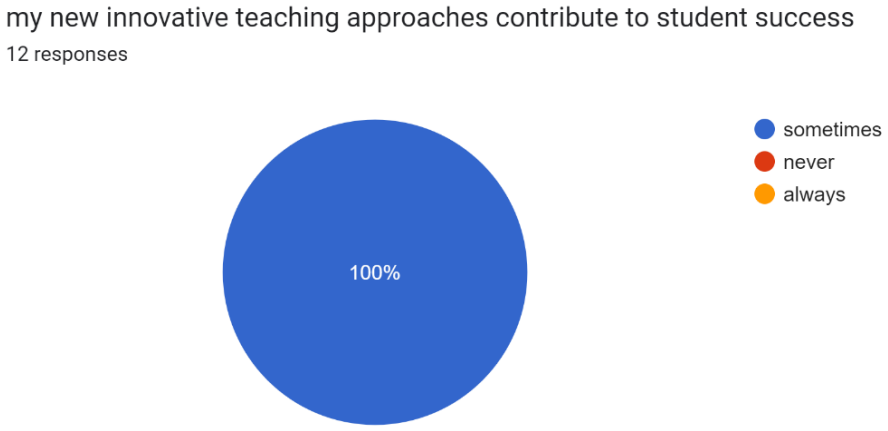
Theme 2: Challenges experienced by the teachers in the implementation of blended teaching and learning.
Lecturers, however, experienced some challenges on the implementation of blended learning which included insufficient training, lack of time and sufficient support. 75% of the lecturers supports the need for sufficient training which will contribute to enhancing the overall quality of teaching and learning experiences, potentially improving student engagement, retention, and academic outcomes.

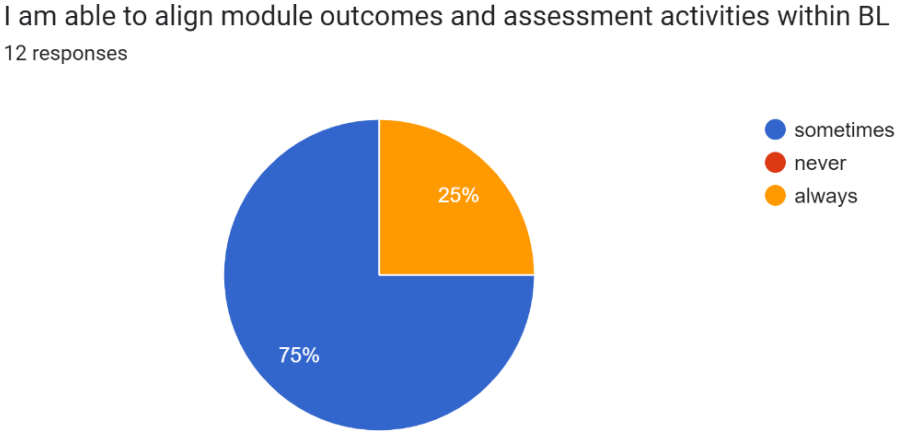


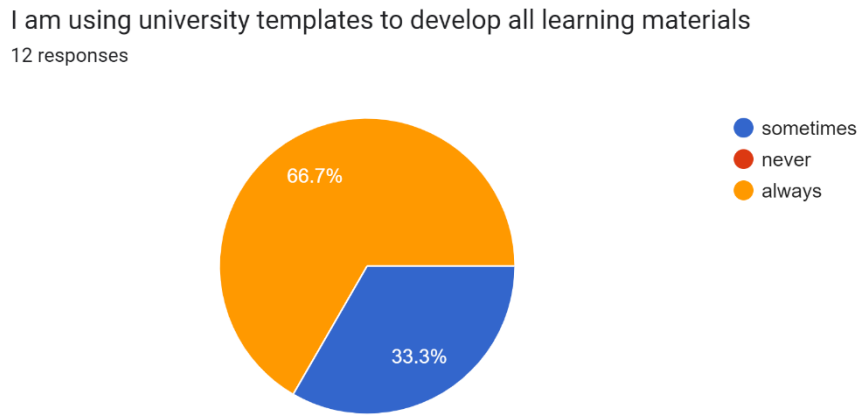


Results of training aimed at integrating blended learning

The lecturers showed positive views and excitement after receiving training on blended learning. 100% of them indicated that they implement all the strategies learnt from the training and workshops. 100% of the lecturers mentioned that they viewed blended learning as the innovative approach that contributes to the student's success. Furthermore, they were excited as 75% 0f them were able to align the module outcomes and the assessment activities and 66,7% were able to use the templates provided to develop all the learning material.







DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study showed that most of lecturers agreed that they have been trained in blended teaching and learning, indicating a significant investment by the educational institutions in preparing faculty for modern pedagogical approaches. This high percentage suggests a proactive stance towards integrating technology and online resources into traditional classroom settings. Wittmann and Olivier (2021) revealed that blended learning is a teaching approach that encourages students to take responsibility for their learning experiences. Additionally, the approach also highlights a growing recognition among educators of the importance of adapting teaching methods to meet the diverse learning needs of students in today's digital age. Azukas (2019) mention that the technology-enhanced learning model helps teachers learn new competencies, increase their knowledge base, improve technology and facilitation skills, and begin problem-solving together.

Moreover, such training likely contributes to enhancing the overall quality of teaching and learning experiences, potentially improving student engagement, retention, and academic outcomes. The findings of the study also revealed a shift towards more flexible and innovative educational practices, aimed at preparing students for the challenges of a rapidly evolving global landscape. Hence, Daniela (2021) reveals the term "smart pedagogy" which is used to describe the adoption of digital technologies to support teaching and learning, helping the lecturers decide on the most suitable activities and technologies for successful learning outcomes. Additionally, most of the lecturers were excited to find that blended learning was the strategy of the institution. However, some lecturers felt that when implementing blended learning they encounter some challenges, and they relate the challenges to insufficient training. Ja'ashan (2015) revealed that using blended learning mode requires long time to prepare and implement blended lessons Additionally, teachers have to apply teaching and learning activities for two modes (face-to face and online). Furthermore, they noted that they needed more training on how to implement such an approach successfully. Besides lecturers receiving professional development, there is also the need for higher education institutions to ensure that they cover the costs incurred for this professional development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the findings above the study recommends that**:**

- Sufficient training on blended learning should be provided.
- Implementation of blended learning approach apps in teaching and learning activities
- Lecturers should create time for preparation for both face to face and online teaching and learning
- Lecturers should understand and be used to the concept of self-directed blended learning which is related to combining traditional and online learning
- Support from management as well as reliable technology and internet connections.
- Needs analysis for academics' learning needs before organising academic staff development programmes so that it fits the purpose and remains relevant to the lecturers' key performance areas (KPA).
- An online Short Learning Programme (SLP) online be developed and offered by the institution.
- Lecturers to register for online courses, like, Teaching with Technology and the university funds tuition.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All authors contributed to all aspects of the research: including writing – review editing & approving the final version.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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