

# Blended Learning: An Evaluation of Learner Perceptions at Saudi Electronic University

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**Abstract:** This study explores students' perceptions of blended learning in a Saudi higher education institution; namely, the Saudi Electronic University. SEU is the only university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that offers undergraduate degree programs in complete mandatory Blended Learning mode of education in all courses. The study describes the actual utilization of online learning represented by Blackboard as the official Learning Management System in SEU and to evaluate students' satisfaction with the learning experience. The respondents in the study were 63 learners of English Language and Translation Program and they were administered an online questionnaire in three parts to obtain feedback on possible areas of blended learning that needed changes. Results showed that the learners at SEU had positive perceptions of the blended learning approach and were appreciative of the fact that this allowed them freedom to pursue their occupations and education simultaneously. Further findings showed that a small section of learners found it challenging to study in a non-traditional university; it is recommended that deeper inquiry be launched into the reasons for this. The study concludes with pertinent recommendations for the education policy makers and educationists at SEU.

**Keywords:** Blackboard, SEU, students' perception, translation courses, blended learning, virtual classes, English Language and Translation.

## 1. Introduction

Established by a royal decree in 2011, the SEU mission is to provide a combination of online and traditional education known as blended learning. At SEU, the teacher is a facilitator with physical and virtual availability through Blackboard, which is the official Learning Management System (LMS) in the university. A fact that provides students with sufficient opportunities to be in continuous contact with their teachers to discuss or to clear their doubts instantly. The English and Translation Department was established in 2014, with students enrolled in 5 branches across five cities in the kingdom: Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Tabouk, and Abha. One of the stated goals of the university was to foster flexible, lifelong learning via distance mode with the best that technology could offer. Accordingly, the current study aimed to evaluate how far the university lived up to its image as an echelon of blended education.

The application of a blended learning approach across studies has been proven to enhance various EFL skills. Almansour and Al-Ahdal [1] concluded that the approach improved the speaking proficiency of ESP undergraduate learners in Saudi Arabia. Blended learning utilizes technology to facilitate and personalize instruction and enable students to learn at their own pace [2-3]. Providing learning materials outside face-to-face contexts allows instructors to spend more quality time-via the LMS with individuals and groups and to provide more constructive response [4]. Moreover, blended approaches may reduce feelings of isolation, common to online instruction [4]; hence, it is considered an ideal middle ground between physical face-to face and virtual online modes. For these reasons and more, higher education institutions world-wide are fast embracing and encouraging blended learning.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Saudi Arabia is in tune with this international trend. There is a rising number of Saudi higher education institutions merging online approaches with face-to-face instruction [5- 6]. One great advantage of using a blended learning approach is that it provides access to education for individuals who live in rural areas, in addition to increasing access to higher education for women, an otherwise big challenge for women in KSA. In traditional societies such as that of KSA, a great deal of the onus to keep the family together rests with women who are constantly called upon to shoulder the responsibility of managing the hearth and being the primary care giver for the children. Given this situation, pursuing education in traditional universities is sometimes not feasible for them and a flexible mode of education like blended learning via electronic mode offers a suitable solution while also empowering them [7]. This method of instruction also supports Saudi women's aspiration to pursue various careers as the country is currently planning to increase women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30% over the next 15 years as one

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of its plans is to transform the economy from oil dependence to knowledge reliance [8]. However, while the Saudi Ministry of Education supports blended learning, it must be noted that the majority of universities implementing this method offer it as an elective in some courses where the instructor deems it feasible or desirable. Therefore, because it is not obligatory, it is noticed that even collectively, only few faculty members adopt this approach [9], thus not completely fulfilling the objective of the university.

Even so, the SEU is the only university in KSA that has offered undergraduate level degree courses in the blended learning mode right from the time of its inception. Further, SEU has international academic partners to collaborate with in developing contemporary curricula. These partners are University of Phoenix, Walden University, Capella University, Ohio University, and Franklin University. There are four colleges under the aegis of the SEU namely, College of Administrative & Financial Sciences, College of Computing and Informatics, College of Health Sciences, and College of Science and Theoretical Studies.

SEU educational goal is to develop critical thinkers, self-learners, and equip them with the skills needed to become life-long learners. To fulfil this goal, the SEU teaching strategies rely on unlimited sources of information such as, e-textbooks, videos, and access to the Saudi Digital Library 'SDL' which are combined and structured for each course in the student's self-learning space utilizing the Blackboard as the official Learning Management System (LMS). The adopted blended learning model in the SEU is divided into 33% face-to-face physical classroom, 33% virtual live classroom and 33% self-learning activities utilizing the vast resources of knowledge databases and structured educational content of the Blackboard. Summative assessments of students' learning outcomes are carried out by different methods with fixed grading scheme of 40 marks for course-work performance, 20 marks for mid-term performance, and 40 marks for final performance.

Although this relatively new mode of education is appealing, it is natural for students coming from traditional high school systems to resist it. But there are mechanisms in place to help them overcome inhibitions: One, explain to students the new method and its benefits; two, allow them to participate and experience this new method; and finally encourage students to express their perceptions about this different model, discuss potential problems, and suggest modifications [10].

### 1.1 *Significance of the Study*

The significance of this study emerges from the uniqueness of education culture in SEU. The country has taken the biggest leaps in the education sector in the last decade or so and the intention got an impetus from the framing of the Vision 2030 plans for the development of the nation. Accordingly, this period saw the opening of a large number of traditional universities in the country. Even so, the Saudi Electronic University (SEU) is unique, being the only public (governmental) university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia offering undergraduate degree programs in complete mandatory Blended Learning mode of education in all courses. Thus, the university guidelines mandate the students and instructors to follow this new method. This also necessitates an evaluation of learner needs and the success of the system in fulfilling them. However, an assessment of learner needs is a relatively new concept in the highly traditional Saudi society, and this is where the current study fills a gap in the available literature.

## 2. Literature Review

Blended learning combines the benefits of both face-to-face and online instruction. It is cost-effective in terms of infrastructure, classroom maintenance, and space [9-11]. It adds flexibility to instructors' schedules so they can manage their non-teaching academic pursuits and activities. It reduces classroom teaching time and offers instructors extended time for planning, grading, and supporting out-of-class activities [4-10]. For students, it offers all-the-time access to course materials while preserving the advantages of face-to-face instruction. It also encourages social interaction and opportunities for a collaborative learning environment beyond traditional classroom settings [12]; students, naturally, build learning relations and engage in creating virtual groups on WhatsApp or Telegram, a new learning trend that has come to be known as micro-learning [13-14]. According to Marsh [15], blended learning supports learners' individualism, collaboration, independence, and engagement. It allows for flexible and less-stressful skills practice because learners can learn at their own pace, take charge of their learning, and track their achievements [2]. Blended learning may also increase participation time for instructors and students as they leverage activities both in and outside of traditional class meetings [16-17].

However, blended learning has several challenges as instructors have to design both face-to-face and online activities. It requires careful planning to determine objectives and the nature, quality and quantity of to be developed and presented in online and face-to-face settings [18-19]. Instructors must select resources, plan course activities, and develop assessments without duplication of face-to-face or online delivery components [20-21].

Blackboard is the most common and therefore, most dominant learning management system (LMS) in the Saudi higher

education system [9-22]. Nevertheless, some research found that instructors struggle with posting and producing study materials, recording lectures, and uploading multimedia presentations [18-19-23]. Many faculty members view the system as complex and unreliable. Thus, they choose not to use the LMS for the distribution of instructional material; instead, they use it for administrative tasks, e.g., e-mail announcements etc. [8]. It is worth mentioning that this case is possible in traditional universities that added LMS optionally. However, the Saudi Electronic University utilizes Blackboard as being obligatory in all courses; instructors are obliged to give virtual classes and activate the discussion board with students.

Al-Drees et al. [24] points out that faculty and students need intensive training both prior to and during implementation to manage blended learning. As instructors gain knowledge and training regarding blended learning, they are more likely to adopt it. Basic Blackboard training in SEU is provided at the beginning of each academic year for new staff and freshman students. Advance training is provided midyear for all levels of educators.

While studies have discussed blended learning in Saudi contexts [18-25-19-26], some of these discussions lack empirical data [9]. Empirical research and in-depth examination of challenges and barriers impeding blended learning in Saudi contexts are needed [9-25]. A gap in the literature exists regarding students' perceptions of blended learning and specifically the usage of Blackboard features, and this is the contribution offered by this study. It has direct relevance for the policy and curriculum developers not only of SEU, but the traditional universities as well which are looking towards greater integration of technology in their pre-existing systems.

### 3. Research Questions

This study explores students' perceptions of blended learning in a Saudi higher education institution, namely the Saudi Electronic University, investigating problems that the students encounter, and identifying potential solutions. More specifically, the study aims to describe the actual utilization of online learning represented by Blackboard as the official Learning Management System in SEU and to ensure students' satisfaction with the learning experience by a thorough assessment of their needs. Therefore, it attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the students' self-concept about technology and using Blackboard?
2. To what extent do students utilize the supplementary materials on Blackboard?
3. To what extent are students satisfied with their blended learning experience at SEU?

### 4. Research Method

The study adopted a mixed-method research design and employed quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

#### 4.1 Participants

The present study surveyed students enrolled in the English Language and Translation Program in the Saudi Electronic University (SEU). It traces the implementation of blended learning mode through surveying 5th level students of the English and Translation department. Randomly, two sections have been chosen across two courses: Lexicography ENG310 (21 response from students in Dammam) and Comparative Constructions ENG320 (42 response from students in Riyadh).

A total of 63 students responded to survey items on three main components: their self-concept about using technology, Blackboard online learning activities and resources, and their satisfaction with virtual online synchronic classes.

#### 4.2 Instrument and data collection

Google forms were used to distribute the online questionnaires. Consequently, a link was created for the questionnaires and was posted on the announcement tab on Blackboard. The majority of questions were designed in a psychometric scale, i.e., Likert scale. When responding to a Likert item, participants specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements. Thus, the range captures the intensity of their feelings for a given item, where 1 is lowest and 5 highest. The second type of questions involved closed response in 'yes' or 'no' format. A third component of the questionnaire comprised multiple choice questions allowing students to choose one or more of the phrases. The last question was an open question asking the students to 'write' their suggestions.

#### 4.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using excel calculations and charts. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed using NVivo12. Responses to open-ended questions were uploaded to NVivo12. Results were initially organized according to open-ended questions. Open-coding techniques were then used to identify participant defined

ideas. Word frequencies were analyzed, and word clouds were utilized to highlight the terms that students used most to express their feelings.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Self-concepts about using technology

Self-concept is a general term used to refer to how someone thinks about, evaluates or perceives themselves. To be aware of oneself is to have a concept of oneself. Baumeister [27] defines self-concept as the following: "the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is". Self-concept and academic achievement are also a positive feedback loop. In a longitudinal study, Marsh [28] found that students with more positive academic self-concept achieved greater academic success the following year. Later studies confirmed the relationship between the two but indicated that achievement affects self-concept more than self-concept inherently influences achievement success [29]. Many of the successes and failures that students experience are closely related to the ways that they have learned to view themselves and their relationships with others and with instruments. It is also becoming clear that self-concept has at least three major qualities of interest to education: (1) it is learned, (2) it is organized, and (3) it is dynamic.

Further self-concept is learned: We in SEU help students develop their positive self-concept, by providing students with the opportunity to teach themselves new educational technologies, and encouraging them to learn through experience. It is also an organized behavior: Each person maintains countless perceptions regarding one's personal existence, and each perception is orchestrated with all the others. It is this generally stable and organized quality of self-concept that gives consistency to the personality. Because it is organized and almost fixed, it tends to resist change. And this fact triggered the main question of this research, what is the students' perception regarding this unusual teaching/learning method. Would they resist it as psychologists predict, or would they happily accept, or would they reluctantly agree to go with it.

It may further be noted that self-concept is dynamic: To understand the active nature of self-concept, we need to acknowledge that self-concept development is a continuous process. In a healthy personality there is constant assimilation of new ideas and expulsion of old ideas throughout life. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct a follow up study to test the development of students' self-concepts. Self-concept develops throughout the lifespan and during any career. According to researcher Donald Super, there are five life and career development stages:

Growth (Ages 0 to 14)

Exploration (Ages 15 to 24)

Establishment (Age 25 to 44)

Maintenance (Age 45 to 64)

Decline (Age 65+)

The majority of SEU Students fall within the range of stage 2 and 3. In the second stage, able individuals experiment and try out new classes, experiences, and jobs. Stage 3 sees individuals establishing their career and building their skills, likely starting in an entry-level position [30].

The first part of the questionnaire focused on exploring students' self-concept about technology. The questions were as shown in the table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Questions Related to Students' Self Concept about Technology

	Question	Possible answers
1	I feel confident in using technology	1,2,3,4,5
2	IT department in SEU is very helpful	1,2,3,4,5
3	When I need advice from my teacher, I can easily get in contact with her/him via e-mail, chat window, discussion forums, etc.	1,2,3,4,5
4	I have studying groups with my friends on Apps and use it for collaboration	a. WhatsApp b. Telegram c. Email
5	I learned how to use Blackboard easily	1,2,3,4,5

Compilation of the responses was collected, and the following results were obtained. For the first question regarding students feeling confident about technology in general, 52.4% of students chose 5 on Likert scale and 38 percent chose 4. This goes to show that most of the students feel confident about using technology.

The second question pertained to how the students feel about the IT support, 38% of the students chose number 3 on Likert scale, 28.6% chose 4 and 23.8% chose 5. The majority of students choosing the middle number indicates that they are less than positive as regards to the IT support.

The third question pertained to the availability of the teacher for immediate feedback or problem solving. via e-mail, chat window, discussion forums etc., to which 81% of the students chose 5 on the scale which indicates high satisfaction.

The fourth question concerned the concept of microlearning and the students utilizing social media applications shows that 81% of the students use WhatsApp to form study groups and engage in collaborative learning techniques.

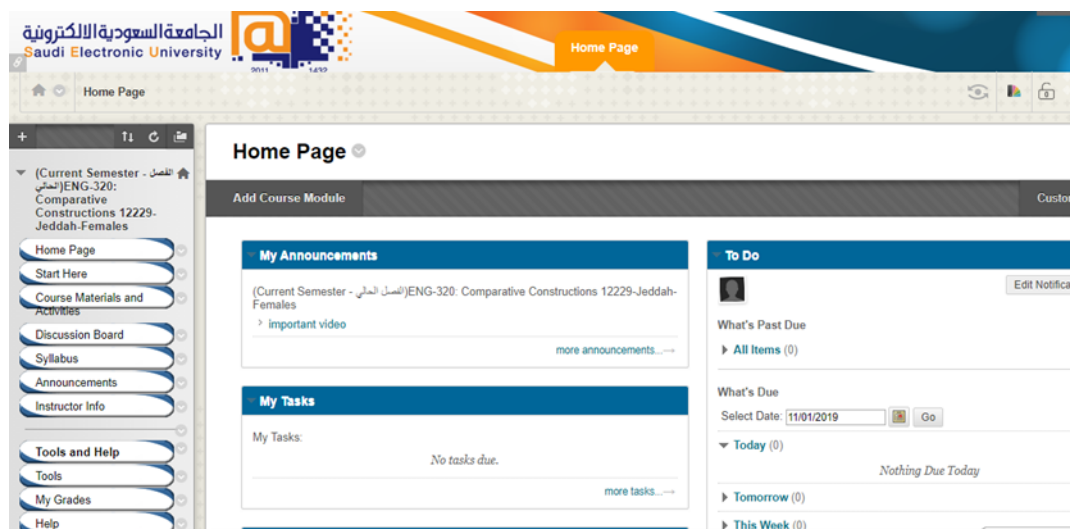
The most unanimous responses were recorded for item 5 on the questionnaire as 38% of the respondents chose number 1 on Likert scale, indicating poor score on the count of ease-of-use of Blackboard. This result really needs great attention from the university as well as Blackboard developers. The university needs to conduct more training and tutorials for students and the developers need to make the interface more user friendly. This is a real concern as Blackboard is the main means of interaction between students and instructors.

The overall result of the students' self-concept about technology can be considered positive. This is a good indication that students appear to be socio-psychologically ready to accept blended learning strategies.

### 5.2 Blackboard online learning activities and resources

Blackboard is a platform that carries the educational material. An analogy may be drawn of Blackboard to a house that accommodates people who need furniture; people are the students, faculty, and administrator; furniture is the educational material designed by university partners and SEU faculty, and presented by educators. These educational materials vary according to each course curriculum and each university. In SEU the curriculum design is such that it is unified 'as much as possible in all subjects in the same department. The following section introduces the main structure for courses in the English Language and Translation department.

The interface that is introduced to the students in ENG 320 comparative construction course is projected in figure 1 below.



**Fig. 1.** Course Homepage

On the left margin, there are some tabs. The course instructor has the option to change the arrangement of the tabs; however, the content within is designed in advance by academic experts under supervision of the department administration.

Under the 'start here' tab, students will instructions to help them prepare for the course and help them become familiar with the tools they will be using in the SEU website and in Blackboard. Some of these instructions are:

#### 5.2.1 Technical Requirements

- Personal computer: laptop, notebook, or desktop (iPad or tablet device optional)
- Headset with microphone and webcam

- Internet browser: Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Safari
- Internet connection speed: 2 megabytes per second or greater

The following tab is ‘Course Material and Activities’, which is the heart of the course from students’ point of view. In this tab, students find week by week materials including PowerPoint presentations, textbook sections requiring reading, weekly activities, rubrics, a variety of quizzes and exam preparation games, in addition to other features. The following figures are screenshots of some pages inside this tab.

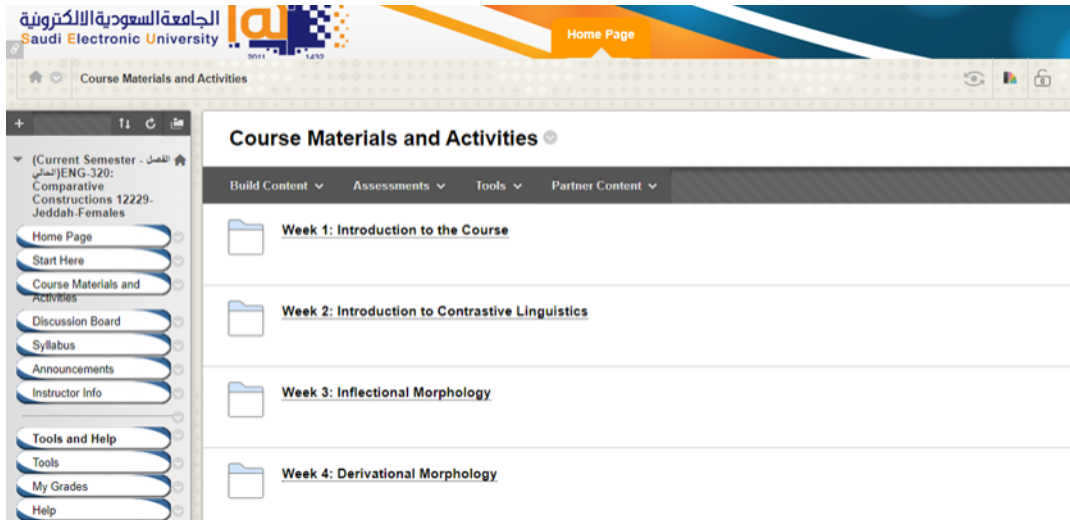


Fig. 2. Course materials and activities main page

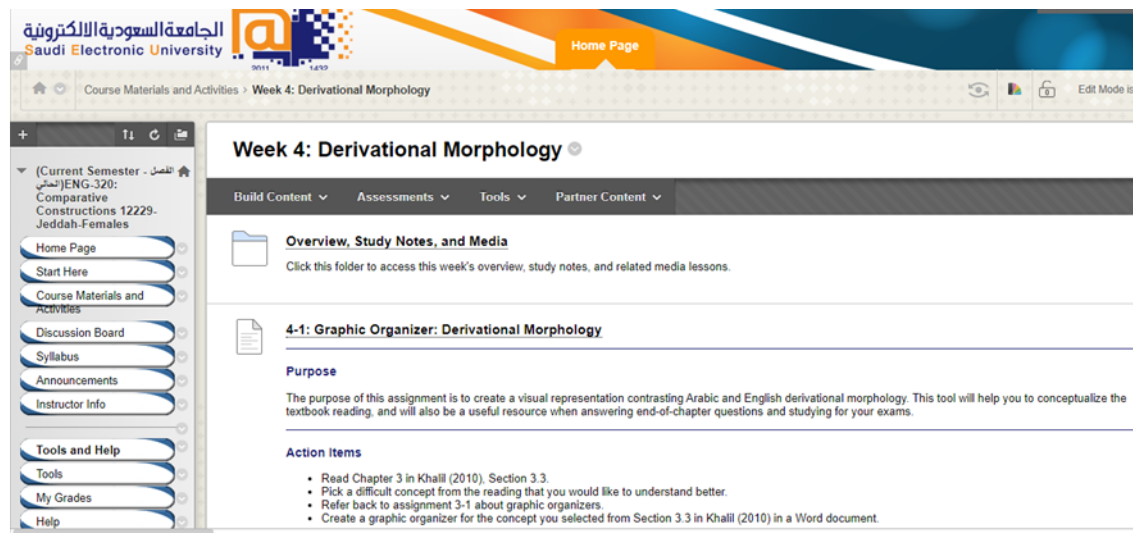
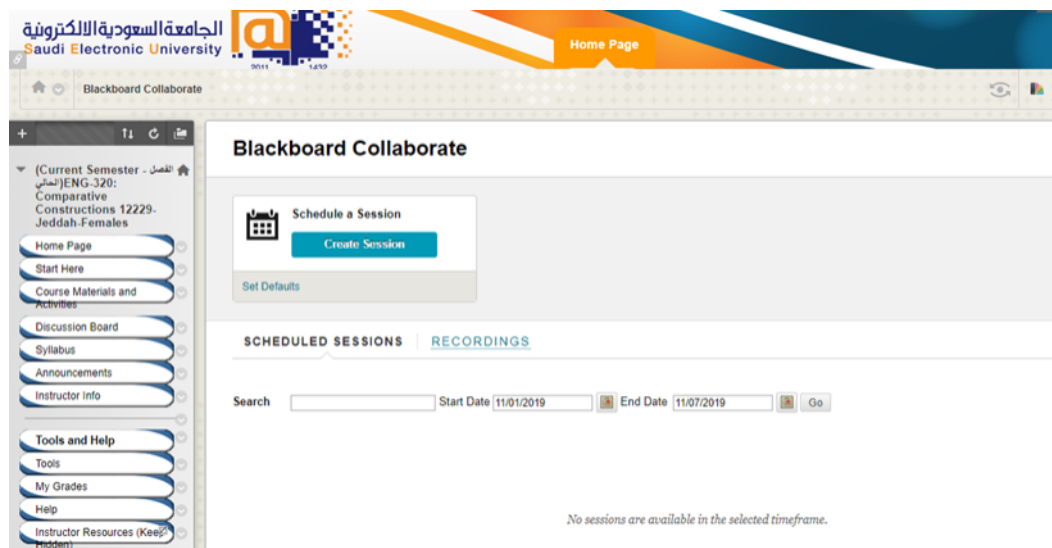


Fig. 3. Sample of weekly content page

Figure 3 shows a sample of one of the weekly materials. Each week is devoted to discussion on a topic and the students can see on the weekly page the following: specific learning outcomes, assigned textbook reading, course video, other resources, new assignments, grading criteria, online quiz, and weekly PowerPoint presentation.

Other important tabs include the ‘syllabus’, ‘discussion board’, ‘my grades’, etc. The interactive tab is the ‘tool’ tab. Here, the instructor creates the online session where the virtual class takes place, and the students have access to enter the same session. There are many options in this area, one of them is the recording of virtual classes which the students may visit later for asynchronous experience. The figure below shows the Blackboard Collaborate interface.



**Fig. 4.** Blackboard Collaborate page

The demonstration above includes, but is not limited to, the basic features that SEU students use on blackboard. The second part of the questionnaire explores the students’ usability of Blackboard features. Table 2 below includes the questions as presented in the questionnaire:

**Table 2:** Questions Related to Using Blackboard Learning Activities and Resources

#	Question	Possible answers
1	I use the following interaction educational activities on Blackboard platform	(Yes, No).
	a. Receive teacher announcements	(Yes, No).
	b. Participate in discussion board	(Yes, No).
	c. Upload assignments	(Yes, No).
	d. Engage in midterm and final exam preparation games	(Yes, No).
	e. Watch educational videos; there are about 20 videos in each course	(Yes, No).

The results of the questionnaire reflected the following findings: 95% of the students stated that they receive timely announcements from their instructors. This is a very good response percent and can be interpreted to show learner satisfaction on this count. 47.5% stated that they participated in discussion board; whereas the number of students who uploaded assignments is a very high 95%. But the fact that more than half the participants don’t use the discussion board, triggers a big question. This fact needs to be treated by instructors, possibly by encouraging students and motivating them. On the contrary, we see almost all the students upload their assignments on Blackboard as opposed to sending them by email or face-to-face submission during the period of contact classes. It is assumed that students can be reluctant to participate on discussion board when they know it is not graded but the mandate of graded assignments results in better output.

The question about midterm and final exam preparation vis learning games came back with an interesting result. 70% of the students stated that they engaged in the preparatory online games. When the remaining 30% were asked the reason for non-participation, the answers varied between ignorance about such exam-oriented games to a general dislike for online games. About the course videos, 66.7% watched only 2 videos of total of 20 videos. Hence, multimedia resources need attention from course instructors and designers.

To sum up, Blackboard materials and activities designed to fulfill the course objectives and outcomes, and it is expected that students would benefit from these interaction and multimedia resources. When we detect that there is a percentage of students who do not utilize these opportunities, we need to rethink possible approaches to encourage students to optimize these tools.

### 5.3 Satisfaction with virtual online synchronous classes

Learners’ sense of competence in using the computer and their interest in using technology for learning are both associated with their satisfaction with online delivery of curricular content [31]. The more their self-concept of

technology mastery is, the more their satisfaction with online classes. That is, for those students who feel competent in using the computer and for those who are interested in using the technology to learn a language, there would likely be higher satisfaction with the online mode of delivery.

For those who are not so competent in using the computer and do not feel comfortable or interested in using it, the level of satisfaction is likely to be lower when the online mode is concerned. In the same study, the correlation between the learners' satisfaction with face-to-face and online delivery modes was negative ( $r = -.30$ ). Although the correlation was not statistically significant, apparently due to the small sample size, this negative correlation implies that some students who favored face-to-face learning may dislike online delivery, whereas some other students who favored online delivery may not like the face-to-face mode [31].

Pena and Yeung [31] concluded their study with a recommendation that curriculum designers need to consider a balance between the face-to-face and online delivery modes to satisfy the needs of different students. This is the norm in SEU as the ratio of face-to-face classes and virtual classes is one to one per week for each course. Yet, we need to look at the survey results of this study to explore SEU students' perceptions about blended learning.

The following table shows the final part of the survey, including questions that test the satisfaction of virtual online synchronous classes.

**Table 3:** Questions related to Satisfaction with Virtual Synchronous Classes

	Question	Possible answers
1	I like using blackboard for studying	1,2,3,4,5
2	I find the online virtual classes useful	1,2,3,4,5
3	Presentation and the teacher voice are sufficient for delivering information.	Yes, No
4	I find the online virtual class motivating. a. The teacher keeps us alert with asking questions, open discussions, giving random examples b. Online chat feature we can all discuss with students and with the teacher can easily and fast exchange knowledge with other course participants via e-mail, chat, newsgroups etc. c. Learning in groups and cooperation with other learners are fostered in the course (e.g., by group activities, discussions etc.).	A B C
5	I prefer the online virtual class. a. I control my personal situation with v class b. I can record, rewind the lecture any time	A B
6	I prefer evening virtual classes because I have a job in the morning	Yes, No
7	Any suggestions to improve your blended learning experience	Open answer

Results of the final part of the questionnaire showed the following: 23.8% of the students chose 4 on Likert scale and 38% of the students chose 5. Consequently, we can state that more than half the students i.e. approximately 60%, like using Blackboard for studying. A result that opens discussion regarding why about 40% of the students are averse to using the Blackboard for studying. This needs further investigation in a parallel study in the future.

The second question was addressed toward the students' feeling regarding the online virtual classes and whether they find them useful or not. 44% chose 5 on Likert scale and another 32% chose 4 on the scale. Thus, a large section at 76% of the students, give us an indication that students' feelings are quite positive towards online virtual classes.

The following question investigated the sufficiency of the online presentation with only the instructor's voice without his/her picture. Students responded with 95% approval of this situation, and they expressed satisfaction with viewing the slides and hearing the instructor's voice describing and commenting on the subject material.

The fourth question was regarding students' motivation to attend virtual classes. The survey provided three options and allowed multiple selection.

- a. The teacher keeps us alert with asking questions, open discussions, giving random examples. (79%)
- b. Online chat feature we can all discuss with students and with the teacher can easily and fast exchange knowledge with other course participants via e-mail, chat, newsgroups etc. (74%)
- c. Learning in groups and cooperation with other learners are fostered in the course (e.g., by group activities, discussions etc.). (34%)



The fifth question asked the students to provide reason(s) for preferring online virtual classes

- a. I control my personal situation with the class. (70%)
- b. I can record and rewind the lecture any time. (81%)

The sixth question regarding the time preference of the students asked them whether evening virtual classes are preferable because they need to report for work in the morning, 67% of the students answered in the affirmative, agreeing that their daytime jobs prevented their engagement with morning classes.

### 5.3.1 Nvivo12 results

The final question was open ended: ‘Any suggestions to improve your blended learning experience’ and requested the students to write their opinion freely. The answers were analyzed by Nvivo12 qualitative analysis tool. After inserting the students answer to the analysis tool, and requesting the word frequency result, the word ‘Nothing’ came back as the most frequent word.

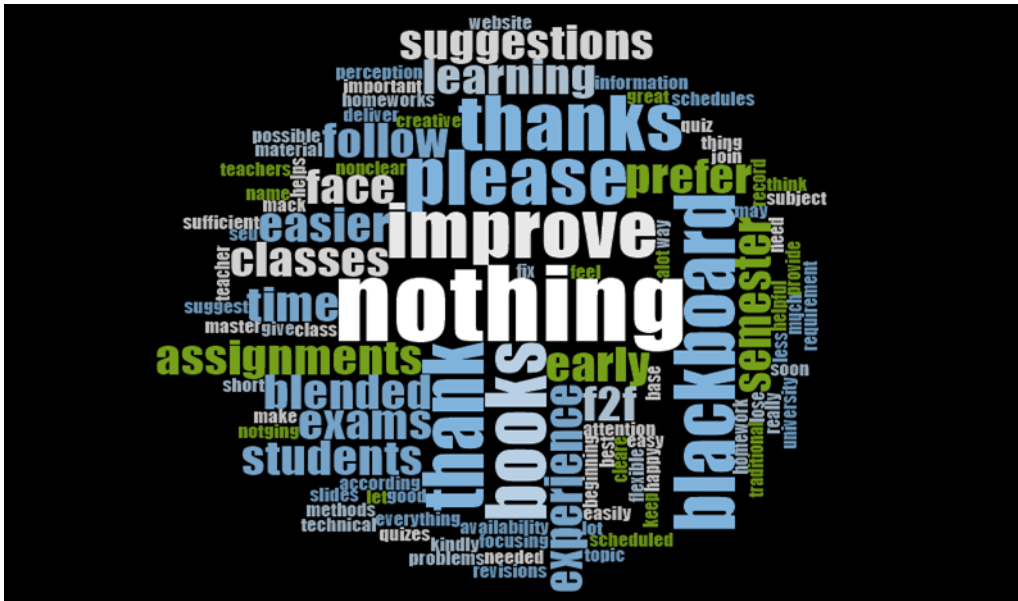


Fig. 5. word cloud created by Nvivo 12

Going back to the students’ response texts, the following texts were spotted ‘I think nothing is needed to improve it’, ‘Nothing, experience is sufficient.’, ‘No’, ‘No , not really’, and so on.

## 6. Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to explore students’ perceptions of blended learning in a Saudi higher education institution; namely the Saudi Electronic University, noting that in SEU blended learning is the culture of teaching and learning and it is the mandated option for both educators and students.

This study investigated problems that the students encountered and identified positive opportunities. More specifically, the study aimed to describe the actual utilization of online learning represented by Blackboard as the official Learning Management System in SEU and to ensure students’ satisfaction with the blended learning experience. Certainly, any new initiative comes with pros and cons. Solikkah and Assegaf [32] note that in the Indonesian context, although blended learning is well perceived, there are obstacles in its implementation in the EAP context.

The overall result of the students’ self-concept about technology can be considered positive. More than 70% classified themselves as confident in using technology; more than 60% expressed their approval of the IT support; 80% felt satisfied with the available communication opportunities and channels with their teachers; more that 80% stated that they already used applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram for learning groups; more than 50% felt it was easy to study with technology. These results give us a good indication that students would be socio-psychologically ready to accept blended learning strategies.

Comparing this positive outcome of students’ self-concept regarding technology with students’ satisfaction regarding

online learning, we find a correlation. The more the students have high self-concept about technology, the more satisfied they are with online classes. Evidence of this conclusion comes from the final part of the survey. 60% of the students indicated that they like using Blackboard for studying; 76% percent of the students expressed their positive feelings towards online virtual classes; 95% felt satisfied with viewing the slides and hearing the instructor's voice describing and commenting on the subject material.

Students also expressed their motivation to attend virtual classes for several reasons such as “the teacher keeps us alert with asking questions, open discussions, giving random examples; using online chat feature we can all discuss with students and with the teacher can easily and fast can exchange knowledge with other course participants via e-mail, chat, discussion groups; learning in groups and cooperation with other learners are fostered in the course.”

Moreover, students confirmed that they preferred online virtual classes by approving the following statements, “I control my personal situation with virtual classes” and “I can record and rewind the lecture any time.” Students also stated their preference to study at SEU as it provides the opportunity for evening classes. More than 67% of the students stated that they have a morning job. Finally, when students were asked to provide any suggestions to improve their blended learning experience, the majority responded “nothing” indicating a positive perception.

## 7. Recommendations

As discussed earlier, a large section of the students enrolled at SEU are positively dispose to the blended learning experience that SEU promises. However, the role of educational institutions does not end with catering to the needs of a section of the learners, no matter how big that section is. The system still needs to conduct diligent and devoted inquiry into the academically marginalised learner base, gather data on the reasons that inhibit their active participation in the process, and remedy the faults as far as possible. Further, greater in-service teacher training initiatives in ICT are a need of the hour. Similar short-term workshops can also benefit the learners throughout their period of enrolment at the university as updated technological skills will ultimately benefit them in the knowledge society of the times to come.

## 8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Appendix

The content of the questionnaire

First, self-concept

1. I feel confident in using technology.
2. IT department in SEU is very helpful.
3. When I need advice from my teacher, I can easily get in contact with her/him via e-mail, chat window, discussion forums, etc.
4. I have studying groups with my friends on Apps and use it for collaboration.
  - a. WhatsApp
  - b. Telegram
  - c. Email
5. I learned how to use Blackboard easily.

Second, Blackboard features

6. I use the following interaction educational activities on Blackboard platform
  - a. Receive teacher announcements.
  - b. Participate in discussion board.
  - c. upload assignments
  - d. engage in midterm and final exam preparation games.
  - e. watch educational videos; there are about 20 videos in each course.

Third, Satisfaction of virtual online synchronous classes

7. I like using blackboard for studying.
8. I find the online virtual classes useful.
9. Presentation and the teacher voice are sufficient for delivering information.
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
10. I find the online virtual class motivating.
  - a. The teacher keeps us alert with asking questions, open discussions, giving random examples
  - b. Online chat feature we can all discuss with students and with the teacher can easily and fast exchange knowledge with other course participants via e-mail, chat, newsgroups etc.
  - c. Learning in groups and cooperation with other learners are fostered in the course (e.g., by group activities, discussions etc.).
11. I prefer the online virtual class.
  - a. I control my personal situation with v class.
  - b. I can record and rewind the lecture any time.
12. I prefer evening virtual classes because I have a job in the morning.
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
13. Any suggestions to improve your blended learning experience.