Institutional and student transitions to into blended learning

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[2942 words excluding references]

Abstract

The 'Transitions into blended learning' project was undertaken at the University of Glasgow, in response to QAA Scotland's most recent Enhancement Themes activity. This work focused on three areas: developing an institutional framework, researching learner experiences, and identifying and implementing interventions to support effective transitions. The institutional framework was developed as a result of analysis of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, informed by the literature. The framework presents key drivers for blended learning, a set of considerations for institutions to enhance their blended learning provision, and a set of processes to facilitate change involving three stakeholder groups at the heart of the model. Learner experience research with students newly engaged in blended learning has identified support needs around access (to technology and learning materials), acculturation (attitudes towards learning online) and attributes (skills), all of which are needed to engage autonomously in blended learning. A set of interventions or 'anchor points' to prevent the institution 'drifting back' into purely traditional approaches to learning and teaching were identified and implemented. These include development of an institutional e-learning framework, recognition and dissemination of good practice through case studies, and a networking event to encourage staff and students to share good practice in blended learning. This paper presents an overview of the project outcomes to date.

Key messages

- A framework was developed to support institutional transitions into blended learning
- Learner experience research highlighted issues of access, attitude and attributes needed for autonomous blended learning
- Interventions, including organisational learning opportunities for staff and students, were implemented to facilitate long-lasting change

Keywords

Blended learning, student transitions, institutional framework

University of Glasgow's approach to the Student Transitions Enhancement Theme

The university does not exist in isolation; it serves the wider community, locally, nationally and internationally. The University of Glasgow recognise that within this wider context, technology is evolving and becoming part of the everyday experience of people, at work, on the move and at home. HEIs are increasingly recognising the need to meet the demands of the changing digital landscape (Gardiner, 2015). New learning technologies offer more affordances for flexible learning (Gordon, 2014), and learners' expectations are increasingly focused on a digital experience (Beetham, White, & Wild, 2013), regardless of debates surrounding variation in student and teacher digital literacies (Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013; Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011). This realisation has led many universities around the world to explore blended learning (BL) as a means to drive educational innovation (Dziuban, Hartman, Cavanagh, & Moskal, 2011). It is against this constant technological evolution and immersion that the institutional Enhancement Themes team determined to undertake enhancement work related to university and its stakeholders' transitions to blended learning. Blended learning has been defined as the "thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p.96-7), and this is the definition we subscribe to, acknowledging that true blended learning results in a reduction of face-to-face time (Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison, 2013). A focus on this theme of enquiry has allowed the university to look at how 24/7 immersion in a digital landscape impacts on student, staff and the institution in terms of readiness for change, particularly in relation to BL. The project has focused on three areas of investigation:

- Year 1: Developing the institutional framework for transition into BL, and researching the student experience of BL
- Year 2: Continuing to research the student experience of BL and identifying 'anchor points' to embed enhanced blended learning
- Year 3: Implementing 'anchor points' to facilitate and embed good practice in BL across the institution

Developing the institutional framework

In developing the institutional framework (Figure 1), we conducted interviews with 20 key informants comprising senior management, heads of services, teachers, and the student representative for learning and teaching across the institution. Our interview questions assessed motivations to engage in enhanced BL, perceived benefits, challenges and barriers, and support needs. In terms of motivation and benefits, it was found that blended learning facilitated an enhanced student experience by increasing self-directed learning, development of information/lifelong learning literacies, flexibility in learning and optimised learning outcomes. There was also the perceived benefit of improved efficiencies in terms high costs of face-to-face delivery and the reusable nature of BL. Additionally, blended learning was perceived to enhance teachers' experience and upskilling. However, concerns were raised around the research-teaching tension, staff workload models, the robustness of IT infrastructure, local learning technology and instructional design support, staff and students' variable digital literacies, students' misperceptions regarding 'value for money', and ethical issues e.g. device ownership. Support needs included staff development (including peer mentoring, local learning technology support, and communities of practice). There was also an expressed need for senior management to review workload and promotion criteria and make recognised appointments in digital education, to continue to embed digital

education in institutional strategy, to increase investment in university infrastructure, and to establish a centre for technology-enhanced learning.

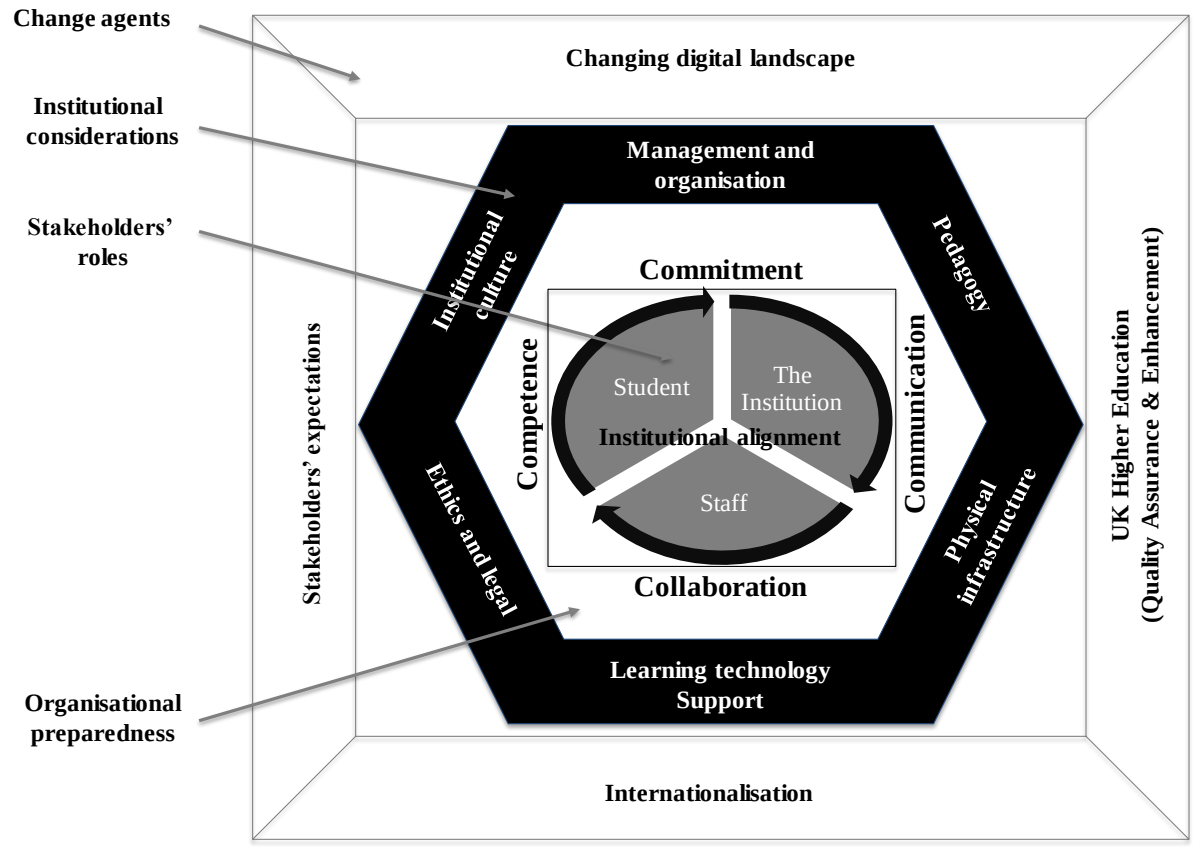

Figure 1: Framework for institutional transition into enhanced blended learning

Informed by our engagement with the literature, we were able to align our findings to four themes of interest, represented in Figure 1; change agents which represent the key sectoral drivers driving institution towards enhanced blended learning, institutional considerations that link internal factors to the external environment, processes for organisational preparedness, and stakeholders, whose roles and expectations need to be aligned.

Change agents

External change agents identified in the study represent the driving forces or rationale for a change of institutional strategy in learning and teaching. These include the changing digital landscape, internationalisation, quality assurance and enhancement, and stakeholder expectations including those of increasingly digitally fluent students and staff.

Institutional considerations

The six dimensions of institutional considerations (Figure 2) were derived from the findings on support needs and recommendations of good practice and echo Khan's (2005) octagonal e-learning framework, reframing it for a UK HE context and focused on campus-based blended learning.

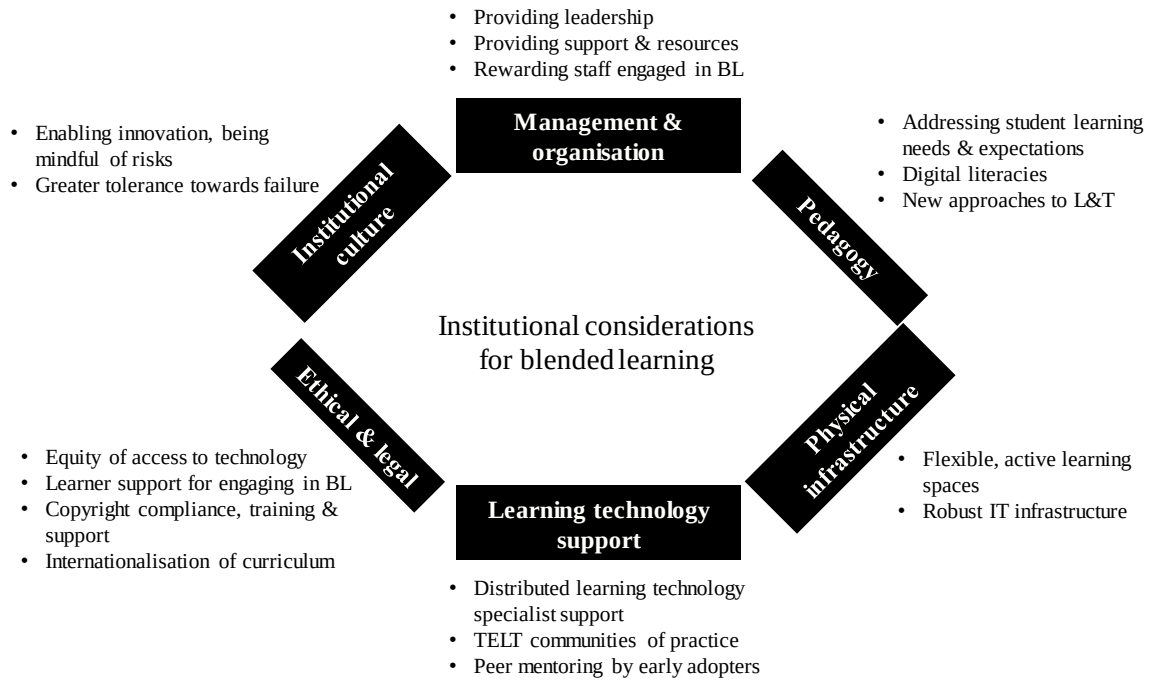

Figure 2: Elaborating the institutional considerations

Organisational preparedness

Organisational preparedness requires the organisation to reflect on its readiness for the desired directional change. Four key elements were identified in the study around managing effective organisational change to support transitions to BL and these include competence, commitment, communication and collaboration. This four elements map approximately to Reason's model that identified competence, commitment and awareness as crucial in shaping decision-making processes (Fischbacher-Smith, 2016).

Stakeholder roles

The central theme considers the roles of relevant stakeholder groups; students as self-directed, reflective learners, teachers as facilitators of independent learning, and management providing leadership and resources to facilitate effective transitions. All of these groups should engage in communication and collaboration to develop staff and student commitment to - and competence in - the BL arena.

The framework and its development are described in more detail in a separate paper (Adekola, Dale, & Gardiner, in review).

The institutional framework was shared with the institutional Enhancement Themes team (20 representative stakeholders across the institution; overlapping with but not the same as the interview participants) to reflect, comment and elaborate on the framework, via email and during a 'world café' event. What emerged from the consultation was recognition that transitioning to blended learning and innovation in learning and teaching generally can be construed as a 'wicked problem' (Rittel & Webber, 1973), one where there is, as yet, no full understanding of how change may be best facilitated. The institutional culture and management and organisation dimensions were seen as pivotal in implementing change in relation to the other four dimensions (pedagogy, learning technology support, ethical/legal, and physical infrastructure). The six dimensions were conceptualised as a series of

overlapping circles and some of the dimensions were viewed as complementary pairs: institutional culture with management and organisation; ethical/legal with physical infrastructure, and pedagogy with learning technology support.

Researching the learner experience of BL

In years 1 and 2, we researched the learner experience of BL. Given that truly blended learning was relatively new in the institution (i.e. effectively combining face-to-face and online instruction to use both to best effect, leading to a reduction in –face-to-face contact), our study was essentially limited and exploratory in nature. We made no attempt at generalisability and the study was intended to provide insight within our own institution and to offer guidance to the sector.

In order to include undergraduates and postgraduates as well as home and international students, we drew on a purposive sample of students (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000), by approaching students on three courses across three of our academic colleges who were newly introducing BL. Our sampling was also opportunistic in the sense that we relied on volunteers, and employed a mix of focus group, interviews and end-of-course survey data. In session 2014/15, students were recruited from a blended postgraduate course in School A. In session 2015/16, we recruited home undergraduates from four online undergraduate related courses in School B, and additional home-based and international participants were recruited from a blended postgraduate course in School C. The number of participants from Schools A, B and C are shown in Table 1. Our questions focused on students' motivations to engage in BL, their expectations, perceived benefits, challenges and barriers, and skills developed as a result of engagement in BL.

Student Cohort	**School A: (international postgraduates)**	**School B: (home undergraduate)**	**School C: (home/ international postgraduates)**	**Total**
Method of data collection used	Focus group	End-of-course quality assurance survey*	Individual interview	
No. of participants (2014/15)	9			9
No. of participants (2015/16)		12	3	15
Total				24

Table 1: Participants recruited to the study

*The end of course survey used open questions. Course leaders incorporated specific questions into the standard forms at our request.

Motivations and expectations

Students were largely motivated to engage in BL because it enabled them to overcome timetabling conflicts between subjects, although some students had no choice but to engage in an online course delivered within an otherwise traditional face-to-face programme. Students typically expected that blended learning would be

easy to use, accessible, and that BL would provide the same “ease of contact with teachers” as they would receive in a face-to-face setting. They also expected convenience and flexibility in learning and an experience to traditional teaching and learning.

Benefits

In term of benefits, participants were positive about the opportunities and convenience brought about by BL in terms of affording them flexibility and control over their learning. Students also reported that BL encouraged independent learning, the blended course was easy to use, it was easier to ask questions online, there was the potential for peer learning using forums, and there was an emphasis on active learning. Particularly notable was the sense that students experienced greater equity of participation.

Challenges

Commonly reported challenges for different student groups included time management, reduced-face to-face contact leading to a sense of loneliness, and technical issues regarding reliable access to - and quality of - learning materials. A lack of input from others, or difficulty asking questions online, was sometimes a challenge. It was particularly difficult for some students to feel that they had fully resolved their query in an online environment, largely due to the inability to engage directly (or synchronously) with the lecturer or peers.

Challenges for international postgraduate learners

These challenges were compounded for international postgraduate students transitioning to UK HE. Some reported concerns included adjusting to a new, unanticipated mode of learning, questioning the rationale of online learning after having travelled to the UK for a face-to-face experience, and concern language because they had to first translate the English term associated within a technology into their own language to discern what it was for. Some students spoke of feeling “alone” and “lonely” because of the lack of face-to-face contact with teaching staff and other students. Given that contributing to online forums was not anonymous, the issue of students saving face also emerged, although there was evidence that students were learning to overcome this shyness.

Skills

The most important skills students developed through engaging in BL included readiness for online learning, social literacies, digital literacies, time management, written communication and critical thinking skills. That international students readily reported greater independent learning, more insight into their own learning, and enhanced facility to do their own research, suggests that the online setting provides them with the time, space and opportunity for reflection that they expressed elsewhere that they lack when it comes to classroom settings. There is also a sense that students developed an appreciation for the value that their peers bring to any learning online.

These findings led to the development of a conceptual model of student transitions to blended learning (Adekola, Dale, Gardiner, & Fischbacher-Smith, in review), shown in Figure 3.

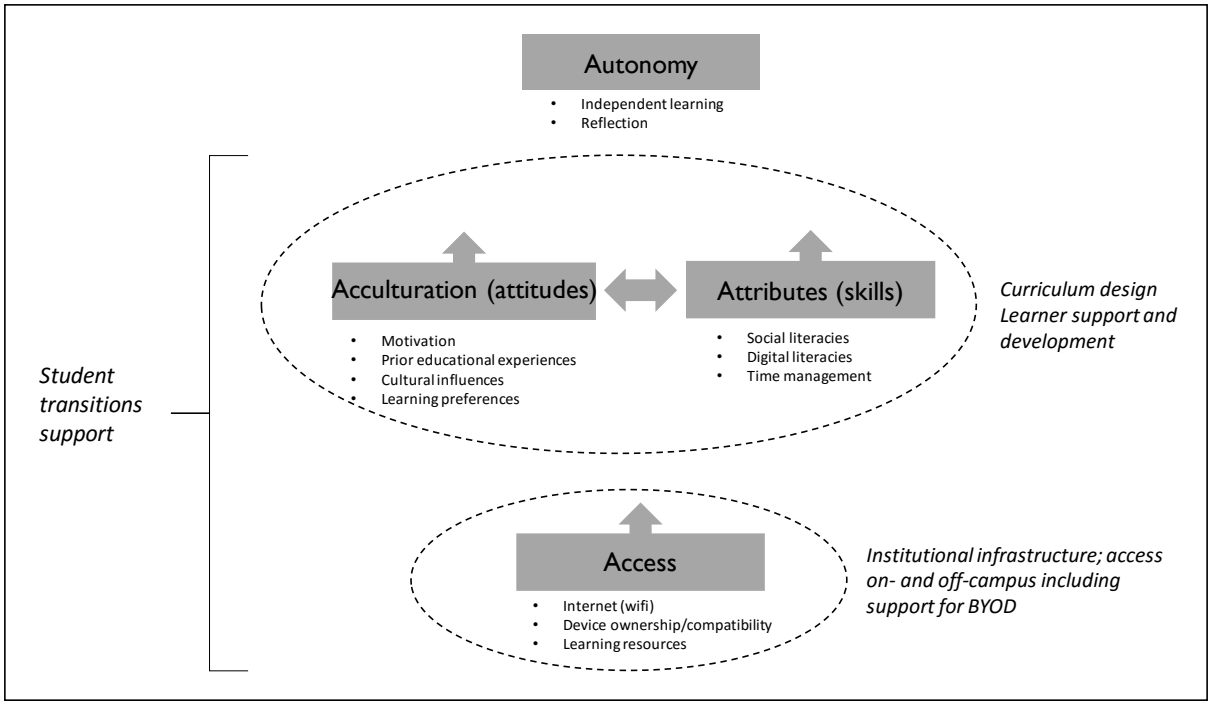

Figure 3: Student transitions to blended learning

This study suggested that success in blended learning was ultimately a function of four distinct aspects: access, acculturation, attributes and autonomy. Access (to technology, Wi-Fi and learning resources) is a basic requirement. Autonomy is the ultimate goal for learners to effectively engage in blended learning, requiring students to be independent, reflective learners. Acculturation relates to students attitudes towards engaging in BL, which may be influenced by their motivation and background, or the opportunity to develop attributes (skills) that are also required to enable them to achieve autonomy.

Identifying 'anchor points' to effect change

A proforma was developed for members of the institutional team to give feedback via email, to answer the following questions:

- What are the main challenges in relation to transitions to BL, in your area of work?
- What is currently being done in your area of work to support transitions to BL?
- What specific interventions of 'anchor points' would you like to see implemented and evaluated in the institution with a view to supporting transitions to blended learning?

Each question was asked in relation to students, staff and the institution.

Challenges

The challenges largely mirrored the outcomes of previous consultations with staff and students, and included:

- *Students:* resistance to active learning, scalability, BL not considered within overall student journey, coordination of support provision across the institution
- *Staff:* Conservatism, lack of time to re-think approaches to teaching, assumptions about student skills and expectations, staff digital literacies

- *Institution:* Workload model, maintaining standards while innovating, variable levels of commitment to BL across parts of the institution, attitude to risk

Implemented enhancements

- *Students:* Good liaison between staff and Students Representative Council, students engaged with and consulted about innovations
- *Staff:* Recruitment of learning technology specialists or digital education leads within colleges, more partnership working across services, MVLS induction for online learners
- *Institution:* Working group to revise promotions criteria, BOLD project funding, attention to efficiencies of scale regarding BL learning materials

Anchor points

- *Students:* Partnership working with staff in developing curricula or learning materials, induction or digital/online learning literacy support for all students, annual review of student support needs
- *Staff:* Increased academic development and training, working with ambassadors/champions, involving support staff in curriculum design, raising awareness of what BL is
- *Institution:* Development of a culture that facilitates more innovation and risk-taking, addressing balance of research-teaching incentive for staff, continued funding for digital developments, integrating good practice guidelines from across the institution

From this feedback, we proposed seven interventions:

1. **Guidelines for good practice in e-learning development** - Guidelines for good practice have been developed by work in the College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences (MVLS), based on the UCL baseline documentation which is available for reuse through the Creative Commons licensing scheme. These are being trialled in MVLS before being refined and implemented across the institution.
2. **Resources to support student induction into blended and online learning** - induction resources including guidance on using learning technologies, and developing online study skills, were developed within MVLS and used as a template for all blended and online programmes or courses of study across the institution. This work is now feeding into a collaborative QAAS funded project involving partners in three other HEIs, to further develop these resources for distribution across the sector.
3. **Staff digital capabilities** - Work on staff digital capabilities within this project, using the Jisc framework (Jisc, 2016) was postponed due to the timescale. However, work is ongoing in other contexts; for example through taught courses and continuing professional development, to support staff development of digital literacies. This remains a priority for the institution.
4. **Student engagement** - One of the recommendations was to engage staff and students in co-creation of BL curricula. Such an approach is supported through the institution's Active Student Participation in Education Network (ASPEN) run by LEADS, the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development Service.
5. **Case studies of good practice** - Case studies have been collated to disseminate good practice across a variety of disciplines, by staff engaging in BL. These will be disseminated internally and externally via the hosting of our digital artefact on the LEADS website.
6. **Organisational learning** - As well as the case studies, we are also hosting an event entitled 'Transitions to blended and online learning' to showcase work done in

relation to the Blended and Online Learning Development (BOLD) project which has run in parallel to the QAA project, as well as staff engagement in open education through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

7. **Continuing to research the learner experience** - We are continuing to research the learner experience across a range of blended contexts, and will report the findings of these

Conclusions

The QAA-funded project, running in parallel with the BOLD project, has had a transformative impact on the institution, in terms of how we support staff and student transitions into BL. We are determined that this valuable work will inform ongoing work, including organisational learning, dissemination of good practice, development and implementation of strategy, continued resourcing for BL developments including appropriate recognition and reward for staff engaged in this space, and continuing support for student transitions into BL.

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