

Identifying Key Stakeholders in Blended Tertiary Environments: Experts' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Although key stakeholders in blended tertiary environments (BTEs) fulfil an extraordinary role in higher education, significant gaps in knowledge about their identities may be impeding the provision of stakeholder support, limiting their ability to promote effective learning and teaching. As online growth intensifies, it is critical that tertiary education institutes (TEIs) address these gaps in knowledge by developing their understandings of key stakeholder identities. This paper re-evaluates the identity of key stakeholders in BTEs, and describes their contributions. Through qualitatively designed semi-structured interviews with 13 blended learning experts from New Zealand, Australia and Canada, and a 5-step analysis of data, it verified and proposed a current list of key stakeholders in BTEs. This included teachers, senior management staff, students, technical support staff, educational support staff, the institute, other support staff, government bodies, technology infrastructure providers, communities, and the public. Some were considered to be among those who contributed most significantly to BTE success. As learning spaces evolve and technology usage accelerates, the outcomes from this research will provide a basis from which TEIs can develop new understandings about their key stakeholders, to help them deliver informed, relevant, and meaningful support.

KEYWORDS

Blended Learning, E-Learning, Higher Education, Stakeholder, Students, Teachers, Tertiary Education

INTRODUCTION

Key stakeholders have contributed significantly to the success of digital transformations, fulfilling an extraordinary role in the advancement of higher education. In an era of phenomenal growth, their commitment to the use of educational online technologies (EOTs) has helped transform traditional learning spaces into dynamic blended tertiary environments (BTEs). Attitudinal factors of flexibility, innovativeness and creativity have stimulated levels of acceptance of online engagement, prompting an increase in interactivity and “collaboration” (Therhault, 2015). For tertiary education institutes (TEIs), this has increased the range of learning and teaching opportunities, enabling them to swiftly adapt to the changing needs of a digitally native generation, and thus ensure institutional relevance in an era of dramatic change.

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In this context, TEIs bear responsibility for ensuring their key stakeholders receive an appropriate level of support to fulfil their roles. In fact, “having knowledge of stakeholders will always be an important responsibility” for TEIs (Avci, Ring, & Mitchell, 2015, p. 53). It is achievable when TEIs understand the role of “knowledge management” as it relates to the capabilities of their people, and the complexities of their environments (Maric, 2013). This involves identifying and analysing their key stakeholders, “to realise who [they] are, and what they want” (Maric, 2013, p. 223), and then “improv[ing] its processes to meet their needs” (Kettunen, 2015, p. 56).

TEIs that “can identify and understand the[ir] stakeholders...can greatly enrich their knowledge” (Avci et al., 2015, p. 53), whereas “neglecting stakeholder relationships” will “lead to limited success” (Kettunen, 2015, p. 56). Significant gaps in knowledge about stakeholders’ identities and contributions may impede the provision of appropriate support, and limit their ability to perform their roles effectively. Establishing stakeholders’ identities, and determining the extent to which their needs and activities are understood and supported is therefore critical. As online growth intensifies and changes the contexts of learning, it is essential that TEIs address knowledge gaps and develop understandings about stakeholder groups at a level that enables the delivery of informed, relevant, and meaningful support. This paper re-evaluates the identity of key stakeholders in BTEs, and describes their contributions.

While some efforts have been made to better understand key stakeholder roles, the numbers of studies about their identification are relatively few. Mainardes, Alves & Raposo (2013), in a theoretical exploratory case study, identified and ranked 21 distinct groups of university stakeholders. Chapleo and Simms (2010), through stakeholder analysis, identified and ranked 10 higher education groups. Wagner, Hassanein & Head (2008) compiled a stakeholder list of at least seven groups, and Sanderson (1997) identified more than 15 distance education stakeholders. An overview of the results from these four studies is outlined in Table 1.

In these studies, students and teachers were featured as the most dominant stakeholders. Bodies supplying accreditation or some form of governance also held top positions, and providers of media, technology and funders factored in significantly. Other key groups included local and educational communities.

Additional literature further developed a picture of stakeholder representation in higher education. Gross & Godwin (2005) recommended that higher education stakeholder analysis should begin with the “obvious and well-known stakeholders: students, faculty, and administrators” (p. 1). Similarly, it was noted that in educational institutions, the most important stakeholders were “students, staff, administration and employers” (Singh & Weligamage, 2012, p. 5). Coleman et al

Table 1. Results from existing studies

Research approach	Stakeholders identified
Mainardes, et al., (2013) Theoretical exploratory case study (ranked, top 10)	Students, teachers, researchers, employers, research and development partners, government, accreditation bodies, local public authorities, non-teaching staff, other higher education institutes, local community, secondary level schools
Chapleo & Simms (2010) Case study and stakeholder analysis (ranked, top 10)	Students, staff, funders, commercial, government, community, governing and academic bodies, research councils and bodies, educational community, graduate recruiters
Sanderson (1997) Case studies and literature (not ranked)	Regulators, purchasers, suppliers (creators and providers: content providers, learning experts, designers, media providers, admin support, HR, technical providers, site coordinators), end users (teachers and learners)
Wagner et.al (2008) Literature and stakeholder analysis (not ranked)	Students, instructors, educational institution, content providers, technologies providers, accreditation bodies, employers

(2013) identified higher education stakeholders as “students, employers, policy makers, faculty and administrators” (p. 3).

Tang & Hussin (2011), in a study about stakeholder perspectives, identified higher education groups as university managers, academic staff, students, parents, graduates, industry employers and other representatives. Leisyte, Westerheijden, Epping, Faber, & De Weert (2013) similarly explained that stakeholders could include academics, students, parents, administrators, managers, alumni, and employers. Other research identified teachers, students, support staff, administrators, and managers as those whose roles in higher education had changed (Freeman, Patel, Routen, Scott, & Ryan, 2013).

These studies contributed useful perspectives. However, the contexts for these stakeholder identifications have since evolved. Over time, these environments have been impacted, transformed and therefore re-contextualised through technological developments. This meant that stakeholder roles and activities were subjected to change; they too had shifted and evolved. These roles now had to be understood in a newer, more relevant context.

While set in general higher education contexts, these studies had not made explicit mention of the *blended* element of the environment. This could have been due to differences in understandings about the meaning or scope of *blended* learning, or the presumption that its inclusion was a given component to the learning. However, since “blended learning intersect[s] within almost every sector of the university environment” (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013), is an integral part of modern-day tertiary strategies, and influences a panorama of activities in TEIs, its significance should be acknowledged. It is a primary component of modern learning contexts, and its use has been made explicit in describing the context of this study (i.e. *blended* tertiary environments).

Although more recent research had been deemed necessary, existing studies provided insights that helped inform choices about methods of data collection and analysis in this study. These included the value of using literature to reveal gaps in stakeholder identification, the value of using purposive sampling techniques to collect data from expert subjects, and the value of using their knowledge and expertise to help construct meaning and understanding about stakeholder identities, especially in light of the limited number of studies on the topic.

The shortage of studies on stakeholder identification in BTEs, and the need for updated relevant understandings signalled that an “examination of [the] stakeholder environment...[was]...pertinent” (Chapleo & Simms, 2010, p. 6). Researchers hope that stakeholder identification will in the future attract the deserved attention from other researchers and practitioners in higher education (Avci et al., 2015). While “who the stakeholders...are is a very complicated issue” (Avci et al., 2015, p. 53) and is considered “difficult to implement” (Maric, 2013, p. 217), since TEIs have “a particularly complex stakeholder environment” (Chapleo & Simms, 2010, p. 6), new stakeholder research was necessary. A re-evaluation of the identity of key stakeholders and their roles needed to occur “when stakeholders’ requirements change[d]” (Kettunen, 2015, p. 56). Especially is this the case since TEIs were “under continuous pressure...to follow the global trends of technolog[ical] innovations”, and adapt to the use of “modern technologies” and “new [educational] forms and structures” (Maric, 2013, p. 223).

This paper identifies and re-evaluates the key stakeholders in BTEs, and describes their contributions. Through qualitatively designed semi-structured interviews with 13 blended learning experts from New Zealand, Australia and Canada, and a 5-step analysis of data, it verified and proposed a *current* list of key stakeholders in BTEs. They included teachers, senior management staff, students, technical support staff, educational support staff, the institute, other staff, government bodies, technology infrastructure providers, communities, and the public. Some of these stakeholders were thought to be among those who contributed most significantly to BTE success. As learning spaces evolve and technology usage continues to accelerate, the outcomes from this research will provide a basis from which TEIs can develop new understandings about their key stakeholders, at a level that enables the delivery of informed, relevant, and meaningful support. TEIs that “can identify and understand the[ir] stakeholders...can greatly enrich their knowledge” (Avci et al., 2015, p. 53). Doing so will lead to better planning, initiatives and improved resource allocation, all of which promote organisational success and curb failure. (Gross & Godwin, 2005, p. 1).

METHOD

A qualitative system of methods was used to guide the collection and analysis of data (Marelli, 2016). Participants were selected using an expert sampling strategy to ensure that data came from those with specific expertise and experience in the field (Trochim, 2006). This method was similar to the approaches used by Chapleo and Simms (2010), who obtained data from ‘opinion-formers’, and Wagner et al. (2008) who used experts’ feedback. Criteria were set to establish a basis for their selection for interviews. Participants had to fit the criteria of a ‘blended learning expert’. An expert is defined as “one whose special knowledge or skill causes him to be regarded as an authority” (Oxford University Press, 2014). Experts could be selected on relatively simple criteria, such as through certain qualifications or experience (Changing Minds, 2013). Thus, the following criteria was set: 1) the individual must have occupied an academic role for not less than 10 yrs in a tertiary blended learning context, 2) hold a post-graduate qualification, and 3) have conducted published research in the area of blended learning. Candidates without blended learning experience, or without post-graduate qualifications were excluded from this study.

A small group of 13 participants were chosen (Saldana, 2011), from TEIs in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. The rationale for this number was based on literature about qualitative research. Saldana (2011), for example, explained that there were varying opinions about the appropriate number of participants. While studying a single individual case in depth would make for a rich profile, an individual was not always representative of the population at large. Therefore, a small group of participants would provide sufficient data, with a minimum of 10-20 needed to ensure credible and trustworthy findings (Saldana, 2011). Accordingly, the use of 13 expert participants fitted within the required range. Obtaining data from a group of several individuals, rather than from one or two would likely deliver a holistic set of results that were applicable in more than one setting, and ensure that “no untoward consequences or none...easily anticipated” (Yin, 2010, p. 47) could arise. Obtaining data from long-serving experts, from across several institutions and countries, was considered an appropriate way of “testing the evidence for consistency across sources” (Yin, 2010, p. 20). Due to their significant experience, they would render richer contextualised explanations than non-expert candidates. Notably, the credibility of findings were increased when they involved feedback from those with prolonged engagement in the field (Nicholls, 2009). The expectations were that “this particular group of people thought to share a common experience... [would] offer meaningful insights into the phenomenon” (Nicholls, 2009, p. 640).

Participants set aside at least 45 minutes of un-interrupted time to completed their interviews, which were conducted via online video-conferencing technology (Skype), and audio recorded using Pamela software. The interview contained 13 questions in total. Question three asked participants to identify the groups they considered ‘to be key stakeholders in BTEs’. Question four asked them to identify which of these provided the most important contribution to the success of a BTE. The use of open-ended questions generated deep, meaningful answers. Probes helped to clarify meanings of responses, encourage in-depth explanations, and stimulate participants to expand their original comments (Yin, 2015). A large quantity of data was expected and received.

The data were recorded, and then transcribed in pre-formatted question-and-answer templates, which enabled the researcher to develop an intimate familiarity with the content (Daniels, 2016). It was analysed using Yin’s (2015) five phases of qualitative data analysis: 1) *Compiling*, 2) *disassembling*, 3) *reassembling*, 4) *interpreting*, and 5) *concluding*. Table 2 demonstrates the link between these five phases, and the techniques used.

NVivo software (QSR International, 2015) was used to import, compile, and organise the transcribed documents into a logical filing structure (Yin, 2015). The data from these documents were disassembled into smaller pieces and coded. Using the *Nodes* coding function, the data were separated into categories that corresponded to the interview questions. These nodal categories, which were labelled using truncated versions of the questions, represented specific portions of the data. Their

Table 2. Qualitative phases vs research techniques

Stage	Stage description	Research techniques
1	Compiling	Import and arrange transcripts
2	Disassembling	Use nodes to code data
3	Reassembling	Use memos to develop understandings of data
4	Interpreting	Explain meaning of data (publication discussion)
5	Concluding	Conceptualise data (publication conclusion)

use enabled the data to be assigned logically, labelled, referenced, and contained within manageable groupings (Williams, 2003). Table 3 demonstrates the link between the node labels used for coding, and the interview questions.

The data was then reassembled, which required that it be transferred from its nodal position into analytic memos (Yin, 2015). These memos were used to record ideas and insights about specific stakeholders, and develop meaningful thoughts about their significance and contribution (QRS International, 2015). Interpretations of the memo data were made, and used to form the basis of the *discussion*, which focussed on the identification of key stakeholders in BTEs, and of these, the most significant contributors to BTE success. Comparisons to existing studies were made to provide a basis from which to correlate understandings about the meaning of the data. The conceptual diagram in Figure 1 uses a highlighted example to demonstrate the link between stages of the analysis process. The outcomes of the analysis provided a basis from which to identify and discuss the roles, contributions, and interests and of the “key players in the environment” (Maric, 2013, p. 217).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

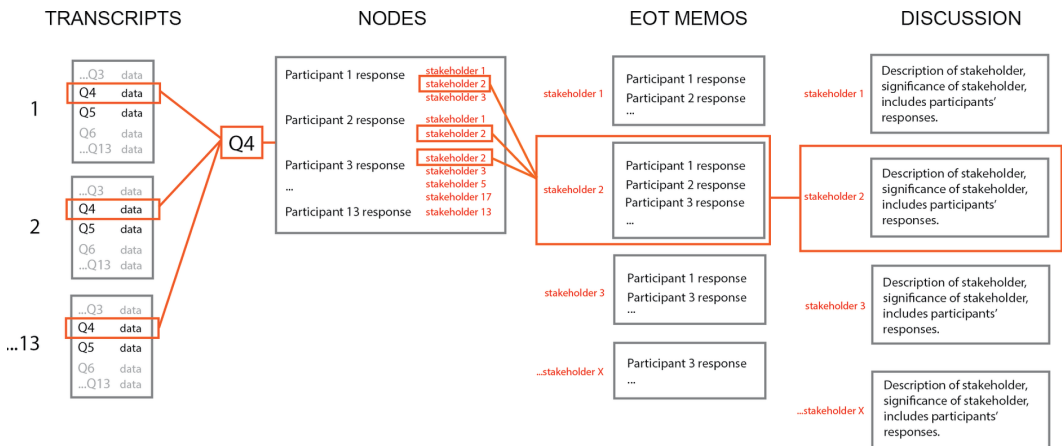
This section outlines the results of the analysis, and discusses its findings in reference to the literature. It identifies the key stakeholders in BTEs, and those participants considered to have made the most significant contributions to BTE success. It also proposes a draft list of key stakeholders in BTEs.

The expert participants identified a range of key stakeholders in BTEs. The most prominently and frequently identified were students, teachers, and technical and educational support staff. Students were identified as key stakeholders by 12 out of 13 experts, because of the need for them to ‘buy into’ blended learning, ‘participate fully, and be convinced’ of its value. Their ability to support discussion, deliver feedback, and enhance “connectedness or community” (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010, p. 17) contributed significantly to the success and value of learning experiences (Tuapawa, 2016b). Some participants categorised students into sub-groups, such as distance learners, local students versus international students, young students who ‘want[ed] the ticket’ versus mature students who ‘wish[ed] to formalise education’. Some also grouped students by their level of engagement with EOTs. These results aligned with the studies in Table 1, three of which had ranked students as key stakeholders (Chapleo & Simms, 2010; Mainardes et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2008). The results were also consistent

Table 3. Nodes linked to interview questions

Node	Node label	Related question
3	Key stakeholders identified	Identify group(s) or individual(s) you consider to be key stakeholders in BTEs.
4	Most important contributors	Which of these provide the most important contribution to the success of a BTE?

Figure 1. Process of data analysis



with a number of other studies that had listed students as key stakeholders (Coleman et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2013; Gross & Godwin, 2005; Leisyte et al., 2013; Singh & Weligamage, 2012; Stein & Graham, 2014; Tang & Hussin, 2011; University of Wisconsin, 2005).

Despite participants' choice of students as key stakeholders, only 3 of the 13 experts identified them to be among those providing the most significant contribution to BTE success. They felt that student 'buy-in [was] directed by teachers', that 'students [were] not the most influential, nor at 'the centre of learning in a BTE'. Instead 'they [were] affected by the outcome' generated by instructors, simply 'follow[ed] what the teachers want[ed] them to do', and were 'impacted by how well [teachers] design[ed] and [taught]'. Their comments were reminiscent of descriptions about "instructor-centred teaching [where] the emphasis [was] on what instructors [did]" (Blumberg & Weimer, 2012, p. 3). Participants said that while "teachers...made the most significant contribution...in the ideal online environment, [they] wouldn't."

Teachers were identified as key stakeholders by 11 out of the 13 experts, because of their immediate and direct involvement in the teaching and learning process, their day-to-day focus on and influence over blended learning experiences, their role in 'develop[ing] the content', and their role as a 'conduit' through which knowledge was passed onto students. These results compared with those from the studies in Table 1, all of which ranked teachers as key stakeholders (Chapleo & Simms, 2010; Mainardes et al., 2013; Sanderson, 1997; Wagner et al., 2008). The results were also consistent with other studies that identified teachers as key stakeholders (Coleman et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2013; Gross & Godwin, 2005; Leisyte et al., 2013; Singh & Weligamage, 2012; Stein & Graham, 2014; Tang & Hussin, 2011; University of Wisconsin, 2005).

Teachers were selected by 9 of the 13 experts as being among those who provided the most significant contribution to BTE success. Teachers guided the blended learning process, from design to delivery, and were 'without doubt' considered 'more important than students', because 'if they [didn't] drive it, it [wouldn't] happen'. Factors including 'how they designed the course', their 'use of resources, levels of interactivity' contributed to reasons for why 'teachers...[were] key...in determining the success' of BTEs. This was interesting, considering that in other studies, teachers, although listed as key stakeholders, were ranked second behind students in the top 10 stakeholders (Mainardes, 2013; Chapleo & Simms, 2010). This difference could have been due to idealistic notions about student-centred learning, or it could relate to the greater role that teachers now assumed in these technologically demanding environments. Teachers "roles [were now] more critical in online learning environments" (Moore, 2013, p. 307). More than ever, they were counted on to use EOTs effectively to communicate, encourage, and assist the learning process, "to master, design, and deliver strategies,

techniques, and methods for teaching online courses” (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Adding to this, ‘generation Z...[were] coming through’ with ‘expectations...that [were] a challenge for [teachers] to keep up with’ (Tuapawa, 2016a). They were the connected students from “the ‘bring-your-own-device era’” (Skiba, 2016, p. 1), who had “learned to expect immediate, continuous, all-round support” (Serdyukov, 2015, p. 64).

While most participants considered ‘academics [to be] the main contributors’, one participant admitted that some teachers were ‘terrible at engaging’. This was due to the growing pressure they faced to spend time undertaking research. The ‘publish or perish’ expectation reduced their focus on quality student engagement. Yet, “direct personal communication...between students and their teacher [was] an indispensable component of any learning” (Serdyukov, 2015, p. 67). Experts proposed an increase in the use of casual lecturers, who did not face the same level of pressure to pursue research, and therefore had more energy to help students. They also stated that there was pressure on teachers to ‘teach more, deliver more’ although being ‘given fewer resources to do it’. Although teachers might have been ‘lean and mean last year’, they had ‘to be leaner and meaner this year’ to ‘facilitate the interaction between the physical and digital learning spaces’. This was in spite of reports “that it [took] more time and effort...to teach an online course than to teach a corresponding face-to-face course” (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 26).

Technical and/or educational support staff were identified as key stakeholders by 9 out of the 13 experts, due to the critical nature of their role in providing EOT support to teachers and students. Participants regarded technical support as a key element to positive learning experiences on and off campus. Educational support staff were considered to be key stakeholders because of their role in providing professional development opportunities to staff who required pedagogical support to deliver blended learning experiences across a range of online tools. “Providing teachers with the appropriate support and professional development [was] crucial to ensuring that technology [was] being integrated” effectively (Moore, 2013, p. 302). “Teachers often ha[d] inadequate (or inappropriate) experience with using digital technologies for teaching and learning” (Koehler & Mishra, 2009, p. 62), due to a “lack of training” or ineffective or insubstantial training (Merfert, 2016, p. 1), which created difficulties for teachers who “struggle[d] to keep up with the ever-increasing...tools available” (Ko & Rossen, 2010, p. 16). Their technical incompetency’s were one of the major problems (Tufan, 2016). They “need[ed] specific training, guidance and support...to successfully use these new technologies, and incorporate them into course delivery...” (European Union, 2014, p. 17). Educational support staff sought ‘to build consensus, to do it collaboratively’ by supporting their colleagues through initiatives that helped them learn to use EOTs. In one TEI, for example, an academic services site had been developed to help users learn how to use forums. One expert considered the increased appropriation of institutional funds towards resources for this group as an indication of their rise in stakeholder importance.

In previous studies, technical and/or educational support staff had not been mentioned explicitly, or had been assigned under a larger general group, such as non-teaching staff (Mainardes, 2013) or suppliers (Sanderson, 1997). However, as the move towards digital delivery has become a priority for TEIs, the significance of these groups is likely to grow, as evidenced by the results of this study. One report discussed the increasing importance of “the role and function of the IT department in enabling and supporting digital transformations” with indications that “the move to digital ...[was] disrupting this role, placing increasing emphasis on IT departments to innovate and adapt to deliver new learning outcomes” (Gibson, Palmer, Brodsky, & Tully, 2015, p. 3). These stakeholders played an important role for both students and teachers, in ‘ensur[ing] the quality of the learning experience’, and in helping ‘to build comfortable and confident technology users’.

The academic institutions ‘sitting behind the academics’, were classed as key stakeholders because of their overarching role in championing, managing and sustaining BTEs. Their responsibilities involved providing “affordable, sustainable approaches” (Beckem & Watkins, 2012, p. 61) to learning. Their investment in skilled expertise to facilitate digital transformations was considered

important in light of technological developments. To support this, TEIs had ‘to design an eco-system of technologies and infrastructure that [was] responsive to changing landscapes, [and] robust enough to ensure stability and quality of learning experiences, and...meet strategic drivers.’ One expert stated that in addition, ‘a shared vision and strategy on how to achieve success’ in blended environments was necessary. It required the ‘resource[s] and the desire to change’, the ability to clarify needs, and ‘generat[e] high level awareness...from the...coalface of delivery or interface with the learners... through to the managerial and leadership levels of the organisation’. It also required ‘a profound and deeply held sense of commitment to improving’.

Experts remarked that the survival of TEIs depended on their ability to embrace, adopt and deliver online learning. ‘The playing field [was now] different’, and being ‘subject to a number of policy initiatives, government targets, regional and employment foci, and funding challenges’ they had to ‘future-proof [their] existence.’ They needed to recognise that they ‘[were] playing a long game...didn’t have the time or the money to keep redoing it’, and ‘didn’t have any other choice than to look to providing online components’. One participant remarked ‘we’re in a global competitive environment’, which meant that to survive, TEIs ‘basically [had] to get smarter with doing more with less’. Another suggested that this was possible, with a clear institutional commitment to the nature and scale of the transformation, ‘diplomacy, and the ability to negotiate’ stakeholders through the transition. This suggested a “focus on changing individual attitudes”, and “using the power of personality and innovative thinking to bring...staff along the journey of digital transformation” (Gibson et al., 2015, p. 4).

Themes more common in this study than in existing studies related to the growing pressure institutes faced to incorporate EOTs into BTEs. Recognition of the demand for ‘consistent, reliable, and essential’ blending learning was significant, with a greater focus on technology as a force dictating delivery. One expert indicated that TEIs that understood technological disruption would ensure appropriate management of change, and embrace opportunities afforded by blended transformations. The use of technology was ‘a paradigm shift for the institute’ and ‘critical to what we are about’. Success ‘always [came] back to effective change and transformational leadership’ which required ‘due diligence around products we select and...roll out.’

Senior management staff were identified as key stakeholders. Some participants thought that the most significant contribution came ‘from senior executives of the institutions’, those in ‘the leadership and management tier of the organisation’, including ‘personnel or direct line management’ staff who had ‘a big role to play’ especially in influencing change, and in securing extra resources. Without the institutional weight brought in by these stakeholders, ‘anything else you did [was] likely to be just around the edges, [and] wouldn’t have the staying power to embed that practise longer term and to transition to business as usual in a sustainable model.’ In fact, without ‘the leadership function of the institute’ and ‘their ability to release resource and champion...a vision,...help set strategy... and endorse ... those hard decisions, ...any project [was] probably likely to fail.’ A recent report indicated that “significant engagement with all the senior leadership of the university [should involve] consulting, understanding, listening and amending [plans]...embracing the concept of change, in order to foster a culture of digital innovation” (Gibson et al., 2015, p. 4). Educational leaders in the future would have to be proactive, anticipatory, and flexible (Peppers, 2016). In other studies, these stakeholders were not mentioned explicitly, or were assigned under a larger general group, such as non-teaching staff (Mainardes, 2013) and staff (Chapleo & Simms, 2010).

Marketers were also identified as key stakeholders, because of their level of influence over the message promoted to communities about TEIs. Family, friends or flatmates of students were also considered to be key stakeholders, because of their provision of familial, pastoral or domestic support. Their interest in the learning content and interactions were cited as having an influence over learning experiences. For example, parents and siblings could join in watching onscreen lectures with the student from home. One expert remarked that comments concerning his lecture had been made to him in person by family members who had viewed the delivery via video conference.

Other key stakeholders were also identified. These included online learning leaders and champions, e-learning advisors, instructional designers, advisory committees, employers, industry, organisations facilitating student work placements, infrastructure providers including writers or proprietors of commercial software tools, the Government and statutory or accreditation bodies, online tool creators and hosts, the public, and non-academic staff. The stakeholders thought to have contributed most significantly to BTE success included e-learning champions, technical support staff, infrastructure providers, and course coordinators.

Differences between these results and those of older studies could be attributed to the impact of technological change and development, as well as the expectations and demands of the newer digital era. In “contemporary, turbulent times”, universities had experienced a shift in social and technological values, and were being forced to reconsider their relationships with stakeholders in diverse and multi-dimensional environments (Maric, 2013, pp. 220, 221). Role changes would continue to occur. Due to various influences, especially technological and sociological change, “the role of...education...is not the same as it was...it has changed, and will continue to change in the years to come” (Maric, 2013, p. 218).

PROPOSED LIST OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN BTEs

This section proposes a list of ten key stakeholders in BTEs, among whom are those thought to have made the most significant contributions to BTE success.

- Teachers
- Senior management staff
- Students
- Technical support staff
- Educational support staff
- Academic institute
- Other support staff
- Government and bodies
- Infrastructure providers and technology hosts
- Public and communities

CONCLUSION

Significant gaps in knowledge about the identities of key stakeholders in BTEs may impede the provision of appropriate support, and limit their ability to commit to effective learning and teaching. As online growth intensifies, it is critical that TEIs address these gaps in knowledge by re-evaluating their understandings of key stakeholder identities and contributions. The contexts in which previous studies’ stakeholder identifications occurred have since evolved. Over time, these environments had been impacted, transformed and therefore re-contextualised through technological developments. Stakeholder roles needed to be understood in a current, more relevant context.

This paper re-evaluated the identity of key stakeholders in BTEs, and described their contributions. Through qualitatively designed semi-structured interviews with 13 blended learning experts from New Zealand, Australia and Canada, and a 5-step analysis of data, it verified and proposed a *current* list of key stakeholders in BTEs. They included teachers, senior management staff, students, technical support staff, educational support staff, the institute, other support staff, government bodies, technology infrastructure providers, communities, and the public. The most prominently and frequently identified stakeholders were students, teachers, senior managers, technical and educational support staff, and TEIs. Certain groups were considered important for various reasons. Students for example, were

considered as key stakeholders because of their need to ‘buy into’ blended learning, ‘participate fully, and be convinced’ of its value. Teachers were chosen because of their immediate and direct involvement in the teaching and learning process, and their day-to-day focus on and influence over blended learning experiences. Teachers were considered to be among those who contributed most significantly to BTE success. This was due to their having the most direct influence in guiding the blended learning process. The perceived level of significance that certain stakeholders held in BTEs had changed over time. For example, educational support and technical support stakeholders had grown in importance. This change in view may be attributed to the impact of technological change and development upon the roles of such groups, and the expectations and demands of the newer digital era.

The application and usefulness of this knowledge is significant for TEIs, who must be capable of daily transforming and reacting to change, and at the same time remaining true to their main mission (Maric, 2013). This involves identifying and analysing their key stakeholders, “to realise who [they] are, and what they want” (Maric, 2013, p. 223), and then to “improve its processes to meet their needs” (Kettunen, 2015, p. 56). The outcomes from this research have provided TEIs with a basis from which to develop and maintain new understandings about their key stakeholders, at a level that enables the delivery of informed, relevant, and meaningful support.

Some of the findings of this study were constrained. For example, some experts commented on the difficulty in identifying key stakeholders, with one stating that success of stakeholder identification depended on each TEI, and their vision of transformation. Digital transformations involved ‘everybody in the institution’, with the potential to ‘grossly underestimate the ability for things to go wrong if you cut one of these out’. Also, a limitation in this research restricts its broad application. The small sample size characteristically used in qualitative studies makes it challenging to generalise results across large populations. However, the findings of qualitative studies provide deep insights into the predilections of participants, and cannot be discounted. In this context, it is argued that the findings reported here provide an informed, robust expose of the current situation.

Future research could involve the development of stakeholder listings for different countries. This could assist TEIs worldwide “to tailor the [stakeholder identification] concept to maximise... potential, while being responsive to a new generation of students” (Moskal, et al., 2013). Future research could also attempt to identify and rank key stakeholders’ needs, understanding that while rankings are fluid, by having “this list of stakeholders, duly classified by importance, [TEIs] are thereby positioned to ascertain their expectations” (Mainardes et al., 2013, p. 2).

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