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6-15-2019

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### Recommended Citation

Hong, Yvonne Ee Von and Gardner, Lesley, "An Evaluation of Blended Courses: Reflections from Undergraduates" (2019). *PACIS 2019 Proceedings*. 174.  
<https://aisel.aisnet.org/pacis2019/174>

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# **An Evaluation of Blended Courses: Reflections from Undergraduates**

*Completed Research Paper*

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## **Abstract**

*Blended learning approaches are increasingly adopted in the higher education context, with various levels of success. This study explored students' experiences and evaluations of a blended course in an undergraduate's programme in information systems at a New Zealand university. This paper presents ten emerged themes, drawing on six in-depth focus groups' interviews with undergraduates. The themes indicate that students are not only accepting of blended approaches but also perceived blended approaches useful for their learning and enjoyable to a certain extent. The emerged themes also uncover students' reflections of their learning abilities and preferences in instances of the rising uptake of blended approaches across the higher education context. These study findings are potentially useful in providing practical contributions by informing learning institutions' key considerations when implementing blended approaches to undergraduates who are relatively new to the method and learning environment.*

**Keywords:** blended learning, student experience, undergraduates, focus groups

## **Introduction**

Blended learning practices is an approach to course design that is envisioned to bring together the best of both face-to-face and online strategies (i.e. use of e-learning tools). Blended learning commonly employs a socio-constructivist approach, which strives to create a constructive and practical learning experience for students (Bocconi and Trentin 2014). This approach is increasingly popular as blended design is perceived to offer opportunities to create transformative learning environments that effectively promote a higher level of learning (Garrison and Kanuka 2004), and also catering to learners' current learning needs and preferences, and in turn improving students' learning outcomes (Graham et al. 2013).

While blended approaches are envisioned to enhance and transform learning, some researchers stated that the inclusion of e-learning tools does not automatically improve learning success (Grosch 2013). This is attributed to concerns, for instance, challenges faced by instructors in integrating the learning curriculum with e-learning tools effectively (Huang et al. 2008; Szeto 2013), and inadequate support by the institutions made blended learning implementation difficult (Rizvi et al. 2017). Furthermore, even though there is research that enquires on learners' input, researchers tend to focus on the overall learning satisfaction or learning outcomes of learners. With the mixed findings of blended approaches' success, there is a need to focus on the potential flipside of learners' experience, for instance, the issues that learners faced and their evaluations on blended approaches, e-learning tools, support and the

learning environment provided (Hung and Chou 2015). Nevertheless, address potential concerns in regards to students' resistance towards the blended format (Baker and Hill 2017).

The primary purpose of this study is to discover students, particularly those who are relatively new to the university context, experiences in blended courses. As universities are moving towards employing various blended methods, this study is also interested to discover learners' thoughts and the perceived level of their adaptations to the changing ways in which learning delivery and activities are conducted. To comprehend the complexity of learners' perspective on blended learning, focus groups were conducted as this form of qualitative research method is suitable in allowing the researcher to explore factors of interest in greater detail (Waha and Davis 2014).

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. We first review extant literature, followed by our research method. We then detail our analysis and findings, followed by discussions and implications. We conclude the paper with limitations and future directions for this study.

## **Literature Review**

Blended learning, also known as hybrid learning, mediated learning, technology-enhanced instruction, mixed modes learning, is generally and at its simplest, defined as employing a range of media and learning methods, most often a combination of face-to-face and online learning (Delialioğlu 2012; Picciano 2009). According to Porter et al. (2014), some institutions defined blended learning with a quantitative measure, using a percentage measure of online instruction and/or activities required for courses to qualify as blended. There is, however, no specific percentage range stated. Southeast Missouri State University, for instance, categorised the amount of online instructions required for a blended course into three categories: Light (1 – 24%), Moderate (25-75%), and Heavy (76-99%) (Porter et al. 2014).

Although there is a lack of an agreeable definition of what blended learning entails, there is mutual agreement among educational institutions in regards to the primary purpose of introducing blended learning approaches. Blended learning is viewed as a move towards recognising that traditional methods are no longer effective and efficient in this day and age, where other available online learning mechanisms could be easily incorporated to help improve pedagogically-oriented innovation (Albrecht 2006; Sorden and Ramírez-Romero 2012). One of the well-known frameworks that researchers pivot on when implementing blended learning is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. The CoI framework, which is well known in informing online and blended designs from a socio-constructivist standpoint, draws attention to the importance of the inclusion of three presences (i.e. cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence) in facilitating a higher quality and deep learning (Garrison et al. 2000).

Blended learning's popularity is contributed to by a number of advantages that blended learning offers. The availability and widespread adoption of technologies and network in learning institutions are seen to widely helped make learning more efficient (Renner et al. 2014). Learning is no longer constrained to the classroom; instead can be made available to students wherever they are. Students are also not restricted to a particular interaction online time as they have the ability to interact synchronously and asynchronously (Strachan and Liyanage 2015). Face-to-face lectures, for instance, are now deemed optional by learners. This is contributed by the ease of access to lecture materials online or the fact that learners can search for any additional information online without having to attend lectures (Dodd 2015).

Secondly, learning is also enhanced by continually evolving technologies as they become more education oriented allowing learning instructors to adapt it to the course objectives to enhance knowledge. Educators can instead focus on creating enhanced opportunities for student-student and teacher-student interactions, increase student engagement and constructive learning. Additionally, with the added flexibility to blend courses, learning facilitators can also focus on continually improving learning pedagogies (Albrecht 2006) by incorporating more essential learning activities or instructional modalities (Christensen et al. 2013; Picciano 2009).

Blended approaches are also seen to offer numerous opportunities for active learning. Active learning, which is generally defined as any learning activities that go beyond merely memorising facts or sitting

in lectures. Active learning, instead, associated with increased proficiency in course concepts, where students practice course concepts applications in a variety of “complex and often collaborative activities” (Daniel & Tivener, 2016; Gudigantala, 2013). Students stated that they value the interactive activities rather than the traditional passive participation in classes. The hands-on learning activities, which tends to focus on collaborative activities were deemed useful by encouraging critical thinking rather than passive information absorption. Active learning activities like flipped classrooms, team-based learning, and problem-based learning are also seen to positively influence students engagement and their learning performances (Lumpkin et al. 2015). Furthermore, the ability to diversify learning activities with the flexible learning environment allows teaching instructors to address and somehow cater to various students with different learning styles (Dascalu et al. 2015).

There are, however, conflicting results regarding the level of success of blended courses compared to traditional classes (Wong et al. 2014). For instance, findings by Choi (2013) and Davies et al. (2013) reported no significant difference in learning performance between students who were enrolled in blended and non-blended courses. Additionally, students reported having negative experiences in blended courses as they felt lost and isolated. This is especially prevalent in the online environment context, where students stated that they tend to feel like an outcast and the online environment is viewed to obstruct personal relationships with peers and instructors (López-Pérez et al. 2011). Findings from Osgerby (2013) also illustrated students’ frustration with ineffective systems, slow delivery of materials and disliked for collaborative activities.

Nevertheless, a survey by the Times Higher Education reported that students were generally less engaged and reported lower satisfaction rates in blended courses. Professor Sharples at the UK’s Open University, however, stated that blended courses should not be reflected on as a failure based on the survey results. Rather, universities have yet to implement blended curriculum designs properly, or more research is needed to discover “there is a difference between what students say they like and what they do better at” (Bothwell 2016).

## **Method and Participants**

This study employed a qualitative approach to understand students’ experiences and their overall evaluations of blended courses. Qualitative research is chosen for this study as this form of data collection allows the researcher to explore beyond the surface meaning of the phenomena (Patton 2015). The qualitative method adopted for this study was semi-structured focus groups. The focus group were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow for a change of questions order, clarifications, and leeway for additional follow-up questions if deemed necessary (Yin 2014). Focus groups were selected for this study as it allows the researcher to not only probe for information on issues of interest, but it also allows the researcher to observe participants’ responses, behaviours and interactions. In addition, participants “tend to be more relaxed and candid in such group situations” (Krueger and Casey 2015).

The study was conducted with the selected cohort of a first-year information systems course. Currently, the course is applying the blended approach, with predominantly face-to-face lectures, accompanied by various self-directed online learning components. The online components include five deliverables of self-directed online technical components, eight weekly quizzes, one individual report assignment, and one group project video. The course also includes face-to-face tutorials which were conducted in a flipped approach, where students are required to watch a content video and attempt the prep work before attending tutorials for discussion-based activities.

Students who accepted the invitation to participate in the focus groups were part of a more extensive study. A total of 27 students participated across six small focus groups. Details of the focus groups’ participants are shown in Table 1. For familiarity purposes, all focus groups were conducted in the university setting. Students who expressed interest in participating were emailed the participation information sheet and consent form beforehand. Before the start of each focus groups, all participants were given time to mingle with the researcher and other participants in order to instil a comfortable atmosphere. All focus groups were conducted towards the end of the course semester, and each focus groups ran for a duration from 60 to 90 minutes. Focus groups were audio recorded with the consent of all participants.

The focus groups were conducted until the point at which the data gathered became repetitive. This meant that theoretical saturation was reached. All focus groups interviews were then transcribed by the leading researcher and all identifiers were removed and allocated with codes to maintain the anonymity of participants. In addition, to ensure the communicative validity of focus groups, participant checks were conducted, where focus groups participants were given the opportunity to review the transcriptions (Bigger 2005).

**Table 1: Participants' Details**

Category	Attributes	#
Gender	Female	21
	Male	6
Age Group	Mature (i.e. age 20 years and more at entry)	1
	Younger (i.e. age 21 years and less at entry)	26
Ethnicity	Asian	14
	Eurasian	1
	Indian	4
	Māori	1
	Pākehā /White	5
	Persian	1
	Sri Lankan	1
High School	Domestic	25
	Overseas	2
Perceive Digital Skills	Novice	9
	Intermediate	14
	Expert	4

## Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using NVivo 11 to retrieve codes and relevant themes. The analysis of the transcribed focus groups' interviews was conducted inductively, based on Braun and Clarke (2006)'s thematic analysis process. The analysis approach consists of initial familiarisation of data which involves re-reading of transcriptions, followed by coding. For the coding phase, we first conducted an open coding approach where each sentence of the transcript was analysed, then categorised into "meaningful phases", followed by labelling each phase with a code. A total of 26 codes were initially formed. We then proceeded with the examination of codes to identify "broader patterns of meaning", where a total of 10 potential themes were identified. The themes were then reviewed and refined to make sure that they credibly represent the dataset and "in answering the research question" (Braun and Clarke 2006). To ensure the trustworthiness of the focus groups data analysis, we employed the researcher-researcher corroboration method, where we discussed, and cross-check the coding strategies and the interpretation of data (Patton 2015).

## Qualitative Findings

### *Evaluations of traditional versus blended courses*

One of the key focuses of this study is to discover learners' experiences in blended courses. The emerged themes are flexibility, interactions with peers and instructor, active learning, technology use, time and cost savings. These themes supported by the snippets of quotes will be discussed as follows.

#### *Flexibility*

This theme refers to the opportunities given to students to facilitate their own learning aside from face-to-face learning times. Unlike traditional learning, students are not forced into a particular schedule-filled structure by the universities. With blended approaches, some learning tasks tend to be delivered in an online manner, where students have to self-direct their learning. The flexibility and the independence given to a student are seen by some as useful in allowing them to work at their own pace. This is demonstrated by Student 3, for instance, on his views on asynchronous lecture recording in enabling him to study in their own time.

*“Lecture recordings have like a lot of value. It is good for revision if you're sick or genuinely can't make to a lecture. Also, for some people, if you have like one lecture on a day and you live an hour out from uni, sometimes you don't want to come in all the way. While the recording is not as good as being in the class itself, it's still like pretty good especially if it's something you're struggling with, so you can pause it and consider what's being said or something you find it easy and you can watch it at 1.5 speed. So, I think recordings can be beneficial. It sorts of like levels the playing field as well. People that struggle more in the course or people that find the course easy can all like benefit equally from it. Sort of like slow it down, speed it up, pause it et cetera.” (Student 3)*

Another student, on the other hand, discussed that the flexibility that blended courses offer is helpful as it allows her study to be fitted around other commitments like work and club activities, while at the same time still provides them with multiple outlets to engage with peers, instead of just in the face-to-face settings.

*“Nowadays, you have so many things to do right, you have to catch up on everything, You also have to work and do everything else like club activities, so I feel like my time is very limited.” (Student 21)*

#### *Technology use*

This is closely followed by technology use. This relates to students' being constantly wired to their devices and their formed habits of relying on various tools in supporting their everyday learning. This theme emerged from students' discussions of the various e-learning tools provided by the course in facilitating their learning activities. For instance, the course's intensive use of the learning management system as the main platform for information dissemination, online quizzes, and discussion is viewed highly convenient by students due to how all relevant materials are collated on the same tool. Nevertheless, it is described to reduce instances of extraneous cognitive load.

*“The homepage is very like nicely separated, categorised, easy to navigate, you press on the home button, and you have like everything there, so it helps you out, it's really easy to access. “ (Student 21)*

*“I think it's coz they are nicely set up and easy to navigate. You've got your lec slides for each lec. So it doesn't overwhelm me. Like not in your face, and it's just organised, so it works well.” (Student 17)*

This is followed by learners' perceived interactivity of learning activities. Quizzes and other online assessment like Excel Training were seen to make learning more enjoyable. Additionally, the important choices of tools with features that cater to diverse learning styles: visually by watching the video,

reading the instructions, and active learning by testing themselves of the content by attempting the practice quizzes.

*“I actually really like Excel Training (SAM Cengage Learning) like it was the same task, but they didn’t change it when it comes to time to assess you. You understood the process, and they make you practice four times. It was like, watch it and then practice it. You could see a video as well, but it appealed to everyone I guess. So that you can like [accommodate] for different learning methods, everyone could have a go. I found that really helpful.” (Student 12)*

*“Yeah, it’s (i.e. technical assessment) interactive. It kinda felt more like a game which makes you sit there and just kind of do it for longer.” (Student 19)*

Furthermore, participants’ perceived ease of use of e-learning tools due to its user-friendly design and supportability by multiple devices, where students were not restricted to browser access but could also use apps on their mobile devices.

*“The [learning management system] user interface is like just great. You’ve got like all your courses there, you can change colours, and it’s user-friendly.” (Student 3)*

*“I like the mobile app version as well. It’s really useful.” (Student 5)*

Nevertheless, the convenience of accessing all needed study materials viewed to be highly convenient for learners as they are not constrained to a particular place or time to exercise their learning activities.

*“I also like how we can remote login from home, coz now you can open the files at home so if I forgot to add it to my USB you will still have access to the uni files from home. It’s really helpful.” (Student 7)*

### *Active Learning*

The third theme emerged is active learning, where students compared the differences where traditional courses were typically conducted in a passive manner. The focus groups’ participants discussed the ability to engage in interactive and meaningful learning activities, where instructors include question breaks in between the face-to-face content delivery. The question breaks can either be in the form of a quiz or getting students to discuss the posed questions amongst themselves. These are viewed to not only make learning more exciting but also aid their understanding of the subject. The act of doing something, in this case, participating during face-to-face content delivery is perceived to be helpful in allowing students to affirm their understanding promptly, and is also seen to increase their attention span in lectures.

*“I’ve got Ron (i.e. lecturer). He’s cool! He’s interactive. He comes up to the aisle and stuff, and he relates to things. Everyone wants to ask questions, you know, and he really encouraged people to ask questions during class.” (Student 9)*

*“The in-class quiz is good to see if you pay attention or not and take good notes because you want to be prepared for the quiz.” (Student 11)*

### *Collaboration*

This is closely followed by interactions with peers. This refers to opportunities to interact in group activities, and in this instance, students discussed having prescribed group activities like tutorials or team-based learning sessions, and informal group studies. Students explained that interactions with peers and instructors are viewed helpful in supporting their learning. These forms of communication are perceived to widen their understanding of the subject, and at the same time, giving them the opportunities to gain feedback. Nevertheless, interactions over a period of time are also viewed to support relationship building among peers who are seen to be helpful in not only improving their collaborative relationship, but at the same time, maintains a sense of belonging in the university context.

*“Coz I find like it’s really good to have those people to bounce ideas off.” (Student 15)*

*"Yeah like there are questions that you don't know. Coz people also have like different views as well on things and just getting that makes me go, "Oh yeah, that's relevant. I didn't think of that!" and it just really broaden your knowledge on the topic" (Student 14)*

They also perceive collaborative activities to be relevant for their future career as it mimics the work environment. They also viewed these activities as opportunities to gain practical communication skills, learning how to manage tasks and the group's dynamics, and facilitate discussions.

*"Group activities are really good coz they mimic the work environment. They set you up for the future. Future jobs and stuff." (Student 6)*

*"It gives you good networking skills as well" (Student 1)*

### ***The balance of blended components***

Focus groups' participants were also asked about their overall views on blended learning and discussed the opportunities of increasing the blended components of courses. The themes that emerged from the focus groups are described as follows.

#### *Face-to-face and online learning component ratio*

The main point that was agreed upon by the majority of participants was the importance of balance for both the online and offline components. A majority were satisfied with the current course design of face-to-face lectures and tutorials, by stating that the course has managed to balance the face-to-face and the online components relatively well. Students were, however, not as keen on the idea when probed for thoughts on shifting to more online learning.

*"I feel like that would take out the whole human... humanity aspect of it which is quite sad." (Student 21)*

*"I like how it's going, but with this course, I wouldn't want more online component. I want more [face-to-face] group work like interacting with other students." (Student 13)*

*"I don't like the idea of everything online. I think like lecs, it takes away all the teaching if it's online. I know there's a big push for everything to become online and the benefits, but it's something I don't believe in. When they do it online, yes people collaborate online, but you're losing the collaborative touch in person, coz you see when you get into the workforce, it's like not good [referring to people skills]. Like [face-to-face] lectures, that's how teaching should take place. That's why I like the balance now." (Student 17)*

Others, on the other hand, stated their strong preference for a face-to-face content delivery compared to online delivery as they perceived it to be more effective in support their learning. Student 1's reasoning for this preference is explained by her inability to stay focused when viewing lectures online.

*"Like with the online lectures as well, you get distracted, and you procrastinate more. (Student 1)*

#### *Workload*

While blended learning is viewed to be a 'cool' idea, most students were quick to point out the perceived increased of workload as a result. With all courses blended, students foresee a jump in self-directed online components and prep work that they have to attempt before classes.

*"Not all of them. I appreciate one course doing that only. If all of them are like that, it would be death.... I feel like not all courses should be the same or else there's going to be an overload of tasks for us." (Student 21)*

#### *Learning Performance*

The next theme that emerged relates to perceived lower performance with increasing self-directed online components. While students acknowledged the rising trends towards online learning, most



discussed the detrimental effect on their learning performance if more online components were introduced in the course.

*“If lectures were made online as well, it would not be helpful coz it would probably bring our marks down.” (Student 9)*

*“Like we're moving towards that online education, but I guess it would be helpful in the sense that people are more focused when they watch it in their own time, but then it's hard to control people. You can't force people to watch anything...” (Student 21)*

Others like Student 11 and Student 13 also echoed similar views by suggesting the need for allocated due dates as an enforcer to make sure that they get things done promptly. This refers to not only assignments but also content videos, like lectures that are delivered online.

*“As long as they have like a due date, you have to finish this lecture by tonight, and I feel like that would keep people on track.” (Student 13)*

### *Group Project*

When a higher ratio of active learning components was discussed, the main thing that emerged is the number of group work allocated for the course. Even though students showed a high preference for collaboration with peers, they were not as keen on assessed group collaborations. Having been part of an assigned group project for the course, participants were ambivalent when it comes to a more assessed group project due to differing experiences. Students discussed the unfairness of grade distribution due to their experiences of working with peers who were free-riding or did not contribute as much to the project.

*“Coz otherwise you get too many free riders!” (Student 19)*

*“... just don't want people to bring your marks down.”(Student 15)*

### *Suitability of blended approaches*

Purpose and its feasibility of blended approaches were also brought up by participants. Some participants compared and discussed the opportunities for blended tasks or activities in different courses. Others, on the other hand, addressed the feasibility of blended activities with some stating that the current method works well.

*“For Accounting, for example, it's hard to do it online because it's like balance sheets and all that, you can't just read the content online, and when you do it, and it's wrong, you have to learn it off the teacher rather than reading off the e-book.” (Student 1)*

### *Staff support*

Participants, in general, were against the idea of reducing the formal face-to-face time, like lectures and tutorials. Students were adamant that if these face-to-face times were reduced, optional face-to-face opportunities times should be increased. Students seemed to have a relatively high need for immediacy and comprehensive feedback, and that their needs were described to be fulfilled by meeting staff in person rather than online.

*“I think if you were to reduce the face-to-face time, you have to increase the opportunities for office hours. The opportunity of actually going face-to-face.” (Student 19)*

Students even though perceived to have adequate digital competence, many still discussed the need for face-to-face technical support and demonstration labs for all the prescribed online components.

*“You could have a tutorial which you can go over like that sort of stuff which would like, make it easy coz at the moment it is all self-taught. And like if you're not particularly into coding, it can seem, you know, daunting and difficult. Whereas if you have like a tutorial that went over that, it could be quite a bit more helpful.” (Student 2)*

“I think maybe they could have like tutorial sessions where they teach the students how to use the tools and show them other tools that they can possibly use instead of that, or where to find more information.” (Student 23).

## Discussions and Implications

Although blended learning approaches are not new, universities in the New Zealand context are still to a certain extent experimenting with various blended methods. This study is hence motivated to investigate students’ thoughts on the overall design of a large-class blended course. Nevertheless, to discover how blended courses could better support learners who are particularly new to the university context. Findings from the focus groups highlighted students’ overall perceptions of traditional versus blended courses, and the importance of balance in blended classes.

When discussing their experiences in blended classes, *flexibility* came up numerous times in the focus groups. Blended approaches were viewed flexible as students were not constrained to carry out their learning in a particular space of time (Waha and Davis 2014). This is followed by their preference for a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous activities. Students perceived these features to be highly useful and appropriate in supporting their learning pace, where some stated that they require a longer time to digest learning materials, while others prefer a fast pace, timely feedback or interactions with peers or instructors.

In addition, the heavy use of learning management systems by universities to convey announcements and distribute all learning materials and activities were perceived to be efficient, and it satisfied students’ learning needs. Learners’ high preference for *technology use* is no surprise given that learners, being constantly wired to their devices, are spoilt with instant gratifications or instant feedback (Lepp et al. 2015). Unlike findings by Osgerby (2013), focus groups’ participants also stated that they were happy with the course’s ‘practice of technology use’. This could be explained by the lack of complaints by focus groups regarding the usability and interoperability of the e-learning tools prescribed by the university. Furthermore, university use of e-learning tools in creating more interactive learning activities is also stated to make learning more enjoyable and effective with the provision of immediate feedback.

Students also acknowledged and appreciated the opportunities to exercise *active learning*, in comparison to traditional courses where teaching was mainly conducted in a passive manner. Learning activities like in-class participation were viewed to stimulate their attention in classes and increase their interest in the subject as a result. This is closely followed by *collaborations* with peers. The opportunities to collaborate face-to-face and online are observed to not only support students academically but also emotionally. The sense of belonging is perceived to be important in increasing students motivation to continually engage in communication (So 2009). According to López-Pérez et al. (2011), a sense of belonging is shown to be of importance in avoiding instances, such as feelings of isolation, poor communications, and dropouts.

The second main category of themes concentrates on students’ overall evaluations of blended learning. Findings demonstrated that blended approaches were relatively well-received by students to a certain extent. When discussed about opportunities to blend components or courses further, students were quick to point out the importance of *balancing the face-to-face and online ratio*. Learners stated that they prefer a high level of “human presence” or teaching presence (Hung and Chou 2015); the ease and availability of interacting with instructors and peers in-person and online.

This is closely followed by a perceived increase in *workload* if online components ratio is higher than face-to-face. Students were concerned that if all courses were to follow suit in implementing flipped and online approaches, they might be required to exercise a higher level of self-directed study time. This somewhat leads to the perception that their *learning performance* may suffer as a consequence. The perceived lower performance seems to relate to students’ procrastination habits and the lack of control in regulating their learning promptly. Students’ lower self-regulatory behaviours were however described to be moderated by an external factor where instructors enforced due dates for tasks. This, however, begs the question of the level of cognitive learning that takes place since students were seen procrastinate, and in turn, treating the assigned due dates as ‘do dates’ (Mastrianni, 2015).

While students prefer collaborating with their peers, they were however not as keen to collaborate in assessed activities like *group projects*. This is to avoid instances of free-riding effect. Students voiced out their frustrations with individuals that put in less effort and the unfairness of tasks that were placed on their shoulders to complete the assessment. According to Hütter and Diehl (2011), this is seen to have a detrimental effect on some active students who felt exploited “may give up on making efforts because of the sucker effect”. This, in turn, harms the overall group performance (Zhang and Meng 2016).

Aside from their concerns of increased workload, students across four focus groups also questioned *blended methods suitability* for all courses. Some discussed that current learning design of mainly face-to-face content delivery works and even though interactive learning activities could be delivered online, students still questioned the effectiveness of this approach. They explained that some courses like Accounting and Economics require some rote learning and that practice of questions is best done in class with the instructors available for feedback.

This study’s findings of first-year undergraduates also demonstrated a more substantial need for hands-on *staff support* or online and offline teaching presence, in comparison to older students. This is seen to be the case that the first years are still finding their feet in the university context. Also, as mentioned above, learners still highly value face-to-face interactions or ‘human presence’, even though online outlets incorporated social presence features. Furthermore, even though learners seem to have adequate digital skills to participate in online activities, they still need support when technical issues arise or general support while they undergo the adjustment period. This indicates that learning institutions who are implementing blended learning should also create accommodating guidelines on how to support learners who have varied needs (Vanslambrouck et al. 2018).

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Even though this study provided insights to learners’ experiences and adaptations to blended courses, since the present study sample consists of mainly undergraduate from the University of Auckland Business School, the insights may only be generalised to that group of students. Furthermore, this research finding may not also be as applicable to mature or students who are higher up in their education, since the focus groups’ participants are predominantly in their first-year of the university. Second, while this study has identified some key findings concerning learners’ experiences in blended courses, future research could also incorporate objective measures to measure students’ learning progress and their overall grades to give a more comprehensive picture of the effects of the course design in accordance to their performance and overall satisfaction. Third, it would also be important to explore learners’ experiences of the different designs of blended courses and learning environments (Vanslambrouck et al. 2018). These comparisons may be of considerable importance to the educational community in aiding their decisions when designing the optimal blended course that fits specific groups of learners’ criteria. Nevertheless, the awareness of balancing the blended learning delivery and current learning institutions’ resources to avoid risks of overreaching its capacity which inevitably transfer the additional costs onto students (Liebermann 2018).

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