

Blended Learning Action Plan

based on the Blend it & Share it report
issued by the Educational Reform / Blended Learning task
force

February 2016

Introduction

In October 2015, the Educational Reform / Blended Learning task force issued its advice on the implementation of blended curricula at the UvA. The advisory report was subsequently distributed within the UvA and submitted for comment to the academic community, which responded extensively. In December, the task force provided a response to and a reflection on these comments. The advisory report was subsequently published as a UvA white paper.

The *Blend it & Share it* advisory report contains a considerable number of recommendations for the UvA and its faculties. The rector requested that the task force draft an Action Plan describing how these recommendations might be implemented.

Essence of the advice

In essence the advice entails the development of a sustainable infrastructure at the central and decentralised levels for developing educational innovation/blended learning. This sustainable infrastructure will support the individual faculties/departments in developing their own education strategy. It is explicitly not intended to promote/facilitate individual ICT & Education projects. A concern raised in various responses to the report was that the offline courses currently offered would be replaced with online courses. This is explicitly not the task force's aim. The task force affirms that active and in-depth learning must be central to the study programme and that an effective combination of offline and online learning activities will offer more opportunities to achieve this. The recommendations are summarised in the appendix.¹

An important departure point in the advisory report is the educational challenge in education at the UvA. Blended learning is not technology and not an aim in itself. The key question is how new combinations of online and offline learning activities can help improve the quality, flexibility, accessibility and

¹ Not all recommendations in the report are addressed in this Action Plan. We believe that the four topics discussed in this plan represent the principal recommendations for formulating a long-term, innovative education policy for the UvA.

efficiency of education. The answer to these education-related questions and the applications differ per faculty/department, in terms of both extent and method. Blended learning solutions are thus faculty/department-specific and have their own content and focus.

The emphasis on faculty/department-specific solutions does not imply that a shared blended learning infrastructure is not necessary. A shared infrastructure encompasses both the development and management of technical facilities and the collective development of expertise (technical, educational and organisational) in blended learning. For this reason a blended learning platform has been proposed in the report (see point 2).

Our Action Plan consists of five sections as follows:

1. developing faculty strategies for blended learning;
2. developing a UvA blended learning platform;
3. financing blended learning;
4. developing policy on copyright, contact hours and open educational resources;
5. information, communication and demonstration sessions.

We discuss the five sections of the Action Plan in greater detail below.

1. Developing faculty strategies for blended learning

The faculty strategies for blended learning constitute the essence of the policy on blended learning. Faculties are quite capable of indicating the educational challenges they are facing.

An important comment made on the *Blend it & Share it* report was that it has not yet been specifically defined how blended learning can contribute to improving the quality of education. The task force therefore proposes visiting the faculties (directors of the Colleges and Graduate Schools) to discuss the possibilities of blended learning based on concrete examples. The advisory report makes a distinction between a general deepening scenario and a broadening scenario. Three specific themes have been elaborated under each scenario:

Deepening scenarios

- Active learning. The focus of active learning lies on active processing based on greater interaction and feedback by, for instance, using a digital workbook or by introducing the flipped classroom principle, which creates scope for increased interaction during face-to-face teaching.
- In-depth learning. The focus of in-depth learning lies on in-depth processing based, for instance, on exercises using simulations, or by introducing the flipped classroom principle, which creates scope for increased interaction during face-to-face teaching.
- Diversity and personalisation. The student population is becoming increasingly diverse, in terms of prior knowledge, level and study pace. This is coupled with a growing need for personalising education. To meet this need, e-learning modules can be developed to remedy students' academic deficiencies or to enable them to increase their study pace.

Broadening scenarios

- Internationalisation. Parallel video lectures could be held in English to offer a bilingual degree programme, for example, or international classrooms could be offered where students at different locations jointly take classes in a virtual environment.
- Lifelong learning and differentiation. This obviously involves developing digital teaching materials that will be used not only for regular study programmes but also for online courses for alumni and other lifelong learners.
- Student recruitment activities. This might include deploying digital teaching materials for matching purposes, taster sessions, web classes etc.

Other themes can be developed at the faculties' request.

Following this presentation, the relevant faculty will be asked to develop a blended learning strategy ² geared towards the specific challenges it is facing. A basic template for describing the strategy will be drawn up so that all the relevant

² Further examples include using MOOCs in individual study programmes, interim formative digital assessment and learning analytics.

aspects (organisation, the required expertise, financial resources etc.) can be discussed.

This approach has a five-fold aim:

1. to provide greater insight into the possibilities of blended learning in connection with education issues at the individual faculties;
2. to develop a UvA-wide blended learning strategy based on faculty strategies;
3. to gain greater insight into blended learning requirements (technical, educational, organisational and financial) at the UvA;
4. to gain greater insight into the available blended learning expertise, which could potentially be shared with other faculties;
5. to gain greater insight into the collaborative possibilities for developing new education products via the blended learning platform.

2. Developing a blended learning platform

At present there is a lack of clear direction, coherence and oversight where e-learning policy and/or blended learning initiatives are concerned. The various policy initiatives undertaken are uncoordinated.

In its advisory report the task force strongly advocates establishing a blended learning platform. The platform primarily has a support and coordinative role in launching blended learning initiatives within the UvA. During the discussions on the recommendations in our report, alternative names were suggested for the platform, such as Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) or Teaching and Learning Network (TLN). A CTL, as generally offered by universities abroad, is broader in scope than blended learning, while a TLN is too non-obligatory in nature. For the reasons outlined above, we would advocate a platform which should, on the one hand, be visualised as a virtual environment where knowledge and best practices are further developed and shared, and as a network of people involved, such as blended learning coordinators, users and experts, on the other. The platform is neither a policymaking nor a strategy development body. The functions of the platform are as follows:

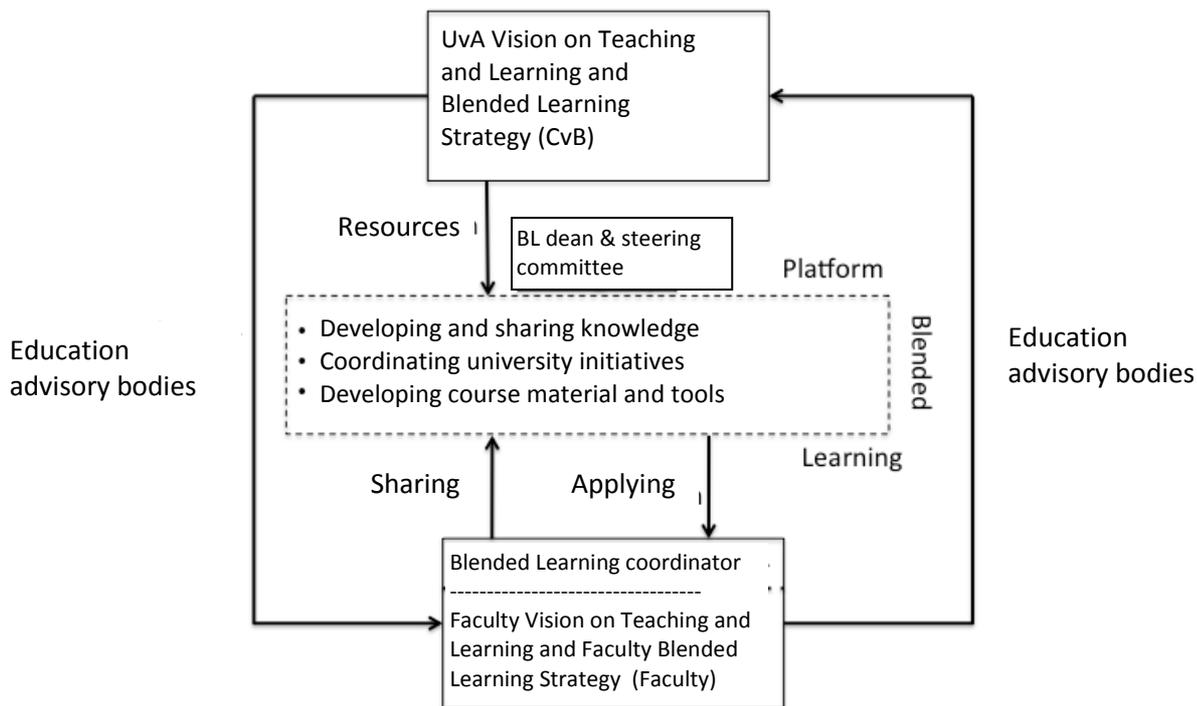
- to bring together, develop and share multidisciplinary knowledge and experiences (best practices);

- to coordinate faculty initiatives for blended learning and related developments (such as digital testing, learning analytics and e-learning platforms);
- to jointly develop and share course material, tools and designs.

To set up and sustain this platform, we propose that a dean of blended learning be appointed. The dean would also be responsible for the development and coordination of various facilities and resources (such as recording studios, digital testing facilities and learning analytics). Lastly, the dean will assume an important, coordinative role in developing the UvA's information strategy and the digitalisation of the education-related administrative processes. The platform will be managed by a steering committee chaired by the dean.

Funds will need to be made available on a structural basis for the development of a blended learning platform and the appointment of a dean of blended learning. A separate Action Plan will be drawn up for the development of the platform. We propose that the blended learning infrastructure be set up for a five-year period initially and that a thorough evaluation be conducted at the end of that period. The diagram below illustrates the position of the platform within the UvA.

Figure 1: Position of the Blended Learning Platform within the UvA



3. Financing blended learning

The use of blended learning solutions is not an optional matter. In our advisory report we stated that the current method of financing individual ICT & Education projects has not brought about a broad, coherent and efficient diffusion of blended learning at the UvA to date. The financing of current ICT & Education projects will need to be scaled down so that these funds can be gradually released to finance blended learning.

The task force proposes using a different financing method which, on the one hand, would do justice to the specific challenges in education facing the faculties, while underlining the importance of coherence, collaboration and coordination among the faculties, on the other. The main components that will need to be financed are:

- faculty strategy for blended learning;
- a blended learning coordinator;
- the blended learning platform;
- a dean of blended learning.

Income (x 1,000)

Expenses (x 1,000)

Current ICT & Education budget	300	Blended learning faculty coordinators	700
Grass roots projects	-40	Blended learning dean (0.5 FTE)	70
Pre-investments Student loans	2,000	Blended learning platform	100
		Blended learning faculty strategies	1,390
Total	2,260	Total	2,260

Explanatory notes

- The proposal contains two proposed sources of financing, i.e. funds for current ICT & Education projects (€300k out of a total of €600k) and pre-investment funds for student loans (€2m out of a total of €4m).³
- The financing of relatively small grass roots projects will remain unchanged.
- A maximum sum of €1,390k is available to finance the blended learning faculty strategies. These funds will be distributed in proportion to the number of students per faculty and the matching principle. The pro rata distribution will maximise the amount per faculty. The matching principle will be applied on the basis of the blended learning strategy. For example: a faculty is entitled to €200k on a pro rata distribution basis. If this particular faculty submits a proposal on the basis of a blended learning strategy for €200k, this amount will be matched with the same amount from the faculty's own funds.
- The blended learning coordinator forms a structural component in the financing of blended learning, in other words the faculties will receive a fixed amount on an annual basis to finance the blended learning coordinator. This role should preferably be fulfilled by a senior lecturer (advanced UTQ) with extensive knowledge of and affinity with blended learning. The role may also be fulfilled by a newly recruited blended learning specialist. The coordinator is responsible for

³ We are aware that consent for using these funds must be obtained from the university representative advisory councils.

coordinating and supporting initiatives within the faculty/department, and central and decentralised initiatives.

- The establishment of a blended learning platform and the appointment of a dean of blended learning constitute an indirect form of financial support from the faculty in developing and implementing blended learning. The production of online course material is characterised by relatively high initial costs and relatively low marginal costs (the costs of reuse and distribution are minimal). Collaboration among the faculties and degree programmes via the platform would therefore be recommended to encourage the production of online course material. Many degree programmes offer Introduction to Statistics courses, for instance. The joint development (and/or the procurement) of e-modules on statistics could deliver considerable cost advantages.

4. Specific task forces on contact hours and open educational resources

In our advisory report a number of important questions were raised, but not answered. These questions keep cropping up in discussions on blended learning. An important, regularly recurring issue concerns the copyright implications for producers of online course material. We furthermore propose that two advisory task forces be established as follows:

1. A contact hours task force. An extensive discussion has been ongoing for some time on the term 'contact hour' between the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the higher education sector, among others. As a result of using online interaction functionalities, the interaction between lecturers and students is expected to increase rather than decrease. This occurs in the flipped classroom approach. A substantial amount of prior research was conducted into the term 'contact hour' and its standard definition. The task force will be asked to clarify how the total number of online and offline interactions between students and lecturers relates to current views on the standard definition of 'contact hour'. The task force will mainly comprise educational researchers, lecturers and students.
2. Open educational resources task force. The UvA will need to adopt a position on open educational resources. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science has articulated a clear position on open educational resources in the Strategic Agenda for Higher Education and

⁴Research 2015 – 2025 'The value of knowledge' (p. 91) as follows: 'A further ambition is that all lecturers in higher education make their teaching materials freely available by 2025 to enable them to use one another's digital teaching materials. However, this is a sensitive issue for many lecturers. A separate task force should issue advice on this topic after having consulted lecturers and students.'

5. Information, communication and demonstration

Our *Blend it & Share it* report elicited wide-ranging responses and questions from the UvA community. Many of these responses require a substantive explanation, while others require justification of the choices that have been made in the report. We therefore propose that a series of information, communication and demonstration initiatives be developed. We propose organising interactive meetings with Boards of Studies, works councils and student councils at the faculties. We would primarily like to demonstrate the possibilities of blended learning using concrete examples.

We propose, in consultation with the Works Council and Central Student Council, that a concrete plan be developed for these interactive information sessions.

In this Action Plan we have emphatically opted for the sustainable development of educational reform / blended learning, with an emphasis on the faculty strategic level (rather than individual ICT & Education projects). Moreover, we wish to underline the importance of having an organisational infrastructure for blended learning, a number of components of which will be financed on a structural basis.

⁴ <https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2015/07/01/the-value-of-knowledge>

Appendix. Recommendations in the Blend it & Share it report

At the central level, these strategic choices mainly concern the following:

1. deepening and broadening education;
2. aligning the central and decentralised blended learning infrastructure;
3. aligning and managing various decentralised initiatives;
4. collaboration with university and non-university partners;
5. financing blended learning;
6. the use of and participation in open educational resources / OpenCourseWare;
7. revision of the contact hours system.

At the decentralised level, choices must be made regarding the following:

1. developing a blended learning faculty plan;
2. making resources available (funds and expertise) and developing an effective incentive structure for lecturers;
3. developing blended learning at curricular level;
4. developing in-house or procuring digital teaching resources;
5. costly education productions (e.g. MOOCs, digital workbooks).

Several initiatives at the central and decentralised levels are pivotal to developing long-term innovation capability in education.

At the central level we propose:

1. launching a Blended Learning research programme and appointing a professor with this remit to facilitate the development of evidence-based blended learning (see the UvA Strategic Plan 2015 – 2020);
2. developing multidisciplinary expertise (educational theory, didactics, instructional design, educational software engineering, project management);
3. setting up a UvA-wide blended learning platform for exchanging and

sharing knowledge and experience, and for developing new education products;

4. appointing a dean of blended learning to oversee the platform and the decentralised blended learning initiatives.

At the decentralised level we propose:

1. making professional development in blended learning the number one priority for lecturers;
2. appointing a blended learning coordinator to coordinate and support initiatives undertaken by the faculties and departments, and central and decentralised initiatives;
3. emphasising teaming up to produce digital teaching resources rather than producing these resources individually;
4. setting high standards for the quality of the production, use and purchased digital teaching resources;
5. if possible, developing digital education products within a modular architecture to ensure greater flexibility in terms of production and use;
6. strongly advocating the development and use of learning analytics.