Experiences of Hybrid Corporate Training Programmes at an Online Academic Institution

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Abstract. During the past decade, many corporations world-wide have embraced hybrid training programmes to derive benefits of the conventional face-to-face (F2F) learning environment coupled with those of online learning environment for their employees. A majority of researches on hybrid learning focus upon blending of existing F2F programmes of brick 'n' mortar institutions with online component. This paper highlights the experiences of an online academic institution in blending its purely online courses with F2F component in order to better meet the training objectives of its corporate clients. It reports myriad of challenges faced during the creation and implementation of its initial hybrid corporate training programmes and how the lessons learned helped in blending its subsequent programmes for better learner and client satisfaction. It brings out the importance of redesigning/ modifying the blending proportion in future offerings of a programme through continual feedback of its corporate clients as well as the learners.

Keywords: Hybrid; Blended; Corporate; Training

1 Introduction & Literature Review

The growing popularity of online education has inspired many conventional institutions world-wide to explore blending of their existing or new programmes with online pedagogy in order to cater to the needs of potential students, who are unable to attend campus-based full-time programmes. Blended learning is consistent with the values of traditional higher education institutions and has the proven potential to enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of meaningful learning experiences [1]. The term "blended learning" or "hybrid learning" is relatively new and researchers have used different perspectives while defining it. Blended learning is defined as a combination of different training "media" (technologies, activities and types of events) to create an optimum training program for a specific audience [2]. For the purpose of a survey conducted on blended programmes in the USA, blended courses and programmes were demarcated as having 30% to 79% of the course content delivered online [3]. Irrespective of the blending proportion, it is a challenge for the designers designing a new blended programme to decide about the amount of blending to be performed between online and face-to-face teaching, keeping in view the overall

objectives of the programme and the expectations of the students [4]. The amount of blending influences the operational issues related to the planning and execution of the programme.

Blended learning environment is increasingly getting popular in the executive education programmes of major corporations. The Shell Open University in collaboration with the University of Twente has successfully designed and implemented blended activity-based training programmes grounded in learner's actual workplace problems [5]. However, there are instances whereby corporations have struggled to adapt such blended programmes for their requirements. While illustrating the blended training approach adopted by Hyundai Motor Company, it is reported that despite efforts to align the curricula and content of the online and offline courses, overlaps and inconsistencies remained, partly due to different parties being responsible for conducting the offline and online courses [6]. Comparison of the blended approach to learning is natural vis-à-vis purely online and purely conventional face-to-face learning models. A study backed the hypothesis that the most efficient teaching model is a blended approach, which combines self-paced learning, live e-learning, and face-to-face classroom learning [7]. In another experiment, it was concluded that pre-service teachers in the experimental group subjected to a blended e-learning cooperative approach had higher achievement levels in their post-overall-course test 'comprehensive-score', and attitudes towards e-learning environments compared to those of the control group [8]. However, another study indicated no significant difference between the hybrid course and the traditional course in students' achievement, knowledge retention, satisfaction, and attitude [9].

Researchers have tried to explore various dimensions of blended approach to learning by using student surveys. An objective assessment instrument was developed and validated in order to capture the learner's views on blended learning and its implementation process [10]. According to a study, while students may believe that the hybrid courses have a negative impact on attendance, they do not self-report an actual impact [11]. In another study, a transformative education scale was used to show that teachers can be transformed through a blended and balanced programme which not only upgrades skills and knowledge, but also enables them to reflect on past and future practice [12]. Blended learning approach utilizes the collaborative power of online learning by encouraging peer-to-peer learning. The significance and power of "coaching" in a comprehensive blended learning strategy for improving the performance of learners has been emphasized upon [13]. "Power distance" is a term which signifies hierarchical difference as deemed legitimate by the members of a group or society [14], who feel that there are an elite few (higher up in the hierarchy) with more knowledge, skill and decision making ability [15]. In a study, it was concluded that in a hybrid learning environment, students with high power distance would prefer to seek feedback from fellow students rather than from the professor [16]. However, this study could not establish any significant positive relationship between power distance and participation on the electronic discussion board. In another study, it has been reported that students who perceived high levels of collaborative learning in the blended learning environment, also perceived high levels of social presence and were more satisfied with the course [17].

Faculty and technology with well developed pedagogy play a major role in the success of a blended programme. According to [18], blended learning adds value only

when facilitated by educators with high interpersonal skills, and accompanied by reliable, easy-to-use technology. It has been reported that many students did not engage in the online resources of a blended programme possibly due to lack of awareness about the e-learning component, combined with inconsistent access to the computing facilities [19]. Thus, there is a clear need of training the students in online pedagogy and learning management system (LMS) before exposing them to online component in the blended programme. Many researchers have made useful recommendations for designing an effective blended learning programme. Guidelines have been provided for constructing successful combinations of elements in blended learning based upon criteria like stability and urgency, "touches" and cost, learning resources and experience [20]. Evaluation and revision of the blended programme based upon regular feedback from the students has been suggested by many researchers. It has been demonstrated how a holistic annual review framework can be helpful to blended learning educational designers to be sensitive to both their audience and the unintended and unanticipated consequences of their actions [21]. A study revealed that students have positive attitudes for hybrid learning [22]. In the same study, design, development, implementation, evaluation and revision are recommended as the five steps in the creation of a hybrid course. Some researchers argue that educationally useful research on blended learning needs to focus on the relationships between different modes of learning (for example, face-to-face and on-line) and especially on the nature of their integration. In particular, such research needs to generate usable evidence about the quality of the students' learning experiences and learning outcomes [23].

2   Universitas 21 Global (U2lGlobal)

Established in 2001, U21Global is a premier online graduate school backed by 17 world renowned universities from around the world. U2lGlobal has successfully enrolled over 4500 students from 60 countries since it opened its classes in August 2003. This paper highlights the experiences of this online academic institution in blending its purely online courses with F2F component in order to better meet the training objectives of its corporate clients.

2.1   Management Programme for Entrepreneurs & Family Businesses (MPEFB)

During early 2006, U21Global joined hands with N S Raghavan Center for Entrepreneurial Learning (NSRCEL) of the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) to create a hybrid programme entitled "Management Programme for Entrepreneurs and Family Businesses (MPEFB). The main objective of the programme was to provide an opportunity to the existing and aspiring entrepreneurs to undergo formal training in management, which they are rarely able to do due to their inability to be away from their business for long duration to attend a full-time campus-based programme. The genesis of the MPEFB can be traced back to the willingness of the two partner institutions to create a new learning paradigm for entrepreneurs by way of bringing out the best of both online as well as conventional

face-to-face (F2F) learning. The big question faced by the instructional designers involved in the programme was to decide about the extent and proportion of blending. There are four paradigms of creating blended learning environments namely, the supplemental model, the replacement model, the emporium model and the buffet model [24]. In the supplemental model, the traditional F2F structure of the course is retained and is supplemented with out-of-class or within the class technology-based activities. However, the supplemental model was adopted in MPEFB in a different manner, whereby the existing online content of selected courses in the U21Global MBA programme was supplemented with the F2F sessions by the IIMB faculty.
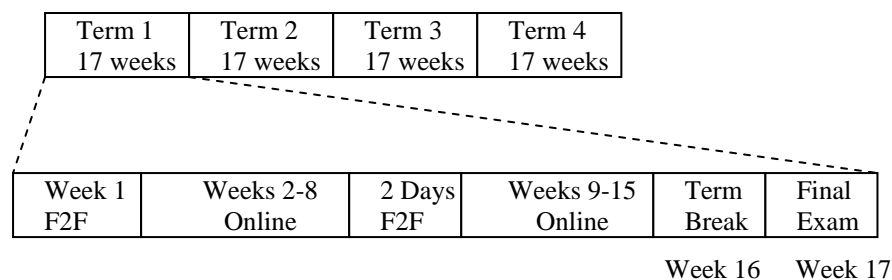
Term 1 17 weeks	Term 2 17 weeks	Term 3 17 weeks	Term 4 17 weeks

Week 1 F2F	Weeks 2-8 Online	2 Days F2F	Weeks 9-15 Online	Term Break	Final Exam

Week 16   Week 17

Fig. 1. Blending format in the first offering (batch 1) of MPEFB.

Fig. 1 shows the blending format for the batch 1 of MPEFB. Each term (constituted by two subjects) comprised of 17 weeks duration and the four terms resulted in 16 months duration of the programme. A high level of coordination was required for creating a joint programme like MPEFB involving two institutions with different inherent cultures and styles of functioning. The following challenges started erupting during the designing and implementation of the first batch of MPEFB:

- The participation from the IIMB faculty in the online faculty training programme (FTP) was only symbolic with many of them opting out of it, while others acting as mute spectators rather than active participants.
- During the customization of the online content (selection of modules, case studies, discussion topics), it was rather difficult to convince the IIMB faculty that micro-level changes within the modules would be very cumbersome and cost intensive.
- In some courses, there were contradictory views of the IIMB and U21Global faculty counterparts with respect to the assessment components to be used.
- Apart from the first term, it became increasingly difficult to make the IIMB faculty aware of the merits of open book open web (OBOW) examination format and they preferred to use the "ready-made" cases from Harvard Business School Publishing (HBSP) and other sources for the examinations.
- The biggest challenge unfolded from the first term itself due to low faculty participation/ presence in the online component of the programme. It became increasingly difficult to encourage the IIMB faculty members responsible for facilitating the online component to devote ample time with the LMS and guide the discussions on the discussion board.

- The above reasons had direct impact upon the engagement of students in the course, with about 15% of the students withdrawing from the programme over a period of time. Though, some students cited personal/ medical reasons at the time of withdrawing from the programme.
- In order to assess the situation, a survey instrument was designed to know about the expectations of the students from the course, their experiences and the problems faced by them during the first term. 34 students responded to the online survey conducted through *QuestBack* [25].
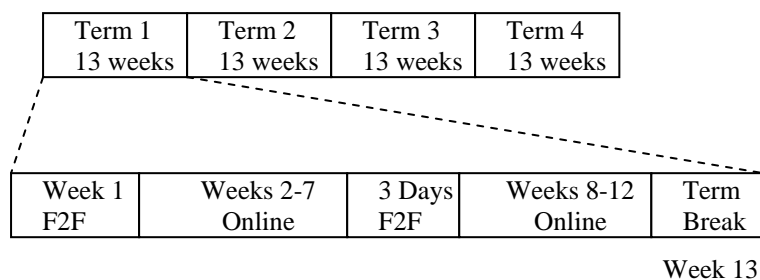
Term 1 13 weeks	Term 2 13 weeks	Term 3 13 weeks	Term 4 13 weeks

Week 1 F2F	Weeks 2-7 Online	3 Days F2F	Weeks 8-12 Online	Term Break

Week 13

Fig. 2. Modified format of blending in the second offering (batch 2) of MPEFB.

The survey findings were useful in incorporating modifications in blending, *modus-operandi* and assessment system of the batch 2 of the programme. During the first offering of the programme, the directors found that it is operationally cumbersome to manage the 16 months duration programme due to overlaps with the subsequent offerings of the programme. In their opinion, one-year duration of the programme would be easier to manage as every year a new batch could be introduced after the culmination of the earlier batch. This decision also took into account the findings of the survey that the students preferred lesser duration for a "Certificate" programme in comparison to a "Degree/ Award" programme. The faculty capacity constraints did not warrant increasing the F2F component drastically. However, it was decided to increase the mid-term contact to three days. Also, while condensing the duration of the programme, the duration of the online component was reduced while slightly increasing the duration of F2F component (by one day). Thus, the F2F component increased in proportion substantially in relation to the online component (as desired by the students in the survey). As shown in fig. 2, each term in batch 2 comprises of 13 weeks duration compared to the 17 weeks duration in batch 1. Nevertheless, the content of the online component was kept unchanged while eliminating certain assessment components to ease-out the learning process on part of the students. Keeping in view the less than satisfactory participation of the IIMB faculty in the first offering of the programme, it was decided that from the second offering onwards, U21Global faculty would facilitate the online component of the programme while the IIMB faculty would conduct the F2F sessions.

2.2 Indian Oil Hybrid Programme in Project Management

2d F2F	Other F2F sessions (2d)	Travel time for participants plus online SOP (2w)	Faculty-facilitated online component Segments 1-5 (7w)	Travel time for participants (1w)	2d F2F

Legend Used:
d = days; w = weeks

					Other F2F sessions (2w)

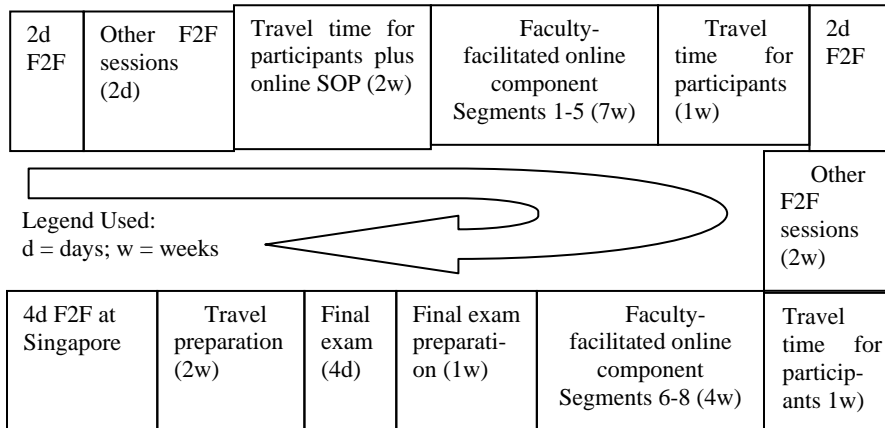| 4d F2F at Singapore	Travel preparation (2w)	Final exam (4d)	Final exam preparation (1w)	Faculty-facilitated online component Segments 6-8 (4w)	Travel time for participants 1w)

Fig. 3. The blending format in the IOCL Hybrid Programme in Project Management

Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) is currently India's largest company by sales with a turnover of US $51 billion, the highest-ever for an Indian company, and profits of US $1.73 billion for fiscal 2006. During the mid of 2006, U21Global created a hybrid programme on Project Management for IOCL. It's current (batch 3) blending format is shown in fig. 3. The two-day F2F at the beginning of the programme was meant to give the students a hands-on workshop in online pedagogy and the learning management system (LMS). This also provided the opportunity to the faculty to interact with the participants prior to the commencement of the online component of the programme. The mid-term two-day F2F had the objective of providing the opportunity to the participants to clarify any topics not understood properly during the online component of the programme. The last leg of F2F sessions is scheduled in Singapore to provide inputs to the participants about international project management practices through the faculty of National University of Singapore (NUS) along with evaluation of the team final projects by the U21Global professors. The typical feature of this hybrid programme is that the participants of the programme (the executives of IOCL) travel from various parts of India to the sprawling campus of the IndianOil Institute of Petroleum Management (iIPM) at Gurgaon (near New Delhi) to attend the F2F sessions. Also, the professor facilitating the sessions travels from Bangalore to New Delhi. Similarly, for the last part of F2F, all the participants and faculty travel to Singapore. Hence, substantial travel costs are associated with the F2F component of this programme. Over the past three offerings of the programme, the following changes in the blending format and modus operandi were brought about, keeping in view the feedback of the learners and the IOCL HR officials:

• In the first offering, the mid-term F2F was kept after the completion of the last online Segment 8. However, the participants felt that this F2F was very close to the last F2F held in Singapore. In batch 3, thus the mid-term F2F is being conducted after Segment 5.

- In the first batch, the mid-term F2F was conducted by a faculty other than the one facilitating the online component. However, feedback from the students revealed dissatisfaction and it was recommended to use the same faculty facilitating the online component for the mid-term F2F. This change in batches 2 and 3 has proved more effective as per the feedback of the participants.
- In order to offset the huge travel costs associated with the movement of the participants from different parts of India to iIPM, Gurgaon, from batch 2 onwards longer term breaks in the programme were introduced to conduct some additional F2F sessions (using experts apart from those of U21Global) there and to take care of the travel time before resumption of the online component.

2.3 Hero Honda – Tata Motors Programme in Operations Management

Online component Segments 1-3 (4w)	1 day F2F at New Delhi	Online component Segments 4-5 (4w)	1 day F2F at New Delhi	Online component Segments 6-8 (4w)	1 day F2F at New Delhi	Final Exam (4d)

Fig. 4. The blending format in the Hero Honda Programme in Operations Management

Incorporated in 1984, Hero Honda Motors Limited (HHML) is a joint venture between India's Hero Group and Honda Motor Company, Japan. It is currently the world's single largest two wheeler company and also one of the most successful joint ventures worldwide. Established in 1945, Tata Motors Limited (TML) is India's largest automobile company, with revenues of USD 7.2 billion in 2006-07. The company is the world's fifth largest medium and heavy commercial vehicle manufacturer, and the world's second largest medium and heavy bus manufacturer. During May 2007, both Hero Honda and Tata Motors enrolled their executives in a common online class of Operations Management at U21Global. Despite both the companies operating in the automotive sector, their products do not compete with each other. Ten executives of Hero Honda and twenty two executives of Tata Motors comprised the total thirty two students of the class. Hero Honda insisted upon blending the programme with three one-day F2F sessions at New Delhi with intervals of one month during the duration of the programme. On the contrary, Tata Motors preferred to have a purely online programme. Thus, in a unique arrangement, the faculty facilitating the course was assigned the responsibility of conducting the F2F sessions for Hero Honda executives (as per the blending format shown in fig. 4), while ensuring that Tata Motors participants are not made aware of such F2F sessions happening for the Hero Honda executives. The professor thus advised the Hero Honda executives not to share their F2F experiences with their Tata Motors colleagues in the online class. The F2F sessions for Hero Honda were used by the professor to provide supplementary inputs and to discuss latest case studies on the subject. It was felt by the professor that as a result, the performance of the Hero Honda executives during

the online discussions also started improving. This was later substantiated by the fact at the end of the training programme, the average overall score of the Hero Honda executives was much higher at 89.56 compared to that of Tata Motors executives at 61.5. Noticeably, two participants of Tata Motors had withdrawn from the course while there was no withdrawal from the Hero Honda participants. The difference in grades and number of student withdrawals cannot be completely attributed to the blending of the programme for Hero Honda. Nevertheless, the findings are indicative of possible improvement in the satisfaction of the learners at Hero Honda due to blending of the programme. High acclaim from the Hero Honda HR department for the programme and approval of many more batches in future is another reason in favour of the hybrid nature of the programme.

2.4 Emirates NBD Hybrid "Certificate in Management" Programme

2d F2F at Dubai	Online SOP (1w)	Online Webinar (1hour)	Online Module 1 (4w)	Online Webinar (1hour)	Online Module 2 (4w)	Online Webinar (1hour)

Legend Used:
d = days; w = weeks

							Online Module 3 (4w)

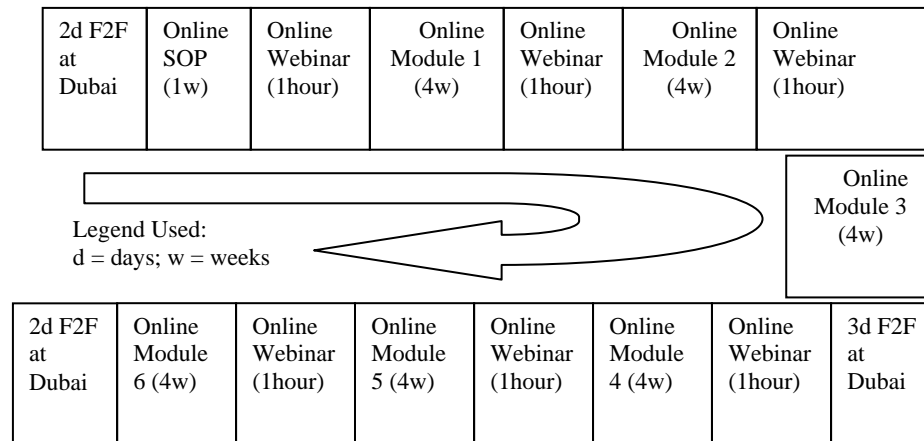| 2d F2F at Dubai	Online Module 6 (4w)	Online Webinar (1hour)	Online Module 5 (4w)	Online Webinar (1hour)	Online Module 4 (4w)	Online Webinar (1hour)	3d F2F at Dubai

Fig. 5. The blending format in the Emirates NBD "Certificate in Management"

Emirates NBD is a leading banking group headquartered in Dubai (UAE). According to a study, blended learning is a viable means to teach interpersonal skills in a bank setting [26]. Interestingly, the findings of this study inspired U21Global to expose its corporate clients to online learning gradually through the hybrid learning approach. However, in the "Certificate of Management" hybrid programme developed for Emirates NBD, the proportion of the F2F component vis-à-vis online component has been further decreased compared to its earlier hybrid programmes by way of incorporation of real-time online "webinars" conducted through software like *Elluminate* and *Interwise*. As shown in fig. 5, the programme blends virtual classroom "webinars" and face-to-face sessions with online classes led by U21Global professors.

3 Comparing the Four Blending Models

All the four hybrid programmes discussed above involve a considerable amount of travel either on part of the students or faculty. A major challenge is finding the right mix in a blended learning environment that will leverage the advantages of asynchronous learning while maintaining quality interaction in the face-to-face classroom [27][28][29]. The 'optimal mix' will be between 90% face-to-face and 10% computer-mediated instruction or vice-versa [30]. Some researchers are of the view that there is no standard approach to a blended environment because faculty design courses to fit their teaching styles and content [31]. Integration between the two environments is critical because students must see the relevancy of activities and rationale for a blended environment [29][31]. Table 1 compares the four hybrid training programmes at U21Global on various dimensions. Apart from the MPEFB, the demand for incorporation of F2F in purely online courses of U21Global had come from the side of the clients, who felt that their employees getting exposed to online pedagogy for the first time may not be "comfortable" with purely online content and delivery. This suggestion was well taken by the training designers at U21Global and was the primary reason in the genesis of these hybrid programmes. It can be seen that the proportion of F2F is the lowest in Emirates NBD programme amongst the four programmes. It is too early to predict the results of this latest experiment at U21Global, whereby the use of real-time online "webinars" would hopefully help in containing the faculty travel costs while retaining the flavor of the F2F interaction up to great extent.

Table 1. Comparing the four hybrid training programmes at U21Global

	MPEFB	IOCL	HHML–TML	Emirates NBD
Travel of faculty	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Travel of students	Yes	Yes	No	No
Same faculty for online as well as F2F	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Total duration of the programme	One year = 365 days	15 weeks = 105 days	14 weeks = 98 days	6 months = 180 days
Duration of the F2F	32 days	9 days	3 days	7 days
Proportion of blending (F2F viz. online)	8.77%	8.57%	3.06%	0.04%
Time intervals between consecutive F2F sessions	Approx. 1.5 months	Approx. two months	Approx. one month	Approx three months
Special Webinars	No	No	No	Yes
OBOW Exam	No	Yes	Yes	No
No. of students per batch	50	50	32	25
Number of batches	Two	Three	One	One
Time of Batch 1 launch	Dec., 2006	Aug., 2006	May, 2007	Feb., 2008
Learning Outcomes (Overall average score) in the most recent batch	85.90	75.55	First batch still in progress	First batch still in progress
Student Satisfaction in the most recent batch	4.53 on a scale of 5	4.69 on a scale of 5	First batch still in progress	First batch still in progress

4 Conclusion & Recommendations

Blended programmes are becoming more and more popular in major corporations world-wide due to synergy between the conventional F2F and online pedagogies. However, such programmes require high degree of synthesis and integration between such diverse modes of training delivery. If such a programme involves partner institutions, the challenge is even higher to coordinate the various aspects of design and implementation to fulfill the learning objectives and outcomes. This paper highlighted the experiences of an online academic institution in creating four hybrid training programmes for corporate clients and how the continual feedback from learners and clients resulted in modifying the blending format for better satisfaction of the stakeholders. The following recommendations will serve as lessons for other institutions planning to create hybrid corporate training programmes:

- Conventional institutions operating in face-to-face pedagogy must understand that online pedagogy may not be a cup of tea for each one of their faculty.

- It is a misconception that blended/ online component would reduce the effort/ involvement on part of faculty. Thus, faculty involved in blended programmes should perform their workload assessment before offering and committing their services for such programmes.

- An abysmal performance of the faculty in the online component of the blended programme may result in students getting wrong impressions about the utility of online education and thus, they may "demand" for more face-to-face component. It is suggested that in the blended learning context, continual moderation of student's postings by the instructor and student-to-student interaction, are likely to improve the student's perception about the online component of the learning environment as well as their grades [32].

- Despite providing proper training in online pedagogy, it would not be a good idea to use the faculty teaching online for the first time in every course of the programme. In-house professors already having experience in facilitating online classes for other programmes/ institutions should be involved at least in the initial few offerings of the programme. Otherwise, external faculty must be involved till the time in-house faculty is not full prepared to undertake the online facilitation.

- It is recommended that the designers of blended programmes should take care of the fundamental principles of adult learning viz. expectation of adults for personal relevance in what they learn, participation in setting their learning outcomes based on their real-world needs, self-direction of their learning resources and pathways and establishment of an active learning community [33]. It is thus imperative to take continual feedback of the students (particularly in executive development programmes) to fine-tune the blending proportion, assessment regime and *modus-operandi* of the programme to better understand and meet the expectations of the students in its future offerings.

- The institutions launching new hybrid programmes should be prepared to encounter teething troubles due to unique expectations of the various stakeholders involved in the programme (students, faculty, administrative staff etc.) and should accordingly prepare contingency plans. It may not be possible to always achieve the right blend in the first offering of the hybrid programme.

- Hybrid training programmes are a better means to expose the employees of corporations gradually to online pedagogy, some of whom may feel highly dismayed if abruptly exposed to the purely online mode of training delivery. The F2F sessions indeed act as cushions to make the learners more comfortable to this new paradigm of training.
- It is easier and more effective to use the same professor to facilitate F2F as well as online in hybrid training programmes, provided the professor is well-trained and passionate about both the pedagogies.

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