STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF BLENDED LEARNING: A CASE STUDY AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

Submitted by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award, the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signed

Ngan Hoang Vu

The research for this thesis received the approval of the RMIT CHEAN on 19th September 2013 (Project number: CHEAN B 0000015672-08/13)

Signed

Ngan Hoang Vu
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>AAOU</td>
<td>The Executive Board of The Association of Asian Open University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AusAID</td>
<td>The Australian Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMS</td>
<td>Content Management System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOET</td>
<td>Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EduNET</td>
<td>The Education Network of Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOU</td>
<td>Hanoi Open University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communication Technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMS</td>
<td>Learning Management System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOET</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOOC</td>
<td>Massive Open Online Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VClass</td>
<td>Virtual Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VDIC</td>
<td>Vietnam Development Information Center</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
<td>The World Trade Organisation</td>
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning at Hanoi Open University, Vietnam. In recent years, the Vietnamese government has produced a number of policies advocating the use of ICT in education, including blended learning, aligning this implementation with its goals to modernise. While there has been considerable research around blended learning in higher education in the west, including in the USA, UK and Australia, research in Vietnam is relatively new. Previous research has suggested that while there is some debate around defining blended learning, there are numerous benefits and limitations. This study aims to add to this research, by exploring blended learning in the Vietnamese context.

This study is framed by a qualitative approach. It employs a case study method to develop rich and detailed descriptions of participant expectations and experiences of blended learning. 13 second year students, in one of 4 blended courses (Accounting, Finance and Banking, Business Management or Applied Information Technology), participated in this study. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews through Skype and later categorised into key themes using inductive analysis.

The findings reveal participants had very positive expectations of blended learning and these related to timing (flexibility and convenience), usefulness (for work and future qualifications) interaction, experiencing new technology, quality of course, and accreditation. While each participant identified more than one expectation, timing and usefulness were most often identified. The participants also had mainly positive experiences in relation to the online components, the face-to-face components, and interaction. Most commented on benefitting from the flexibility and timing of the course as well as learning outcomes. Most also commented that their experience was affected by lack of interaction and technical problems. Participants’ expectations and experiences generally aligned especially around timing.

This study confirms many of the findings in previous research around student expectations and experiences of blended learning in higher education. However it adds to this research by suggesting that participants in this particular context, also had expectations around the usefulness of blended learning courses to work and future qualifications as well as expectations around accreditation that have not been given much attention in previous research. It suggests also that these participants experienced benefits to their work, which have also been underplayed in research. Finally this study suggests that these additions to the research have particular implications for administrators, faculty and universities.
**Keywords:** Blended learning, e-learning, Information and Communication Technologies, the use of ICT, higher education, Hanoi Open University, students’ expectations and experiences, Vietnam.
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an introduction to the study. It begins with a background section exploring the development of blended learning in western countries, to increasing interest in Asia including Vietnam, and then more specifically to its implementation in Hanoi Open University where this study is set. It then moves to describe the rationale for the study, the research questions and the significance of the study. Finally, an overview of the thesis is provided to orientate the reader to what follows.

1.1 Background of the study

Since the late 1990’s and early 2000s, the use of blended learning in higher education has become more significant in western countries including the USA, the UK and Australia. Distance education providers were among its early adopters. In recent years, the spread of computer use, the development of internet technologies, and more recently still, the development of Web 2.0 technologies have contributed to its increase. According to Graham (2006), “The term blended learning is being used with increased frequency in both academic and corporate circles” (p.3).

While there is debate around just how to define blended learning, researchers such as Graham (2006) suggest that it is now commonly associated with being a combination of face-to-face learning and online learning. Indeed some researchers refer to blended learning as the “best of both worlds” (Morgan, 2002; Young, 2002). The main benefits of blended learning involve its convenience, ease of access, and cost, as well as the provision of more effective pedagogy (Graham, Allen & Ure, 2005). More and more institutions, teachers and learners are choosing blended learning over other learning options including fully online (Graham, 2006; Kim & Bonk, 2006). Garrison and Vaughan (2011) suggested that blended learning has met the demand of the 21st century while still capturing the needs of traditional education.

Most blended learning research has been undertaken in western countries including the USA, Canada, Europe and Australia. This has resulted in a considerable body of research investigating various aspects of blended learning from different perspectives. The main focus of research has related to learning effectiveness, satisfaction of both learners and faculty, consideration of access and flexibility, and cost effectiveness (Graham, 2013).

Other countries in Asia are now attempting to follow suit. In countries such as China, Japan, Taiwan and Singapore, blended learning is gaining more popularity. However, while blended
learning is well-received in western societies, levels of success vary in Asian countries because of a number of challenges relating to different cultural backgrounds, different attitudes, as well as issues around implementation (Tham & Tham, 2011). Since the 2000s, the Vietnamese government has been interested in implementing the use of ICT broadly into education, as well as e-learning and blended learning more specifically in higher education.

**Education in Vietnam and the use of ICT**

Vietnam is a developing country. After joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007, the country has been trying to modernize and has made considerable investments in an effort to realize this policy direction, including in education. Among many sectors, development in education is considered one of the main priorities of the government in Vietnam, as education is perceived as a very important way to support economic and social development. As a result, education reform has been a priority. This intent to embark on major reform, so as to support the modernization and industrialization of the country, is also being undertaken by most countries in the South East Asian region.

The Vietnamese government has identified the integration of ICT in education as one of the vital ways to achieve its aim of developing a modern education system. Since 2000 the government has produced a number of policy documents which support the development of a number of ICT related programs and provide general guidance for the use of ICT in training activities. Encouraged by the government, use of ICT in education and training has been increasing. Online learning or e-learning, as the two terms are often used interchangeably, has been introduced to the country based on the belief that it can provide easy access to a large number of learners and that it can transform learning from teacher-centred approaches that dominate current practice, to learner-centred approaches, which are seen as offering learners more benefits. Compared to online learning or e-learning, blended learning is a newer term. While not often explicitly referred to in government policy documents, the term blended learning has been used in projects supported by international governments and organisations to improve the capability of the Vietnamese education system, and is becoming more known. Projects include some conducted by AusAID and the World Bank.

Vietnam however has a long Confucian tradition in education. In this tradition, teachers are at the center and learners assume a passive role. Implementing blended learning, that requires learners to self-regulate is therefore not likely to be simple. For some students this may just be too hard (Kaleta et al, 2005).
The context of Hanoi Open University, the research setting of this study

Hanoi Open University was established in 1993 with a main focus on distance education and training. Over 20 years of operation, the University has gained a reputation for being one of the best providers of distance education programs in the country. The University has been developing a network of distance learning programs throughout many provinces and has successfully trained thousands of students in various disciplines (Hanoi Open University, website, n.d).

Informed and encouraged by government policy around innovation in education, Hanoi Open University has prioritised the development and application of ICT in distance education in order to up-scale and improve training quality. As a result, the implementation of e-learning has become a focus. Since 2009, Hanoi Open University has officially operated an e-learning program as a significant development in its distance education program and has attracted a growing number of learners. The university has determined that e-learning is among the most important solutions to diversifying teaching and learning methods, expanding training courses, assuring the quality of programs and promoting cooperative programs with international institutions (Hanoi Open University, n.d).

1.2 Rationale for the study

The main rationale for this study is to better understand how students are responding to the government’s initiatives around blended learning. While there has been considerable research around blended learning, most of this has been conducted in the west. In Asia, although blended learning is currently gaining attention, it is still not well-developed. As well, findings from these particular contexts cannot be seamlessly transferred to the context at Hanoi Open University.

I am one of the students that the Vietnamese government has sponsored to study abroad as part of the education innovation process. My official job at Hanoi Open University is to work in cooperation with international universities and educational institutions, to set up quality training programs for learners in Vietnam and to share and exchange knowledge, as well as experiences in education and training. I became increasingly interested in blended learning especially as some of the faculty were suggesting that through its combination of online and face-to-face, student learning could benefit. However I also knew that the university had not given much attention to supporting teachers to implement blended learning. Specifically I wanted to know
more about what students actually expected of blended learning and the nature of their experiences.

1.3 Research questions

The study is guided by the following research question:

Overall question: What are students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning programs at Hanoi Open University?

This broad question is broken down into the following three questions:

- What are the students’ expectations of blended learning programs?
- What are the students’ experiences in blended learning programs?
- How do the students’ experiences meet their expectations?

1.4 Overview of the research method

As will be explained in further detail in Chapter 3, a qualitative approach framed this study and a case study method employed in order to develop richer understandings of practice in a Vietnamese context. It is a small scale study, with 13 second year students who are enrolled in one of four courses (Accounting, Business Management, Finance and Banking, and Applied Information Technology). The study used semi-structured interviews through Skype as a means to collect data and this was followed by coding and data analysis.

1.5 Significance of the study

The study is important for several reasons. First, the study contributes to the broad field of research around blended learning in higher education by adding a voice from an Asian context. Second, it contributes to research specifically around the student expectations and experiences of blended learning in Vietnam. Third, through its case study approach to this research, and use of interview data which captures the voices of the participants, it provides more detailed descriptions of 13 students’ views. It is likely that as this study documents and provides insights into student views it can impact on blended learning practices in similar contexts in Vietnam. In particular, as it presents a sample of student views, it can help inform the further development and implementation of blended learning at Hanoi Open University. It could, for example, enable university leaders and faculty to have better understanding of the student experience in these environments, environments that are very new to stakeholders. Finally, by providing a picture
of student experience of blended courses at Hanoi Open University, it may assist policy makers as they seek to answer questions relating to the effectiveness and suitability of blended programs in a Vietnamese context.

1.6 Thesis overview

This thesis consists of six chapters and six appendices.

Chapter One has introduced the study, so as to provide the reader with information about its background and to orientate the reader to its key ideas. It also provides the rationale for the study, as well as the research questions, and the research contribution. Finally it provides the overview of the structure of this thesis.

Chapter Two reviews the literature that informs this study. It has three parts. The first part broadly examines blended learning in the higher education context. The second part focuses on blended learning in the context of Vietnam and at Hanoi Open University. The third part explores research around students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning.

Chapter Three describes the research process used in this study. It is divided into four main parts. The first part explores the researcher’s orientation which frames this study. The second part discusses the research design and the selection of case study. In the third section, data collection and analysis methods are described, including the choice of interview. Finally, in the fourth part, the reliability and validity of the data is discussed.

Chapter Four reports the findings of the study. It does so in response to the research questions presented in Chapter 1. The first section re-introduces the participants. The second section focuses on the participants’ expectations, followed in the third section by their experiences. This leads to the fourth section in which experiences are considered in light of expectations.

Chapter Five discusses the results of the study in relation to the research literature. It suggests that the study adds to our existing knowledge in a number of ways because of the research setting in Vietnam.

Chapter Six concludes the study in relation to the research questions presented in Chapter 1. As well, it discusses the implications and limitations of the study.
1.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided the reader with an introduction to the study, and to the broad ideas and research which inform it. It has also discussed the research questions which guided the development of the study, including the research design, as well as the significance of the study. Finally, the organization of the thesis was described to orientate the reader more fully to the thesis.

The next chapter reviews the research literature around the use of blended learning in the higher education context generally, and then in Vietnam specifically.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews relevant literature relating to the research focus on student expectations and experiences of blended learning in higher education. This chapter has three main sections. The first section analyses research around blended learning in the higher education context generally, exploring issues in definition, its roots in distance education, and common arguments regarding benefits and limitations. The second section turns to consider the specific context of Vietnam and Hanoi Open University and its recent policy directives around using ICT and blended learning. The third section focuses specifically on research findings relating to higher education students and their expectations and experiences in blended learning.

2.1 Blended learning in higher education

2.1.1 Introduction

The rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has had considerable influence on higher education. Commonly, policy makers, and many researchers have advocated the use of ICT as a means of improving student learning and increasing their likelihood of employment in a world in which ICTs are embedded (Akkoynulu & Yilmaz-Soylu, 2006). Yet, as other researchers have suggested using ICT is not so straightforward and that, rather than benefits being predetermined, their use is much more complex and highly unpredictable (Selwyn, 1999).

In recent times, there has been an increase in the use of ICT in higher education contexts, particularly in Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (Graham, 2006). A range of factors including the need to develop and deliver cost effective programs has contributed to this use (Graham, 2006). This is evidenced by the popularity of MOOCs as a means of offering one course to a large number of participants. As well, the changing cohort of higher education students, many of whom are older, work and have families, has also supported this use. The use of ICT in many Asian countries is only in the early stages of development (Peeraer, Tran & Tran, 2009).

The development of e-learning, online learning and web-based learning have emerged from within this general interest in using ICT. E-learning can be defined as a model of learning and teaching through the internet, network or computer to meet the individual learning or institutional goals (Clark & Mayer, 2003). Online learning, defined by Khan (1997) is the use of the internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor and other
learners, and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience. Web-based learning refers specifically to delivering content through web-based technologies, tools and services that focus on user participation and interaction (Richardson, 2008).

While these terms, e-learning, online learning and web-based learning can refer to quite different things, they are often used interchangeably. Further, research findings around benefits and limitations which draw from one area, are interchanged with the others. Thus, the literature in these areas tend to all refer similarly to benefits around ease of access, “anytime” learning, flexible class schedules, and travel cost reduction, as well as to limitations around “one-size fits all”, loss of personalisation and loss of interaction between learners and instructors, and between learners. Often, both benefits and limitations are compared to face-to-face learning.

Later discussion in this chapter focuses more explicitly on benefits and limitations of blended learning. In the next sections, I explore the roots of blended learning and some of the problems in defining blended learning.

2.1.2 Roots of blended learning

Blended learning has roots in distance education (Brody, 2006) as indeed does ICT, such as video, sound recordings and television, in education more broadly (Akkoyunlu & Yilmaz-Soylu, 2006). Due to the fast development of computers and networks, various forms of learning at a distance have emerged and blended learning is among one of these, given that it involves the integration of online learning and face-to-face learning, and involves conducting the learning process over a distance.

There is some debate around defining distance education, although in general it is acknowledged that it involves distance between learners and teachers and the use of technology as tools to carry out and promote learning processes over a distance. To Sauve’ (1993), distance education can be seen as “an umbrella concept covering correspondence courses, televised teaching, radio-broadcast teaching, open learning, computer-assisted instruction, telematics, individualized learning and self-learning” (p. 102). Greenberg (1998) suggests that distance learning is “a planned teaching/learning experience that used a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning” (p. 36). Kaya (as cited in Akkoyunlu & Yilmaz-Soylu, 2006) similarly suggests that distance learning is referred to as a type of education in which the distance between learner and educator is emphasized, and technology is used intensively throughout the learning process.
Before the rise of computers and the internet, the concept of blended learning had actually been in use for a long time and referred to the mix or blending of different methods used by teachers such as using pens, papers or images to deliver their lectures. However, with the development of technologies in the 21st century, the current definition of blended learning seems to not only refer to the combination of different methods as in the past, but also (and perhaps mainly) to the blend of technologies and face-to-face learning. Blended learning, especially its online component, is now seen by many authors as the outgrowth of distance education due to its efforts to use modern information and communication technologies in teaching and learning over distances (Brody, 2006).

2.1.3 Issues in definition

There are various ways of defining the term ‘blended learning’ in the literature (Clark & Mayer, 2003). Singh and Reed (2001) suggest that blended learning is learning using a variety of instructional modalities. For Graham (2006), blended learning is the combination of instructions from face-to-face learning systems and e-learning systems. For Partridge, Ponting and McCay (2011, p. 3) “blended learning courses in higher education can be placed somewhere on a continuum, between fully online and fully face-to-face courses.” Some suggest that blended learning is the combination of the “best of both worlds” (Morgan, 2002; Young, 2002), that is ‘the best’ of face-to-face and online learning (or e-learning or web-based learning). Stacey and Gerbic (2008) suggest that whereas online learning or e-learning focuses on the electronic environment; blended learning stresses the relationship between traditional instruction with online instruction.

Debates around the definition of blended learning have often concentrated on the boundary of the term. Current research has sought to determine the proportions of each modality (online learning and face-to-face learning) that is required to label or define a course as “blended” (Graham, 2013). As Graham provocatively questions, how much online learning is required in a blended learning experience? What percentages does traditional learning account for? In response to this question, Allen and Seaman (2007) suggest that 30-79% should be blended. Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin and Rapp (2010) also considered a program as blended if 30% of the content was delivered online. However, it is very difficult to measure the exact percentages of some learning programs. Furthermore, even if a percentage could be determined, it is difficult to identify the practical difference between 29% versus 30% of the content delivered online (Graham, 2013).
Another issue related to the definition of blended learning is the determination of what is being blended. According to Graham (2006), there are three common ways of blending: (1) blending online and face-to-face instruction, (2) blending instructional modalities, and (3) blending instructional methods. Among these ways, the most frequent use of the term blended learning denotes the combination of online and face-to-face instruction, so as to help distinguish blended learning course experiences from either distance learning or face-to-face learning (Graham, 2013). Moreover, arguments around blended learning definitions are also about how educational institutions operationalize the difference between face-to-face courses and blended learning courses, and whether or not quality should be included in the definition (Graham, 2013).

Yet this is not to suggest that this lack of common definition is necessarily a problem, with some researchers suggesting that this variation of blended learning definition across institutional contexts is desirable. According to Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts and Francis (2006), the lack of an exact definition in fact allows staff and institutions to “negotiate their own meaning” (p. 4) or to “adapt and use the term as they see fit, and to develop ownership of it” (p. 17).

Compounding this issue around defining blended learning is the fact that the landscape of blended learning is still evolving quickly (Graham, 2013). However agreements seem to be increasing that the term is flexible in its boundary, depending on individual researchers and institutions, but that its intent is to combine face-to-face and online learning (Drysdale, Graham, Spring & Halverson, 2013).

For the purpose of this paper, I adopt the broad meaning that blended learning is “used to describe any and all varieties of teaching where there is integration of both face-to-face and online delivery methods” (Partridge et al., 2011, p. 2) as it seems to be appropriate for the program at Hanoi Open University, the setting of this research.

2.1.4 Web 2.0 and blended learning

According to numerous researchers, the development of Web 2.0 technology has significantly redefined blended learning (Hay, 2009). Web 2.0 applications include wikis, blogs, social networking, and podcasting and a number of popular websites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Flickr use Web 2.0 tools. According to Dabbagh (2004), Web 2.0 technologies emphasise interactions with others. This view is shared by others such as Thomson (2008) who comments on users being able to create, share, collaborate and communicate their
work without the need to have web designing or publishing skills. Flexner and Solomon (2010) suggest furthermore, that by collaboratively creating documents and presentations, both synchronously and asynchronously and sharing and comparing information, users are able to jointly construct knowledge. To some researchers, the use of these Web 2.0 technologies enable both students and teachers to perform learning and teaching activities not possible through other technologies including Learning Management Systems (LMS) (Köse, 2010).

Some researchers argue that the employment of Web 2.0 technologies in blended learning environments enables a shift to collaboration. For example, Richardson (2010) suggests that collaboration or interaction between students and their peers, as well as between students and instructors can be enhanced. Kumar (2009) suggests similarly that Web 2.0 tools enable greater capacity for students to discuss course content, to communicate with others and thus enable learning to be a more creative process and indeed a more successful and enduring one.

Some researchers also suggest that the use of Web 2.0 technologies can enable a shift from content-centred learning to learner-centred learning, arguing for example that Web 2.0 technologies enable students to stay engaged in the learning process by producing and publishing work themselves. As well, some suggest that students can become co-creators of knowledge through the exchange of information and experience (Sadaf, Newby & Ertmer, 2012). Furthermore, they can also “have their say in deciding and getting what is most useful to them” (Kumar, 2009, p. 4), and thus have a more active role in their learning.

It is important to note that the tools used for blended learning programs at Hanoi Open University are Web 2.0 tools. These tools enable students to participate in the learning process in ways they have never experienced before. In Vietnam, learning in higher education is usually controlled by the instructor and there is little interaction with students in classroom settings. Direct instruction and mastery of content are typically emphasized. Access to Web 2.0 tools can enable students to create user accounts, to search for the link they want, to post comments or give feedback in discussion forums, and to upload images during their learning process.

2.1.5 Researching blended learning generally

Research around blended learning has increased over the past decade with much of it focusing on the higher education context (Halverson, Graham, Spring & Drysdale, 2012). Much of this research has been undertaken in America (including the USA and Canada), Europe and Australia, where blended learning has become a rising trend since 2000.
Research has focused on various aspects of blended learning such as instructional design (Cheung, Lam, Lau & Shim, 2010), the criteria for successful blended learning (Mitchell & Honore, 2007), and the role of technology. Graham (2013) suggests that some of the main issues research has attempted to address are learning effectiveness, learner and faculty satisfaction, access and flexibility, and cost effectiveness. In this blended learning environment, researchers commonly agree that learners can study at their convenience while being kept motivated by socially interacting with the instructor or other learners in some face-to-face sessions (Graham, 2013).

Blended learning research has also considered various stakeholder perspectives. For example, Graham, Woodfield and Harrison (2013) examined the implementation of blended learning at faculty level as well as institution level from the administrators’ perspective. This study identified that core issues such as institutional strategy, structure and support were vital to guide the administrators interested in blended learning implementation. Another study by Usta and Ozdemir (2007), examined the students’ perspective, concluding generally positive opinions.

Despite the amount of research, Graham (2013) suggests that it is comparatively undeveloped compared to research in distance and traditional learning environments. He suggests that this may be because there is a lack of theory in guiding this research. According to Graham (2013), most of the existing research has sought to solve localized problems and few attempts have been made to contribute to the “conversation about theory” (p. 13). He suggests that more research on theories may help to focus researchers in the substantive psycho-social issues that make blended learning distinct (Graham, 2013).

In Asia, blended learning in higher education is gaining popularity in a number of countries including China, Japan, Taiwan and Singapore. While blended learning is generally well-received in western cultures, this may not be the case in Asia countries due to challenges such as different cultural backgrounds, different perceptions toward the approach, and the lack of appropriate knowledge relating to the implementation (Tham & Tham, 2011). Thus, while much is known about blended learning, there is little known about its application in Asia countries, such as Vietnam, the focus of this study. This study aims to contribute to this gap in the literature.

2.1.6 Methodologies in blended learning research

As research around blended learning (as is currently defined as a mix of online and face-to-face components) is relatively new, especially when compared to other research fields such as
traditional learning or distance learning, researchers are still exploring how to conduct this research. Researchers are still “aiming to discover which are the more robust variables or constructs that explain successful experiences of face-to-face learning when it is combined with some technologically-supported learning” (Bliuc, Goodyear & Ellis, 2007, p. 232).

Bliuc et al. (2007) reviewed methodologies used in research around students’ experiences of blended learning. They concluded that in terms of methodology, most of this research was one of three types: case studies, survey-based studies or comparative studies. In the next few paragraphs, I explore these three types in further detail.

2.1.6.1 Case study

According to Bliuc et al. (2007), most research involved case study as researchers sought to identify and explain aspects of a specific context and to offer detailed and rich explorations of practice. Bliuc et al. (2007) argued however that while case study can be useful in gathering in-depth information of the case, it can also be difficult to generalize the findings because the findings may be embedded in the context. Generally, case-study research was therefore combined with interviews and questionnaires in an effort to “explore ways in which blended learning can be flexibly designed to take into consideration and respond to a wide range of individual learner needs” (Bliuc et al., 2007, p. 236).

Some case study research focused on general aspects of blended learning. For example, El Mansour and Mupinga (2007) collected data through a case study of undergraduate students to describe their experiences in hybrid and online courses, with attention given to instructor support, and online interactions, among others. Findings showed that although most students agreed that the courses met their expectations, they had negative experiences including technical “hiccups”. Other case study research focused on specific aspects, such as interactive learning (Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2007). In this particular study, in-depth interviews as well as a log system were also used to collect data. One of the findings of this study was that motivation was a crucial factor in student achievement.

2.1.6.2 Survey

Survey-based studies are studies that use statistical analysis to identify relationships between different variables. The study of Bliuc et al. (2007) indicated that there were comparatively few examples of survey-based studies. However, it seems that more recent research, conducted after Bluic et al. (2007), has adopted the use of survey.
López-Pérez, Pérez-López and Rodriguez-Ariza (2011) explored the effect of students’ blended learning experience on learning outcomes in the context of University of Granada. Three hypotheses were formed and tested, focusing on the relationship between the application of blended learning and students’ outcomes, the objective outcomes (final marks) and the subjective outcomes (perception of utility, satisfaction and motivation). The results demonstrated that the dropout rates were reduced and the exam pass rates were increased with the implementation of blended learning. Moreover, they suggested that there was a link between students’ perceptions and the objective outcomes, that is, that students perceived a high degree of utility, motivation and satisfaction in blended course, which led to a positive attitude towards learning and thus having a positive influence on the students’ final marks.

Similarly, the study by Zhao and Yuan (2010) was designed around measuring blended learning satisfaction, using a scale with 14 variables. This survey instrument was then applied to discover the Peking University students’ attitudes on blended learning. The statistical results indicated that adaptability, perceived usefulness, teacher response time and course applicability were the important factors which can affect the learners’ satisfaction of blended learning.

Findings from survey-based studies can be limited, if this is the only means to collect data. As well, self-assessed survey instruments rely on participants being able to honestly give their views (Bliuc et al., 2007).

2.1.6.3 Comparative studies

Comparative studies were also commonly used. This comparison involved comparing general aspects such as the different learning environments (Farley, Jain & Thomson, 2011) and the overall effectiveness (Trpkovska, 2011) to comparisons involving very specific aspects of the course, such as the use of virtual classroom (Parker & Martin, 2010). Comparative studies usually involved comparing blended learning to fully online learning, or comparing blended learning with face-to-face learning. These are discussed in further detail below.

In one of the studies which compared blended learning to an online context, Parker and Martin (2010) considered student perceptions of these two environments. They collected questionnaires from 57 undergraduate students in an instructional technology course. These findings revealed that students in the fully online courses rated the feature and characteristics of the virtual classroom higher than those in the blended courses. For example, the students in the fully online course rated interactivity, one of the characteristics of the virtual classroom, higher (M=22.82) than students in blended course (M=19.77).
In another study, this time which compared blended learning with face-to-face learning in the South East European University, Trpkovska (2011) concluded that the online and blended approach was more effective overall than face-to-face instruction. It was found in the study that the level of students’ acceptance toward blended learning program was high. For example, 48% of the participants said they believed all content in an education program could be taught even more effectively in blended mode than through on site courses (Trpkovska, 2011). Similarly, in another study, Riffell and Sibley (2003) indicated that students experienced more student-instructor interaction in the blended programs than in face-to-face programs. In another study, students in blended courses were more satisfied with using technology to facilitate and improve their learning than students in face-to-face courses (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007).

Some studies emphasized that students’ experiences of blended learning were more positive than both fully online and traditional learning. Rovai and Jordan (2004) found that students in blended courses had a stronger sense of community, than those in either fully online or traditional courses. This view was also supported by survey data from Australian universities. It showed that “there is a general preference among students to use web-based facilities in conjunction with face-to-face activities, that is, blended learning, rather than solely the web-based or face-to-face ones” (Bliuc et al., 2007, p. 239).

However, there are some contradictory findings in relation to the students’ satisfaction of blended learning. A study by Parkinson, Greene, Kim and Marioni (2003), concluded that students in the traditional classes had more positive feedback to a range of themes, including classroom climate, learning needs, learner efficacy, interaction, and appropriate format for the content, in comparison to blended learning students. However, the term blended learning in this study referred to a distance learning mode. Therefore, it could be likely that the results may be because there was a lack of face-to-face activities.

As the previous discussion in this section has showed, methodologies used by researchers when conducting blended learning research were often comparative. This comparison often involved comparing blended learning to online learning or to face-to-face learning. This research also commonly used case studies, surveys, as well as interviews. My study also uses some of these means of collecting data, namely case study and interviews, as detailed in Chapter 3.
2.1.7 Common benefits and limitations of blended learning

2.1.7.1 Benefits

Numerous benefits of blended learning are reported in the literature. For academic staff, administrators and institutions, benefits of blended learning often report on it being a cost-effective way to avoid overcrowded classrooms (Bahr & Bodrero, 2011), and as a means for institutions to save money and time by offering re-usable materials for students (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). As well, benefits also relate to being able to provide more flexible scheduling and increase support to learners at different stages of the learning process.

In regard to the benefits to students, which is the focus of this study, blended learning research also reports several benefits. Commonly researchers report that blended learning offers the “best of both worlds” (Morgan, 2002; Young, 2002). Some researchers suggest that for many learners, blended learning is a way to balance their independent learning in an online environment with human interaction in a face-to-face environment (Hartman, Dziuban & Moskal, 1999; Morgan, 2002). Further, that the blend of online learning and face-to-face learning, while helping students to improve social interaction, also enhances their motivation and engagement to courses. Some researchers, drawing on the online components in blended learning argue that these components offers similar benefits as in online learning around providing increased flexibility and convenience so that students can complete learning tasks from home and at time that best suit their schedules (De George-Walker & Keeffe, 2010, Tweedell, 2000). Some researchers also comment that for students with jobs, family or distance barriers, it provides better access to them by reducing constraints such as time, place or stress. According to Kistow (2011), flexibility and convenience were cited by the students as major advantages of blended learning programs.

For both faculty members and students, blended learning is also advocated on the grounds that it leads to improved student outcomes (Partridge et al., 2011). Partridge et al. (2011) reported that students in blended learning course performed better on exams, assignments, discussions, projects and other assessments. Another study at the University of Central Florida revealed that students in blended courses succeeded at rates of 97% compared to 94% in face-to-face courses and 92% in fully online courses (Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal, 2004). Similarly, the study of Lopez-Perez et al. (2011) revealed that blended learning influences the exam marks of the students positively.
In addition, some researchers comment that blended learning courses enable useful learning experience to students. The study by Ireland, Martindale, Johnson, Adams, Eboh and Mowatt (2009) indicated that the usefulness of blended learning, which referred to “useful to learning and understanding” (p. 128) was considered the students’ top rated experience. Moreover, blended learning is often reported in the literature as meeting student expectations for utilizing technology (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). For example, the view is expressed that students like to use these technologies to have opportunities to interact with their classmates online as well as in class, and that these interactions help promote their study. According to Graham, Allen and Ure (2005) blended learning also helps students to reduce costs such as travel costs or other educational costs, such as material costs.

2.1.7.2 Limitations

In spite of the many benefits reported in the literature, blended learning is also seen as posing challenges for learners, teachers, faculty members and institutions. For the lecturers, some researchers comment that it impacts on their workloads (Stacey & Gerbic, 2008) as it can be time consuming for lecturers to prepare lessons in this environment. This view is also supported by (Clark, 2011, p. 18) who comments that for faculty, “designing a blended delivery course is not as simple as merely introducing online components into a traditional course or a quick “cut and paste”, but rather it is a total instructional redesign.” Furthermore as suggested by a number of researchers, producing blended courses requires faculty to be able to use the technology effectively and to be able to provide ongoing technical support for their students when learning in these environments. Vaughan (2007) suggests that one of the risks for faculty is that they may have a “fear of losing control over the course, lower student evaluations, and an uneasiness about how this type of learning model fits into the culture of teaching, research, and service” (p. 88). Some researchers also report that the interaction between the lecturer and student is limited in blended learning environments and can lead to reduced student motivation in some cases.

Self-regulation has been reported as one of the main obstacles to blended learning (Graham, 2013). Researchers comment that participating in a blended learning course requires students to be very active and to manage their time well (Collis, 2003; Dziuban et al., 2004). Not all students have these skills (Kaleta, Garnham & Aycock, 2005) and some may assume that less face-to-face contact means less work and may encourage them to think that they can leave all the online work until the last minute. This passive attitude may cause negative effects on the learning process. In addition, some researchers comment that being able to learn in a blended
environment may put pressure on students who find it hard to deal with technology (Walters, 2008). In a survey in Ontario’s twenty four colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, approximately 10% of the students believed they lacked the computer and literacy skills to be successful in a blended learning course (Clark, 2011). Apart from the capability to use technologies, the technology hiccups such as the bad internet transmissions or other technical issues (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Usta & Ozdemir, 2007) were among obstacles to blended learning.

2.2 Blended learning in Vietnam and Hanoi Open University

This section of the chapter now turns attention to Vietnam and the policy context which recently advocated the use of ICT in higher education generally, and the use of blended learning environments specifically. As well it considers recent policy initiative at Hanoi Open University.

2.2.1 ICT Policy context in Vietnam

The Vietnamese government considers education a priority in the process of moving the country into the global community. Yet as described by Peeraer, Tran and Tran (2009) in their policy analysis of the efforts by the Vietnamese government to implement ICT, while there is “a high appreciation of ICT for education, (but) in practice, ICT is mainly used to replace existing teaching practice, in a very limited way” (p. 1). Furthermore, drawing on Selwyn’s (1999) research, this mismatch of rhetoric and reality in ICT policy is common and that underlying this mismatch is a technological determinist premise that ICT is inevitably beneficial.

Since the earlier 2000s, Vietnam has promoted the use of ICT in education and a number of government policies and guidelines have been developed supporting its implementation and widespread use in higher education. In Vietnam, policies and guidelines are issued by governmental departments, mainly the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), which is responsible for education and training in the government and for all levels of education (Tran, Vu & Sloper, 1995).

As shown in Figure 2.1, in 2000, the Ministry of Training and Education launched the ICT Masterplan which aimed over the period for 2001-2005 to set specific directions for information technology development and application in education (Peeraer et al., 2009). As shown in the conclusions of this Masterplan, ICT is seen as a key to improving not only education but also the country as a whole. “IT in education will make big changes in teaching and learning methods
and in educational management. These, in turn, will strengthen quality of education, create better human resources, and develop the country in general” (MOET, as cited in Peeraer et al., 2009, p. 7).

| Master Plan for Information Technology in Education for the period 2001-2005 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Directive 58 on enhancing the application and development of IT for the industrialization and modernization |
| Decision of PM on approval of Implementation of Directive 58 |
| Directive 29 on Enhancing Teaching, Training and Integrating ICT in Education for the period 2001-2005 |
| Decision of PM on approval of the developing IT human resources program to 2010 |
| Decision of PM on Approval of the Strategies of Developing ICT in Vietnam until 2010, Benchmarks for |
| 2020 |
| Decree on Information Technology Application in State Agencies’ Operations |
| Guidelines MOET to DOETs for enhancing the implementation of some activities on ICT |
| Directive 40 on the movement “Friendly School, Active Students” at secondary schools in the period 2008-2013 |
| Guidelines MOET to DOETs for IT tasks in school year 2008-2009 |

Figure 2.1 A Decade of ICT Policy Guidelines in Vietnam, adopted from Peeraer et al. (2009)

According to the Masterplan, one of the long term objectives for the integration of ICT was to meet the demands for educational reform in relation to content, teaching and learning methods, as well as in educational management (Peeraer et al., 2009). The priority of the Masterplan is the provision of ICT infrastructure in education and training. As a result, in April 2003, the Minister of Education and Training and the Minister of Post and Telemetrics signed an agreement on the EDU project. The aim of this project was to facilitate internet connection to senior high schools and fibre optic networks to some universities, so as to create the means for an e-learning program. In December 2004, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2008) launched an e-learning portal (http://www.edu.net.vn) to provide information on e-learning implementation.

In 2001, Directive 58 of the Government on Enhancing the Application and Development of Information Technology for the Industrialization and Modernization, ICT was seen as an object of education. Directive 29 of the Ministry of Education and Training was issued and mentioned that the core mission of education was to promote the use of ICT in education at all levels and in all programs (MOET, 2001). After that, Directive 55 of the Ministry of Education and
Training, focused on the integration of ICT in education, and shifts to the enhancement of teaching, and training by applying ICT in education (Peeraer et al., 2009). Based on Directive 55, teachers are encouraged to design their lectures or other teaching activities on a computer (MOET, 2008). Additionally, it aims to develop an e-learning database and library on EduNET, including multimedia materials, electronic lectures and virtual experiment software (MOET, 2008).

These above policies also put emphasis on implementing ICT as a new method of teaching and training to meet learning demands (MOET, 2008). As part of the ambition by the Vietnamese government to develop an information society, education was expected to provide online learning and teaching, electronic curriculum and content and e-lessons (MOET, 2007). Thus, e-learning and the development and use of e-lessons is put forward as the major goal of the integration of ICT in education, though there was no clear definition of what an e-lesson was (Peeraer et al., 2009).

Being supported and encouraged by government policies, educational institutions in Vietnam have made initial achievements in terms of ICTs and e-learning development. All schools and universities have websites for sharing information and for learning purposes. Resources such as lessons and tests are posted and shared online. There are network connections between universities and MOET (Pham, 2008). A number of universities have offered online learning programs for undergraduate students such as Hanoi Open University, Hanoi University of Technology, and Teachers’ University.

Blended learning has recently been introduced and integrated into Vietnamese institutions under international aid funding such as AusAID (VDIC, 2012). Although this project has successfully gained a number of achievements in the period of 2011-2015, it mostly emphasised the development of blended learning in industrial organisations to make them become more effective in sharing knowledge, building the capacity of their staff and delivering better development outcomes.

While a number of polices have been produced and some investment in ICT, progress towards the plans has been slow. In part this is because there has been limited provision made for the training of staff, and as well a lack of understanding of the complexities involved in implementing ICT. In fact, Vietnam is at the early stages of the use of ICT in education and blended learning.
Research around blended learning in Vietnam is very limited, although it should be noted that the amount of research seems to be increasing (Peeraer et al., 2009). More research on broad topics such as ICT integration in education, including the teacher’s use of ICT or the implementation of ICT in specific education programs, have been conducted. For example, Dinh (2006) investigated teachers’ points of view on factors which influenced their adoptions of ICTs in classroom practice. In another study, Nykvist, Lloyd and Vui (2003) focused on the engagement of ICT in Master level programs in a Vietnamese university.

It also needs to be noted that the research field may suffer because of the way that terms such as ‘blended learning’ and ‘e-learning’ are used interchangeably. Thus for example, research jointly conducted by the Government of the Netherlands and Vietnam’s Ministry of Health, examined e-learning in medical education (Churton, 2011). Yet this research may have been categorised as blended learning research. Discussion now turns to Hanoi Open University (HOU), the site of this study with the intention of outlining its efforts to implement ICT and blended learning.

2.2.2 Policies of Hanoi Open University

Hanoi Open University is a public university and was established in 1993 to implement different education programs including distance education (which is the key task) so as to provide access to education for more people (Hanoi Open University, n.d).

The University has eleven faculties, providing various full time courses in Information Technology, Telecommunications, Biotechnology, Tourism, Foreign Languages, Chinese, Law, Economics, Industrial Design, Finance and Banking. The University has 1087 teaching staff including full time as well as part time. The University is well known for its distance learning programs which serve as the base for training facilities in many provinces across the country. Through the development of programs over 20 years, the University has successfully contributed to the role of distance education in the national educational system.

Since then, the University has grown with 50,000 enrolments each year (Hanoi Open University, n.d) and is now a full member of the Association of Asian Open Universities. In recent times the university decided that it needed to respond to the world-wide trend of employing ICT in open and distance learning, and as a consequence the implementation of e-learning became a priority strategy. As outlined on the university website, e-learning was seen as a means to improve teaching and learning methods, to expand training courses, to assure the
quality of programs and to promote cooperative programs with international institutions (Hanoi Open University, n.d).

Since 2009, Hanoi Open University has officially run an e-learning program as a significant initiative. This program has been set up under the approval of the Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam, and considered an accredited training program. It is to be noted that being accredited is significant to this study. The program has attracted a growing number of learners. While officially the program is named “e-learning” it actually combines e-learning with face-to-face learning, and so can be defined as a blended learning program. The term “blended learning” is fairly new to Vietnam education compared to “e-learning” and this may be a reason why this term is not used. As well it could also be that this is the de-facto definition.

**Blended learning courses of Hanoi Open University**

There are four blended courses (subjects) running at Hanoi Open University. They are Accounting, Business Management, Finance and Banking, and Applied Information Technology. The four blended courses have a similar interface design (Mijares, 2012). While the literature suggests that the weightings of the online and face-to-face components can vary, this does not appear to be the case at this context. Generally 80% of these four courses are delivered online. The face-to-face component is much smaller, at around 20%.

These blended learning courses use a Learning Management System (LMS) named “Lop hoc cua toi” or “My class” in English (see Figure 2.2). When students sign into their accounts, they can access different links to information such as Personal Information, Message, Email, Regulation, My calendar, and Results, which appear on the left hand side of the screen. At the centre of the screen are links to subjects which are divided in two types: In-progress Subjects (Mon dang hoc) and Completed Subjects (Mon da hoc).
Figure 2.2 Image of the Interface of Online Classroom

Figure 2.3 shows a screen-shot of a particular in-progress course. The course is divided into a number of weeks. Each week specifies the learning outcomes that students need to achieve and has links to electronic lectures and materials. Each course also has a VClass, or an online conference component, in which teachers deliver specific content at set times.

Figure 2.3 Image of a Particular Subject with Links to Online Lectures and Materials
Figure 2.4 gives an example of the discussion forum in the LMS. There are parts for topics relating to learning processes and parts for general information such as announcements, instructions, news and events, and other comments.

As discussed previously in this chapter, Web 2.0 tools accessible via this LMS, enable users to create their own account, search for information, write posts, make comments, and upload images during their studying process.

In sum, it is important to note that although the progress of developing blended learning programs in Vietnam may be somewhat slow, it appears that Hanoi Open University is making steady progress in this regard.

At Hanoi Open University, there has been very little research on blended learning. Given the university’s interest in the development of such a program, with the plan to add more courses in different majors and to enhance the infrastructures to promote use of ICT in distance learning courses, there is a need for research. While there is considerable research around students’ perspective of blended learning, this research has not been conducted in the context of Vietnam. Thus, a study which explores students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning in Vietnamese will contribute to research literature.
2.3 Research findings regarding expectations and experiences

2.3.1 Introduction

Research around blended learning generally and students’ dispositions to blended learning in particular, have mainly been conducted in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia, where blended learning has been used since 2000. In the main, a positive disposition towards blended learning has been concluded in these studies (Adam & Nel, 2009; Drysdale et al., 2013; Mitchell & Honore, 2007; Sharpe et al., 2006). For example, Cheung et al. (2010) concluded that both online learning and blended learning classes met students’ expectations although there were still some negative experiences such as technology “hiccups” and a sense of feeling lost in Cyberspace.

The reason why most research has found high levels of student satisfaction with blended learning options could be because, by definition, blended learning encompasses the combination of the best of online learning and face-to-face learning. As mentioned by Graham (2013), “many learners value both the richness of interactions in a face-to-face environment and the flexibility, convenience, and reduced opportunity costs associated with online learning” (p. 18).

Initial research into blended learning focused on defining blended learning and identifying the benefits and challenges it offered. As the research field matured, the focus of research moved more so to learner outcomes, the interaction in these environments and student perceptions, and experiences. Drysdale et al. (2013) suggests that research around dispositions has been the second most commonly researched area of dissertations studying blended learning. They further suggest that the motivation for this research around understanding blended learning from the students’ points of view is a way to evaluate the success and effectiveness of blended learning. Thus, learners’ expectations, experiences and satisfaction or points of view are among topics that many research studies mentioned.

There has been considerable research investigating student perspectives of blended learning, and what are their expectations and experiences. I report on this research in the next section.

2.3.2 Students’ expectations of blended learning

Clarifying students’ expectations became an important way for researchers to assess students’ satisfaction of the training courses. According to Press (as cited in Pinto & Anderson, 2013, p. 3), expectations are “assumptions of performance” that are typically evidence-based stemming
from three sources: personal past experience, the experience of other people, and what is seen as customary. As suggested by Pinto and Anderson (2013), the expectations students bring into the learning environment were often preconceived expectations formed prior to actual knowledge or experience. However, the preconceived expectations of student may vary depending on factors such as rumours, personal experiences, peer experiences, and reputation of instructor. In their study, Pinto and Anderson (2013) confirmed that students formed their expectations about online or blended learning courses in relation to a wide range of topics such as technology, course content, difficulty level, and communication with instructor and peers.

For the most part, research has concluded that flexibility, interaction, and the use of technology are common expectations. For example, flexibility in time and place was found in the study by Paechter, Maier and Macher (2010) who found that students’ expectations of the flexibility in the choice of learning strategies and the exchange of knowledge with peers were positively related to learning achievements. Interaction, especially among peers was reported by Pinto and Anderson (2013) as well as Paechter et al. (2010) as another expectation of students. Furthermore, Paechter et al. (2010) commented that expectations revolved around ease and speed in exchange of information and knowledge among peers, and the support of cooperative learning and group work with other course participants. Pinto and Anderson (2013) confirmed that students expected to communicate more with each other in blended learning course. It is important to note that students mainly expected blended learning courses to be a rewarding experience, however, there were some negative views reported such as blended courses being less engaging than traditional ones (Pinto & Anderson, 2013).

The importance of expectations was significantly stressed in The Sloan Consortium’s *Pillar Reference Manual on Student Satisfaction*. It was among five factors leading to student satisfaction with online learning (The Sloan Consortium, 2002). Wu, Tennyson and Hsia (2010) indicated that performance expectations, which were impacted on by students’ computer self-efficacy, system functionality, course content, and interaction between students and instructor, significantly affected learning satisfaction. However, from another perspective, Vaughan (2007) considered student expectations as one of the challenges of implementing blended learning courses. For example, students who are new to blended learning often believe that fewer classroom sessions means less course work.

Although some research has concluded that expectation is one of main factors affecting students’ satisfaction in blended learning (Wu et al., 2010; Jackson, Jones & Rodriguez, 2010),
there is still a lack of research and rich descriptions of what students expected before attending blended learning courses and how their expectations are formed.

2.3.3 Students’ experiences of blended learning

There has been a considerable amount of research around students’ experiences of blended learning courses. Studies have shown that students’ experiences of blended learning course were mostly positive (Akkoyunlu & Yilmaz-Soylu, 2006, 2008; Balci & Soran, 2009).

For example, Balci and Soran (2009) conducted research at the University of Turkey which observed students’ opinions on blended learning. One of the results was that a majority of students considered blended learning enjoyable. The mean score obtained from the students’ response to the question of whether blended learning application was enjoyable and appropriate was above 3.00 and scaled as high. Similarly, in a longitudinal cohort study with three phases, Ireland et al. (2009) used various instruments including questionnaire, focus group and interviews to collect data in order to evaluate students’ knowledge, attitude and experiences of blended learning courses. One of their results showed that many of the 36 students had positive experiences and positive attitudes toward blended learning. For example, 22% strongly agreed and 50% agreed that the lectures were useful in aiding understanding of the module (Ireland et al., 2009).

In other contexts such as Asia or the Middle East, previous studies have reached similar conclusions. Zhao (2008) examined students’ perceptions of a blended learning program in South China Normal University in Guangzhou and confirmed the positive experiences of students in the research context of China. The same attitude was presented in the case of Arab Open University in Kuwait, when most of the students expressed their satisfaction with their blended learning experiences (Sharafuddin & Allani, 2011).

When exploring blended learning experiences, researchers usually paid attention to components of the modality including online components and face-to-face components and the level of interaction. These key areas of research frame the ensuing discussion.

2.3.3.1 Students’ experiences of online components of blended learning

In the main, previous findings of students’ experiences of the online components of blended learning courses were positive. For example, Kistow’s 2011 study revealed that in general, students enjoyed working in an online environment. Other studies investigated particular aspects of the blended learning course, such as the course content, the online resources or the
online design. For example, Usta and Ozdemir (2007) in a Turkish university, reported on participants’ positive experiences of the course content within the blended learning environment. Participants also commented on ease of access to this content. In regard to online resources, the study in this Turkish context also found they were convenient and useful to the students. Positive opinions of students were also acknowledged in the study of Sharafuddin and Allani (2011) with most survey responses agreeing or strongly agreeing that teaching materials including books, course guides and audiovisual aids were efficient.

In addition, current research has also paid attention to the design of the online environment believing that it plays a vital role in influencing students’ learning experiences (Kanna & Kurup, 2012). Delialioglu and Yildirim (2007) in their study revealed that half of the students commented favourably on the course websites. One of the features of blended learning courses that students liked the most were user-friendly graphics.

Virtual classrooms are also a part of online components of blended learning. According to Parker and Martin (2010), “Virtual classrooms are online environments that enable students and instructors to communicate synchronously using audio, video, text chat, interactive whiteboard, application sharing, instant polling etc.,” (p. 93). Some research suggests that the use of these classrooms can reinforce the notion of community, and improve the quality of the instruction and the flexibility in course delivery (Parker & Martin, 2010).

In sum, the research literature has generally reported positive results relating to students’ experiences of online components, including course content, online materials and the website design of blended learning.

2.3.3.2 Students’ experiences of face-to-face components of blended learning

Research literature on students’ experiences of blended learning also indicated positive experiences of face-to-face components. Ireland et al. (2009) commented about the benefits of lectures as they promoted the direct communication between students and instructors, students and peers. The study concluded that although the participants appreciated their virtual campus experiences, they did not want to replace face-to-face lectures with a fully online learning course. According to El Mansour and Mupinga (2007), it is the physical presence of the instructors which made students’ experiences of face-to-face lessons positive.

This is similar to the findings of Balci and Soran (2009) which found the face-to-face environment more advantageous for improving their interaction with other students and the
instructors. In fact, 90% of students preferred the face-to-face environment over the online environment when they were asked to choose (Balci & Soran, 2009). Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz-Soylu (2008) suggest that face-to-face sessions promote the social interaction between students and others. During the study by Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz-Soylu (2006, p. 48), the researchers observed that “face to face classes forced the students to be actively engaged and connected to the process”. They also suggested that face-to-face learning was familiar to the students and that it was quicker for students to interact in this environment such as getting answers for their questions from the instructors or peers. As well, they felt that this kind of interaction was limited in e-learning due to the physical distances.

2.3.3.3 Students’ experiences of the interaction in blended learning

Interaction is commonly agreed by researchers to be an important aspect of successful blended learning environments. Interaction can occur in face-to-face components as well as online components through tools such as a discussion forum, a chat room, email, or a virtual classroom. Interaction can also occur between students and students, students and instructors and students and course content according to Moore’s framework (Moore, 1989). According to Moore (1989), while student-student interaction or student-instructor refers to all communications between and among peers or between instructor and students that occur throughout the course, the student-content interaction is the interaction of students with content that results in changes in understanding, perceptions and cognitive structures. According to Wang (2009), “through interaction with the instructors, peers and course content, students have the opportunities to negotiate meaning and connect new concepts to previous knowledge,” (p. 589).

Generally, research has shown that students’ experiences of the interaction between students and instructors and between students and students were quite high and effective (Usta & Ozdemiz, 2007). In relation to the interaction between students and content, varied findings have been found. In the following section I present the main results of previous research regarding each of these three interactions.

Interaction between students and instructors

Instructors are important to students’ learning engagement and they are often the ones who give advice and support to students so that they can complete their study. In a blended learning environment, it may be more difficult for students to receive this level of interaction and support
compared to traditional learning modality. Therefore, some researchers suggest these environments need to provide more opportunities for interaction (Wang, 2009).

Most students have a high opinion of the interaction with instructors in blended learning environments. According to Farley et al. (2011), 96% of the students in a blended finance course thought that interaction between students and instructors was valuable. Likewise, in the study by Wang (2009), students felt that this interaction enabled them to understand the course content, construct their knowledge and give them more practice. Similarly, the study of Sharafuddin and Allani (2011) as well as Usta and Ozdemir (2007), all supported the idea that students experienced the interaction with instructors effectively.

**Interaction between students and students**

It is a generally held belief that students benefit from interacting with their peers during the learning process. By sharing experiences, as well as knowledge, students can improve their learning outcomes. In addition, social connection is seen to enhance their engagement.

In their study, So and Brush (2008) reported that students with high levels of collaborative learning tended to be highly satisfied with the course. Additionally, they suggested there was a positive relationship between collaborative learning and social presence. They suggest that this may be because “the feeling of connection and closeness with other students affects individual motivation to engage in academic activities” (So & Brush, 2008, p. 329).

It is commonly argued that students’ experiences of the interaction with peers were positive. Usta and Ozdemir (2007) showed in their study that there was high interaction between students and their classmates as the students’ opinion about the matter was found at a quite high level (M=3,97). In the study, the findings revealed that the students strongly agreed with the item “I could share what I learned in this programme with the other students” (Usta & Ozdemir, 2007, p. 4). In Kistow’s (2011) study, a majority of students stressed the need for the interaction with peers and the sharing of experiences, knowledge and skills.

Interaction using an asynchronous discussion forum and a synchronous chat room are considered two of the most common communication forms used in blended learning environments, especially the asynchronous discussion forums (Weinel & Hu, 2007). The key difference between these two forms is that discussion forums do not require an immediate response such as required in a chat room. Thus postings in the discussion forums are stored online and can be reviewed later. To some researchers, this capacity enables learning to be
convenient as well as improving learning experiences (Salazar, 2010). However, the participant presence in the chat room, arguably created by the immediacy of responses, may be lacking in the asynchronous environment (Weinel & Hu, 2007). To the contrary, some researchers (Akkoyunlu & Yilmaz-Soylu, 2006) argue that students preferred studying in the asynchronous setting more than in synchronous settings.

As well some researchers suggest that discussion forums may be more effective in terms of reflection and learning (Weinel & Hu, 2007). Lyons and Evans (2013), suggest that use of a discussion forum can enhance student learning experiences. In their study, 67% of students in a post-study survey agreed or strongly agreed that it was valuable and enabled them to think more critically about the course material.

**Interaction between students and course content**

The capacity of students to be able to engage with course content is also generally agreed to be a vital part of learning. It is reported that students are selective and intentional in their interaction with course content (Murray, Pérez, Geist & Hedrick, 2013) with students tending to choose to use the course materials which they perceived to be directly related to achieving high scores. Lecture notes are among the materials which are usually seen as very useful by the students. According to Sharpe et al. (2006), 94.7% of the participants of a 2004 survey at Metroville University on various activities on Blackboard, found the downloading of lecture notes useful or extremely useful.

Time constraints are reported as the main reason why students selectively access course content (Murray et al., 2013). This study also noted that supplementary content was largely ignored by students, as they tended to rely upon instructors to provide relevant course content (Murray et al.).

**2.3.4 The match of students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning**

Previous research, such as studies by Cheung et al. (2010) and El Mansour and Mupinga (2007), have stated that in the main students’ experiences somehow meet their expectations. Other studies such as those of Zhao and Yuan (2010), and Sharafuddin and Allani (2011) also concluded that students were generally satisfied with their blended learning courses. This satisfaction may lie in the combination of online learning and face-to-face learning (Graham, 2013) as it enables students to enjoy the advantages of online learning while still feeling engaged in the learning process through the maintenance of the social connection between
students and other parties such as instructors and peers. While this study does consider the possible match of experiences to expectations, this is not its prime focus.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has reported on research which informs this study. It has explored the development of blended learning in higher education, and discussed issues in definition, and the impact of Web 2.0 tools. It also discussed the methodologies used in previous research, including the use of case study and interviews that are used in this study. Benefits and limitations of blended learning were also discussed.

This chapter has also described the Vietnamese policy context and the implementation of ICT and blended learning at Hanoi Open University which frames this study.

In addition, this chapter has reported on research around student expectations and experiences in blended learning environments, highlighting the importance of interaction. Most of this research has been conducted in western countries and not Vietnam.

The next chapter turns to discuss the research design of this study.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the research design I used for this study. In the first section, I describe my orientation or world view, which underpins it. In the second section, I describe the research design, including the research questions and the selection of case study methodology. I then turn to the third section, where I describe the specific data collection methods I used, followed in the fourth section, by my choice of data interpretation methods.

3.1 My orientation

In this part of the chapter, I deliberately choose to use the first person as a means of emphasising my role within this study. As Patton (2002) suggests, using first person enables me to “acknowledge(s) the humanity of both self and others and implies relationship, mutuality, and genuine dialogue” (p. 64). This cannot be as readily achieved through the use of third person as it is a more formal voice, a more academic voice, which can create distance between the researcher and those she researches and can encourage an abstract perspective to the study, rather than one which emphasises that it is situated in a particular context. In this study, I designed it, I chose the participants to be involved, I chose how to collect data, and how to analyse it. It is through my eyes, that is, through me as the ‘human instrument’ that this study was enacted.

Writing this chapter in the first person also communicates my self-awareness of my role in it. It is about being reflexive, having an ongoing conversation with myself about the role that I have in this study, and “to undertake an ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). As Patton goes on to suggest, being reflexive is about being “attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 65).

I bring many perspectives to this study. One perspective I bring to it, is that of a Vietnamese woman. I have understanding of our culture and our broad way of seeing the world and the ways that we often operate within it. In Vietnam, our culture focuses on being respectful to one’s parents, superiors and those in authority. I was raised to believe that it is important to be positive and that being critical was something to be frowned upon. I assumed therefore, when designing the interview questions, that participants were likely to be reserved and perhaps somewhat unwilling to give a response that could be interpreted as a negative view. Designing a set of question prompts, that I could then use to redirect the participants, was important to this study.
I also look at Hanoi Open University’s desire to introduce ICT through this same perspective. Vietnam is not a rich country. Trying to implement ICT was always going to be difficult. As well, I knew that what was achievable in this particular context would be very different from what could be achieved in other contexts.

Another perspective I bring to this study arises from my employment at Hanoi Open University. In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has encouraged the use of information and communication technologies in educational institutions by issuing legal documents and policies to support the implementation and development process (see Chapter 1). As a result, a number of universities and educational institutions have placed considerable emphasis on the integration of information and communication technologies in their training and education programs, including the use of e-learning or blended learning.

I knew that Hanoi Open University had been trying to bring about change for some time and was familiar with polices that it had developed around ICT use in distance education. From 2009, Hanoi Open University had begun to implement its blended learning program and was among the first to deliver programs of that kind in Vietnam. I supported the university’s efforts and believed that in some ways it was a natural progression from being a distance education provider. While working at the university I was aware that a number of students could not finish their study as they needed to work. I thought that blended learning courses could probably enable them to do so. As a mother, I was only too aware of the issues around juggling family and work commitments. I thought that blended learning could ease this conflict.

To this study I also bring my world view. According to Creswell (2009), a worldview is a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds. Guba (1990) in a similar vein suggests it is a “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (p. 17). Thus a worldview impacts on the whole research process including its focus, questions asked, as well as choice of design and specific data collection and analysis methods. Creswell (2009) suggests there are four broad types of world views: post positivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism, with each having a different way of seeing the world and acting on it.

I broadly support a constructivist world view. Researchers who hold this view often seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2009) or to understand the context or setting of the participants (Crotty, 1998). To Guba and Lincoln (2004), constructivists advocate that there is no objective reality and that a single version of truth cannot
be known. Rather they argue that realities are constructed or made by individuals and groups. The realities they argue are always open to interpretation so researchers then seek to interpret the meanings others have about the world. Constructivism, according to Guba and Lincoln (2004) involves understanding and reconstructing the constructions that people hold.

Broadly influenced by this world view, I focused this study on a natural setting, the ‘world’ I inhabit; the university in which I work. I used myself as ‘the human instrument’ to study the participants within this context, using purposive sampling as the means to select participants best suited to my purpose. I chose interview as a means to understand their perspectives of blended learning and used inductive analysis, analysis drawn from the data itself to make findings and I consulted with participants in order to ensure that my interpretation of their views was appropriate. I now turn to describe these decisions in further detail.

3.2 The research design

This section is concerned with the research design I selected for this study. It explains the research questions I developed as well as the selection of the research site and participants.

3.2.1 Setting research questions

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), “the researcher has an idea of the parts of the phenomena that are not well understood and knows where to look for these things – in which settings, among which actors. And the researcher usually has some initial ideas about how to gather information (p.17). I saw first-hand the many changes that were taking place at Hanoi Open University and developed an interest in investigating students’ perspectives of blended learning further.

Building on this initial interest, I then set about formulating specific questions to frame my study, using the research literature (see Chapter 2) as the main source of ideas. A considerable part of this research focused on perceptions of the blended learning environment, and benefits to learning. I realised that while there had been a large amount of research, very little had been conducted in Vietnam.

The question written for this study is restated below:

What are students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning programs at Hanoi Open University?
The question is broken down into the following three questions. These questions have a number of prompts in dot points identified from the research literature which I developed as a means to prompt a response in a particular direction if needed.

- What are the students’ expectations of blended learning programs? (Possible prompts: flexibility and convenience, the use of technology, the interaction…)
- What are the students’ experiences in blended learning programs? (Possible prompts: experiences of online component, face-to-face component, the interaction…)
- How do the students’ experiences meet their expectations?

3.2.2 The qualitative nature of the research

Given my broad orientation to the constructivist world view in which I value understanding how people construct their own versions of reality and my specific interest in learners’ points of view relating to their blended learning courses at Hanoi Open University, I chose qualitative research methods. According to Creswell (2009), “qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Similarly, Johnson and Christensen (2008) argue that “qualitative research is used when little is known about a topic or phenomenon or when one wants to discover or learn more about it. It is commonly used to understand people’s experiences and to express their perspectives” (p. 33). It is a type of research which “relies primarily on non-numerical data” (Johnson & Christensen, 2000, p. 312) such as text, image, audio or video. Qualitative approaches also seemed appropriate to achieve the objective of the study. A quantitative approach, which relies mainly on numeric data, and not verbal description, may not have provided these answers (Creswell & Clark, 2004).

3.2.3 Selection of case study as the research strategy

A research strategy is like a master plan for the proposed study (Merriam, 1988). I chose case study as the research strategy for this study. Case study is also seen as a means for recounting through the participants’ own eyes and using their own words. According to Yin (2009), cases studies are commonly used as a research method in education. Typically a case study is an "in depth analysis of a single case or a small number of cases" (Creswell, 1998, p. 65) and “can be very informative in providing a rich description of a context” (Bliuc et al., 2007, p. 242). Case studies take place in natural settings (Yin, 1990) and are concerned with offering detailed accounts, of the particular case, and are less interested in generalisation (Stake, 1994). The use of case study method to explore students’ points of view on blended programs at Hanoi Open
University also seems to be appropriate because it can be useful in identifying important aspects of students’ experience and rendering an insight into the contribution of blended learning to the students’ studying outcomes.

In this study, I selected Hanoi Open University’s blended learning program to be a “unit of analysis” (Yin, 2009, p. 29). In fact, this study of thirteen participants constitutes one single case study. As blended learning is an under-researched area in Vietnam, and as the objective of the study is to explore the expectation and experience of students, it can be seen to meet the requirements of an exploratory case study (Yin, 2009).

3.2.4 Selecting the site and research participants

3.2.4.1 Research site

I chose Hanoi Open University as the research site for the study as I was working at this site. I saw working from this site as an advantage to the study in terms of understanding the complexity of change being undertaken. As well I had first-hand knowledge of the site including its policies and procedures and knew, from prior experience, that The Management Board encouraged research to be conducted for the development of the university in particular and for national education in general. Thus I thought there would not be any difficulty in gaining access to the site. I acknowledge that having this degree of familiarity with the site can make it difficult to distance myself from the study (Yin, 1984). It is to be noted that I was employed in an administration capacity, thus I had no influence on the participants. As such, I felt that there were no ethical issues in this regard.

As previously discussed, Hanoi Open University is one of the first higher education institutions in Vietnam to implement a blended learning program. Established in 2009, the program has overcome initial concerns and has increased the number of enrolments. The main function of the university is to provide distance education services, to meet the learning demands of an increasing number of students and to contribute to boosting the future labour workforce.

Hanoi Open University currently has 11 departments and many satellite training centres in other provinces all over Vietnam. More than 50,000 are enrolled in the university in a range of programs such as business, finance and banking, languages, law, computer sciences, telecommunications, tourism and hospitality, and industrial design. The university is well-known for the quality of its open learning courses and for the effort to modernize. It is also a
member of The Executive Board of The Association of Asian Open University (AAOU) with a lot of cooperation activities in education and training in the region.

The Centre of E-learning, previously known as the E-learning Program, was opened in 2009 as a step to modernize the distance education program and to adapt to the new learning demand of students. The Centre is mainly responsible for setting up distance learning courses under e-learning modes, and cooperating with other partners in and outside Vietnam to develop and implement e-learning programs. The department now has more than 5000 undergraduate students in four main courses: Business Management, Accounting, Finance and Banking, and Applied Information Technology.

Programs at the Centre have both online and offline sessions. Content is mainly delivered online, however, for each course, there is one to two sessions that learners have face-to-face. This matches current world trends in which e-learning and traditional learning are combined, and in doing so is often seen as enabling ‘the best’ from both forms. According to the Science Council of Hanoi Open University (Hanoi Open University, n.d), and based on research on e-learning programs all over the world, this is the most suitable e-learning program for students in the context of Vietnam. Therefore, as mentioned previously, the program is actually in blended learning mode, in spite of the fact that the name remains as “e-learning”. In the main, these face-to-face sessions are for meeting with lecturers for revision. Assessment of each course is proctored via a test which students undertake using pen and paper and within the presence of examiners.

I sought approval to conduct the study with the Rector of Hanoi Open University and the Head of the Centre of E-learning. A letter giving an overview of the study and formally requesting access to the site was sent. Approval was readily given giving me access to the research setting and to possible participants (see Appendices).

3.2.4.2 Research participants

Given the focus of this research on student expectations and actual experiences of blended learning, I decided that a small number of participants were appropriate for this study. In this way as well, I thought it more likely that I would be able to develop a more detailed examination, or a thicker description.

I chose to focus on undergraduate students in the belief that they would be more willing to participate rather than higher degree students who may be more pressed for time. I also used
“purposeful sampling” (Mertens, 2005, p. 317), to select research participants that I believed were more experienced and also more likely to participate. I decided to focus on second year students as I thought they had more potential to provide thoughtful information on the course compared to first year students who had only limited experiences. Moreover, I thought that second year students were more likely to join the project than third or four years who could be overloaded by their study.

I posted a recruitment advertisement, with support from the administration team, on the website of the Centre of E-learning, Hanoi Open University, asking for second year undergraduate students to act as participants in this study. Thirteen students contacted me indicating their willingness to participate. I thought this number met the purpose of this study and would be manageable. Thus, these thirteen students became the focus for this study. The demographic information of the thirteen participants is shown in Table 3.1.

\[
\begin{array}{|p{3cm}|p{3cm}|p{1cm}|p{10cm}|}
\hline
\textbf{Pseudonym} & \textbf{Gender} & \textbf{Age} & \textbf{Course} \\
\hline
Hai & Male & 32 & Business Management \\
Lan & Female & 23 & Business Management \\
Quoc & Male & 29 & Business Management \\
Thanh & Male & 36 & Business Management \\
Phung & Female & 23 & Business Management \\
Lam & Male & 34 & Business Management \\
Quan & Male & 29 & Business Management \\
An & Female & 28 & Accounting \\
Mai & Female & 37 & Accounting \\
Thai & Male & 22 & Applied Information Technology \\
Minh & Male & 25 & Applied Information Technology \\
Hien & Female & 46 & Finance and Banking \\
Nga & Female & 24 & Finance and Banking \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

The section is concerned with the selection of methods for data collection and analysis. Although these processes are interconnected (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1980), I discuss them
separately for procedural ease, beginning with data collection and then followed by data analysis.

3.3.1 Data collection

Collecting the data for this study became somewhat problematic. I had initially intended to conduct two interviews with each of the 13 participants. The first interview would focus mainly on broad expectations of blended learning and the second interview would focus more on experience. This was not possible because of the timing of the academic year in Vietnam which did not coincide with that in Australia. As a result, I decided to conduct one interview, but one which would include both foci of the study. I thought this method of data collection would allow me to obtain the information I needed to answer the research questions.

Interview is a common method used to collect data in qualitative research and case study. According to Denscombe (2007), interview is a suitable method when the researcher needs to gain insights into people’s opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences. Patton (1980) comments similarly that interviews are used “to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (p. 196). As argued by Marshall and Rossman (2006, p. 102), interviews may enable the researcher to “understand the meaning that every day activities hold for people”. I thought that interviews might give me in-depth data and that by valuing the way participants responded, the conversation between interviewer and interviewee might flow naturally. In this way, I hoped that more of their stories of their blended expectations and experiences might be revealed. Interviews are probably the most flexible method of data collection because adjustments can be made during the interview itself (Denscombe, 2007).

I spent considerable time preparing for the interviews, writing the questions, practising the questions and reviewing them prior to conducting them. I also checked equipment such as the computer and recording device as the interviews were to be conducted through the internet using Skype, and I wanted to prevent any interruption during the actual interviews.

The interview questions were based on the research questions and focused on participants’ perceptions of blended learning, their expectations and experiences (such as the interaction, and the use of technology). I used Patton’s (1980) descriptions of different types of questions, such as feeling and experience type of questions, to inform the development of questions. I decided to use semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1990) as I felt this would enable the participants to develop their own ideas as they saw fit. Semi-structured interview are often used with the aim of “discovery” rather than “checking” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 176). In brief, the interview
questions focused on three main issues, including students’ expectations of the blended learning program, students’ experiences of the program and then the match between their experiences and their initial expectations. The detail of the interview questions are shown in Appendix 4.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions with the 13 students. Each interview took place for about 30 minutes. During the process, I recorded the conversation, as well as took notes of the content in case there was something wrong with the recording. I then transcribed the recorded contents. In the main, the interviews were conducted similarly. I opened each interview with a general conversation in order to put the participant at ease and tried to establish rapport with each participant and to keep the interview running smoothly. I conducted each interview individually which is perhaps easier to arrange and control (Denscombe, 2007). In addition, with only one interviewee talking at a time, there was little difficulty in transcribing a recorded interview. During the process, I tried to gain trust from the participants (Fontana & Frey, 1994) and keep the interviews flowing. Towards the end of the interview, I asked the participants for confirmation of key points and reminded them that a hard copy would be forthcoming for them to check and to make changes as they saw fit. I then thanked each participant for their contribution and concluded each interview.

The language used during the interview process was Vietnamese because not all the students could speak English fluently. I also felt that the students would feel more comfortable using their own language. Later these interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participants for member checking to preserve the original content and avoid any misunderstanding (Mertens, 2005). Transcripts were then translated into English.

I ensured that ethical considerations were taken into account when designing, implementing and reporting on this study. This study was approved by the RMIT Ethics Committee (see Appendices). To ensure the interviewees’ anonymity, I assigned pseudonyms (see Table 3.1) as described earlier. I carefully explained the interview purpose and the process which would be used and informed participants that they could withdraw at any time. During the interview, I also advised the participants that they could refuse to answer questions they thought could pose risks to their study. I also reminded them that the data collected from the interview would be kept in a safe place and would be destroyed after 7 years.

In this study, the interviews, as noted were conducted through Skype, a common application which allows people to make video calls through the internet and using this method enabled me to conduct interviews with participants despite the geographical distance between us. Skype is
now gaining recognition as a new data collection method (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Hanna, 2012). The advantages which this new method offers include the possibility to record video as well as voice that can benefit researchers during their data analysis process. As well, as the interviews are conducted “at a distance” this may make it easier for interviewees to choose not to continue (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010). With the development of the technology, the quality of the interviews through Skype was good, with clear video and sound. In the main, the interviews were conducted quite smoothly except one which was interrupted due to the quality of the internet transmission.

3.3.2 Data analysis

This discussion is concerned with the selection of data analysis methods used for this study. It is the process which “involves making sense out of text and image data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). Data analysis tends to be an ongoing and iterative in qualitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2010).

Initial processing of data

As stated previously, the interviews conducted in Vietnamese, were later transcribed and translated. I used the process of transcription to review the data based on the original recording. After that, I then translated the interview data back into Vietnamese and sent it to the participants for checking.

Back-up copies of the transcripts, as suggested by Denscombe (2007) were made. Although this was time-consuming, I thought it was a secure way to avoid any loss or damage which could affect the research process. I then worked mainly with the copied files, as the originals were kept in a safe place for privacy reasons. In addition, I organized the transcriptions of the data so that there were spaces at the right margin of the paper for me to add notes relevant to the text. Furthermore, transcriptions were also given a serial number which allowed me to move back or forth through the data during the analysis process.

Specific analytical strategies

In order to ensure that “the researcher’s explanation of the data should emerge from a careful and meticulous reading of the data” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 287), transcriptions were read in line with the notes taken during the interviews. In this way it would be possible for me to revise any relevant factors that could affect the understanding of the data. I also paid attention to
interviewees’ silences during the interview. It has been suggested by Denscombe (2007) that silences and spaces might have important meaning for the analysis of qualitative data.

By reading, re-reading and looking closely at the data, I was then able to divide the data into meaningful analytical units. The literature review, which had identified several key themes in relation to blended learning, also served as a valuable means of categorizing data. After that, I coded the data based on the meaningful segments. According to Johnson and Christensen (2004), “coding is the process of marking segments of data (usually text data) with symbols, descriptive words, or category names” (p. 502). In other words, the coding involves two processes, labeling the data and categorizing data. I continued to categorize the data until all of the data had been included.

There were times when I went back and forth between stages or steps. This was the normal process of data analysis. As explained by Denscombe (2007), the data analysis in qualitative research tended to be iterative with stages being revisited as part of what was called a “data analysis spiral” (Creswell, 1998; Dey, 1993).

3.4 Interpretation

This section is concerned with my efforts to make sense of and draw conclusions from the data that had been gathered and analyzed (Patton, 1987).

3.4.1 Explaining the data

At this stage, I began to look for key themes and topics to serve as a framework for the discussion (Merriam, 1988). It is important for the researcher to identify the relationships between the categories of data, or to be aware of patterns within the data (Denscombe, 2007). I generated an initial list of themes, ordered them and then checked them against the data.

I then moved to the writing stage, using text to explain the key themes. In the main, I continued to write and review the writing until a rough draft was completed. The rough draft was read several times and then matched again with all the data. Changes were made to the draft where applicable. This process of writing, review and comparison to the data continued until I was satisfied that I had produced a reasonable analysis.
3.4.2 Criteria for trustworthiness of the study

I then used a range of strategies to ensure the credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability of the study. These are described below.

Credibility

As described by Denscombe (2007) credibility or validity refers to the accuracy and precision of the data. To assure the credibility of the study, I asked the participants to check the interview transcripts during the data analysis process. This assisted me to see whether I had conveyed the idea intended in the transcript translation and whether the themes I developed spoke their story. This way of member checking helped ensure the value of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the accuracy of the study. As advised by Denscombe (2007) as well as Lincoln and Guba (1985), I kept an audit trail. This means the study is open for examination by other researchers to ensure that it fairly represented the participants.

Transferability

Transferability relates to the ability of the findings of the study to explain similar phenomena in other context (Denscombe, 2007). It is clear that with the small number of participants, the findings of this study could not be generalized to a larger population, although they may be used to inform it. The rich information will provide readers with understanding about the case study, “something that is particularly valuable in terms of the transferability of findings” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 300). Being a case study, the study could help to generate ideas about the topic and thus could assist those who aim to do further research.

Confirmability

This aspect refers to the absence of bias in the research. I engaged in “critical self-reflection about the potential bias” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 249). Moreover, as suggested by Denscombe (2007), I approached the data analysis process with an open mind, to seek alternative possible explanations of the data and to avoid missing data which was significant to the findings.
3.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has reported on the research process selected for the study. It began by discussing my orientation and worldview which influenced the overall design of the research. Then it moved to explore the selection of case study as the framework. As well, it discussed the data collection methods selected, including the use of interview and the data analysis methods selected, including coding and categorization. Finally, it has included discussion of the interpretation phase of the study including methods used to ensure its trustworthiness.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

This chapter reports on the findings in relation to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. As outlined in Chapter 3, 13 students participated in this research. This will be reported as a single case study in order to gain a detailed picture of students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning. For procedural ease, this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the case study, and provides a short narrative of each of the 13 participants who contributed to it. This is followed in the second section by an exploration of their expectations of blended learning. This particular discussion is organized by key themes which emerge from the data. The third section then explores their actual experiences, followed in the fourth section where possible link between participants’ expectations and experiences are described.

Due to the small sample size, all the analyses and discussion in this thesis are only tentative, and cannot be generalized to a broader context without further research. The analyses are also descriptive in nature, and no statistical tests were conducted to establish any quantitative correlations among the factors under investigation.

4.1 Introducing the case study

The findings of this study are reported as a single case study. As described by Merriam (1998), a case study is a thing, a single entity or a unit around which there are boundaries and can be a person, a class, a program, a school or any specific policy. In this study, the blended learning program of Hanoi Open University is considered a single case study. This single case study involves 13 participants who were all students in blended learning programs at HOU in 2013. These 13 participants (7 males and 6 females) were enrolled in four different programs (Accounting, Finance and Banking, Business Management and Applied Information Technology). This information was presented as Table 3.1. Data collected for this case study came from a single Skype enabled interview with each participant (See Appendix 4). As briefly discussed in Chapter 3, I recognize that conducting only one interview, while a detailed one, is a limitation of the study. In the next section, I provide a brief narrative about each of the 13 participants as means of orientating the reader to those involved in this study.

- Hai

Hai is enrolled in the Business Management course. He is 32, married and works for a company but also runs his own business as well. He acknowledges that he is very busy and so wants to
be very careful in managing his time. He had not studied via a blended learning mode previously, but is keen to do so, as he believes it will enable him to continue to work while he studies. Hai is a student leader, appointed by the course administrator to support other students in the course, including being responsible for raising course issues and concerns. He is very well organized and keen to do well in this course, as he believes that having this qualification will then enable him to expand his business. He also suggests that he has some interest in perhaps undertaking a master’s degree.

- An

An is enrolled in Accounting. She is 28, single, and very keen on pursuing her career, as she feels that she is at a bit of a stand-still. She works for a state company and is keen to rise within it, commenting that qualifications are important to this company for promotions. She believes that this degree will assist her to gain a promotion. An is fairly quiet, and rather matter-of-fact in the way that she speaks. She also has no prior experience in studying via blended learning.

- Mai

Mai likewise is enrolled in Accounting. She is 37, is married and has two children, which she feels makes studying rather difficult, especially as one of her children is still rather young and requires considerable attention from her. She commented on feeling some conflict about her desire to study and do well and her need to mother her child. Mai is also working. She wants to complete this course so that she has more formal qualifications, as she thinks that she needs them in order to keep working in her current position.

- Lan

Lan is enrolled in Business Management. She is 23. As the other participants, she also works full time and is undertaking this course in addition to her work commitments. Like An, she is also fairly reserved and did not appear to be that interested in expanding on her thoughts in any detail. She was very keen to complete this course, so that she was more qualified to perform her job.

- Thai

Thai is enrolled in Applied Information Technology. He is single, 22, and the youngest male in this study. He had almost completed another course in Information Technology at another
university but had difficulty towards the final stages and as a result, decided to complete the course at another institution that he believed he could be more likely to succeed in. He is currently working but not in his preferred field. Thai is keen to succeed in this course, but openly acknowledges that he does not really want to work too hard to do so. He cares more about passing all the examinations than in achieving high results.

- **Quoc**

Quoc already has a bachelor degree in Technology. He is currently enrolled in the Business Management course. He is 29 and has been working for some time in this field, but he thinks that the pay is not enough for him and he would like to be able to earn more money. He comments that he has to travel as part of his job and that this makes it hard for him to study. Quoc is interested in setting up his own company, as he wishes to be more successful and to be able to afford a higher lifestyle. To achieve this aim, he thinks a business course will give him the skills to do so. He is very open when talking about his aims in life.

- **Thanh**

As Quoc, Thanh is enrolled in the Business Management course. He is 36 and manages his own company, but feels that he needs to build up his skills in order to keep running it successfully. He wants to continue to be successful and so sees this course as a way for him to do so. He is very positive about studying and is quite prepared to put in a lot of time in order to do well.

- **Minh**

Minh is studying Applied Information Technology. He is 25, and single. He has been working since leaving school in a range of jobs and continues to work while he is studying this course. Minh believes as the other participants do, that it is important to gain this qualification. He thinks that doing so will enable him to further his career prospects.

- **Phung**

Phung is studying Business Management. She is 23 and therefore the youngest female in this study. Like Hai, she is also a student leader, and tends to take her position rather seriously. Unlike the other participants in this study, who at times could be rather reserved in expressing their own opinions, Phung was quite confident in expressing her ideas, and could at times be almost critical. She is keen to study and is rather ambitious.
• **Lam**

Lam is 34 and enrolled in Business Management. He also works as a hotel manager, a job that he enjoys. He wants to do this course to help him in his job. He also feels that by completing this qualification, he will be acting as a good role model for his son. This is very important to him. He believes that undertaking this course will enable him to build work relationships that he thinks could further him later in life. He is quite keen to talk and share. He is also a student group leader.

• **Quan**

Quan is 29 and studying Business Management. He has had some prior experiences in online learning environments but didn’t formally complete a qualification. He has just become a manager and is very keen to make sure that he maintains this position and believes that the course will be useful to him. As the other participants, he is undertaking this course while he continues to work. Quan is also interested in pursuing further study and expressed interest in undertaking a higher degree as Hai.

• **Hien**

Hien is 46 and enrolled in Finance and Banking. She has had some experiences studying previously via distance education. She lives in Thanh Hoa province which is a long way from Hanoi Open University campus. This is the main reason why she wanted to undertake a blended course, as she thought she would not be able to attend face-to-face classes. She is the oldest female in this study and is quite proud of her abilities to use ICT. She has very positive views about undertaking this course.

• **Nga**

Nga likewise is enrolled in Finance and Banking. She is 24 and works for a bank. She is very interested in the increasing use of online and blended learning in education. This is one of her motivations for undertaking this course, as well as increasing her work opportunities in the banking sector. She is keen to do well. She is very open in talking about herself and the course, as Phung.

From the brief narratives of the participants described in the previous paragraphs, some common characteristics are revealed. These are that while the participants varied in age, they
all work and study at the same time. Most had not had previous experiences with blended learning and were not concerned about this and as suggested by much of the literature, they have a general belief that blended learning will be beneficial. They also share plans for the future job prospects that the degree will enable.

4.2 Students’ expectations of the blended learning programs

This part of the chapter reports on students’ expectations of the blended learning program at Hanoi Open University. An analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that six main themes emerged in relation to students’ expectations of blended learning courses. These were:

- Timing
- Usefulness
- Interaction
- Using new technology
- Quality of course
- Accreditation

These themes frame the ensuing analysis. It is to be noted however that participants generally revealed many themes in one response and that separating the themes is for reader ease of understanding, but does not accurately reflect the interplay between these factors. Table 4.1 lists each of these themes and the number of participants who expressed it.

*Table 4.1 Participant Expectations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>% of participants who identified this expectations (N=13)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using new technology</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of course</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following sections, I present each of these themes in turn. This is then followed by a discussion of the interlinking between the themes.
4.2.1 Theme 1: Timing (Flexibility and convenience)

All of the participants commented that they expected that a blended learning course would have time benefits. This seems to relate to two interconnected aspects: flexibility and convenience, as typified in the comment from Minh when he commented that the, “most important reason for choosing this program of Hanoi Open University is that the time is flexible and convenient”. I discuss each of these aspects in turn below.

First, time flexibility seems to relate to being able to study at any time and place. As commented by Hien, who is undertaking Finance and Banking,

First, the time is flexible. I can study whenever I want, wherever I want, even at night or at work when I am free. It is also the most important. I think blended learning is suitable with people who work and study at the same time.

Similarly, Thanh, in relation to studying Business Management said:

I chose the program as it is suitable for me as I am studying and working at the same time. The time is flexible. I can study any time at any places without having to go to class and follow a fixed timetable.

Flexibility also seems to refer to being able to continue to work full time, as shown in the following quotes:

I attended some other bachelor programs in the past but usually I had to stop in the second year because my work often required me to go on business. Since I knew about this blended learning program, I have chosen it because it is suitable with my time (Hai, studying Business Management).

In fact, I don’t have much time. I am having a job in a company so I have a lot of work to do and I don’t have time to go to class. Attending this course, the time can be flexible. I can study at night or noon or in the morning, whenever I can arrange for it, study wherever I want. This is the key reason for choosing the course. The importance is that the course allows me to arrange my time accordingly (Quan, also studying Business Management).
Furthermore, one student felt that this type of flexibility was vital given that, “It is hard to attend traditional learning program or even training programs which run after hours as I am currently having a job” (Minh, Applied Information Technology).

Secondly, in relation to the timing being convenient, Phung, the youngest female in the study said:

I choose the program as it is convenient. In traditional learning, including in-service learning, students have to go to class. It takes a lot of time and students cannot manage their work if they have any. If they have job to do, they often miss lessons as the lessons cannot be redelivered to them. In blended learning course, I can re-play the lectures online. The time is flexible so I can replay the lectures when it is ok for me. I can self-manage my study. Because the lectures can be watched again, I am able to control my studying process.

Particular attention is given to facilitating convenient access to resources as demonstrated in this comment by Thanh, who manages his own company, “It is convenient to use the online resources at a suitable time and place”.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Usefulness (for work and future qualification)

All except one of the participants (Lan) perceived that the blended course would be useful to them. For example, Thanh studying Business Management said, “My biggest expectation is to obtain knowledge of accounting and management. My job relates to these kinds of knowledge and I need to get a deep understanding of them in order to do my work better”. Similarly, Quan, who has recently taken on a managerial position in his job, commented, “My previous major was mechanics… However, I have just turned to do some business that is why I need to study Business Management. I want to obtain useful knowledge to my job”.

This notion of usefulness seems to relate to being useful for their current work. For example, Lam, who works as a hotel manager commented specifically on the practicalities in this course in Business Management for his work, “Compared to traditional learning, the knowledge provided by blended learning or (an) e-learning program is provided based on the teachers’ experiences. The teachers are people who are successful in their career, thus knowledge provided by them is practical”.

An also said:
I work for a state company so it is crucial for me to get a degree. Completing this course will strengthen my profile in the company. Attending a blended learning course or an online course is the fastest and most convenient way.

As well, for some participants, being useful related to their future study or qualification prospects. As commented by Quan, who expressed interest in undertaking a higher degree,

The qualification is very important. I am about to become a manager, thus it is very difficult for me if I don’t possess a degree in business management. Also, I expect that after completing the course, I will be eligible to take a master course which is one of my ambitions.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Interaction (peers)

Around one third of the participants commented on expecting to be able to interact with their peers in the blended course. For example, An stated that, “I expect to build a good connection with other students in the course”. To Thai, the youngest male in the study, the blended Applied Information Technology course would enable him to “build new relationships with more people”, a sentiment also suggested by Phung, who is the youngest female. Only one participant spoke about interaction in relation to the teachers.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Using new technologies

Only three commented that they expected that they would be engaging with new technologies through their participation in this course. An’s comment is typical that, “This course is so exciting. We can access to a new world of technology”. And as commented by Thanh, “I can access the new modern technology which is really good. It is also another expectation of mine”.

4.2.5 Theme 5: Quality of course

Several participants commented that they expected the course would be of high quality. Nga, who works for a bank, commented that she had high expectations because she had heard from some other people who already attended the course that the training program was of high quality. Lan also commented similarly,

When I was about to start the course of blended learning program at Hanoi Open University, I was quite nervous because the program was new in Vietnam and people said that it was risky to attend such a new program like that. However, my experience since then has been good. I have also known that the program is run
4.2.6 Theme 6: Accreditation

Several of the participants also expected that this blended learning program would be appropriately accredited and therefore was attractive to them. In Vietnam, there has been an issue in the past with the accreditation of programs and courses with some leaving current students or graduates in the lurch. As discussed in Chapter 2, the blended learning programs at Hanoi Open University are full accredited.

To Nga, this was important as she said, “From the beginning, I was quite worried because I am not sure about the program. I wanted to get an accredited qualification.” Lan commented similarly that, “I chose this program based on experiences from other students who said that the quality of the program is pretty good.”

4.2.7 The interconnection of themes

As mentioned previously in the introduction to this section, participants always gave several expectations for undertaking the blended learning program. Thus, while I have separated these expectations for ease of discussion, it is important to note the interlinking or complexity in their expectations. These interconnections are shown in Table 4.2 below.

Five participants gave two expectations. In all five cases this related to timing and usefulness. Five other participants gave three expectations, and the pattern in which expectations they gave varied. For example, one participant expected timing, usefulness and interaction with peers. Interestingly, however of the five expectations, four included timing and usefulness. A further three participants gave four expectations. In all cases, usefulness and timing were included. Thus it would seem that timing and usefulness are a greater combined expectation of the participants in this study.

It is also interesting to note that the participants did not express any negative type of expectation. All of their expectations were in positive terms.
Table 4.2 Interconnection of Participant Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interconnected expectations</th>
<th>% of participants who identified these interconnected expectations (N=13)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timing and usefulness</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing, usefulness and quality</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing, usefulness and accreditation</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing, usefulness and interaction</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing, usefulness and new technology</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing, usefulness, interaction and new technology</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing, usefulness, accreditation and quality</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.8 Summary of the students’ expectations

This part of the chapter has reported on the 13 participants’ expectations of the blended learning program. It has shown that participants’ expectations were always positive about the possible benefits of blended learning, with none indicating any concerns. It has shown that six themes: timing, usefulness, interaction, new technology, quality of course, and accreditation, were identified. It has also shown that all participants identified more than one reason. Timing and usefulness were the most commonly identified expectations of these 13 participants.

4.3 Students experiences of the blended learning programs

Discussion now turns to student experiences with blended learning. When being asked about their blended learning experiences, the students’ level of confidence when they answered the questions was not the same as those of the earlier questions in the expectation sections. For example, when I asked Hai to describe the features of blended learning program and his experiences of the program, he seemed to not know where to start. He hesitated and kept silent for a while. The same thing happened to other participants.

As a result, I needed to use prompts as a mean of soliciting a possible response. As explored in the literature review chapter, there are various definitions of blended learning and that in the context of this study blended learning is defined as a combination of online instruction and face-to-face instruction (Graham, 2013). Thus, when designing question prompts, these two components were used as a frame. Furthermore, prompts relating to the three kinds of interaction (student to student, student to content, student to instructor) were also used, as the
literature suggest that interaction plays an important role in motivating the students’ engagement. For a new program such as the blended learning program at Hanoi Open University, it is crucial to understand how the interaction happened and whether it supported the students’ learning process. Furthermore, prompts such as “What did you like”, “What did you dislike?” or “What obstacles did you face?” were used to find out more about students’ opinions on the main benefits and obstacles to blended learning.

In the main, after analysing the interviews transcripts, the following themes about students’ experiences emerged.

These were:

- Online components
- Face-to-face components
- Interaction (student to student, student to teacher, student to content)
- Main benefits of blended learning
- Obstacles to blended learning.

Each theme is discussed in a separate sub-section below.

4.3.1 Online components

In relation to their experiences of the online components of the blended learning course, most of the participants (77%) gave positive comments on the online components in their respective blended learning course. In the main, this related to the content, the materials and the interface of the online environment. Each of these is explored below.

Content

Most participants commented specifically on the quality of the content and its practicality. It would seem that when referring to content, the participants were referring to content uploaded by the teachers such as lecture notes or virtual conferences.

Regarding the quality of the content, participants found the content easy to understand as typified in these comments. “The content of the lessons is rich, easy to understand and suitable with most of the students” (Nga), “The content provided through online sessions is good and understandable” (Quan). Two other participants, Thai and Lan said that they met no difficulty in acquiring the knowledge due to the ease which the course content was offered, while students
like Thanh and Quan, stressed the fact that the content might accommodate different students who varied in age and background. There were also a number of students such as An, Nga and Thanh who commented that the online content was rich and diverse.

In addition, also nearly half of the participants reported that the online content was convenient for their studying. Typical comments were, “People can arrange to join at any time that is convenient to them. They can learn those online lessons whenever and wherever they want,” (An). “It is also very convenient that students can watch or listen to the lessons wherever there is internet connection,” (Thai). “It is exciting that we can listen to or watch the lectures again as many times as we want if there is anything we don’t understand,” (Minh). “One advantage of the online lessons is that they are recorded so students can use them again, thus be able to control their studying process,” (Phung).

In relation to the practicality of the online content, it is interesting that around a third of the participants commented on the courses providing them with knowledge which related to practice. According to Nga, “Knowledge provided by the online lectures is practical that can be applied straight to our real life and work situations”. Having a position at a bank, Hien also said what she had learnt in the Finance and Banking course helped her in fulfilling her daily working tasks. Minh similarly indicated that the content was useful for his current job. Also as discussed by Lam, the content of the course was delivered by teachers who were expert in the field and that with their rich experiences, the knowledge became a combination between theory and practice.

Materials

69% of participants gave positive comments on course related materials. Course materials seemed to refer to supplementary materials (such as reference materials that students could use in addition to course content) and were seen as different to course content. According to 50% of participants, the learning materials provided in the blended learning courses were considerably rich and diverse. As described by Nga, online resources might vary from pdf files to multimedia ones. Giving the same ideas, Mai even stressed that, “I am afraid that the students do not have time to read all the online resources which are actually very rich”. Moreover, An added that she found the learning materials in blended learning courses were as rich as those in traditional courses. Furthermore, a number of participants such as Mai, Lan, Thai and Hien said that the materials of blended learning courses were relatively easy for students to understand.
In addition, positive feedback about the programs’ materials also related to the convenience which it brought. “I can download the materials whenever I want”, Lan said. At the same time, Quoc gave more details on how convenient it is for him to use the online materials.

> For example, if I am busy this week, I will download the mp3 file and copy it into my mobile phone and then I can hear it during my business trip. If I want to understand more about any subjects, I can download the pdf text book into my technology devices for later reading.

In general, it is significant to note that the participants’ experiences of the learning materials were relatively favorable. According to Quoc, if students spent more time reading and using the materials, the knowledge which they could gain might be considerable. Several participants commented that they felt if they took full advantages of the resources they could improve their studying. Lam was one of the participants who suggested this in his conversation with the researcher during the interview. In other words, the online resources met the learning demands of most participants attending the interviews.

**Interface design of the website**

A number of the participants said they found the interface of the online courses easy to use (see Figures 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4). Quoc said:

> In my opinion, the interface is reasonably designed. For example, if I am in week 1, then the link for week 1 lessons will be easy to see. If it is Week 2, then Week 2 content will appear. In each subjects, there is box for you to click, that will give you information on subject assessment such as how to calculate your attendance mark, how many percentage the homework accounts for, etc

Similarly, Nga also supported the idea about the user-friendly interface design in this more detailed description:

> There is a time bar which lets students know which week they are in and what exercises they have to do. Lessons are divided by week with attached quizzes which help to evaluate how much students have learned after the information has been taught and presented. I found this interesting.

**Negative experiences of the online components**
However, a few negative experiences of the online components were reported during the interviews although they belonged to a minority. The VClass (Which stands for Virtual class and is actually online conference) lectures seemed not to meet the demand of the learners of the program. Minh said the quality of the VClass was not high because of their limited length which he thought prevented students from getting satisfied answers for their questions from the teachers. Furthermore, students reported that the VClass lessons were usually delivered from 6pm to 8pm. Although this after-hour time frame might allow most of people to attend because it would not affect their working time, for student like Mai who had to cook the dinner for her family after coming back from work, it was not easy for her to attend the live lessons. In addition, she also reported experiencing some errors with the internet transmission line at that peak time. A few participants such as Hai and Minh mentioned that they found the learning resources not as sufficient as those in a traditional learning mode. Another participant, Quoc commented on inaccuracies of the text books, for instance, he found out that there were some errors in the answers given for exam practice questions and there were even a few differences between the text books and the lecture slides. These views are contradicted by the opinions of most participants who commented to the contrary about the richness and diversity of the online experience.

In sum, despite a few negative experiences most participants’ comments on the online components of the blended learning programs are mostly positive with most attention being paid to course content, online resources and the interface. Discussion now turns to exploring the experiences of the participants with the face-to-face components of blended learning.

4.3.2 Face-to-face components

Around two third of the participants commented positively on the face-to-face components of the course, especially around their effectiveness, as typified in these comments. “The traditional learning sections are very effective because teachers deliver the lessons directly and students can meet and share knowledge with others,” (Hien). “It is the time which lecturers can respond quickly and straight to the questions from students,” (Nga). “Face-to-face learning is very useful because students can communicate and share their knowledge to others in order to get deeper understanding of the lessons,” (Thanh). “In offline classes, questions can be answered in quickest time without being posted to the discussion forum and students do not have to spend a considerable time waiting for the solution,” (Lan).
Often when discussing the benefits of these face-to-face components, students commented on the opportunities to directly interact with lecturers and other students in their class. In those lessons, they commented they did not have to wait for the answer to their queries as they usually do in the online environment and that teachers gave their feedback immediately and directly to the students. As well they commented that other students can also contribute to their understanding, by sharing what they think about the issues being examined in their course.

To some of the participants, the immediate feedback and direct interaction was seen as what was lacking from online learning. Minh mentioned this situation in his interview commenting that when online lecturers seemed to take some time to answer questions and that this waiting time may result in students’ loss of interest in problem solving. Given these circumstances, he thought that face-to-face lessons could solve this limitation.

In addition, participants commented that face-to-face lessons were an effective way to keep them motivated. Hai said that face-to-face lessons played an important part in the blended learning program. He also indicated that it helped maintain his enthusiasm as well as improve the engagement of students. Having the same opinion, Thanh said:

*This is an advantage of the blended learning program because it promotes the motivation of study. Students are able to interact directly, thus they become close to each other and willing to support each other in terms of study, work and even personal issues.*

However, there were different views about how often the face-to-face learning sessions were conducted. Three participants, An, Nga and Hien said that they attended classroom lectures about once a month. However some commented that they felt that the number of sessions was not consistent over the course and that they had reduced over the time of their enrolment. Some reported that face-to-face sessions were more regular in Year 1 of their course (Hai, Quoc and Lan) but then the number of offline lessons decreased from the second year.

Almost all participants expressed the need to maintain or increase the number of those face-to-face lessons as demonstrated by the following comment from Hai:

*The decrease in number of face-to-face sessions has brought about the reduction in the interaction among students as well as in their motivation of the study... In my class, the number of students has dropped from 250 to 80... One of the reasons is that the students’ enthusiasm, interest and engagement have been reduced.*
Similarly, Lam said the program should increase classroom learning. He thought that if the lessons were delivered directly by the lecturers, the learning spirit of the students would be improved.

About half the students commented however, that while most students’ experiences of face-to-face components were good, not all students were able to attend face-to-face sessions because they lived in different geographical areas and had different types of jobs, making it fairly difficult for all of them to attend regularly (Quoc, Nga, An, Hien, Minh, Lam). A number of interviewees such as An, Lan, and Hai suggested that the classroom learning should be held once per month, as they felt this frequency was ideal for students to get a balance between their individual conditions and the demand of having immediate interaction to promote their engagement.

Only 1 participant (Quan) commented that he did not like the face to face sessions as he thought students mainly chatted and made friends during the sessions and made little contribution to the lesson.

4.3.3 Interaction

This sub-section reports on the interaction which took place both in the online environment and the traditional face-to-face classroom environment. As explored in Chapter 2, interaction refers to three kinds of interaction: student-instructor interaction, student-student interaction and student-content interaction. These will be discussed in turn below.

4.3.3.1 Interaction between students and instructors

In the blended learning program at Hanoi Open University, the interaction between students and instructors could take place either in the online environment or in the face-to-face sessions. According to participants such as An, Lam, and Thai, students might be able to communicate with the instructors online or offline, including asking their questions at the traditional class or posting their inquiries on the virtual class or on the forum. In the virtual or classroom environment they tended to expect that teachers could answer any questions immediately. For questions posted in the forum, it might take up to 72 hours for the students to receive feedback from the instructors (Minh, Quoc, Nga, Lam). Furthermore, students could use additional tools such as mobile phone, email, chat room to contact the instructors for any learning purposes (Hien, Nga, Thanh).
In the interviews, it was acknowledged by most of the participants that the instructors enthusiastically supported students during their studying. For instance, Minh said that the instructors tried their best to answer all his questions or enquiries in a shortest time. Quan also gave a detailed illustration that, “Teachers responded to my questions very quickly. I had a couple of times posting one or two questions in the forum in the evening and I received their answers in the early morning of the next day”. Thanh added that both the instructors and the course administrators usually reminded students through email or mobile phone about the course requirements so that the students did not miss any course assessments.

Most participants commented that the interaction between students and instructors was effective. According to Nga, the instructors were dedicated to support the students during their studying process. Thanh confirmed this point of view by using the words “good” and “effective” to describe his positive experiences.

The literature has shown however that it is crucial that students should also contribute their part if they want to have an effective interaction with the instructors. However, participants indicated quite contradictory views. For example, while Nga said that students were actively engaged in the interaction process by raising all the questions and inquiries to the instructors, Hai reported to the contrary, that students tended to be less active from the second year and that made the interaction not as effective as it used to be.

It is likely that the reduction in the offline sessions as mentioned previously might have influenced the level of interaction, as the less face-to-face sessions a course has, the less possible direct interaction between the students and the instructors. Quoc said that the limited direct contact between the students and the instructors could have bad effects on the learning motivation of a number of students, leading to them not completing their study in some cases.

4.3.3.2 Interaction between students and students

Overall, the interaction that occurred from student to student happened regularly as reported by most of the participants in both online and offline environments. Activities such as discussion, group assignment, and exercises, as well as tools such as discussion forum, chat room, email, mobile phone, and some applications such as Facebook, Skype, Viber, were seen as enabling this interaction.

In terms of frequency, online interactions from student-to-student took place more regularly than face-to-face interactions. For instance, Lan said that,
The group members live in different provinces and that makes the face-to-face meeting hard to organize. We only meet directly in face-to-face sessions or in the exam sessions. Normally, we stay online and discuss about the group exercises through the Yahoo chat room.

As discussed by Hien, face to face interactions happened mostly in face-to-face sessions held by instructors and administrators. In contrast, Lan similarly reported that students usually met online for group discussions.

According to a number of the participants, such as Hien, Lan, Nga, An, and Mai, the discussion forum was a place which attracted many students’ participation, for the purpose of sharing knowledge and discussing other learning issues.

There is a forum for everybody to attend. Pages for each subject are created by the instructors for students to join and share their knowledge and understanding. Students use the forum quite often, (An).

The number of students who participate and the number of topics and articles posted on the forum are very big. Students usually post their questions on the forum and discuss plentiful ideas, (Nga).

Students attend the discussion forum frequently because it is one of ways to obtain the attendance mark (Lan).

There were both positive and negative feedback about the value of the forum. For example Mai commented positively that:

It is very interesting to take part in the discussion forum. Each student can share their learning experiences. If there is any difficulty such as difficulty in understanding the content, they can seek support from others in the forum.

Hien also supported the forum commenting, “I often use the discussion forum….It is very simple to use”.

Some participants reported that the forum was slow, messy and ill-managed (Quoc), that students did not make much use of it (Lam), and that there were some problems with the internet transmission which made it difficult to use in some cases (Nga).
Beside the forum, participants also used tools such as chat room, email, Facebook, or Skype when they had to complete learning tasks in group. As mentioned at the start of this section, due to the differences in geographical areas, timetable and other personal matters, students rarely met directly to do the group assignment together. As indicated by more than half of participants (n=13, 61.5%), chat room and Facebook were two common tools used in online group activities.

In sum, the findings showed that the interaction between students and students happened regularly and positively in both online and face to face settings. Students saw that the interaction not only met the requirements of the course, but were also a part of their own need for knowledge sharing and supporting each other.

4.3.3.3 Interaction between students and content

As mentioned in the Chapter 2 (see Section 2.1.7) blended learning as well as online learning has created opportunities for students to access online course materials. In the blended learning courses in this study, online resources referred to various kinds including lecture notes, reference materials, and module guides. According to nearly half of the participants, there was ease in access to the online course materials in the blended learning courses at Hanoi Open University.

In the main, the findings suggest that there were varied experiences of the interaction between students and content. According to a number of the participants, such as Mai, Lan, Hien, and Thanh, students accessed online resources, especially module guides and lecturers’ notes, to help understand more about the lessons and thus successfully complete the assessments such as quizzes, assignments and tests. Thanh said he downloaded, read and used all of the online resources and tried to make the most use of them in order to get the best results from the quizzes and tests. On the other hand, Minh reported that not every student made the most use of the online materials, as they worked during the day and only studied at night and this made them too tired to access all the course resources. Lam gave a similar view that it took time to read and use the course materials and not every student could afford the time to use them productively.

The frequency of accessing supplemental resources such as reference materials was different among the participants. It seems that the use of supplemental resources was influenced by students’ self-motivation. For example, Quoc reported that students who were active in their learning usually downloaded all the online resources to their individual devices for the
convenience of studying. Thai said his purpose was to pass the exams so he did not focus on reading supplementary materials. Similarly, Lam indicated that students who just wanted to pass the exam rarely accessed the resources.

4.3.4 Main benefits of blended learning

The participants in this study commonly identified several benefits of blended learning. These were: the flexible and convenient timing, the effectiveness of the learning outcomes, the usefulness and the interaction between students and students. In the next few paragraphs I explore these benefits in further detail.

Firstly, all of the thirteen participants said that they liked the flexibility and convenient timing offered by their blended learning course. This comment from Quoc is a typical one, “The thing I like best is the flexible and convenient studying time”. Similar comments were also made such as this, “It is flexible and I can study when it is convenient for me” (Hien). “I like the flexibility of the course. The time is flexible. I can study whenever and wherever I want. For example, if I am busy, I can reschedule my studying time” (Quan). Specific comments were also made in relation to the convenient use of online lectures and resources, as demonstrated in this comment by Hai. “Online lessons and resources are stored on the website so that students can use whenever they want.” An expressed the same idea, “I also like the fact that I can store knowledge and learning resources online, in CD or Mp3 file and use whenever I want,” (An). So too Minh, that:

I like the convenience of the online lectures and resources. It is like my own store where I can get anything at any time I want. Just need a mobile phone then I can study wherever I want even at the workplace.

Flexibility and convenience was seen in aiding their need to also work. As Lan commented, it was important that, “The studying as well as the assessment do not affect students’ work and vice versa”. To a few participants, flexibility was also seen as beneficial to family commitments. Nga, for example commented, “I don’t have to spend too much time to go to class. This is what I like most. Additionally, I still have time for my family”. Mai also expressed this idea that the study did not affect her job and her family.

Secondly, a majority of students said that the blended learning course effectively supported their learning outcomes. Typical comments were that, “It supports my learning a lot and also brings the effectiveness,” (Nga). “My studying is effective and the learning outcome is good”
“The course brings me effective learning outcomes” (Thanh). Thanh also added that it was important that the blended learning program met his conditions and was suitable to him. Phung even indicated that the blended learning course led to better learning outcomes compared to a traditional learning mode.

Another benefit seems to be the usefulness provided by the blended learning courses. About one third of the 13 participants said that the courses provided practical knowledge which helped them in their current job. Lam commented for example that, “I have obtained a lot of knowledge which is useful for my job.” Hien commented similarly that, “At the moment, I am working in the banking and finance field. The program provides me a lot of knowledge which serve my work”.

Minh thought that being useful to his work was very important as shown in this comment:

I am working at the same time with studying, thus I found a lot of interesting things. The knowledge I obtain is practical and I can apply it directly into my daily work. This is the most important thing. When I am studying and working at the same time, there are many things I can understand more compared to the past.

In addition, students also commented that the course helped them to build or maintain the relationship with other students. An commented that, “I have chances to communicate and build relationship with other students… It is excited to join social activities and make a lot of friends”. Similarly, Thai said, “What I like is that there are many social activities for students to get on well and support each other”. Thanh added that:

I have chances to know many people and build the relationship with them in terms of studying as well as working. Most students have the same common in their desire of studying, thus they support each other during the studying process and in the real life.

4.3.5 Obstacles to blended learning

The findings suggest that participants feel there are three main obstacles to blended learning. All bar one student (An) mentioned that one of the obstacles was not having enough interaction. Some typical comments were that, “The disadvantages are the limited interaction between students and students, between students and teachers compared to traditional training programs” (Nga). It seems though that participants were particularly concerned about the lack
of face-to-face interaction as shown in these comments: “The limitedness of direct communication or interaction among people. It is hard to expect a straight away answering if students or teachers don’t meet directly,” (Thanh). “The disadvantage is that there are few classroom sessions which play an important role in helping students understand the lessons and promoting their interaction between students and teachers through the direct feedback of teachers to students’ inquiries and questions,” (Lan).

Several participants also stated that this limited face-to-face communication would affect their learning. Minh mentioned for example that it was complicated to get a full and satisfied answer from teachers as classroom sessions were limited in numbers. He also added that the time waiting for the answer to his inquiries could make him forget or lose interest to the questions he had asked. Some also felt that this lack of interaction would reduce their engagement. Quan stated that:

*Compared to traditional learning, it has a disadvantage that there is no 100% contact with teacher during class time as in traditional learning, thus it is easier for the learners to lose the concentration on their study. It has also reduced the engagement of students to the training course... I don’t like the less interaction between students and teachers. It makes me easy to forget what I have learnt.*

As Quoc also suggested, that this may lead to students withdrawing from the course.

*The interaction between students and teachers, students and students is limited as there are few classroom sessions. That will easily make someone lose their engagement to the studying process, leading to the rates of quitting the course are higher than traditional learning.*

Nearly half of the 13 participants mentioned experiencing technical problems, including slow internet connections, as another major obstacle to blended learning courses. Lan said, “There are some technical faults probably due to the fact that there are too many people accessing the online classes”. Quoc was even more explicit, commenting that, “If people are too busy, they may leave the studying until the last minute. This can cause blocks in the internet transmission”. Perceived problems with the internet connection seemed to be one of the main concerns. As Quoc commented, “I sometimes have to travel to mountainous areas where there is no 3G, thus I cannot connect to the internet to study”. According to Mai, “It could be the internet transmission in Vietnam is not good sometimes which may cause some troubles or interruptions.
to the online training program”. Thanh commented similarly that, “The internet transmission is not stable, leading to the interrupt of discussion or completion of exercises”.

About one third of the 13 participants also commented that having to self-regulate one’s learning was also a big challenge to blended learning. As Minh commented, “The challenge is that students must be self-managed if they want to succeed in their study”. Other participants such as Phung, Thai, and Quoc shared this same point of view.

4.3.6 Summary

This part of the chapter has reported on participant experiences with blended learning courses. It has shown that, in the main, the participants’ experiences were positive in both the face-to-face and online components. It has shown that the participants identified several main benefits to the blended learning environment including its flexibility and convenient timing, its practicality and links to work, as well as the usefulness and the interaction between students. As well, it has identified several obstacles to blended learning such as limited direct interaction, technical problem and students’ self-regulation.

4.4 The links between students’ expectations and experiences

Previous sections of this chapter have considered participant expectations and then later their experiences of blended learning courses. This section of the chapter is concerned with the possible connection between expectations and experiences. However, as is discussed below, this was not an easy process as participants were not able to discuss their experiences to the same extent as their expectations.

It was very noticeable when conducting the interviews that when it came to this question of whether participants felt their experiences met their expectation, most participants were hesitant. Typically participants replied with a single word “yes” and did not seem willing to elaborate. Some gave a short sentence reply, such as this comment by Hien, “I think the course meets my expectations somehow”. It seems likely then that the participants had not thought clearly about the ways that their expectations were met. All indicated however that they were satisfied. Five of the thirteen participants said their expectations were highly met while the rest indicated that their satisfaction level was moderate.

To see if there were connections between expectations and experiences, I re-analyzed the interview transcripts. The identified expectations; timing, usefulness, interaction, using new
technology, quality of the course and accreditation were then compared to the identified experiences.

**Timing**

All participants had the expectation that blended learning courses would be timely and would be convenient and flexible, especially in enabling them to continue with work. This expectation was matched by actual experience, with participants commenting favorably on how the online components enabled these to be met.

**Usefulness**

The majority of participants also expected that the blended learning courses would be useful to their work, both current and future, as well as to future study. This seems to be somewhat met with around one third of the 13 participants referring to the practicality of the course content in relation to their work.

**Interaction**

Around a third of the participants had commented that they expected that the blended learning course would enable them to interact with their peers and to the content. This does seem to have been met with participants commenting that the interaction experiences were one of the main benefits brought by blended learning courses.

**Using new technology**

Several participants expected that the course would enable them to experience new technologies and this was expressed in positive language. However, given that comments around experiences with technologies were only negative around technical faults and internet connection issues, this does not appear to have been met or that there expectations were unrealistic.

**Quality of the course**

Several participants also expected that the course would be of high quality. This expectation seems to have been confirmed by participant experience, as all 13 participants commented that the blended learning environment, especially the interactions enabled them to achieve effective learning and obtain useful knowledge. A few participants commented that learning outcomes
were partly depended on students’ self-regulation, and that students who were good at self-regulation, would get better results than those who were not.

**Accreditation**

Undertaking an accredited course was also an expectation of several participants. This does appear to have been met with a number of interviewees commenting on how the course was an accredited qualification, as well as providing useful knowledge to meet the need of the industry.

Thus it would seem that for the most part participant expectation and experiences of blended learning courses were comparable. Yet participants had difficulty responding to questions around their actual experiences, tending to just confirm in a single word or short sentence that they had been met. Delving deeper into possible reasons for this hesitance or reluctance was not a purpose of this study. As such future study in this area is warranted.

### 4.5 Conclusion to Chapter 4

This chapter has reported on the findings of this study. These findings were drawn from semi-structured interviews with thirteen students attending four different blended learning courses at the Centre of E-learning, Hanoi Open University.

In relation to their expectations of blended learning courses, participants were always positive. They identified several expectations, namely, timing (flexibility and convenience), usefulness, interaction (with peers), experiencing a new technology, quality of course and accreditation. Typically they identified several of these expectations when in interview, however timing and usefulness were most dominant.

When it came to exploring their actual experiences in blended learning courses, participants were more hesitant, resulting in the need for the researcher to prompt in order to solicit a response. These prompts were around their experiences with the online components, the face-to-face components, their interaction (between students and instructors, students and students, and students and content), as well as their overall experience in terms of benefits and obstacles. Participants identified obstacles such as the brevity in classroom sessions, the slow and unstable internet transmission, and the need to be a self-regulated learner. For the most part, participants reported positive experiences. In the main participant expectations and experiences were comparable. One expectation around positively using new technologies however was not met.
The next chapter will provide a discussion of the findings which will be organized under the framework of the research questions.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

In the previous chapter, I reported on the findings of this study which emerged from the interviews held with the 13 participants, all higher education students in one of four programs at Hanoi Open University, Vietnam. In this chapter I now turn to discuss these findings in relation to previous research.

This study has one overarching question:

What are students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning programs at Hanoi Open University?

For ease of discussion, the question was divided into three sub-questions:

- What are the students’ expectations of blended learning programs?
- What are the students’ experiences in blended learning programs?
- How do the students’ experiences meet their expectations?

5.1 Introduction

The research literature has suggested that there are various ways of defining blended learning, and that for the most part these variances revolve around what is being blended and the proportion allocated to each component (Graham, 2013). Despite this difference in view, blended learning is often associated with the combination of online and face-to-face instruction (Graham, 2006; Drysdale et al., 2013) and often couched in terms as offering the best of both. Additionally, it is important to note that the combination of online learning and face-to-face learning is often seen as the key factor which makes students satisfied about the blended learning courses (Graham, 2013). This combination apparently enhances the students’ studying experiences, as students can still enjoy the advantages offered by online environment, while still feeling connected and engaged to the learning process through the direct communication with peers and instructors in face-to-face sessions.

Researchers in the field have tended to focus on the positives of blended learning rather than the challenges that institutions, instructors and students may face from adopting blended learning (Graham et al., 2005). This positive view of blended learning, albeit at times more akin to an uncritical view, was common among the participants in this study. The participants had little preconceived knowledge of the benefits and limitations of blended learning and tended to
assume that experiences would be positive. For example they chose the particular blended learning course as they saw the benefits in doing so, such as fitting their timetable scheduling.

At Hanoi Open University, there is no evidence of a definition of blended learning in place or use. Rather it would seem that the notion of blended learning, as involving a combination of face-to-face and online learning, is the de-facto definition. While the literature suggests that the weightings of each of these components can vary significantly, this does not appear to be the case at this context. Rather it seems to the contrary, that there is a rather fixed view of these weightings, with the dominant amount of time being awarded to the online component, and with face-to-face assuming more of a secondary role.

The four blended learning programs at Hanoi Open University (Business Management, Accounting, Finance and Banking, and Applied Information Technology) have a similar structure, with each using a LMS to house weekly lectures and resources. Each also has a virtual classroom component for an online conference and online discussion forums for the students to interact. Each also has a very small face-to-face component, one or several traditional classroom sessions usually for the purpose of subject review or soft skills training. Based on the range of combinations occurring in a blended environment suggested by Graham et al. (2005), the model of blended learning at Hanoi Open University seems to be viewed as “blends that have a dominant CM component” (p. 254).

Blended learning in western countries has its roots in distance education (Brody, 2006), with shifts towards blended approaches developing over time, especially as more technologies came onto the market, enabling users to study more readily ‘at a distance’. While Hanoi Open University also had this history offering courses in distance education for over two decades, its introduction of blended learning programs was swift, and without an interim period of development.

The Vietnamese government has prioritized the use of ICT in education seeing its use as integral to its economic and social progress. It has issued a number of policies to serve as guidelines for ICT implementation, yet these lack clear directions on just how this can be achieved. This can be a challenge for institutions. Hanoi Open University has developed its own policy around the use of ICT yet this policy also does not give detailed guidelines for implementation. This lack of policy direction may have contributed to the blended learning practice that has resulted.
In the next few paragraphs, I turn attention to specifically discussing the research findings relating to students’ expectations and experiences in the light of previous research.

5.2 Student expectations of blended learning program at Hanoi Open University

5.2.1 Introduction

The participants in this study had very positive expectations about blended learning. For example, the participants expected that blended learning would help them to balance their study and their other commitments, such as work or family, or they expressed the hope that the course would enable them to obtain useful knowledge and skills for their career. Participants usually expressed several expectations, with timing and usefulness the most frequent. This finding is well reported in the literature. For example the study by Pinto and Anderson (2013) argued that students formed their expectations about online or blended learning courses in relation to the technology, the course content, the difficulty level, and the communication with instructor and peers.

Pinto and Anderson (2013) also suggest that students bring their expectations into the learning environment, that is, they form them prior to actual knowledge or experience from three main sources: personal past experience, the experience of other people, and what was seen as customary (Press, as cited in Pinto & Anderson, 2013). This finding seems to be reflected in the context of this study. None of the participants had prior experiences of blended learning thus their expectations were not rooted in actual experiences. In fact, in the main, their expectations were influenced by experiences of other people such as family or friends.

It is significant to note that in the research literature, students’ expectations of blended learning were not always positive. Pinto and Anderson (2013) found that some students thought that, “students would be less willing to ‘speak their mind’ in the hybrid course format” or “Hybrid courses would be more ‘boring’ than traditional course” (p. 8). In this study, negative expectations were not expressed.

A thematic analysis revealed that expectations could be grouped into six main categories. These were: timing (flexibility and convenience), usefulness (for work and future qualification), interaction (mainly with peers), using new technologies, quality of course, and accreditation. I now turn to discuss each of these in turn.
5.2.2  Timing (Flexibility and convenience)

Timing was identified as the most dominant theme from the coded analysis of interview transcripts. All thirteen participants commented that they expected the blended learning courses would be flexible and convenient in term of the timing. It is significant to note that the participants focused heavily on the online aspects of blended learning courses when they commented on this theme. This may relate to the fact that the courses were mainly online.

This expectation around timing is often expressed in the literature. For example Paechter et al. (2010) identified “Flexibility of learning with regards to time and place” as one of the students’ expectations in their study. According to Tweedell (2000), many adult learners want to take advantage of online learning environments because of their busy schedules and the online format’s convenience. Other researchers also suggest that students can complete learning tasks from home at times that best suit their schedules (De George-Walker & Keeffe, 2010).

5.2.3  Usefulness (for work and future qualification)

Usefulness is the second most identified expectation of the participants in this study. The term usefulness refers to being useful for work and for future qualification. As mentioned previously, as all of the participants were working while undertaking study, they expected that the blended courses would provide them with practical knowledge and skills, and would be useful for their jobs. Moreover, they perceived that the course would strengthen their careers, and enable them to achieve a higher qualification, as qualifications, especially bachelor degrees in Vietnam, are considered as one of the keys to get a successful career. This study adds to our understanding around this expectation, as being better placed to gain a qualification for the purpose of career promotion has not featured significantly.

5.2.4  Interaction (with peers)

Being able to interact with peers has been identified in the literature as a common expectation of blended learning (Paechter et al., 2010; Pinto & Anderson, 2013). In Pinto and Anderson’s 2013 study, students expected that they would be able to communicate more with each other in a blended learning course. Similarly Paechter et al. (2010) commented on a number of expectations relating to the interaction with peers, including easy and fast exchange of information, supporting cooperative learning and group work and enabling personal contact with peer students. This study seems to support these findings as it too revealed that the participants expected to build good relationship with other students. The participants in this study expected that interacting with peers would improve the quality of the interaction as well
as build connections with more people. The participants however did not elaborate much and this may be explained by the fact that the participants did not have prior experience in the blended learning environment so perhaps generally hoped that the relationship with peers would be good.

It is interesting to note that while the literature explores interaction as involving student to student, student to instructor and student to content, this was not really the case for the students in this study. Interaction in relation to peer interaction dominated their expectations. Only one student, An, commented on the interaction between students and instructors. Previous research such as Paechter et al. (2010) has mentioned that the interaction between students and instructors is a common expectation of blended learning.

5.2.5 Using new technology

Some students expected that the blended learning course would enable them to access and experience new information technology. This is perhaps not such a surprising point. For many students, computers and personal technologies are a way of life (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) and for some, the internet is more important to them than the television (Graham & Dziuban, 2008). Yet, in the context of Vietnam, this theme is interesting. Vietnam is a developing country and education is currently in the process of innovation. ICT has been increasingly applied into training courses since 2000. There are more opportunities for students to learn via technologies as the learning resources are now not as limited as in the past communist era. Yet for other students using technologies in a blended learning course may be one of the few regular opportunities they have.

5.2.6 Quality of the course

The literature has suggested that students expect that the blended learning course would be of high quality (Pinto & Anderson, 2013). This study also indicates this expectation. Yet it is difficult to determine what exactly the participants meant when they commented on the course quality, as they did not go into any depth despite researcher prompting. Thus, the term, ‘the quality of the course’ could refer to a wide range of aspects, from the design of the course, to the course content, from the instructors’ support, to the interaction with other students, or everything in combination.

5.2.7 Accreditation

This study has also shown that the participants expected that the blended learning course would be accredited. This expectation has not been evident in the research literature. As discussed in
Chapter 3, the blended learning program at Hanoi Open University is one of the first of its kind in the context of Vietnam, thus it is understandable that participants would take into account whether such a new course would be of a particular recognised standard. This concern may stem from the fact that there were limitations in the expansion of higher education networks in Vietnam. According to the Ministry of Education and Training’s report (MOET, 2009), “About 20% of newly established or upgraded universities and colleges (12 schools) since 2005 have not fully implemented the commitments as stated in the Feasibility Project document and the program description” (p. 4). Non-compliance did result initially in some universities being required to complete a number of training activities. Although Hanoi Open University has been established for 20 years, the blended learning program offered by the University is a new one in Vietnam. Therefore, it is likely that students would have concerns about whether the program is accredited.

5.2.8 Summary

In the main, the findings of the study relating to student expectations of blended learning supported previous research in a number of ways: students have various expectations of blended learning, expectations were formed prior to actual experiences of blended learning courses and specific expectations including flexibility and convenience in timing, peer interaction, and the quality of the course were confirmed. The study adds to research by drawing on experiences from students in Vietnam. It also suggests a number of expectations such as usefulness, and accreditation, which have not been identified in the literature. Also, unlike previous research which identified both positive and negative expectations, this study only concluded the former. Further exploration of why this was the case is outside the scope of this study.

5.3 Student experiences of blended learning program at Hanoi Open University

5.3.1 Introduction

Discussion now turns to consider the second sub-question around participant experiences of blended learning. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the participants were rather hesitant when asked to talk about their actual experiences and as a result, I needed to use prompts in an effort to encourage further elaboration and detail. It is likely however that participant reluctance to explore this type of questioning may relate to their commonly held uncritical view of blended learning. Further discussion however is outside the realm of this study.

In the main, the participants commented on having positive experiences of blended learning. This is a position also reported in the literature from diverse research settings. For example,
Balci and Soran (2009) in research conducted at a university of Turkey revealed that a majority of students considered blended learning enjoyable and easily adaptable. In another study, this time in South China Normal University, Zhao (2008) reported similar positive experiences. Likewise, in the study of Sharafuddin and Allani (2011) in the Arab Open University in Kuwait, most students reported high levels of satisfaction with their blended learning experiences.

This study suggests that participants commonly identified several reasons for their positive experiences of blended learning at Hanoi Open University. These were: the participants’ experiences of online components, of face-to-face components, of the interaction (between students-students, students-instructors, and students-contents), main benefits of blended learning, and obstacles to blended learning. I now turn to discuss each of these themes in the next section.

5.3.2 Experiences of online components

When discussing their experiences of the online components of the blended learning course, the participants often focused on the course content, access to online resources and the interface design. Other research has made similar conclusions. For example, Usta and Ozdemir (2007) reported students having positive experiences of the online course content in terms of being able to access theoretical and practical information and being able to do so when convenient, that is when they wanted access. This study reported similarly, with participants commenting positively on finding course content both practical and convenient. To some participants, the practicality of the course content was seen as particularly useful for their current job, seeing that they could apply it directly to their daily work, and help them to run their work more effectively.

Course materials (lecture notes, course guides, supplementary materials such as reference books and audio or video aids) were also identified by the participants as valuable. Previous research such as that by Sharafuddin and Allani (2011) concluded from survey data that the majority of students at a Kuwait university agreed and strongly agreed about the efficiency of the teaching materials including books, course guides and audiovisual aids.

The design of the learning interface is important as it can significantly affect the learning experience for the student (Kannan & Kurup, 2012). As described by Mijares (2012), the “interface design refers to elements related to the look and feel of the blended learning system” (p. 5). Many of the participants commented favourably on their learning experience as a result of the user-friendly interface. This is also a view found in previous research. For example,
Delialioglu and Yildirim (2007) concluded that it was features of the course website that students liked the most. As discussed previously in Chapter 4, the participants of this study felt the LMS of the Hanoi Open University courses was well-structured and helped them to easily access the content or information they needed.

While participant experiences were usually reported in positive terms, there were a few occasions when this was not the case. Some of the participants were not satisfied with the duration of the virtual classroom as well as its delivery time believing that the allotted time was not enough. In sum, participant experiences of the online components of the blended learning course are mainly positive and support previous research findings in the field.

5.3.3 Experiences of face-to-face components

As mentioned in the Findings chapter (Chapter 4), many of the participants in this study had positive experiences of the face-to-face components. This finding has also been commented on in earlier research. For example, the study by Ireland et al. (2009) concluded that students had positive experiences of the face-to-face component based on the view that it promotes the face-to-face communication between students and others such as the lecturers or peers. Similarly, Balci and Soran (2009) concluded that students found the face-to-face environment more advantageous for improving their communication with their friends and instructors. In their study, El Mansour and Mupinga (2007) suggested that the physical presence of the instructors also aided the positive experiences of blended learning courses.

The findings of this study add to this earlier research as participants indicated that the fast and direct communications with instructors and peers during the face-to-face classes made their studying effective. They felt they did not have to wait long to get an explanation or to receive the answers for their questions. They also felt they could share knowledge and skills with other students of the same course. This study seems to add more weight to the study of Ireland et al. (2009) as students said they do not want the face-to-face sessions to be reduced in number or duration.

It is significant to note that although there were some contradictory reports about how often the face-to-face learning sessions were conducted, a majority of students said that the traditional lessons were limited in numbers. In fact, they indicated that the amount of face-to-face in their courses had reduced over the time of their enrolment, and that they were not happy with this reduction. Almost all of the participants expressed the need to maintain or increase the number
of those lessons. As they elaborated, they felt the face-to-face session helped promote student engagement as well as avoiding the dropout rates.

5.3.4 Experiences of the interaction

When it comes to interaction, such as the interaction between students and instructors, students and students, and students and content, the findings of this study generally reported positively on them. I discuss each of these aspects of interaction in further detail below.

5.3.4.1 The interaction between students and instructors

The interaction between students and instructors plays an important role in the learning process. Zhao and Yuan (2010) suggest that prompt feedback from instructors greatly enhancing student satisfaction of courses thus keeping the students involved and motivated. Previous research such as that by Farley et al. (2011), Sharafuddin and Allani (2011), Usta and Ozdemir (2007), and Wang (2009) concluded that interaction with instructors was high, valuable and effective. In this study, the participants who commented on the instructor, did so in relation to performing a supportive role and being prompt in replying to student questions and inquiries.

In the main, the findings of this study revealed positive student and instructor interaction experiences. Yet this study suggests that there were different levels in the interaction with the instructors and that it seems that, if they wanted an effective interaction, they needed to be the one who first actively engaged in this process.

The reduction of the face-to-face sessions as mentioned previously was said to influence the interaction between students and instructors. The reduced opportunities to directly communicate with the instructors meant that students may not have sufficient feedback.

5.3.4.2 The interaction between students and students

In the main, the findings of the study indicated that the interaction between the participants and peers was regular and positive. The participants mainly communicated in the online environment, through a wide range of activities (group assignment, exercise, and discussion) and tools (discussion forum, chat room, email, and mobile phone). This seems to support previous research of Usta and Ozdemir (2007) which showed high interaction among the students and also research by Kistow (2011) in which students placed a great emphasis in the interaction with peers and on the sharing of experiences, knowledge and skills. Usta and
Ozdemir (2007) also stated that the web-based environment was beneficial to students for sharing learning with classmates.

Many of the participants in this study used discussion forums to interact with their peers. This seems to support the study of Weinel and Hu (2007) which suggested that asynchronous discussion forums were one of the most common communication forms used in distributed learning and blended learning environments. Other research has also reported positively on the use of discussion forums. According to Lyons and Evans (2013), a majority of students taking part in their study agreed or strongly agreed that there was value in adding the asynchronous online discussions. Similarly, the study of Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz-Soylu (2006) highlighted that the use of the forum contributed to the students’ learning. This study at Hanoi Open University confirms these findings.

Some of the participants however reported experiencing problems with the discussion forum such as problems with the internet transmission. These problems may have resulted because of the low level of infrastructure in place. Moreover, some participants were also critical of the number who chose not to contribute to the discussion forum. It is likely, however, that as students in Vietnam are used to traditional learning with a teacher-centred approach, that they may experience problems self-regulating their own learning. In sum, the findings of the student-student interaction in blended learning course seem to support the research literature.

5.3.4.3 The interaction between students and content

In the main, the findings of this study suggested student and course content interaction were depended upon students’ self-motivation. If students’ self-motivation was high, and they wanted, for example, to obtain the best results, the level of interaction was high. Conversely, students who just wanted to pass the assessments, accessed the course content infrequently. This finding reinforces the study of Murray et al. (2013) which reported that students interacted with course content selectively and intentionally.

Previous research has shown that students reported positively around being able to access course notes (Sharpe et al., 2006). For example, a survey at Metroville University in 2004 revealed that 94.7% of the students found using Blackboard extremely useful to download lecture notes (Sharpe et al., 2006). In another study, Murray, Perez, Geist and Hedrick (2012) also suggested that students tended to access course materials when they perceived doing so directly tied to earning a good grade. Similarly, students in this study reported that being able
to access module guides and lecture notes, gave them access to more knowledge that was useful for the assessment.

In terms of the use of supplemental materials such as reference materials, the study has suggested that students had low level motivations. It is possible that time constraints reported in other studies such as that by Murray et al. (2012) may have contributed to this experience.

5.3.5 Main benefits of blended learning

The participants in this study commented on experiencing several benefits of blended learning. These were; flexible and convenient timing, effective learning outcomes, usefulness and interaction with fellow students. These benefits of blended learning seem to be similar to those identified in the research literature as is explored in the next few paragraphs.

First and foremost, all of the thirteen participants commented that they benefitted from the flexible and convenient scheduling of the blended learning course, which they thought gave them access to learning as job responsibilities and family commitments made it difficult for them to attend fully face-to-face classes. Thus, they thought the blended learning course helped them balance their study with their other daily life commitments. This finding resembles those of Kistow (2011) who also concluded that students cited convenience and flexibility as a major advantage of the blended learning program.

The participants in this study also commented on experiencing learning benefits as a result of being involved in a blended learning course. Other studies have reported likewise. For example, Lopez-Perez et al. (2011) demonstrated that blended learning positively influenced the students’ exam results. Similar opinions were reported in Partridge et al. (2011). Some studies have further suggested that this improvement results as blended learning enables students to constantly reinforce their learning (Lei, as cited in Lopez-Perez et al., 2011).

Participants also commented on having what they term as “useful experiences”, that is, they felt that the blended learning course enabled them to have practical experiences which assisted them in their current job. This view is also evidenced in the literature, with a study by Ireland et al. (2009) commenting that usefulness (in terms of knowledge) was rated the highest experience by students. This study at Hanoi Open University adds to this finding by suggesting that usefulness is linked to work.
Some participants also reported experiencing building social relationships with their peers as a result of participating in a blended learning course. However this was not referred to as often as being flexible and convenient.

5.3.6 Obstacles to blended learning

The participants in this study identified that there were three main obstacles to their achieving positive experiences in blended learning environments. These were: the limited face-to-face interaction, the technical problems, and the students’ self-regulation.

The participants in this study were not generally satisfied with the amount of face-to-face sessions. They believed that the number of sessions had been reduced over time. They felt that more face-to-face sessions would increase their motivation to be engaged in the course. This finding is not so evident in the research literature. For the most part, existing literature seems to comment on maintaining face-to-face so as to reap the benefits of blended learning. It is important to note that there is, perhaps, an inherent contradiction emerging in the participant expectations, that is, that while they liked the flexibility of online learning as it enabled them to juggle their work and family commitments, they also wanted more face-to-face time, which by its very nature is difficult to attend given work and family commitments.

Technical problems, especially problems with the internet transmission, were reported as an obstacle to student learning experience. As suggested by a few participants, these problems may emanate from the lack of internet infrastructure in a developing country like Vietnam or because student use of the infrastructure may cause it to overload. Encountering technical issues is well reported in the literature. El Mansour and Mupinga (2007) for example commented that technology hiccups including bad internet connections contributed to the negative experiences of blended learning. The study of Usta and Ozdemir (2007) also commented on student technical or internet problems while enrolled in a blended learning program.

Self-regulation was also identified as an obstacle to their experience with one third of the participants reporting this challenge. Self-regulation has been reported as an obstacle in previous research. Graham et al. (2005) described this kind of obstacle as a cultural barrier for learners and instructors in blended learning courses. Kaleta et al. (2005) suggested that some students are just simply accustomed to a passive role and cannot make the switch to the type of learner demanded by blended environments. It is perhaps not so hard to understand why students in the Vietnamese context considered self-regulation such a big problem given that Confucian education focuses on the teacher-centred approach and passive learner role.
Although students may be used to ICT in education, it also takes time for them to develop self-discipline (Collis, 2003).

5.3.7 Summary

In the main, participant experiences were mainly positive in relation to the online components, face-to-face components and interaction. As such, these experiences confirm earlier research. Participant experiences also add to current research by suggesting that different levels of involvement in the interaction with the instructors appear to influence the quality of the interaction and that usefulness of the experience may also connect with working lives.

5.4 Expectations and experiences

For the most part participant experiences of blended learning courses seemed to meet their expectations. For example, participants expected that the timing of the blended learning course would be flexible and convenient for them as they had family and work commitments and these were realised in practice. Participants also expected that being involved in a blended learning course would enable them to interact with their peers and this too was realised for many of the participants. Some participants however had difficulty being able to commit to this interaction perhaps as a result of cultural and technical issues.

Some expectations however were not met. Some participants had commented that they expected that they would be experiencing new technologies. When actually reflecting on their experience, some participants commented that technology, especially internet connections, was actually an obstacle to their learning. Some participants also commented that they had the expectation that the blended learning course would be accredited. Yet this expectation was not explicitly referred to when participants were asked to comment on their actual experiences.

It is important, however, to reiterate that most of the participants had difficulty responding to questions about their experiences and whether they did meet their expectation. It was common for participants to respond to this line of questioning with a single word or short sentence in the positive. Perhaps, as has been mentioned throughout this chapter, cultural factors may have come into play. Given the scope of this paper, possible reasons for this hesitance or reluctance were not investigated. As such, future study in this area is warranted.
5.5 Conclusion to Chapter 5

The 13 participants in this study had positive expectations of the blended learning program at Hanoi Open University. While the participants had an uncritical view of blended learning and were hesitant to explore their experiences to any depth, they thought for the most part, that these were met in practice. For example, participants expected that the blended learning course would be convenient to them as many had families and worked, and this was realised in experience. Some expectations around using technology and the course being accredited were not so readily reconciled in practice.

In the main, participant expectations and experiences marry with those concluded in previous research. For example, participant expectation and experience of interacting with peers is well reported. The study however does add to earlier research in a number of ways, especially around the expectation of accreditation. These conclusions are discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 6: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS

This study has shown that students at Hanoi Open University have a number of expectations and experiences of blended learning and that while these often connect with the broader research literature, there are some points of difference. This chapter reports the conclusions of the study derived from the findings reported previously and relates these to the research questions and to the research literature. It also suggests a number of implications for further research, for policy makers, university leaders and teachers that emerge from these conclusions. This chapter also identifies the limitations of the study.

6.1 Conclusions

The conclusions of this study are reported in relation to the research questions set out in Chapter 1. This study has one overarching question:

What are students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning at Hanoi Open University, Vietnam?

For ease of discussion, this question was divided into three sub-questions:

- What are students’ expectations of blended learning programs?
- What are students’ experiences in blended learning programs?
- How do the students’ experiences meet their expectations?

I report on each of these sub-questions in the sections which follow.

6.1.1 Question 1. What are students’ expectations of blended learning programs?

The research literature, conducted mainly in western countries, suggests that higher education students have various expectations of blended learning, including around technology, course quality, level of difficulty, communication with instructor and peers, as well as flexibility and convenience in timing, and that it was common for several expectations to be expressed. Research also suggests that more often than not, these expectations were preconceived ones, formed prior to actual knowledge or experience. Research has also shown that students’ expectations of blended learning were not always positive.

The study also revealed that students often have several expectations of blended learning. However it does reveal a few subtle differences with the literature. First, it reveals a somewhat
different view around the influence of prior experience on expectations, as the participants in this study had no prior experiences in blended learning environments and rather indicated they were influenced by the experience of others. Second, while both positive and negative expectations were usually reported in the literature, the participants in this study only had positive ones.

This study also adds to the literature as it provides a voice from students in Vietnam. While expectations around timeliness and usefulness are reported in the literature, this study in suggesting that these two expectations were of most importance to the participants provides additional insight. As well, these participants often aligned usefulness specifically to their work and identified expectations around accreditation which have been given limited attention in the literature.

6.1.2 Question 2. What are students’ experiences of blended learning programs?

This study suggests that the experiences of the participants in this study were generally akin to that reported by the literature. For example, the participants also commented on their experiences in the online and face-to-face components, and their interaction, as well as identifying positive experiences relating to the course content, course materials, the interface, and the classroom sessions. Unlike the research literature, which also gave considerable attention to negative experiences, the participants in this study gave less. While these negative experiences, around interaction in the face-to-face environment, technical problems and students’ self-regulation, have been reported in the literature, the participants’ near consensus that lack of interaction in the face-to-face was an issue has not been featured to the same extent. By suggesting that participants aligned practical experiences in the blended learning environment to their work needs, this study does provide further insight into this aspect of research.

This study does add to the research literature by revealing the hesitancy that participants had when asked to articulate their experiences of the blended learning environment. While the reasons motivating this hesitancy were outside the scope of this study, it is likely that cultural factors may have had a role to play.
6.1.3 Question 3. How do the students’ experiences meet their expectations?

For the most part, participants’ expectations were realised through actual experience. However, it is to be noted that while participants identified accreditation as an expectation, it was not explored as an experience.

6.2 Implications

Several implications emerge from this study and these are described below.

6.2.1 Research

This study suggests the need for continued research in several areas. One area involves the need for further case studies in other settings in Vietnam so as to continue to build a richer description of students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning.

A second area involves giving more attention in research to the possible influence of cultural factors, particularly in regards to participant experiences of blended learning.

This study has focused on students. A third area of research could focus on teachers and their expectations and experiences of blended learning. This research could also be comparative, so that differences and similarities in the different participants could be identified.

Given the rapid rise in the use of blended learning, research could also focus on longitudinal studies and studies that involve a larger number of participants. This study involved a small number of participants with the intent of developing a more detailed picture of their views. A larger study perhaps utilizing other data collection measures such as survey could yield findings from a much larger participant group. To enhance the credibility of the findings, a longitudinal follow-up study is also recommended to establish whether opinions regarding blended learning courses changed over time.

6.2.2 Policy documents

Blended learning is newly arrived in Vietnam. While the Vietnamese government has prioritized the use of ICT in education including the use of e-learning or blended learning in higher education, there is not much attention given to clearly defining blended learning (what it is and what it is not), nor to identifying clear objectives and targets. This study suggests then that policy makers could focus more on these areas. Related to this, policy makers could pay
more attention to developing guidelines and frameworks to support the informed implementation of blended learning.

6.2.3 University leaders

This study suggests that participants had particular expectations of their blended learning course. These expectations may not be known by university leaders. As a result student expectations may not be realized in practice. University leaders, including faculty and administrators, could produce policy documents so as to better manage the expectations of students who plan to enroll in blended learning courses. Armed with knowledge about their expectations, university leaders could help students be more informed about whether to select a blended learning environment. By understanding student expectations, administrators and faculty can explain or provide students with more information or clarify the format of the courses, to help students avoid unsatisfactory experiences.

University leaders have an influential role in the implementation of policies related to the integration of blended learning. Leaders can for example encourage and foster the development of a culture in which the possibilities of blended learning are more openly explored. University leaders can play an important role in providing an environment that encourages the adoption of blended learning, including providing technical support, so that technical issues often reported in this study are minimised.

Many of the participants in this study felt that face-to-face learning experiences were limited. University leaders could attend to this perceived limitation, perhaps leading to an increase in the number of these sessions provided to students.

6.2.4 Teachers

This study also has some implications for teachers in higher education. By being more aware of the range in student expectations of blended learning, they may be better able to address their needs. Teachers could also benefit from being aware of the numerous benefits and limitations identified by the participants in this study. In particular, teachers could then put into place particular actions to more likely achieve desired benefits and reduce limitations. Moreover, professional training in blended learning could enable teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning experiences in blended learning environments.
6.3 Limitations of the study

With all research, this study has a number of limitations. This study is conducted within a very specific context that being the Hanoi Open University in Vietnam and involved a purposive selection of participants. The scope of this study was small, focused on one university and a small number of participants within this university. This small number of participants in one setting allowed me to undertake a deeper inquiry into expectations and experiences of blended learning. The interpretation of the findings is therefore bound to this particular context. While generalization was not a goal of this study, the expectations and experiences identified by participants in this study may assist future research in other settings.

There are also limitations relating to data collection. Despite the intention to conduct several interviews with each participant, issues around the scheduling of classes in Vietnam meant that only one interview was possible. Furthermore, I recognize that observation may have enhanced the study by providing more detailed commentary of actual practice, but the distance, cost and limited time for the study was prohibitive. In addition, this study is also potentially limited by self-report bias, as the study relied on participants giving honest accounts of their expectations, and experiences of blended learning. Furthermore, I do acknowledge that these accounts could also have been weakened by recall, and social desirability (Polit & Beck, 2006). However, despite these acknowledged limitations in the research design, I believe that the selection of case study was appropriate and valuable in relation to the goals of the study. Case study enabled me to develop more detailed descriptions of students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning within this particular setting.

6.4 Concluding remarks

Unlike Western countries which have been investigating blended learning environments in higher education contexts for some time, this field of research is relatively new to Vietnam. This small scale study of some 13 participants from Hanoi Open University therefore makes an important contribution to this field.
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Appendix 1: Recruitment Advertisement

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT
Students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning: A case study at Hanoi Open University, Vietnam

Dear research participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

My name is Ngan Hoang Vu, a Master of Education (by research) student at RMIT University and I am conducting my thesis with Dr Kathy Jordan, a senior lecturer in the School of Education. In this research, my overall aim is to investigate students’ expectation and experiences of the blended learning programs at Hanoi Open University. The research may give the university insight into what students are thinking about the programs and whether the programs meet their expectations.

Currently, I am seeking second year students who have experiences of the blended learning programs to share their expectations and experiences with me via a Skype-based interview. This interview will be of around 30 minutes and will be recorded.

I would like to use the data that I will be collecting from you for my thesis and possible conference papers and/or journal articles. To protect your privacy, I will use pseudonyms so that individuals are not identified. I will provide you with the written transcription of the interview for member checking before I use it in my research. Being in this study is completely voluntary - you can decline participation without any disadvantages. If you do decide to participate you may withdraw at any stage or avoid answering questions which you feel are too personal or intrusive.

I will keep the consent forms, transcripts and data and audio tapes in a confidential place at the School of Education for five years as required. After five years, all records will be destroyed through the secured system at the Faculty.

If you are interested to participate, please contact me at +61 424801626, or email me at s3409534@student.rmit.edu.au.
Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: Students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning: A case study at Hanoi Open University, Vietnam

Investigators:

- Dr Kathy Jordan, School of Education, College of Design and Social Context.
  - Contact details: Room: 220.3.11. School of Education, Bundoora West, RMIT University, VIC 3083. Email: kathy.jordan@rmit.edu.au, Phone: (03) 99257813
- Master by research student, Ngan Hoang Vu, School of Education, College of Design and Social Context.
  - Contact details: School of Education, Bundoora West, RMIT University, VIC 3083. Email: s3409534@student.rmit.edu.au, Phone: (04)24801626

Dear students of Centre for E-learning, Hanoi Open University,

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by RMIT University. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the study, please ask one of the investigators.

Who is involved in this research study? Why is it being conducted?

- My name is Ngan Hoang Vu and I am a Master by research student in the School of Education, College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University. I am working on this research study as part of the Degree for Master of Education (by research) (MR018) under the supervision of Dr Kathy Jordan, a senior lecturer in the School of Education.
- The project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference number)

Why have you been approached?

You have been approached with this invitation because you are a second year student at Centre for E-learning, Hanoi Open University.

What is the research study about? What are the questions being addressed?

- This research study is a qualitative study. It aims to explore what students think about the blended learning programs, whether the programs meet students’ expectations.
- This study seeks the involvement of 10 second year students from Centre for E-learning, Hanoi Open University.

If you agree to participate, what will you be required to do?

If you do agree to participate, you will be required to take part in a Skype-based interview. It will take about 30 minutes to answer the interview questions and your answers will be recorded. The interview will ask you about your point of views on various issues of blended learning programs such as the program content, the web environment, the use of technology, the student support, the interaction between students and students. The researcher will also take notes during this interview session in case there is something wrong with the recording.
What are the possible risks or disadvantages?

- Taking part in this research study will pose no risks to your study to the best of my knowledge. However, if you find participation in the project distressing, you should contact the primary researcher Dr Kathy Jordan (contact details above) as soon as convenient. Dr Kathy Jordan will discuss your concerns with you confidentially and suggest appropriate follow-up, if necessary.

What are the benefits associated with participation?

Participation in this study may be of benefit to you in the sense that you will have a chance to voice your opinion and to seek support and improvement of the program from the administrators of the university.

What will happen to the information provided?

- To protect your privacy, the data will be coded and pseudonyms will be used so that individuals are not identified. The information will be strictly kept confidential in a secured place.
- Any information that you provide can be disclosed only if (1) it is to protect you or others from harm, (2) a court order is produced, or (3) you provide the researchers with written permission.
- The results of this research study will be disseminated in the Master thesis and/or conference papers and journal articles. The research data will be kept securely at RMIT for 5 years after publication, before being destroyed.

What are the rights of a participant?

- Being in this study is completely voluntary; you can decline participation without any disadvantage. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any stage or to avoid answering questions which you feel are too personal and intrusive.
- I will provide you with the written transcription of the interview for member-checking before I use it in my research.
- If you are not sure about any questions in the interview, you can ask the researcher any questions such as for the purpose of clarification.

Contact details for any questions or concerns?

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the primary investigator, Dr Kathy Jordan, or the Master student, Ngan Hoang Vu with the contact details above.

If you have any complaints about your participation in this study, please see the complaints procedure on the Complaints with respect to participation in research at RMIT page

What are other ethical issues?

There will be no foreseeable issue that you should be aware of before deciding to participate in this study.

Yours sincerely,

Kathy Jordan

Ngan Hoang Vu
Kathy Jordan  
(PhD)  

[Signature]  
(Master student)
Appendix 3: Sample Consent Form

PARTICIPANT’S CONSENT FORM

1. I have had the research study explained to me, and I have read the information sheet
2. I agree to participate in the research study as described
3. I agree:
   to be interviewed via Skype
   that my voice will be audio recorded
4. I acknowledge that:
   (a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied without any disadvantages.
   (b) The study is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
   (c) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
   (d) The security of the research data will be protected during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the study outcomes will be provided to the university library. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant

Date:

__________________________________________

(signature)
Appendix 4: Sample Interview Questions

Background information on participants

Gender: □ Male
      □ Female

Age:

Program of study: □ Accounting
                   □ Finance and Banking
                   □ Business Management
                   □ Applied Information Technology

Describe your prior experiences of blended learning (eg. Name of blended learning course? How course was blended)

Expectations

1. Why did you choose a blended learning program?
2. What were your expectations?
3. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning programs? (e.g. cost effectiveness, time saving, flexibility, “best of both” environments, improved learning outcomes, interaction with contents, instructors and students)

Experiences

1. Describe the features of this blended learning program, i.e. what were the face-to-face elements and the online elements? (eg. web-based content? printed materials? email to instructors expected weekly? student discussion group? face-to-face meetings?)
2. Describe the role and the participation/interaction of students to instructors? of students to students? of students to content?
3. Do you think the features and interactions supported your learning and the assessment of your learning? In what ways? What was missing?
5. Did your experiences match your expectations? In what ways?
6. What recommendations do you make?
Appendix 5: Sample Interview Transcript

Researcher (R): Good morning, my name is Ngan and I am doing a research on Students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning: A case study at Hanoi Open University. You have signed the consent form, which means you have agreed to take part in this research. You can withdraw at any stage as you like. Can we start now?

Participant (P): Sure.

R: First of all, can I have some of your background information?

P: Yes

R: What is your major?

P: I study banking and finance.

R: Can you describe any prior experiences of blended learning you may have?

P: I do not have any prior experiences regarding of blended learning. The course I attend at the moment at Hanoi Open University is my first experience of blended learning.

R: Thank you. Now I would like to ask you about your expectations of blended learning program. First of all, why did you choose a blended learning program?

P: This is from my personal requirement. I have already had a job so I do not have time to go to school. This program creates many favourable conditions for me to study, especially the flexible time it offers. The course also does not affect my job so I choose it. Furthermore, I heard from some other people who already attended the course that the quality of the training program was good. All these things made me choose the course.

R: What were your expectations?

P: From the beginning, I was quite worried because I am not sure about the program. I also wanted to get a good learning outcomes and an accredited qualification.

R: What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning programs?

P: The advantage is that the program saves me the time and the travelling costs. The disadvantages are the limited interaction between students and students, between students and teachers compared to traditional training programs. I think it is the most disadvantages.
R: Thank you. Now I would like to ask you about your experiences. Could you please describe the features of this blended learning program?

P: …

R: Can you tell me something about the online elements?

P: I think the contents of the online elements provided by Hanoi Open University are suitable with many people. The interface of online sessions is easy to use. There are exercises which are divided by weeks and there are time bar which let students know which week they are and what exercises they have to do. Lessons are divided by week with attached quizzes which help to evaluate how much students have learned after the information has been taught and presented. I found this interesting. The content of the lessons are rich, easy to understand and suitable with most of the students.

R: What about the materials of the course?

P: The materials provided by the program are rich and diverse. For example, at the beginning of a term, the university will provide students a range of materials such as text books, CDs for the convenience of the students’ studying. Students can also access to the online classes and get the online materials which are attached there. The online materials could be in pdf files, video files or multi-media files. And there are a lot of interesting materials.

Adding to the online sessions, I want to tell you about the virtual classes which take place in the online environments and students and teachers could communicate with each other at the same time. The contents of the lessons provided by the classes are suitable for students who have job like me. It is not theoretical but related to practice. The knowledge provided by the online lectures is practical that can be applied straight to our real life and workplace situations. In my opinions, it is effective. Furthermore, the way the teachers deliver the lessons is lively and enthusiastically.

R: Can you give me some information on the face-to-face elements?

P: The classroom sessions are among the requirements of the program. However, there are a lot of students who live far away from Hanoi cannot attend the sessions. Students who live in Hanoi can usually take part in these sessions. Most of the subjects offer classroom sessions. If students do not attend, then they will miss a chance to meet the teachers and get answers directly for any inquiries they may have.
R: Do you think the classroom sessions are effective?

P: It is really good to attend the classroom sessions, especially before the examination. I know that with online learning or blended learning, students need to manage their own studying process. However, teachers can help students to summarise and stay focus on the most relevant and useful knowledge. Students who take part in the classroom sessions usually get high mark from the examination. I am the one who usually attend those sessions.

R: Could you please describe the role and the interaction between students and instructors, students and students, and students and contents?

P: Yes. I will talk about the interaction between students and teachers first. Nowadays, students play an active role compared to the past. If there is any inquiry, they will even phone the instructors for an answer. As regulated by the program, there is a forum for the students to contact with the instructors. It is a place where the students can do some posting relating to their studying and receive answers for any questions from the instructors within 72 hours. If it is an urgent matter, students can call the instructors directly. I think the interaction between students and instructors is quite good. The instructors or teachers are very devoted and enthusiastically with the students although their ages are not much different. Some students are even older than the teachers. The teachers are very good and this is a really good studying environment. I think people who have already had job but still want to get a higher qualification should attend this training program. I have recommended this training program to a lot of my friends. Many of them have taken part in the program already.

R: How about the interaction between students and students?

P: The students in my class are from different areas of the country. We do not know each other much and do not meet regularly except in classroom sessions which are held twice or three times per month. Students’ groups are often formed basing on the geographic area where they live in. Students discuss issues relating to their study mostly online and through the phone. In my points of view, students’ discussions through phone are not effective compared to through yahoo chat room, Facebook or email. Students often support each other during the learning process. They share information and knowledge as well as do not cause trouble to another. If we come across a difficult lesson, we will hold a meeting and any students who have deeper understanding of it will help others to solve the problem.
Students often do the exercises by groups. It is very hard for people to meet in person to discuss about the exercises because most of them have their own job and their own family. Some people even have to bring their children to the meeting if there is any. Therefore, most of the interactions take place online. Facebook and yahoo chat room or other tools have important role to connect students with each other. We usually decide a specific time which is suitable for every members of the group to meet online to share information and knowledge and to help each other. If there is anyone who cannot attend the online meeting such as a chat group activity, they still can access the chat room to read all the contents of the chat group session and to catch up to the group’s information and activities. This is how my group is. I think the effectiveness of group activities depends on the management of the group leader.

R: Do you use discussion forum for the interaction?

P: Yes, I usually use the discussion forum. I have posted a lot of articles to this forum. This is the place where students access, then post their questions and share plenty of their thoughts. Most of people use the discussion forum. However, the use of discussion forum depends on the quality of the internet transmission. If the internet transmission line is good, there is no problem with the use of discussion forum. If it is not good, students can lose access to the discussion forum despite the fact that they are in the middle of posting a topic or sharing some information. The same thing can happen with the exercise doing process. It is lucky that Hanoi Open University understands the situation. For example, if students lose access to the site when they are posting information to fulfil the participation requirements or when they are doing an exercise as part of the assessment requirements, they can take a picture of what appears on the screen and sent it to the instructors. The instructors will then agree with you that you have the applicable reason and thus allow you to do the posting or the exercise again. The difficulty caused by the internet transmission has become a common problem.

R: Can you describe the interactive between students and contents?

P: Oh, yes. Half of the members of our group usually download the audio files of the lessons to the personal devices to listen and to study. There are a lot of files in multi-media format which are suitable for students to study. However, I prefer to read the text book. I do not like listening to the lessons. Since the beginning of the study, I have listened to the audio files about two times. I think this one belongs to personal preferences. Each student has a different preference. It is good that the materials are rich and there are a lot of choices for students to choose.
R: Thank you. Let me move to another question. Do you think the features and the interaction which you have just mentioned supported your learning and assessment of your learning? If yes, then in what ways?

P: Yes, it supports my learning a lot and also brings the effectiveness. The content of the course is practical. I am working for a bank, thus I need information and knowledge relating to my work. This course in banking and finance supports me a lot by providing me practical knowledge which is useful for my work.

This blended learning is an intelligent program and suitable with the learning trends all over the world. In other countries, there is a majority of students studying in e-learning and blended learning programs. These kinds of program were set up quite long ago in other countries compared to Vietnam. Attending the program, I think it is suitable with me and very effective. A lot of other students have the same opinion. This is because they all have to go to work and do not have enough time for the traditional classes. The traditional classes are only suitable with primary school or high school.

R: Could you please tell me what did you like? What did you dislike? What obstacles did you face?

P: I don’t have to spend too much time to go to class. This is what I like most. Additionally, I still have time for my family. I also like the close relationship between students and teachers. Furthermore, the materials are rich and easy to read and to learn.

The thing I do not like is: In the first year, the numbers of classroom sessions are quite satisfying. There were about 2 or 3 classroom sessions each week. I like classroom sessions because they give me chances to communicate with peers and teachers. However, the classroom sessions are now reduced to once per month. I don’t like it at all. I think the program should have at least one classroom lessons per two weeks. Once per month is not enough for the students.

About the obstacles, I do not have any obstacle relating to technology such as the use of computer. I has been using the computer since I was in grade 6, thus I am very familiar with it. Some students whose age is high may have some challenges of using information and communication technology. The only and biggest obstacle which I might have comes from the internet transmission line. The quality of the internet transmission in Vietnam is not good. I turn on the wireless modem and even use 3G sometimes to access to the internet but in some
cases it still fails to connect to the learning system. This happens commonly in Vietnam. I feel very upset whenever the access is lost as I am doing my exercise and I have to start all over again. However, the frequency of it is not too much.

R: Could you please let me know whether your experiences match your expectations?

P: Yes, the things which I have experienced about the blended learning course meet my expectations. If someone found out that the course did not meet their expectations, they usually stopped it. My class’ numbers of students were 60 at the beginning of the course, now there are only 40 students. But for me, the course is suitable and easy for me to follow. I think we should have a faith in the teachers in particular and the program in general. Most of the teachers possess high positions in the industry, thus I believe the knowledge delivered by them is standard and useful for my current job. Although the tuition fee is increasing, I do not think that it is a matter if the quality of the program is good.

R: I have one more question for you. Do you have any recommendations for the program?

P: If the tuition is reduced a little bit, then it would be so good. Or the University should not change the fee for the last semester. However, my key recommendation is that the University should increase the classroom sessions to once per two weeks.

R: Thank you very much for your participation in the interview. I hope you will be successful with your study in the future.

P: You are welcomed. I also wish you all the best with your thesis.

R: Thank you!
Appendix 6: Approval Letter for Research Project

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Approval Letter for Research Project:

“Students’ expectations and experiences of blended learning: A case study at Hanoi Open University, Vietnam”

25th June, 2013

Ngan Hoang Vu,

School of Education
College of Social Design and Context,
RMIT University, Vic. 3083, Australia.

Dear Ngan Hoang Vu,

Thank you for your request to recruit participants from Centre for E-learning, Hanoi Open University for the above-titled research.

I have read and understood the Explanatory statement regarding the research and hereby give permission for this research to be conducted.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Le Van Thanh

President of Hanoi Open University

Email: thanhlv@hou.edu.vn