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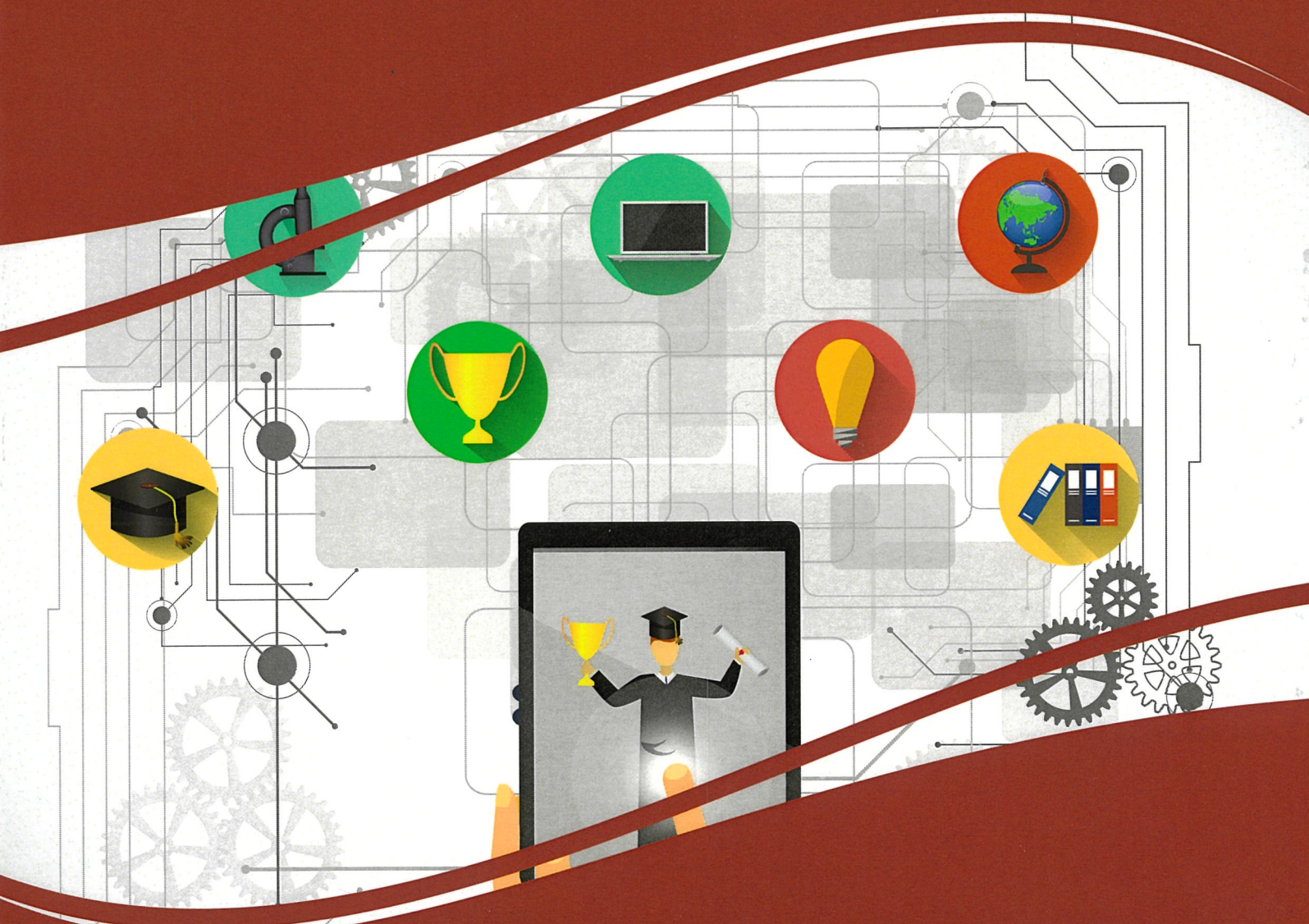
Mobile and Blended Learning Innovations for Improved Learning Outcomes



David Parsons

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Chapter 4
Learning about Blended Learning through Students' Experiences:
An Exploratory Study in Postgraduate Guidance and Counselling Programs in a University with Campuses in Australia and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The digital age together with the political and economic agenda to make higher education more accessible and cost effective are challenging teaching academics worldwide to rethink and redesign their pedagogical practices. The challenges include how to respond to increasingly diverse twenty first century learners who demand flexibility, and the requirements of a more service driven economy. For a program to be successful in higher education's current learnscape, teaching and learning need to optimise students' experiences and learning outcomes. The exploratory study discussed in this chapter investigates seventy-three postgraduate students' experiences with blended learning in guidance and counselling programs in one Australian university with an offshore branch campus in Singapore. The study aims to inform the future design and delivery of teaching and learning within blended learning spaces with a focus on pedagogical practices for student engagement. As such, it contributes to the body of knowledge about learning design that enhances student learning experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Both the Ernst and Young's "University of the Future" report (2012) and The New Media Consortium Horizon Higher Education report (2014) have recognised the digital age as a key driver in higher education institutions for twenty-first century learners. The emergent corollaries include: global mobility, the changing demographics of student candidates, the political and economic agenda making higher education more accessible and cost effective. These have coincided with a mushrooming availability of rapidly changing learning technologies. The upshot has been that technology-enhanced learning is more appealing to an increasingly diverse and more flexibility-demanding group of students within higher education (JISC, 2009; Shroff & Vogel, 2010).

The challenge is for teaching academics to implement programs that align with the demands of higher education institutions, which meet all the students' diverse learning needs and which intelligently employ the ever-changing technology. The goal is to maximise student engagement in order to achieve the highest outcomes. For programs to be successful in the current learning environment, Jordan (2015) finds that there needs to be a clearly articulated vision. Evaluating the current learnscape is an imperative precursor.

The chapter commences with a wide-ranging review of the current literature on blended learning, including a focus on counsellor education. Blended learning is where face-to-face classes are complemented, or fused, with web-based, online learning materials (El-Mowafy, Kuhn, & Snow, 2013; Garrison & Vaughan, 2011; Keppell, Suddaby, & Hard, 2011; López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011). The context and the methodology for the study is then introduced. Findings and discussion follows, including the translation of research learning into practice. The limitations of the study and future research concludes the chapter.

BACKGROUND

Blended Learning

Blended learning is often defined as a combination of traditional and online teaching designs. Traditional approaches typically refer to face-to-face, synchronous teaching experiences in the form of lectures, workshops, tutorials and seminars (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). These traditional designs are distinguished from those approaches utilising technology, such as enhanced, online and blended learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). At the pedagogic core of traditional methods are key elements where students learn by: reading materials (e.g., textbooks and lecture notes); guided self-teaching (developing reading lists); independent study (assignment and exam preparation); engage in personal communication (through contact with other students and lectures); use of audio-visual materials (such as films); and, learning by traditional academic teaching methods (seminars, lectures and other classes) (Peters, 2001).

Blended learning approaches contain the same pedagogic core as those in traditional approaches and provide a vehicle for thoughtful integration of the synchronous (traditional face-to-face) and asynchronous (internet assisted) learning activities (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Therefore it is not a simple combina-

tion of the two means of learning (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010) as blended learning requires a commitment to creating an ideal learning environment for students where pedagogy and technology is meaningfully combined (Rovai & Jordan, 2004) in order to foster engagement and high learning outcomes. There are benefits in both methods as each approach aims to deliver high quality learning outcomes and experiences for students.

Blended learning is a specific approach to learning design. It can be implemented at multilevels (curriculum, subject, activity and/or assessment) and is a relatively cost-effective method of education delivery (Keppell, Suddaby, & Hard, 2011). The core principles of delivery include flexible instruction and learning; face-to-face and online delivery modalities; integrated instructional methods across hybrid contexts; synchronous and asynchronous formats; partially instructor centred and learner controlled environments (Young, 2002; Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2007; Oh & Park, 2009; Hamilton & Tee, 2010). Teaching academics can be severely tested when redesigning curriculum content to create successful interactive hybrid learning approaches (Hamilton & Tee, 2010).

Challenges discussed in the literature include what is to be blended and the quality of the blend. Questions posed by Bath and Bourke (2011) are pertinent: "What is the value of bringing students together in a single place and time? How is it different when students are learning face-to-face vs. online/distance, or in real time vs. asynchronously?" There is no single approach to blended learning that answers these conundrums (Partridge, Ponting, & McCay, 2011), but frameworks can be utilised to provide meaningful learning experiences and outcomes to students. Two established frameworks are the 'Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education' (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and the 'Community of Inquiry' (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011).

The Seven Principles (see Table 1) are a reflective practice tool for guiding professional approaches to teaching and learning. Although developed pre-online learning, nevertheless the Seven Principles are relevant to today's teaching using blended pedagogies (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Partridge et al., 2011). The principles are applicable to both undergraduate and postgraduate education (Ames, 2015).

Table 1. A general overview of the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

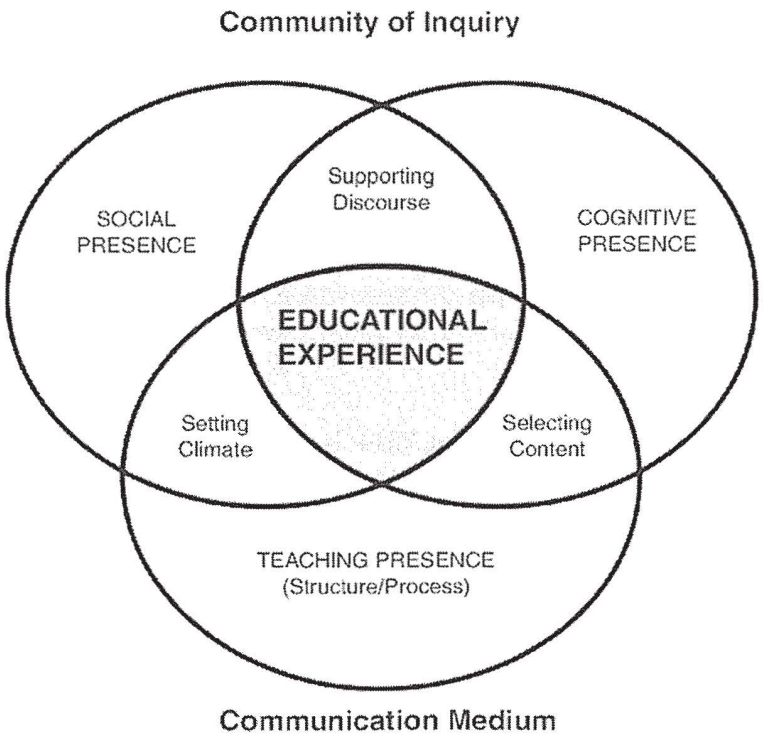
1. Good practice encourages contacts between students and faculty	Frequent student-faculty interaction in and out of class as a key factor in student motivation and involvement.
2. Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students	Working in collaborative environments increases involvement in learning. Sharing ideas enhances understanding.
3. Good practice uses active learning techniques	Learning involves active participation in order to make education meaningful and relevant.
4. Good practice gives prompt feedback	Feedback assist student in self-reflection of their current skills and knowledge to enhance academic performance.
5. Good practice emphasises time on task	Efficiently utilising realistic amounts of time means effective teaching and learning for both students and teaching academics.
6. Good practice communicates high expectations	Withholding high expectations of students is critical for student to make the link between effort and outcomes.
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning	Inclusive best practice that supports and enhances individual student's diversity and capitalises on their existing strengths and knowledge.

The community of inquiry (CoI) framework is rooted in a social-constructivist theoretical approach where learners make sense of their own experiences through social interaction and collaboration (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011). Learners are actively involved in the construction of knowledge, building on their existing understanding. Teaching and learning evolves from instructor-centred and content-orientated to learner-focused and process-orientated.

The CoI framework (see Figure 1) was developed in response to the identification of the crucial elements in the context of computer-mediated communication that are "pre-requisites for a successful higher education experience" (Garrison, et al., 2000, p. 87). Validated by a number of studies, it is a leading model guiding research into blended learning in higher education (Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010; Partridge, Ponting, & McCay, 2011; Shea, Hayes, Vickers, & Gozza-Cohen, 2010).

The CoI is comprised of social, teaching, and cognitive presences. Social presence represents the learner's engagement in synchronous and asynchronous reciprocal interaction; cognitive presence characterizes the integration of critical thinking and purposeful discourse to promote and sustain higher levels of learning; teaching presence entails leading and managing productive hybrid learning environments, and integrating high level knowledge learning with advanced reasoning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Within these spaces there exists a high level of student choice, active engagement and, self-responsibility on the part of the student. The educational experience is predicated on the overlap of the three presences.

Figure 1. Community of inquiry (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011, pp. 18-19)



The Postgraduate Experience with Blended Learning

A growing body of research has reported that teaching academics in higher education are responding to the challenges of integrating technology-enhanced learning into teaching and learning spaces to create, support, promote, and sustain active learning (Cater, Michel, & Varela, 2012; Henrie, Bodily, & Manwaring, 2015; Kim & Bonk, 2006). No longer considered a trend, as initially presented in the literature (Cottrell & Robinson, 2003; Young, 2002), blended learning is now firmly embedded in the twenty-first century university experience (Bonk, Kim, & Zeng, 2004). As the emphasis on blended approaches has increased, so too has the focus on student engagement within these spaces (Vaughan, 2014, p. 247).

Student engagement within blended learning environments is a key goal for teaching academics in higher education (Keppell et al., 2011). Student engagement, as defined in higher education literature is "active and collaborative learning, participation in academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching education experiences, and feeling legitimised and supported by university learning communities" (Coates, 2007, p. 122). Further, Henrie et al. (2015) defines engagement as the "quantity and quality of cognitive and emotional energy students exert to learn" (p. 132).

Within higher education research, levels of student engagement in the teaching and learning process is one of the "most important indicators of the quality of teaching activities" (Saritepeci & Çakir, 2015, p. 203). There is some evidence to suggest that blended learning design may enhance student engagement, through the provision of technologies to support learning, however little is known about what specific technology is leading to the observable gains (Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013). Conversely student isolation and limited peer interaction have been reported as potential drawbacks in the online component of blended programs (Jonas & Burns, 2010), with Hong, Lai, and Holton (2003) offering caution by highlighting the potential for high-level passivity. Some studies report higher levels of satisfaction, with learner and instructor interactions and social connectedness aligned with face-to-face teaching (Parkinson, Greene, Kim, & Marioni, 2003); but others report a stronger sense of learning and a broader range of interactions for learners and instructors with blended courses (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Shroff & Vogel, 2010).

The literature is therefore clearly mixed as to the relative benefits of face-to face teaching, web based teaching and blended learning, with regard to student engagement. The teaching academics' competencies and capacity in effectively blending different dimensions of the curriculum are thought to be paramount, postulated to be the key to the quality of student motivation, engagement and satisfaction in blended programs (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005; Lawlor & Donnelly, 2010; Shroff & Vogel, 2010).

Counsellor Education

The aim of counsellor education pedagogy (Egan, 2014; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2014) is for students to develop and deepen their knowledge and understanding of counselling theory and practice by engaging with and reflecting on the literature, viewing and practicing micro skills in simulated and real contexts, receiving feedback, being coached in skill performance, and using self-assessment processes to reflect on competence and skill development. Integrating technology into these spaces provides multiple pathways for teaching academics and students to develop key knowledge and skills whilst at the same time, providing space for students to develop a professional identity as a global counsellor (Sells, Tan, Brogan, Dahlen, & Stupart, 2012). Many confirm that blended delivery is an appropriate and effective method for professional preparation (Wantz et al., 2003; Wilson, 2001; Kato, Shiono, Goto, &Tsuchida, 2011).

However it does not have unanimous support, with some in the counselling profession viewing it "with scepticism or resistance" (Sells et al., 2012, p. 39). Their argument is that counselling is essentially a person-to-person experience and that counsellor education online with minimal face-to-face interaction is inadequate (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). The rebuttal to this argument is the growing trend, internationally, of clients themselves choosing to access care (including mental health care Kummervold et al., 2002) online rather than face-to-face.

Identifying standards of competence in counsellor education using blended learning has proved to be an ethical and educational challenge (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011; Sells et al., 2012). Regulating agreed standards in action has been a focus for accreditation bodies around the world. These professional associations set the standards for professional programs relative to their respective association standards. Higher education institutions abide by these standards in the development of curriculum material. Blended modes of education can present challenges for quality assurance, however, accreditors are responding to the academic challenges posed by internet-enabled learning (Eaton, 2001).

THE STUDY

The institution where this study was conducted hosts two campuses along the east coast of northern Australia and has an offshore branch campus in Singapore. The guidance and counselling programs reported in this study, are the Master of Guidance and Counselling (MGuidCouns) and the Graduate Certificate Career Development (GradCertCareerDev). The MGuidCouns course provides students with extended knowledge and skills in guidance and counselling. As this course is accredited by the Australian Counselling Association and the Singapore Association for Counselling, graduates can pursue careers in both countries, as well as internationally. The GradCertCareerDev, accredited by the Career Industry Council of Australia, qualifies graduates to work as career development practitioners. Students completing this program are eligible for entry to the MGuidCouns, and advanced standing is granted for two of the three subjects.

The curriculum is standardized across the tri-campuses, with 80% of the content common across the sites and 20% contextualized to local considerations. Each subject in these programs requires a 130 hour work load of study-related participation. In Singapore, the degrees are taught on a trimester basis, combining thirteen weeks of online material with twenty-five hours mandatory face-to-face teaching. Students are either residents or persons with employment or dependent passes. In Australia, the programs are taught in blended and online mode with eleven days of mandatory face-to-face classes dispersed across four of the eight core subjects.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research was to ascertain students' perceptions of their experiences with the blended guidance and counselling programs taught across the tri-campuses of the university. There were two online surveys, with the first being a preliminary exploration and the second survey was more detailed. The focus group drilled down on the issues elicited by the two surveys. The ethical guidelines of the university were followed with approval for the research to proceed prior to the commencement of the study.

Research Questions

The researchers were curious to know about students' experiences with blended learning in their post-graduate guidance and counselling programs. Consequently the research questions framing the study are: (1) What are the experiences of students in their blended guidance and counselling programs (2) What are the recommendations of students to improve their experiences in their blended guidance and counselling programs.

Participants

Conducted over three years six months, a total of 73 postgraduate students participated in this exploratory study. Table 2 outlines the demographic details across the data sets.

Measures

As a comprehensive literature search was unable to locate a survey measure that contained all the items of interest under investigation, the first survey was based on the conceptual frameworks of Billings

Table 2. Demographic details

Data Set	Data Set One	Data Set Two	Data Set Three
Instrument	**Online survey 2011**	**Online survey 2014**	**Focus group 2015**
Participant numbers	28	38	7
Gender	• Male 3 • Female 25	• Males 7 • Females 31	• Males 2 • Females 5
Age	02: 20-29 08: 30-38 14: 40-49 04: 50+	09: 20-29 07: 30-39 15: 40-49 07: 50+	03: 30-39 04: 40-49
Ethnicity	Chinese - 16 Indian 4 Australian - 3 Other - 5: French, American, Irish, Canadian	Australian – 24 Chinese – 4 Indian – 4 Other – 6	Australian - 6 Other – 1
Location	Students Singapore campus	Students cross campus: Cairns – 13 Townsville – 13 Singapore - 12	Students Australian campus Mandatory face-to-face classes
Participant Enrolment	28 students enrolled in the Master Guidance and Counselling program	35 students enrolled in the Master Guidance and Counselling program; 4 students in the Graduate Certificate Career Development program; 2 students enrolled in Master of Education, studying guidance and counselling subjects.	7 students enrolled in the Master Guidance and Counselling program
Total Enrolment	52 total students enrolled	122 total student enrolments	15 total students enrolled

(2000) and Paechter and Maier (2010). Both frameworks are structured around student perceptions of satisfaction with, and the benefits and barriers of, postgraduate studies. The survey consisted of 65 questions, comprising 18 forced-choice items, 7 binary option items, Likert-type scale items - 23 x 5 and 5 x 3 Likert-type scale items - and 12 open ended items. The open ended items were designed to generate extended responses on respondents perceptions of blended learning experiences not biased by the researcher's preconceived notions of what respondents would comment on. A sample of Likert-type scale items include: Rate your satisfaction with the block week quality of lecturing throughout your course (very satisfied, dissatisfied, neither dissatisfied or satisfied, satisfied, very satisfied); I think that my point of view was acknowledged by other participants in the class, both online and face-to-face (strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, and strongly agree). A sample of open ended items include: What are your career goals / aspirations; what are your reasons for enrolling in the JCU Singapore MGuidCouns degree.

Preliminary analysis of the data set from survey one was undertaken in order to inform the content in the second survey. This process allowed the research team to delve further with their questions pertaining to experiences with meaningful blending primarily in the online learning space. The 48 survey comprised 8 forced-choice items, 9 binary option items, 30 x 5 point Likert-type scale items, and 1 open-ended item. The open-ended item provided respondents with an opportunity to extend upon responses if needed. A sample of Likert-type scale items relating to the guidance, counselling and career development community site include: The information on the site has not extended my learning; the site provides relevant information; the site adds value to the learnjcu subject site; the site is interesting to explore (strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, strongly agree).

The analysis of the online surveys laid the foundation for the focus group interview, where participants elaborated on their experiences of the phenomenon under discussion. The 20 minute focus group interview was audiotaped and transcribed prior to analysis, thus helping to maintain the trustworthiness of the data. The researchers regarded the focus group as both a typical case sample and a sample of convenience based on the phenomenon under investigation and the availability of the participants.

Data Collection

A mixed methods approach was chosen to elicit responses from students at different stages of their studies. Students completing survey one did not complete survey two as they were a different student cohorts. Triangulation was used to support the credibility of the findings with data from one source enhancing, supporting, and complementing data from other sources. By using a pragmatic approach where the research questions remained the focus, these multiple data sources enabled the researchers to combine the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research design while compensating for weaknesses.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was submitted for descriptive statistical analysis using survey monkey (survey 1) and SPSS 22 (survey 2). In these surveys, the Pearson product moment correlation Coefficient (Pearson r) was performed to calculate values, either positive or negative linear relationships between two variables. The standard convention level of $Probability\,(p) < .05$ was accepted for evaluating statistical significance.

The method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns across the qualitative data set was Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic six phase thematic analysis coding and categorization process:

transcribing data, generating initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, writing report (p. 96). This framework guaranteed a transparent audit trail to help ensure the analysis process was methodologically and theoretically sound. After strenuous re-analysis of concepts and ideas, a thematic map was generated to provide a consistent interpretation of the data set. Pertinent quotes were extracted from the qualitative data and relevant statistics from the quantitative data were used to illustrate and support the thematic analysis of participants' reality. The thematic analysis was triangulated to the literature and back to the surveys and focus group data.

FINDINGS

Eight themes were reported within the data: blend as a multidimensional concept; communication and connectedness; arranged collegiality; digital literacy; information communication technologies; Discipline knowledge; authentic support; reflecting about action.

Blend as a Multidimensional Concept

The convenience and availability of accessing subject content and resources online, and constructing their own learning without being time bound, in places and spaces of their choice, was appreciated by most of the students across the three data sets (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). The complimentary nature of online and face-to-face learning enabled students to be actively engaged with learning materials. Commentaries included: *I felt prepared as I was able to access all material easily, leaving me prepared for the block weeks; It gives me flexibility to plan for my learning, allowing me to schedule family, personal, work commitments and educational needs accordingly.* In the first data set there was a positive correlation between students who frequently accessed subject material online and satisfaction with the blended mode: n=.572, n=26, p=<.01. Moreover, the majority of students in this data set, 75.00% (n=21), indicated satisfaction with the face-to-face component of the blend commenting on the effectiveness of merging mandatory face-to-face classes and online learning: *Having a block week for one subject and the rest of the study period, pursuing learning and reading at one's own pace; The intensive face-to-face lectures during block week enhances understanding through engaging topics and activities.*

While students in the first two data sets valued social connectivity, working as a team and networking, the consensus of the third data set was cooperating and respecting the contribution of others was of little worth unless it involved assessment. Comments included: *I think if there was a purpose to it ... even if it's only worth, fifteen per cent, if you have that purpose for why you are talking.* This is in contrast to students in data set one and two who identified the collaborative nature of communication and sharing their learning as key to their knowledge creation and their student experiences. Students in these data sets enthusiastically remarked on studying with persons with diverse racial, ethnic and national backgrounds. Observations included: *The rich sharing by students of different backgrounds and age groups allows cross-fertilization of ideas; I like a mix of both local and Australian staff.*

Communication and Connectedness

Connectedness between cross-cultural students and academics contributed to students' satisfaction with the blended program. Explanations specific to students studying on the Singapore campus included: *Being*

able to interact with a very diverse group of students. This is a very strong advantage of JCU Singapore which needs to be optimized for further learning opportunities.

Students' engagement with synchronous and asynchronous communication and collaboration shaped and developed their knowledge, understandings and skills as developing counsellors and career development practitioners. Students appreciated the blend of communication, with many remarking on the accessibility of the teaching academics, saying their "you can call me anytime, email me" mantra added value to their learning experience. While 40.75% (n=11) of students in the first data indicated they were comfortable participating in online discussions, 51.85% (n= 14) were equally comfortable interacting online with teaching academics and peers.

Online communication was dismissed by a nominal number of students (n= 1) in the third data set, advocating that face-to-face communication was the only form of communication worthy of acknowledgment: *No one got to know each other until today.* This viewpoint discounts online communication as a key contribution to knowledge creation in a blended program, with opportunities to foster professional working relationships through the social presence utilising online methods not being taken up. The majority of students however appreciated the strategic communication opportunities offered online, with 53.85% (n=14) of students in data set one indicating a high level of comfort when introducing themselves via the community blogs, surveys and discussion boards. Furthermore, students in data set two recognized the value of participating in the Blackboard Collaborate session(s) prior to attending face-to-face classes. Commentaries included: *It was still an icebreaker to come in here and oh I kind of know the name, I know someone.* While many students appreciated the self-directed nature of the blend, they noted restrictions in working online when minimal numbers of students joined the collaborate sessions or when those that did join in did not have a microphone so communication were restricted.

While students in the first data set appreciated the accessibility of teaching academics across the blended spaces, willing to discuss concepts to deepen meaning, to share aspirations, avert worries, and inform career plans, a minority of students (n=2) in the third data set were apprehensive about approaching teaching academics. Explanations included: *I've got a problem, I don't want to talk to Hilda (teaching academic) ... because, I want to look like I'm actually a mature student, who do I talk to?*

Arranged Collegiality

In response to the findings of data set one, students were allocated online partners in some subjects. This arranged collegiality was "meant to encourage greater association between [students] and to foster more sharing, learning, and improvement of skills and expertise" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 118). Feedback in data set two identified many students valued the arranged collegiality initiative, while others noted it as unhelpful. Commentaries included: *I had a frustrating encounter with my online partner ... we did not seem to communicate very well. Perhaps this was because we had trouble accessing work through Pebble; Partner or group work online is extremely frustrating....getting partners to engage is difficult and causes lots of stress.* Moreover, a small number of students in the third data set (n=2) perceived online partnering as imposed, superficial and inflexible, only useful if it was assessed. One recommendation proposed was to abandon partners and invite communication on the discussion board meaning students "can then interact with everyone", thereby encouraging contact between students and students with an aim of developing reciprocity and cooperation, which is supported by Chickering and Gamson (1987) as part of the Seven Principles for Good Practice.

Pebble+ became a university led teaching and learning initiative prior to the second survey being administered Whilst student engagement on the confidential platform was included as an assessment criteria in one subject, findings from the second data set indicated that while 67% (n= 24) of the students knew about Pebble+ and its use, 84% (n= 32) did not use it to store and share artifacts. Remarks across data set two and three included: *I see and appreciate the value of Pebble but using it ... was not as productive as I thought that it would be ... I ran out of time; Prefer that as adult learners we were left to negotiate our own way of collaborating; Merging Pebble+ with subject learning would increase its usage.*

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), arranged collegiality is "double edged" (p. 118): on the one hand a stepping stone for students to begin working together, conversely, a forced, insincere and unproductive way of student engagement. Students need to recognize the tasks as credible, worthwhile and relevant. Seemingly good intentions directed toward promoting a collaborative culture can fail if perceived as contrived and unconnected to assessment. These findings aligned with student engagement pertaining to the energy they spend on academically purposeful activities (Kuh, 2001; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

Digital Literacy

The ease with which students independently accessed the Learning Management System (LMS) in the first data set was positively correlated with their satisfaction with blended learning: r=.527, n= 26, p= <.01. Explanations included: *Able to access the course materials easily and felt prepared prior to entering the block week classes.* Whilst acknowledging students were generally positive and satisfied with accessing the LMS, digital literacy impacted engagement for some students. Accounts included: *Basic computer skills are not sufficient to access this model of learning; I am not tech savvy, so sometimes I find the many online activities a bit daunting especially as I feel it is all; I find that the IT intimidating and standing in the way of my studies.* As indicated by the literature, there has been a shift in focus from developing students' technical skill and knowledge, to the learning process (Partridge et al., 2011), however this data is indicating a dualistic student need which includes developing technological knowledge for learning, and enhancing digital literacy skills required to access and use the technology.

Information Communication Technologies

Whilst students across the data sets had regular access to a computer, students in the second data set identified limited bandwidth hindering their access to the LMS and the Blackboard Collaborate sessions. Explanations included: *We had to switch the video off because it was cutting off the audio but it was just the one time; My greatest problem has been my internet connection which is via satellite and very slow; Black board collaborate and the resources on lib guides are excellent it is just my internet speed and download that is the problem; I have very limited internet access at home I cannot listen to collaborate sessions.*

Whilst identifying these barriers, the majority of students valued the Blackboard Collaborate sessions. Commentaries included: *I am relatively new to online study and I definitely enjoyed the interactive nature of the Blackboard Collaborate sessions. I had a few technical issues from my end, however the help and support available was excellent. The orientation of how to use the site in the first session was very valuable; I did feel a little less isolated with the subject I enrolled in this semester because of the collaborator sessions. They were my life saver. Discussions in the Blackboard Collaborate sessions are*

excellent. It was noted in the second data set that Blackboard Collaborate sessions need to be relevant to elicit optimal engagement and *"not just outlining text chapters that we have to read anyway".*

Whilst many students across the exploratory study recognised the collaborative nature of the Blackboard Collaborate sessions, some identified the problematic scheduling of the sessions yet appreciated the recording option meaning they could listen to the session at a more suitable time. Statements included: *Finding a suitable time is often the difficulty. It is good we can listen later but so much better when we can all interact and discuss.*

Students in the first data set identified room for improvement with the design of the LMS menu, recommendations taken on board prior to the administration of the second survey. Commentaries included: *Materials are not organized efficiently; One never knows where something will be found; Many of the lecturers did not post anything but the subject outline online; Sometimes resources or even the subject outline wasn't posted until well into the trimester.*

Discipline Knowledge

Students appreciated the "learning and inquiry process" led by teaching academics and counsellor professionals with specialized knowledge and expertise, meaningfully engaging students and contributing to a sense of connectedness. Within these collective learning spaces, real life shared standards of practice were understood, analysed, synthesised, evaluated, and integrated. There was a significant correlation in the first data set between student satisfaction and the quality of practitioner educators emphasising discipline focused inquiry based learning: $r=.537$, $n=24$, $p=< .01$. Commentaries included: *The quality of the subject and expertise of the teaching staff is above expectations. When I graduate, I will know I have been part of a very rigorous course and be confident of my competency due to the high standards expected; Learning from an experienced lecturer and applying what we learn.* These findings are indicative of developing professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and social presence within the course whereby students and teaching academic develop group cohesion (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011).

Students were unanimous in their enjoyment of the subject content, tasks and assessment. Explanations included *the structure, the foundations in itself are very user friendly. The weekly tasks and that sort of thing are really helpful; I do like every activity that I do. I like the course mate; The resources on the LibGuide counselling pages are helpful and I particularly like the videos.*

Authentic Supports

Considerable emphasis is placed on academic skills and professional literacy and numeracy in the blended programs. Students are encouraged to avail themselves of student support services and obtain help through the Education librarian. A library site has been set up for the programs as well as the Guidance, Counselling and Career Development community site which provides students with a wealth of constructive information and resources. With these supports available, the researchers have pondered, have students been taught how to learn online.

The Guidance, Counselling and Career Development community site, established after the analysis of the first data set, is an online environment where students enrolled in the programs, have a shared space to engage, individually or collectively, with global counselling issues. This site compliments rather than duplicates the individual subject sites and is aimed at building counsellor knowledge. While 89%

(n=34) of students in the second data had set accessed the site, 61% (n=23) indicated it provides relevant information, and 63% (n =24) that it extended their learning.

Students in the first data set prioritised human resources and physical resources compared with web-based support, with 50.00% (n=14) naming the teaching academics as their primary source of support accessing the LMS, compared with peers (28.57%, n=8), student services (3.57%, n=1), infohelp (10.71%, n=3), and university staff (7.14%, n=2).

Remarks by students (n=3) in third data indicated the academic writing and English proficiency requirements frustrating, irrespective of the resource available. Developing one APA (American Psychological Association) format and style guide to be used across the programs was proposed. Furthermore these students were exasperated with the time learning advisors took when responding to their queries. Commentaries included: *I've spent two weeks and I'm still waiting ... I find that very difficult.* Aligned with the Seven Principles by encouraging contact between students and faculty, this commentary indicates that prompt feedback (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) is required by students in all interactions.

Reflecting about Action

Students recommended face-to-face induction days at the commencement of their studies as adding value to their student experience. While much of what they identified as content for this induction is included online on the subject site and the community site, students voiced face-to-face induction as their preference to online induction. Recommendations included: *I think they should have a session like this where you come out here for two days and you learn, how to write an academic essay, you meet the people here, you do the reference like what is expected and boom, you've got someone for life or through the whole course and you know what you are doing and what is expected; Giving a beginners course relevant to the subject and where and how to source materials.*

In conjunction with these recommendations, students suggested practices for improving the student experience in their blended programs (Table 3). The first four recommendations were enacted prior to administering survey two, and the remaining recommendations were reported in data set two and data set. Actions encompass collaborative responsibilities at the organizational, managerial, interpersonal and teaching academic level. Some of these recommendations have been enacted €, are being developed (BD), under investigation at a managerial level (UIM), and under investigation at an organization level (UIO). Under investigation at the managerial and organization levels means the decisions are beyond the jurisdiction of teaching academics.

DISCUSSION

Higher education institutions have adopted blended learning as a response to rapid changing technology and connectivity demands, student needs of ease of access and flexible learning and expectations of high quality learning experiences and outcomes, and an institutional need to deliver cost-effective courses (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011; Henrie et., 2015; Saritepeci & Çakir, 2015). This exploratory study investigated postgraduate students' experiences with the blend in their guidance and counselling programs. Two research question were posed: (1) What are the experiences of students in their blended guidance and counselling programs; (2) What are the recommendations of students to improve their experiences in their blended guidance and counselling programs.

Table 3. One step better: Next practices

Students' Recommendations for Improving the Online Component of the Blend	Element of the Corresponding CoI	Stage of Implementation
Developing more ICT information and how to guides; Developing more 'how to learn online' information and how to guides	Teaching presence	E and BD
Standardizing LMS menus for ease of navigation	Teaching presence	E
Redesigning assessment tasks for more fluid active engagement	Teaching presence	E and BD
Posting subject content on the LMS at the commencement of the study period	Teaching presence	E
Providing more ICT support	Teaching presence	E and BD and UIO
Identifying the existing digital literacy of students and providing appropriate support	Teaching presence	BD
Organizing face-to-face induction programs	Teaching presence	UIO
Scheduling academic writing workshops at the commencement of study periods	Teaching presence	UNM
Having one authoritative APA quick guide recognized across all the subjects	Teaching presence	BD
Scheduling online orientation sessions specific to (1) the subject content and (2) navigating the LMS	Teaching presence	E
More efficient response from online learning advisors across the duration of studies	Social presence	UIO
Equity and accessibility to technology (bandwidth, downloads, data) and identifying ways to equate this	Teaching presence	UIO
Converting Blackboard Collaborate sessions to MP3 files for ease of access	Cognitive presence	UIO
Multiple formats of video files: allowing for streaming or file upload options through use of secure dropboxes	Cognitive presence	UIM
Linking Blackboard Collaborate recordings as audio files through the LearnJCU App	Cognitive presence	UIO
Compiling documents on the subject site into folders to just download one folder	Teaching presence	UIM
Looking into a way videos could be put into drop box to save time to download as they always cut out for me	Cognitive presence	UIO
Revising the online partner system making it more worthwhile and relevant	Social presence	BD
Promoting Microphone usage during the Blackboard Collaborate sessions	Teaching presence	E
Scheduling more casual 'getting to know me' activities on subject site (currently some social activities are on the community site)	Social presence	BD
Designing collaborate sessions designed for optimal engagement through utilization of analytics data of dwell time and student feedback	Teaching presence	BD
Aligning online networking with assessment	Social presence	BD

Overall, irrespective of gender, age and ethnicity, student satisfaction with the blended programs were positive. Students verified their satisfaction was influenced by the flexibility, convenience and accessibility of the curricula in the blended spaces, mandatory face-to-face classes and online learning. In alignment with the CoI framework, research has found that there are no gender differences in perceptions of any of the presences within blended programs (Swan & Ice, 2010) and instead there is a focus on the process of the construction of meaning through personal responsibility and inquiry learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011), regardless of gender, age or ethnicity.

According to previous studies (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003; Twigg, 2003) students value the high level of diverse curriculum engagement, with many tasks reflecting authentic work-integrated deep learning. Negotiated tasks, aligned with subject learning outcomes, content and assessment tasks, were not reliant on the blended learning design, but were indicative of students becoming co-constructors of their learning as they engaged with realistic, relevant learning tasks. Students recommended the inclusion of additional collaborative tasks in both online and face-to-face learning to enhance and sustain social presence. Broadening collaborative learning activities to include wikis, blogs, pecha kucha's may be a mechanism for stimulating students' interest and adding value to collaborative CoI spaces across the hybrid program.

Ensuring teaching academics create a smooth interface between face-to-face and online delivery is essential. Orientation to blended learning is necessary so students learn codes of engagement as CoI members as well as hybrid learning and teaching requirements. This orientation is focused on redesigning students' experiences of the structure and approach to learning in higher education institutions. O'Quinn and Correy (2002) maintain that this mindset shift is also targeted at teaching academics as they redesign their subject for the self-paced blended learning setting ... "in how educators orchestrate the act of learning" (p. 1) and in how they design effective practical blended educational environments. The initial step in this process is ascertaining and addressing teacher academics and student digital literacy needs with regard blended learning design, and responding to these needs so that academics and students develop their competencies' as they engage meaningfully in each subject's blended CoI.

Reciprocal communication is named in the literature as a factor contributing to student's positive perceptions of learning online (Wise, Chang, Duffy, & del Valle, 2004). Purposeful dialogue with peers and instructors has been linked with enhanced motivation and course satisfaction. Our research team found that interaction across the blended environments positively contributed to collaboration and reports of course satisfaction. Importantly, Ocak (2011) and Biggs (2003) declare that "good dialogue elicits those activities that shape, elaborate, and deepen understanding" (p. 13). However this potential for communication was not echoed in our study. While students reported favourably on synchronous and asynchronous interactions, they did not identify the hybrid communication medium leading to deeper levels of learning.

When online and face-to-face teachings are compared, students report higher satisfaction levels of dialogue and social connectedness with face-to-face teaching (Parkinson et al., 2003). This is contrary to Rovai and Jordan (2004) who report a strong sense of learning and a greater range of interactions for students with their instructor with blended programs.

Conrad (2005) affirmed the influential role competent teaching academics leading blended CoIs have in quality teaching and learning. Her research supports face-to-face engagement with online learning to "enhance connectedness and satisfaction" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011, p. 25). Our findings indicated that students and teaching academics courteously engaged with each other in the blended spaces as both contexts were equally conducive to curriculum engagement.

Several researchers (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Lawlor & Donnelly, 2010) have identified one of the most influential factor in blended learning pedagogy is the competency of the instructor leading the blending. Students repeatedly acknowledged the professionalism, competency, and commitment of the teaching academic and counsellor professionals in creating and sustaining relevant and authentic, learner driven, CoIs.

Students acknowledged teaching academic based on the campus as their point of contact in any matters relating to their studies, with Singapore based students specifying this teaching academic provided a sense of belonging and identity within the program and the institution. This is reinformed in the writings of Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999) who maintains identity is important for students to grow as they develop as a community of learners in hybrid learning experiences.

Students commented that the blend of the programs, enabled them wider and faster access to meaningful curriculum content and instructor support. These findings replicate those of Matheos, Daniel, and McCalla (2005), who note that instructor support in traditional classrooms, is often restricted to specific office times or classroom schedules. Whereas the amount and variety of subject material differed across subjects, many students commented on the degrees of variance in the depth of curriculum materials available on the LMS. This finding highlights the importance of the educational design being similar across subjects in the degree course, yet flexible in response to individual subject learning outcomes, curriculum content, and student needs incorporated within the CoI framework.

Whilst most students found the LMS easy to navigate, they did identify support mechanisms that would increase their familiarity with the platform. Information guides (e.g., logging into Blackboard Collaborate, navigating the Blackboard Collaborative space, engaging in Pebble+, discussion board etiquette, APA referencing) were suggested as practical ways of adding value to learner engagement within the blended programs. Similar recommendations are promoted in the writing of Cockbain, Blyth, Bovill, and Morss (2009) and will be prioritized for ongoing redesigns of the guidance and counselling and career development programs.

Commenting that blended learning is time intensive, students proposed standardizing the design structure and format of the LMS menus. One could speculate that the variation in levels of digital literacy could equate with different amounts of time needed to familiarise themselves navigating e-learning platforms. Buddying novice with experienced web users may be one way of providing collaborative support for students as they grow and develop their skills with navigating the blended environment.

While time management was considered a potential barrier to experiences with blended learning, technology was further recognised as a hurdle. Although learner flexibility and convenience is widely identified as a key factor for blended course choice by students (Graham, 2004), technological access issues can hinder access to online learning environments. Internet access is not universal due to logistical and economic factors, and these can impact a student's level of engagement with the subject materials (Univeristy of Illinois, 2010). There are specific areas currently under investigation to ensure equality of access, such as video streaming and file upload options.

TRANSLATING RESEARCH LEARNINGS INTO PRACTICE

In response to students' recommendations, the teaching academics have made changes to the "instructional attributes" (Oh & Park, 2009, p. 328) of the blended subjects. Blackboard Collaborate sessions explaining blended learning and introducing students to the digital literacy skills and ICT knowledge

required are scheduled at the commencement of each study period separate to curriculum focused sessions. Blackboard Collaborate sessions are scheduled to describe how to learn online as well as to explain assessment tasks. In response to feedback on the time taken to navigate the online environment, many of the subjects now have generic LMS menus. To keep students informed with the module content, academics have developed short video vignettes describing elements of the content modules. Pebble+ is set up on a voluntary basis for students to provide reflective feedback to one another on readings, activities and assessment tasks. Students have options to choose from when introducing themselves to their subject community including "getting to know me" blogs, learning style questionnaires, and wellness quizzes.

There is opportunity to further investigate student experiences and engagement through learning analytics as, "studies have demonstrated a relationship between the frequency of student LMS usage and academic performance" (Whitmer, Fernandes, & Allen, 2012, p. 2). Learning analytics has the potential to capture direct data of learners' online activities, assuming their engagement, by providing authentic and timely evidence (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2014, p. 27). This provides the opportunity to further investigate student interaction and behaviours within the programs.

The support of the library and the learning support staff have been enlisted to lead online information sessions on topics that are perplexing to students. To further support students develop their understanding of APA, an APA checklist is provided, directed toward students developing their skills in self-reflection (López-Pérez et al., 2011). When aligned with the Seven Principles, this provides the opportunity for prompt feedback in various ways (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996) to support students take ownership of their learning and develop self-reflection as part of cognitive presence.

Baepler and Murdoch (2010) identify the need for early and frequent assessment as best practice in blended learning. Consequently more formal requirements pertaining to formative assessment has been adopted. By clearly communicating expectations for assessment, with explicit rubrics for making judgements, Sells et al. (2012) find this provides a respectful learning environment that is conductive for building professional working relationships. This element also addresses the teaching presence as it moderates and focuses the assessment tasks throughout each study period (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011).

CoI development within the course is foregrounded by the teaching presence. This is "essential to bring all the elements together and ensure that the community of interest is productive" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011, p. 24). Based on our findings, there is an opportunity to explore the social presence, in particular global, professional identity development, in consideration of inter-cultural awareness and blended spaces for collaboration and question answer sessions. This element could be explored through the adoption of Web 2.0 tools, including those provided by social media. It is argued that the sociability and scalability of this media can be utilised as both tools for learning and learning spaces (Licona & Gurung, 2011).

The cognitive presence element of the framework provides a space for meaning to be constructed from experience (Garrison er al., 2000; Garrison & Vaughan, 2011). Based on our findings, there was a strong focus on the technological skills and knowledge required by the students to access the course. This was an intentional focus within the data collection tools, however, an investigation into student experiences in the realm of conceptual knowledge and skill development, in the online, face-to-face and practicum experiences, could further function to inform the blend, thus providing an indicator of student engagement practices (Henrie et al., 2015), within the cognitive presence.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It should be acknowledged that although the surveys and focus group data identified student experiences in the blended programs, the study did not measure the extent students' experiences influenced their sense of agency, nor if it was a barrier or an enabler of cross cultural interactions, engagement and collaborations. Despite these limitations, an important contribution of this study to the literature is that it provides a starting point for evaluating the learnscape to inform the design and implementation of meaningful blended programs.

Within this study, there is a limitation that the voices of the teaching academics are not included. In addition, there is a gap in terms of the effect of different teaching approaches within blended environments, with a focus on the perspective of teaching academics within the space. Therefore, there is a need to extend the current investigations into "approaches for blending technology with different instructional approaches" (Delialioğlu, 2012, p. 312).

CONCLUSION

To triangulate the data further, inclusion of learning analytics data can further inform the blended program. Learning analytics is defined as the "measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimising learning and the environments in which it occurs" (Learning Analytics & Knowledge, 2011, para. one). It is a field that is used to analyse transactional data, for example, time spent engaging with online content or discussion boards within a LMS, such as Blackboard. This transactional data can either focus on specific information for one student or general patterns of interaction which has the possibility of measuring progress, inferring engagement and predicting learning outcomes (Richards, 2011). Whilst not explicitly measuring student engagement, there are identifiable patterns in student behaviours, such as interactions with course content and learning activities that are measured by learning analytics programs (Blackboard.com, n.d; Morrison, 2012), which give indicators of engagement within a blended subject. Learning analytics has the potential to capture direct data of learners' online activities, assuming their engagement, by providing authentic and timely evidence (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2014, p. 27). In this context, extracting, analysing and synthesising checkpoint and process learning analytics from the subject sites to learn more about students' online usage patterns and interactions, knowledge processing, evolution or construction would be useful in informing the sites design and layout, in conjunction with future learning and teaching practices (Lockyer, Heathcote, & Dawson, 2013).

In alignment with investigating pedagogy, our findings further inform the blended programs in two ways. Firstly, by adding to the existing small group of studies using qualitative methods (Delialioğlu, 2012, p. 311) and investigating student experiences within blended learning environments from the perspective of teaching academics. Secondly, Henrie et al. (2015) state, there are currently few studies which examine student experiences and engagement through the lens of operational principles or core attributes provided by a teaching academic to promote greater student engagement and subsequent performance and outcomes within blended learning environments. Therefore, this study aims to inform the future designs and delivery of teaching and learning materials within meaningful blended learning spaces with a focus on pedagogical practices for student engagement. As such, it contributes to the body of knowledge about learning design that optimises the 21st century learning experience.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Blackboard Collaborate: An online learning tool which provides synchronous learning such as secure video conferencing, interactive whiteboards, breakout rooms and document viewing and sharing. It has an asynchronous capability where sessions are recorded and can be viewed at a later date.

Blended Learning: Face-to-face (FTF) classes are meaningfully complemented, or fused, with web-based, online learning.

Counsellor Education: Involves students developing a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of diverse counselling theory and cross cultural practices.

Counsellor Professionals: Skilled counsellor practitioners employed in the field and in academia.

Digital Literacy: People's skills and knowledge in using a range of technological tools to search, use, create and evaluate information, construct new knowledge and interact with multiple platforms and formats.

Higher Education Institutions: Institutions that provide post-secondary education. They are also commonly referred to as universities or colleges.

Learnscape: A collaborative working and learning environment where teaching academics and students share ideas, develop and construct meaning, and consolidate their skills and understanding.

Offshore Campus: Higher education universities offering courses and programs to students studying at an international site.

Student Engagement: The time and energy devoted to working with and through academically purposeful activities.

Teaching Academics: Skilled teachers, educators, subject coordinators, lecturers who work in higher education institutions where teaching university students is a focus.