



Reflection and response of the Innovation in
Education/Blended Learning Task Force to the
suggestions of the academic community

Date
December 2015

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October 2014 saw the setting up of an Innovation in Education/Blended Learning Task Force, comprising a mixture of experts and members of teaching management from various faculties of the UvA. At the request of the Executive Board, the Task Force sought to answer the following questions:

1. Reflect on the existing Vision on Teaching and Learning and examine how recent developments could be integrated into the curricula.
2. Develop a didactic concept for blended learning curricula where there is a good balance between online and offline learning and which is in line with the learning outcomes of degree programmes and the general objectives of education at the UvA (research-intensive education and student-activating education).
3. Provide an overview of empirical evidence concerning blended learning.
4. Examine whether, and how, blended learning can contribute to flexible learning pathways for non-traditional groups of students (part-time students, continuing professional education, etc.).
5. Prepare a list of the online forms of education at the UvA and specify which of them lend themselves to being scaled up.
6. Provide an overview of the financial consequences and technical preconditions.

Besides answering these questions the Task Force took the liberty to obtain more information in a broad sense on the issue of blended learning and innovation in education.

The Task Force published its advisory report in September 2015. In consultation with the Task Force, the Executive Board decided to disseminate the advisory report within the UvA community and to ask it to respond to the advisory report. Fortunately, full use was made of that opportunity. The Task Force is very appreciative of those responses because it shows great involvement on the part of lecturers, students and other members of the UvA community in the development of education.

Many responses reached Task Force members through informal channels; these will not be discussed here. In addition, 45 formal responses were received, which were initially addressed to the Executive Board. Those 45 responses have recently been discussed in depth by the Task Force. They are responses from individual students, employees (academic and support staff) and from formal bodies within the UvA, such as programme committees, student councils, etc. It should be noted here that not all programme committees and student councils of all faculties responded. The responses sometimes differ widely in terms of content, varying from ‘concern that the main focus of knowledge transfer lies with face-to-face contact with lecturers’ to ‘I think we should not exaggerate the role of the face-to-face lecturer in the learning process.’

In this letter we will give a brief response to and reflection on some frequently occurring comments on the advisory report. We also examined the extent to which a particular comment caused the text of the report to be amended. We shall deal with that aspect first.

Changes in the report

The Task Force decided to make a few amendments to the text of the report. One response referred to some flaws in the wording and editing of the text. They will be corrected. No changes will be made to the style, scope and structure of the report.

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Various responses posed critical questions concerning the comment in the report that ‘the clock is ticking’ (pages 3 and 30) as regards the introduction of a blended learning strategy. We have decided to delete the term ‘the clock is ticking’ from the text because the term itself provoked an inordinate amount of discussion (and sometimes irritation). However, the Task Force does believe that the UvA and its faculties will soon have to make strategic choices in respect of blended learning (see also below).

Various comments were made about the role of the dean of blended learning and of the UvA blended learning platform proposed in our advisory report. We will explain these in greater detail later in this letter; this explanation will also be included in the advisory report.

Reflection on comments

The Task Force expressly opted for an educational perspective on blended learning when it started its work. It did not make a choice as regards the desirability and opportunities of blended learning from the outset. The open questions from the terms of reference initially determined the direction of our search. The findings from scientific research into blended learning, experiences of blended learning within and outside the UvA and the UvA’s current Vision on Teaching and Learning ultimately resulted in the vision on blended learning as set out in the report.

The report comprises two parts. In respect of the combination of offline and online teaching activities, we recommend that they are always developed from a vigorous and comprehensive educational perspective. As regards the Vision on Teaching and Learning itself, we recommend developing a depth and breadth strategy. Depth has to do with stepping up contact between student and lecturer, whereas breadth has to do with relating teaching and learning to society.

Urgency

Some responses cast doubt as to the urgent need referred to in the report to develop a UvA blended learning strategy. Some respondents believe there is insufficient regard for specific problems within the UvA as the basis for justifying the need for a blended learning strategy. The Task Force believes that the urgency has arisen as a result of a combination of developments, within and outside the UvA, some of which are of technological nature and some of which are not. We referred to the consequences of that combination of developments, in summary, as unbundling. The term unbundling is not only used to describe developments in the private, commercial sector, as suggested in one response, but has a long tradition in academic literature on higher education.

We are well aware that the sense of urgency is experienced differently within the various faculties and degree programmes. Nevertheless, the Task Force believes that the developments mentioned are of a scale and nature such that a blended learning strategy needs to be developed. Naturally, the faculties and degree programmes are free to disagree here.

Broader versus narrow vision on blended learning

It was difficult to find a good definition for blended learning. We considered in depth the various definitions found during our literature research. Some authors make a distinction between a broad and a narrow definition. A broad definition of blended learning is taken to mean a combination of approaches to education, instruction methods, educational technologies and transfer methods. We did not opt for this broad definition, because these combinations have long been in existence and have been thoroughly examined. The narrow definition primarily has to do with an optimum combination of online and offline learning. We opted for a narrow definition where the emphasis is on the importance of an educational vision.

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The role of technology

The fear that teaching and learning would be excessively determined by technology were blended learning to be introduced is expressed in some responses. Along the same lines, we were warned against going along with new technology hypes to too great an extent. The Task Force believes that a critical attitude in respect of the role of technology in education is required. At the same time, it believes that the opportunities offered by technology must be exploited in order to improve education. Improving the quality of education is the key element in our advisory report. Whether, and if so, which, technical resources are used here is of secondary importance and should not become an end in itself.

Abstract and contains sweeping statements

Some responses stated that the report was too abstract and contained too many sweeping statements. This response was to be expected. Knowledge and experience of blended learning within the UvA varies sharply. Blended learning has already been applied within some degree programmes for a long time, whereas in other degree programmes knowledge of it is virtually non-existent. Moreover, blended learning will be applied in very different ways within the various degree programmes. We have given a variety of examples of blended learning in a number of UvA faculties in the appendices. We hope our report will primarily contribute to discussions about innovations in education and improving education at degree programme level.

Finances/implementation

The advisory report does not contain a finance section providing an estimate of the costs, nor does it contain a plan of approach for the advisory report. The Task Force believes that the possibilities of blended learning in terms of educational content and organisation should be identified first and that the financial frameworks for it should be specified and a plan of approach prepared as a second step.

Blended learning as a cost-cutting measure

Some responses are sceptical of blended learning because it is possible that it will be used to cut back on face-to-face instruction. In our report, we expressly chose an approach where blended learning is intended to improve the quality of education. In our opinion, the choice between offline and online education should not be determined by the financial aspect but by the effectiveness of contact between lecturer and student (offline and online). In the report we opted for improving the quality of education by using a depth and breadth strategy in education. Using combinations of offline and online forms of education offers many opportunities to achieve that breadth and depth.

Lecturers

A few respondents expressed the concern that the introduction of blended learning will mean an increased workload for lecturers and that this was not factored in to the decision-making process. This is a legitimate concern. Many ICT projects in education fail because lecturers receive insufficient support and/or rewards for their efforts in this area. This concern is also voiced in the report. For these reasons we argue for priority to be given to supporting lecturers (time, money, expertise, incentives).

Centralised versus decentralised

The Task Force's report contains recommendations affecting matters at centralised level and at decentralised level. The idea behind this is that better interplay will be achieved between centralised and decentralised initiatives. At present, there are many ICT and education initiatives where there is relatively little coherence. For this reason the Task Force believes that oversight is required. Moreover, oversight will enable knowledge and experience in the area of blended learning to be shared more efficiently between faculties and degree programmes. It is a good thing when faculties

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and degree programmes can learn from each other's knowledge and experience. It is certainly not the intention that blended learning initiatives should be imposed top-down on faculties. Depending on their specific requirements, faculties and degree programmes will ultimately have to be able to make their own choices as regards blended learning.

Dean of blended learning and blended learning platform

A few comments were made about our recommendation that a dean of blended learning be appointed. The fear is that this person will play an inordinately determining role within the UvA. Our recommendation concerning the dean of blended learning was not made in isolation but is part of our recommendation that there should be more oversight in respect of the education policy, in particular in the area of ICT in education (see comments regarding 'Centralised versus decentralised'). One of the responses suggests that a dean of HE (Higher Education) should be appointed rather than a dean of blended learning. According to the response, expertise in the area of learning in higher education is required. Blended learning could be a part of that. The Task Force finds this an interesting idea, because it would certainly create a comprehensive vision on learning in higher education. A possible disadvantage is that it would cover too large a policy area which would be difficult for one person to oversee.

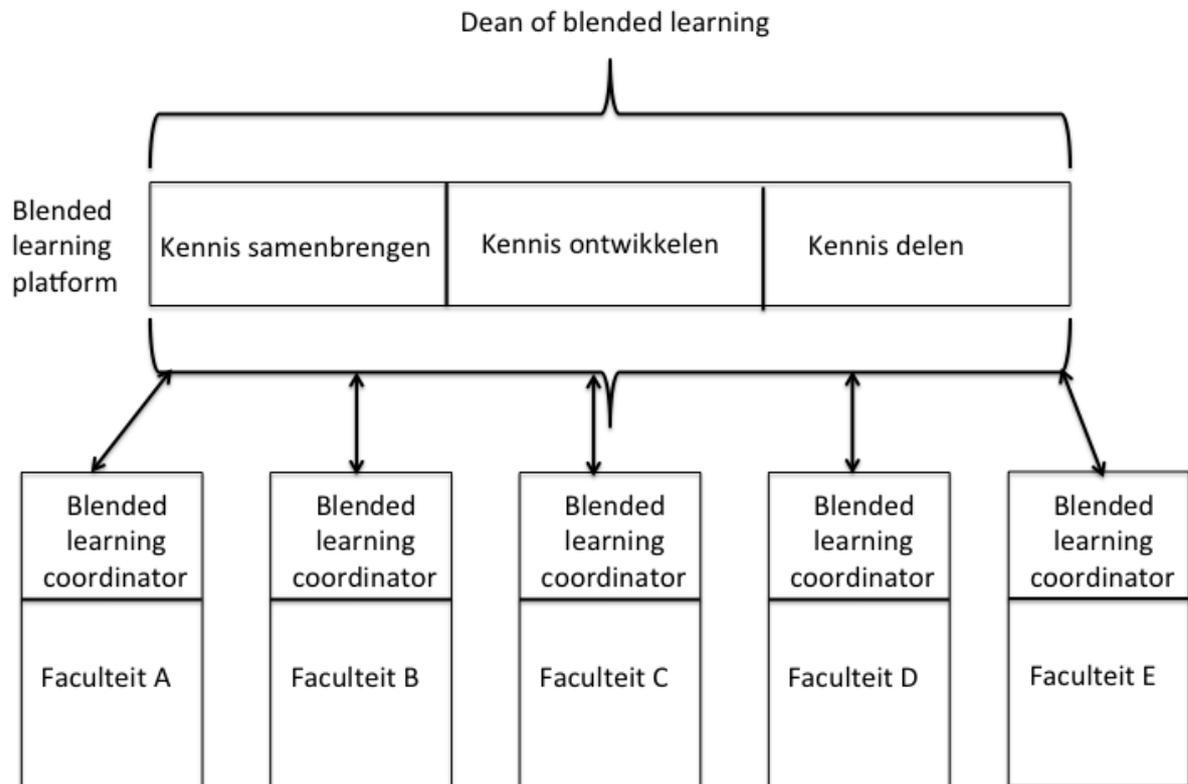
Another suggestion involved a Centre for Teaching and Learning following the example of many universities in Anglo-Saxon countries. Some Dutch universities have comparable centres of expertise (Erasmus University, University of Leiden, University of Utrecht). The disadvantages of such centre of expertise structures is that expertise is centralised (and, therefore, by definition is not spread over the faculties), and that they will quickly adopt a fairly autonomous position within the university.

In our advisory report we argue for a blended learning platform which is intended to function as a network organisation within the UvA. Faculties participate in this network through blended learning coordinators and participating lecturers. Decentralised input is thus guaranteed. The appointment of blended learning coordinators is part of our recommendation. They could be people with specific expertise in the area of blended learning or lecturers released from other duties for a specific period of time to fulfil this role. The platform or network has three core functions: to collect and connect knowledge and experience, to develop knowledge and to share and disseminate knowledge.

In our vision, the dean of blended learning has a coordinating or guiding role in the platform or network, where the UvA's Vision on Teaching and Learning (see advisory report) forms the broader framework for the implementation of the platform's three core functions. The following diagram outlines the role of the dean of blended learning, the platform's three core functions and the role of the faculty blended learning coordinators.

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Empirical evidence

The Task Force carried out a comprehensive examination of the literature to establish the effectiveness of, and student and lecturer satisfaction with, blended learning. On the basis of this literature research we conclude

‘that blended learning does not automatically lead to better results. The quality of education does not depend first and foremost on the modality used (online or face-to-face) but primarily on the quality of the learning activities and the way in which they are harmonised, the interaction with the lecturer, instruction methods and the instruction materials that encourage the student to process the learning material actively and in depth.’ (p. 16)

We have noticed that this conclusion has led to confusion in some cases. It resulted in questions such as: why would we introduce blended learning unless it leads to better results? Do we have to wait until there is greater certainty as to its effectiveness before introducing blended learning?

With our conclusion we primarily intend to convey the idea that it is not the form of education (online or offline) which determines its effectiveness or quality. Just like in traditional face-to-face instruction, the quality and effectiveness of education in a blended form is determined by a host of factors, such as the design of the curriculum, the degree to which feedback is given and the manner in which it is provided, study material, the planning and the time the student devotes to studying. The great advantage of blended learning is that it provides more opportunities to determine whether learning or teaching activities can best be offered in an online or offline form. Moreover, it renders forms of education which have proved effective, and which traditionally could only be provided on a small scale and face-to-face, capable of being used for large groups or groups which are difficult to reach.



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Open educational resources and learning analytics

Comments were made and questions raised regarding the significance and use of, and policy regarding, open educational resources and learning analytics. We do not deal with these matters in detail in our report. We believe that, owing to their complexity, these topics and their potential significance for education within the UvA should be addressed in separate reports. The UvA's library could play a key role in the preparation of an advisory report on digital study material and open educational resources.

Best regards,

On behalf of the Innovation in Education/Blended Learning Task Group
Prof. Peter van Baalen, chairman