Blend IT & Share IT

Advisory report issued by the Education Innovation / Blended Learning Task Force

Date
September 2015

Management summary

The University has the honourable and responsible task of educating talented individuals and preparing them to take on roles that will pave the pathway for society. The responsibility therefore falls to the University, more than any other organisation, to not just critically keep pace with, but to stay ahead of, developments taking place in society.

This poses a significant challenge. Digitisation but also other significant societal developments are leading to what we refer to in this report as the unbundling of academic practice in general and of academic education in particular. At the same time, high standards are being imposed on education and research even as quality is coming under pressure due to declining government funding and the massive scale of higher education.

In this advisory report, we first outline these changes and subsequently set out in which direction education at the UvA should change and which measures should be taken to effect these changes. To this end, we have adopted a blended learning perspective. Blended learning is not a technology. Blended learning primarily entails seeking new combinations of online and face-to-face teaching and learning activities underpinned by a strong educational perspective. Education innovation lies not in widely available, advanced digital education technologies but rather, as the Austrian-American economist Schumpeter pointed out many years ago, 'in persevering with combinations'. The Task Force believes that blended learning offers abundant opportunities to achieve a meaningful and innovative re-bundling in education.

The Task Force has found that a great many exciting ICT education projects have been launched and implemented at the UVA in recent years but that they have failed to be integrated into a long-term, innovative UvA-wide education strategy. We also believe that the current Vision on Teaching and Learning should have greater depth and breadth. Depth involves strengthening the relationships between studying and lecturing, and between students and lecturers. These relationships have come under significant pressure on account of various developments and threaten to compromise the quality of education. Breadth relates to the University's ties with the wider society. Blended learning offers abundant opportunities for deepening and broadening education at the UvA.

In our view, the clock is ticking. The UvA has not been a frontrunner in education innovation in the past years, nor in widely integrating ICT in education for the longer term. For the reasons outlined above it is essential to develop an integrated education strategy (depth and breadth) in the short term, focusing on a student-centric vision on teaching and learning, with blended learning becoming the default situation in education.

A strategic reorientation and the development of a long-term dynamic innovation capability for education constitute the two pillars of our advice. At both the central and decentralised level, important choices must be made and initiatives undertaken.

At the central level, these 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 hour 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. the development of 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 to appoint a professor with this remit to facilitate the development of evidence-based blending 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 central 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 between 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 teaching resources within a modular architecture to ensure greater flexibility in terms of production and use;
6. strongly advocating the development and use of learning analytics.