# Prospects and Challenges of Using Blended Learning Strategies for Part Time Students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

In a bid to cope with the 21st century technological demands, most tertiary institutions across the globe have queued into the paradigm shift in instructional process through the integration of technology in instructional delivery. One of such technologies is the use of blended learning to complement traditional teaching methods. This study therefore aims at finding out the prospects and challenges of using blended learning strategies for part time (evening and weekend) students. The study was guided by two research questions and two null hypotheses. The study purposively selected the entire 46 lecturers involved in Evening and Weekend Programme (EWP) and 287 EWP NCE students in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri. A 20-item questionnaire was designed by the researchers with 4 point modified Likert response scale patterned thus: SA, A, D and SD. The questionnaire was given to experts who did both face and content validation and a reliability r of .77 was attained. Mean was used to answer the research questions while t- test was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 significance level. The findings of the study indicated; enriched learning experiences, active involvement of students in instructional process, collaborative learning, access to learning content from anywhere and any device as some of the prospects of using blended learning for part time students while the challenges include; inadequate facilities, lack of technical support, network challenges and problem of self directedness in device usage. Based on the findings, recommendations were made and conclusions drawn.

**Keywords:** Prospects, challenges, blended, strategies.

## Introduction

The upsurge in the use of technology has in the recent past permeated all fields of human endeavor. Global best practices, in all ventures, including education, are rated with the level of compliance to technological innovation. Technology impels novelty in educational practice and as such, is progressively determining teaching and learning in the 21st century. Accordingly, the 21st century teaching and learning methods emphasize learner centeredness as well as active and collaborative learning. This is a paradigm shift, from the old method of teacher centeredness that renders the learner inactive and passive most of the time. In this regard, a good number of academic institutions globally, are incorporating various technologies into the instructional procedures to ensure active and collaborative learning for effective performance of their students.

Digital learning simply means any type of learning that makes use of technology. It allows individuals to learn anywhere and at any time, placing the learner in charge of his own learning process. Digital learning offers supplementary content when matched with conventional teaching. It is groundbreaking in the sense that, the learner takes charge of how, where and when to learn.

Typologies of digital learning include; adaptive learning, blended learning, badging and gamification, classroom technologies, e-textbooks, learning analytics, learning objects and mobile learning (Superadmin, 2020). However, the interest of this study is on the prospects and challenges of blended learning as a digital learning method.

**Blended Learning**

Blended learning as the name implies, is the harmonization of two different learning approaches to optimize learning results. It is also called hybrid learning whereby technology and digital media are incorporated into the traditional face to face classroom setting. United States Department of Education (2015) defines blended learning as the intentional and complementary merging of online and face to face learning into one harmonious whole. Garrison and Vanghan (2007) perceive blended learning as the thoughtful fusion of face to face and online experiences such that the strength of each is blended into unique learning experiences. The scholars further noted that it is a fundamental redesign that transforms the structure of and approach to teaching and learning. Pereira et al (2007) perceive blended learning as a teaching modality based on synergic combination of traditional teaching methods with tactics and characteristics of non-attendance-based distance teaching or e learning. In this regard, blended learning complements traditional delivery methods with digital learning thereby providing the students the finest of both online practice and face to face experience. Blended learning combines many approaches including learner centered teaching, active and collaborative learning as well as experiential learning all geared to meeting the needs of various learners.

Singh (2003) affirms that blended learning aims at (a) aiding active learning; (b) lessening duration of attendance-based classes; (c) enhancing academic feat and long-term knowledge; (d) evading potential challenges of fully non-attendance-based teaching. Similarly, Alex (2022) notes that, the four main rudiments of blended learning include; face-to-face instruction/learning, digital/online instruction/learning, permitting students to control the pace, place, path, and/or time of their learning, and an integration of the face-to-face and online learning work. Singh (2003) further identified models of blended learning to include; whole group rotation, station rotation, flipped learning, and playlist and hybrid course.

Features of blended learning as highlighted by Singh (2003) and Alex (2022) imply that it enables students to actively collaborate as they gather and share information with their course mates. This is done with the aid of Web 2.0 tools such as social networking sites, wikis and other media and interactive web conferencing applications. Web 2.0 refers to various web-based technologies that provide opportunities for users to be consumers and producers of content through collaboration, editing and publishing (Cumming et al 2015, Park, 2013). Web based applications no doubt paves way for innovative communication in the sense that they provide personal learning space where students create, share and receive immediate feedback from fellow students and staff. Park (2013) affirmed that the present day college students are web 2.0 savvy. Consequently, tools like WhatsApp, Google Classroom, Discord, Microsoft Teams and Slacks can be maximized for effective instructional delivery in higher institutions like AIFCE Owerri. It is pertinent to note that

collaboration especially among part time students through web 2.0 tools can take place in the dual nature of blended learning (face-to-face/online).

**Part Time Students**

Part time students are students who do not attend classes on regular bases. Usually, part time programmes are held in the evening and weekends, hence the name evening and weekend programme (EWP). Participants of EWP are characterized by individuals who cannot engage in a regular full time programme due to their commitments to either their occupation or other ventures. Bean and Metzner (1985) describe a part-time student as a non-traditional student, who pursues higher education, typically after reaching physical maturity, while living off-campus and possessing responsibilities related to family and/or employment. Most people enroll into part time programmes to navigate work, family and other family commitments while receiving education simultaneously.

In spite of the seeming benefits of part time studies, Wolfe, (2017) enumerates the challenges associated with part time students as; social seclusion, elongated graduation time, crowded schedule, less likelihood of getting degree, tax fine and restricted number of programmes. This may be the reason for the prior affirmation of Gonzalez (2009) that part time students have higher rate of attrition when compared with full time students. Consequently, the attrition rate among part time students can be minimized through blended learning strategies which uphold active and collaborative learning. This will in no small measure boost students' commitment to the programme of study, reduce feelings of seclusion, and engender active involvement in the instructional process.

Accelerale (2018) highlights the benefits of blended learning as; cost effective, consistency in class as well as pre-training, access to content from anywhere, any time and on any device, Enriched learning experiences and insightful reports about learners. In addition, the findings of Pereira et al (2007) enumerate the following potential advantages of blended learning: modernization of teaching methods; development of diverse skills; provision of tangible, consistent, ever handy and updated materials; maintaining appropriate level of knowledge for the field of study; improvement of academic performance; facilitation of the flow of communication among students and between teachers and students. Blended learning enhances self paced learning in which case part time students can regulate their learning pace in line with personal commitments. The model offers both teachers and students enough flexibility and accessibility to instructional process without relinquishing face-to-face contact. Blended learning strategy is not only efficient but very capable of dealing with the challenges of the use of technology in instructional processes.

Despite the fact that blended learning enhances active and collaborative learning in line with the demands of the 21st century method of teaching and learning, researches (Gilmour, 2020; University of Wisconsin, 2020 & Hofmann, 2019) associated blended learning with the following demerits: lack of practitioners' know-how, inadequate tools, lack of basic digital computer skill, lack of interest in the use of technology, inadequate training, expensiveness of technology, problem of adaptation, lack of administrative support, logistic barriers in relation to Wifi and total access, troubles with self directedness in usage, ability to navigate different platforms and devices, lack of time and management skills, resistance to novelty etc. However, Rogers (2003) observes that it takes time for a new innovation to be adopted and implemented appropriately as such blended

learning as an innovation is not an exception. On the other hand, Agamba (2015) notes that appropriate use of technology to improve students' performance rests principally on teacher's belief and quality of support available for appropriate technology integration. In other words, the efficacy of blended learning depends on the expertise of the instructors and the level and quality of support provided by administrators through technical support centers. These conditions if properly put in place will help to alleviate barriers that impede the appropriate use of technology and ensure effectiveness of blended learning for part time students.

**Purpose of the study**

The study determined the prospects and challenges of using blended learning strategies for part time students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri. Specifically, the study sought to;

1. Identify the prospects of using blended learning strategies for part time students;
2. Find out the challenges of using blended learning strategies for part time students;

**Research questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the prospects of using blended learning strategies for part time students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri?
2. What are the challenges of using blended learning strategies for part time students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri?

**Hypothesis**

**$Ho_1$:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of lecturers and part time students on the challenges of using blended learning strategies in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri.

**Methodology**

The study was carried out in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri, Imo State. The entire population was 323 participants in the NCE Evening and Weekend Programme (EWP) made up of 287 NCE students and 46 lecturers. The researchers developed a 20-item questionnaire entitled "Prospects and Challenges of Using Blended Learning Questionnaires" (PCUBLQ) to obtain relevant information from the respondents. The questionnaire was divided into two clusters that covered the two research questions. The response was patterned using a 4 point Modified-Likert scale as thus: Strongly Agree (SA) 4 points, Agree (A) 3 points, Disagree (D) 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) 1 point. The questionnaire was validated by two experts and was subjected to a reliability test using Pearson Correlation Coefficient. A coefficient of 0.77 was obtained which indicated that the instrument was reliable. With the help of a research assistant, 323 copies of the questionnaire were administered, 319 (98.7%) were returned and used for the study. Mean was used to answer the research questions while the t test was used to test the hypothesis. Items that registered mean scores of 2.5 and above were accepted as positive while items with mean scores below 2.5 were not considered as positive. The hypothesis was tested using t-test statistics at .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was accepted if t-calculated value was less than the t-

tabulated value at .05 while the null hypothesis was rejected if the t- calculated value was greater than the t-tabulated value at .05.

**Data Analysis and Results**

**Research Question 1**

What are the prospects of using blended learning strategy for part time students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri?

**Table 1:** Showing mean responses of respondents on prospects of using blended learning strategies for part time students

| S/N | The following are prospects of using blended learning strategy | Mean | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | It provides easy updated of learning materials | 3.4 | Accepted |
| 2 | It helps students to prepare for lessons ahead of the class | 2.6 | Accepted |
| 3 | It enriches learning experiences among students | 3.3 | Accepted |
| 4 | It enables active involvement of students in instructional process | 3.8 | Accepted |
| 5 | It creates room collaborative learning among students | 3.7 | Accepted |
| 6 | It increases communication flow between teachers and students | 3.2 | Accepted |
| 7 | It helps in development of diverse technological skills | 2.9 | Accepted |
| 8 | It helps to access learning content from anywhere and any device | 3.5 | Accepted |
| 9 | It provides flexibility of place and time of learning | 2.5 | Accepted |
| 10 | It eases of feedback from students | 2.8 | Accepted t |

Data on Table revealed the prospects of using blended learning for part time students. The items scored as follows: It provides easy updated of learning materials 3.4; It helps students to prepare for lessons ahead of the class 2.6; It enriches learning experiences among students 3.3; It enables active involvement of students in instructional process 3.8; It creates room collaborative learning among students 3.7; It increases communication flow between teachers and students 3.2; It helps in development of diverse technological skills 2.9; It helps to access learning content from anywhere and any device 3.5; It provides flexibility of place and time of learning 2.5; It eases of feedback from students 2.8. This implies that all the items were prospects of using blended learning strategies for part time students.

**Research Question 2**

What are the challenges of using blended learning strategies for part time students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri?

**Table 2:** Showing mean responses of respondents on challenges of using blended learning strategies for part time.

| S/N | The following are challenges of using blended learning strategy | Mean | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Inadequate facilities hinder blended learning | 3.2 | Accepted |
| 2 | Lack of basic digital skills hinder blended learning | 2.9 | Accepted |
| 3 | Lack of interest in the use of technology hinder blended learning | 2.3 | Rejected |
| 4 | Lack of technical support hinder blended learning | 3.4 | Accepted |
| 5 | Network challenges hinder blended learning | 3.1 | Accepted |
| 6 | Epileptic power supply hinder blended learning | 3.0 | Accepted |
| 7 | Problem of adaptation to novelty hinder blended learning | 2.5 | Accepted |
| 8 | Ability to navigate different platforms and devices | 2.8 | Accepted |
| 9 | Lack of Wifi/data hinder blended learning | 2.7 | Accepted |
| 10 | Problems of self directedness in device usage hinder blended learning | 3.3 | Accepted |

Data on Table 2 revealed the following as challenges facing the use of blended learning as a teaching strategy. The items and their score were: Inadequate facilities hinder blended learning 3.2; Lack of basic digital skills 2.9; lack of technical support 3.4; Network challenges 3.1; Epileptic power supply 3.0; problem of adaptation to novelty 2.5; ability to navigate different platforms and devices 2.8; Lack of wifi/data 2.7; problem of self directedness in device usage 3.3. The results indicated that all the items except one were considered as challenges to using blended learning strategies for part time students, except item on lack of interest in the use of technology with mean score of 2.3 that was not accepted.

**Test of Hypothesis**

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of lecturers and part time students on the challenges of using blended learning strategies in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri.

**Table 3:** t-test analysis of no significant difference in the mean ratings of lecturers on the challenges of using blended learning strategies in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri.

| Groups | Mean | S.D | n | Df | t-cal | t-critical | Significant |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lecturers | 3.04 | 0.71 | 45 | 318 | -1.27 | 1.96 | **Accepted** |
| Part-Time Stds | 3.23 | 0.74 | 274 | | | | |

The data on Table 3 showed that the calculated t-value is -1.27 while the t- critical value is 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance and at 433 degree of freedom. Since the calculated value is less than the t-critical value, the null hypothesis was accepted. Thus, there is no significant difference between the mean responses of lecturers and part time students on the challenges of using blended learning strategies.

**Discussion of Results**

The findings of the study showed the prospects of using blended learning as; easy access to updated learning materials, students can prepare for lessons ahead of the class, enriched learning experiences, active involvement of students in instructional process, collaborative learning among students, increased communication flow between teachers and students, development of diverse technological skills, access to learning content from anywhere and any device, flexibility of place and time of learning, ease of feedback from students. The findings agree with Singh (2003), Pereira et al (2007). Singh (2003) observed that blended learning aims at aiding active learning; lessening duration of attendance-based classes; enhancing academic feat and long-term knowledge as well as avoiding potential challenges of fully non-attendance-based teaching.
Similarly, Alex (2022) notes that, blended learning permits students to control the pace, place, path, and/or time of their learning. That part time students can maximize their learning experiences through blended learning agreed with Cumming et al (2015); Park, (2013) who note that blended learning provides opportunities for users to be consumers and producers of content through collaboration, editing and publishing. Accelerale (2018) and Pereira et al (2007) also affirm that blended learning ensures access to content from anywhere, any time and on any device, modernizes teaching methods; develops diverse skills; provides tangible, consistent, ever handy and updated materials. In other words, blended learning is capable of meeting the challenges of dynamic changes of technological developments in higher education.

The study also revealed the challenges of using blended learning for part time students as; inadequate facilities, lack of basic digital skills, lack of technical support, network challenges, epileptic power supply, problem of adaptation to novelty, ability to navigate different platforms and devices, lack of Wifi/data, problems of self directedness in device usage. The findings of the study agreed with Gilmour (2020), University of Wisconsin (2020) and Hofmann (2019) who enumerate the challenges of blended learning as; lack of practitioners' know-how, inadequate tools, lack of basic digital computer skill, lack of interest in the use of technology, inadequate training, expensiveness of technology, problem of adaptation, lack of administrative support, logistic barriers in relation to Wifi and total access, troubles with self directedness in usage, ability to navigate different platforms and devices, lack of time and management skills and resistance to novelty. Problems of adaptation to novelty, lack of basic digital skills and problems of self directedness in device usage agreed with Rogers (2003) who asserts that it takes time for a new innovation to be adopted and implemented appropriately. Inadequate facilities, lack of technical support, epileptic power supply, lack of wifi and ability to navigate different platforms and devices all agreed with Agamba (2015) who notes that appropriate use of technology to improve students' performance is influenced by teachers' expertise and level and quality of support provided by administrators through technical support centers. The study did not indicate lack of interest in the use of technology as a challenge of using blended learning. There was no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and part time students on the challenges of using blended learning for part time students.

## Conclusion

Blended learning involves the deliberate and corresponding integration of online and face to face learning into one harmonious whole. It is an innovation to cope with the demands of 21st century teaching and learning. Blended learning is designed to aid active and collaborative learning and enhance academic performance. It permits students to control the pace, place, path, and/or time of their learning. Part time students are students who cannot engage in a regular full time programme due to their commitments to either their occupation or other ventures. Most people enroll into part time programmes to navigate work, family and other family commitments while receiving education simultaneously. Similarly, part time students have a higher rate of attrition when compared with full time students. Consequently, the attrition rate among part time students can be minimized through blended learning strategies which uphold active and collaborative learning. In addition, blended learning is cost effective and part time students can access instructional content from anywhere, any time and on any device. This will to a large extent boost students' commitment to the programme of study and engender active involvement in the instructional process.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made

1. The use of blended learning should be encouraged for the instruction of part time students.
2. Lecturers should undergo training on the use of modern technology for instructional delivery
3. Part time students should be given orientation on the use of mobile devices for academic purposes
4. Technical support centers should be made accessible for assistance to both staff and students
5. Service providers should ensure that networks are available while data is made affordable in terms of cost.
6. Providers of power like Eastern Electricity Distribution Company (EEDC) and other bodies alike should ensure that power is provided regularly for electronic devices.

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