‘Blended learning’ at UWA: a discussion paper and draft policy

Background

A small sub-group of the Teaching and Learning Committee was asked to prepare, for discussion by the Teaching and Learning Committee and subsequent approval by Academic Council policy in the matter of ‘distance education’, ‘online courses’, and ‘blended learning’ for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Definitions

There are many definitions of ‘blended learning’, online courses’, and ‘distance education’.

Although ‘blended learning’ is a term which is sometimes used to describe learning which combines delivery media or instructional methods, its more common meaning, and the one which is used in this document, is the combination - or blend – of online and face-to-face instruction.

Currently the predominant mode of blended learning is the use of a managed learning environment such as WebCT as a supplement to face-to-face teaching. However the policy of UWA is to develop the full transformative potential of e-learning to enable more effective student learning.

‘Distance education’ denotes teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching.

‘Online learning’ is an umbrella term used to describe any education or training that occurs online.

The context

The context of the group’s consideration was the perception of all members of the group that:

1. There is a plurality of student needs and circumstances
2. Student expectations are changing
3. Technology extends the range of tools available for teaching
4. Technology enables new, more effective, ways of learning
5. The plurality of tools enables teaching which more closely matches the plurality of student needs and expectations
6. In general the policy issues around modes of learning should address themselves to how they may achieve high quality student learning for all students

Discussion

The University has developed a number of policies relating to teaching and learning. However while considering what the University’s policy of blended learning should
be it soon became evident to the group that although the University has in its 12 educational principles stated what are the educational outcomes for its students it has developed no policy about the means by which those outcomes are to be achieved. Nor does it require in its course approval or evaluation processes any assessment of the means of delivery.

The group could discern no policy distinction that could usefully be made between online, blended, or distance learning and more traditional forms of on-campus delivery. Any policy that is developed can and should be applied equally to all modes of learning. It is the firm view of the group that the University’s policy on teaching and learning should include clear principles on how teaching methods should be selected. These principles should be applied to all teaching modes whether they be traditional or new, class-based or technology-based. They should be used when approving courses and units, and when evaluating them. In all cases the critical issue is not what techniques and tools are used but how they are used.


the ultimate objective of, and test of, teaching is quality student learning;

• quality student learning requires the acquisition and application of learning skills, therefore: - students should be encouraged to learn how to learn, to recognise the processes of their own learning, and to acquire the necessary learning skills and strategies;

• students should be encouraged to be independent, self-directed and self-regulated learners. This does not imply abandonment to their own devices but structured learning experiences which lead to autonomy;

• quality learning is achieved through the deep approach, the key feature of which is understanding of concepts, principles and theories rather than the simple reproduction of information.

• as student approaches to learning are influenced by a number of factors, including their previous educational experience, their cultural background, their perceptions of particular learning tasks and assessments, and discipline contexts, it is important to design and implement curricula that maximise the deep approach;

• the deep approach is encouraged by well-designed active learning tasks: students learn better when they are actively engaged in their learning rather than when they are passive recipients of transmitted knowledge. Problem-based learning is an effective means of active learning;

• the deep approach is encouraged by reflective practice including self-evaluation and understanding of learning processes;

• although the students’ first-year is particularly critical in acquiring learning skills, skills acquisition continues beyond first-year, through all successive stages of university learning;

• students should be assisted to acquire lifelong learning skills.

While this is a valuable guide to student learning it offers little guidance to staff on the principles to be applied when selecting appropriate teaching modes. Following a
review of policies at other Group of Eight universities\(^1\) and extensive discussion we suggest that these principles should be that teaching at UWA should be conducted in a way which is:

1. Student-centred
2. Appropriate
3. Effective

**Principle 1  Student-centred**

- **Student characteristics**

While there are clear dangers in oversimplified stereotypes there is no doubt\(^2\) that there are significant changes in the background and expectations of students. What are now commonly referred to as “Net-Gen’, or ‘Millennial’ students are characterized as digitally literate, connected, expecting immediate responses, experiential, social, team- and structure-orientated, visual and kinetic, easily integrating the physical and virtual. They are adept at multi-tasking, orientated to engagement and experience, and inclined to engage with projects which they perceive as relevant. They can rapidly shift attention and may choose not to pay attention to things that do not interest them.

- **Student requirements**

For many students attending University in their formative years as young adults the needs are for intellectual and social development and a sound grounding in an academic discipline. But for some older students the needs are for a qualification for career advancement; for others the need is to acquire or update specialist knowledge. Such differences should inform the choice of teaching modes.

- **Student expectations**

Many students now have expectations that are moulded by a high degree of exposure to, and use of, communications technology. Others have no such background. Students now expect a high level of technology in education as in other aspects of their lives, and choose online in units designed with a traditional face-to-face delivery mode. It is now common that a relatively small fraction of students – half, or even fewer – choose to attend lectures and rely instead on Lectopia and other online material. This may be for a number of reasons: timetable clashes, work commitments, preferred learning style, and perhaps even the view that attending a lecture adds little or nothing to the learning experience.

- **Cultural and educational background**

The UWA student body is not homogeneous; there is no single student experience and no single preferred mode of teaching. Good teaching will recognise and, as far as possible, accommodate such differences. Information and communications technologies greatly expand the range of tools available to teachers and must,

\(^1\) See Appendix 1
alongside more traditional forms of teaching, be assessed in terms of the appropriateness to the students being taught, the nature of what is being taught, and the objectives of the course.

**Principle 2  Appropriate**

- *Preferred learning styles*

It is now a commonplace of pedagogy that different people learn in different ways and with different preferences between visual, hearing, reading and writing, and kinaesthetic\(^3\).

- *Student locations*

While the majority of the UWA student body study at the Crawley campus, significant numbers are at other sites within Perth, some are at remote locations in the State, and others are located overseas.

- *Student circumstances*

While some students are free to devote all time and energies throughout their university years to studying, living and socializing within the University, many students spend considerable amounts of time in paid employment. Some study while in full-time employment. Some have family responsibilities of various types. Such students are not able to devote all their time or their energies to studying.

**Principle 3  Effective**

While the mere use of a delivery mode does not automatically guarantee any particular outcome each mode has distinctive characteristics which tend to make it particularly suitable in certain learning situations. Technologies can now be used in conjunction with other delivery methods to broaden the range of tools which may be used to achieve student-centred, effective and appropriate teaching. Once the characteristics and distinctive needs of the student group have been assessed the most effective mode can be selected. The following table indicates the main categories of such tools, with current examples:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Live in-person</th>
<th>Synchronous virtual collaboration</th>
<th>Asynchronous virtual collaboration</th>
<th>Self-paced asynchronous</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-led classroom teaching</td>
<td>Live online learning</td>
<td>Online discussion boards</td>
<td>Online tutorials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hands-on labs</td>
<td>Online chat/IM sessions</td>
<td>Listservs</td>
<td>Simulations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching/mentoring</td>
<td>Conference calls</td>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>Online self-assessments</td>
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<td>On-the-job training</td>
<td>Video-conferencing</td>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>Archived webinars</td>
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<td>Fieldwork</td>
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<td>CD-ROMs</td>
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<td>Lectopia</td>
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</tbody>
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In selecting the most effective modes questions which should be considered include:

- What are the learning objectives of this unit?
- What is the appropriate mix of information transfer and active engagement in this unit?
- What should be the extent and nature of contact between staff and students in this unit?
- What is the extent and nature of contact between students in this unit?

At the time of approval the likely effectiveness of a unit can only be estimated. Although this is tangential to the policy discussion of this paper, we suggest that as a matter of routine there should be a review of a unit’s effectiveness, including the effectiveness of its modes of delivery, three years after its introduction.

Other considerations

While the choice of any particular mode or modes of delivery can only be determined in relation to the characteristics of the students and the objectives of the course there are certain other practical factors which must be taken into account when assessing what mode to use.

Access to materials and technology

In modes which require the use of printed materials students must have fair and equitable access. Where online modes are used students must also have equitable access to the necessary technology. All students must have access to appropriate study facilities.

Access management

Wherever it is necessary to ensure security (e.g. for assessments) appropriate identity and access management infrastructure must be in place.

Technical infrastructure

Technical systems and networks must be reliable and robust.

Support for teachers

Introducing technology-assisted modes of teaching may be time-intensive. Teachers who wish to use technologies which are new to them must have the necessary advice, training and support. This extends beyond use of technologies themselves to the teaching skills which may be specific to a particular mode (e.g. online facilitation), and to the skills required in successfully constructing a blended course.

Support for students

Students must have a readily available source of advice and support academically and, where online technology is involved, technically. As far as possible all students should have ready access to the full range of Student Services support.

Students must be given consistent and transparent guidance on how they are expected to engage with learning processes and activities.
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Policy statement

This policy is a statement of general principles that apply equally to all the University’s teaching regardless of the location or the mode of teaching.

The University encourages staff to select from the full range of available teaching modes those which provide a learning experience which is student-centred, appropriate and effective.

Through its staff training and development programmes the University will support its staff in the acquisition and development of relevant skills.

Through its provision of technical and physical infrastructure and of resources the University will facilitate the adoption of the full range of teaching modes.

Through its student support services the University will ensure that all its students have the skills necessary to fully engage with the learning modes which are employed.
Appendix 1  eLearning policies in Go8 universities

A search of the web sites of the Go8 Universities returned detailed e-learning policy statements from four: the University of New South Wales, the University of Queensland, the University of Sydney, and the University of Adelaide. The web site of the University of Melbourne has a page “Key Issues for E-Learning Strategies and Technologies, 2007” but access is restricted. It does not have a publicly accessible statement of policy or principles of elearning.

There is a consistent view in the detailed policy statements that e-learning is not merely a substitute for face-to-face teaching in particular circumstances (such as remote delivery) but is instead a use of technological opportunities that enhance student learning. The consensus view is that the technologies can be used in conjunction with traditional delivery methods to broaden and to enhance learning and to improve learning outcomes by catering to different learning styles. There is no sense in these statements that e-learning is a sometimes necessary evil to be kept in check; rather it offers a suite of opportunities to be used to complement traditional teaching methods. Some illustrative excerpts from the policy statements are given below.

1. The University of New South Wales
UNSW states as one of its eight ‘Learning and Teaching Goals’ that:

“We will be a leader in the provision of integrated online learning opportunities for students on and off campus.”

The preamble to UNSW’s goal notes that:

“Recent developments in technology have presented remarkable opportunities to enhance the student experience. … Whilst we have no intention of being an ‘online’ University, we do believe that we should strive for excellence in the use of online opportunities to improve learning by our students be they on or off campus.”

2. The University of Sydney
The University’s ‘vision’ is:

“To support the University community to enhance the student learning experience and the campus with sustainable learning technologies that promote research-led, active and innovative approaches to learning and teaching.”

Its Information and Communications Technology Office in Teaching and Learning Strategy notes that:

“E-learning is an increasingly significant part of the student learning experience at the University of Sydney. There have been substantial increases in the use of the central elearning platform over the past two calendar years.”

It has seven guiding principles for e-learning practice, which include:

- Focusing on improving learning outcomes
• Adopting a student perspective on learning and teaching
• Using quality assurance for the purposes of improvement
• Leading and informing through policy creation
• Developing institutional knowledge and skills for use of e-learning technologies

3. The University of Queensland

UQ states that:

“Flexible learning is part of The University of Queensland’s overall strategy to deliver an enhanced, student-centred approach to learning by applying the most effective, flexible and appropriate teaching and learning modes and technologies. The University aims to encourage independence, creativity and problem-solving in students through flexible approaches to learning, to prepare them for the future.

Flexible learning is an overarching approach which emphasises an education where learning opportunities and options are increased and where students have more control over the learning process. It focuses on improving learning outcomes and maximizing student engagement in learning by using the most effective, varied and appropriate teaching and learning modes.

The aim of flexible learning is to broaden the scope of students’ learning interactions through providing a better mix of learning situations. Students are aided to develop new learning strategies through courses which enable and empower them to explore a variety of modes of interaction. These learning strategies should be consistent with ensuring appropriate depth of knowledge, as well as advancing the broad graduate attributes expected at the University of Queensland.”

UQ’s priorities include:
• keeping pace with changing delivery technologies, and facilitating the University community’s ability to access them;
• maximising the potential of online delivery to provide materials and enable group communication.

In seeking to assure quality teaching and learning, UQ aims to:

“Establish and conduct methods of continual self-evaluation directed toward: program improvement; targeting more effective uses of technology to improve pedagogy; advancing student achievement of intended outcomes; improving retention rates; effective use of resources; and demonstrated improvements in the University’s service to its internal and external constituencies.”

Specifically, UQ addresses the following in assessing elements of flexible learning:
• Are technologies used effective in terms of improving pedagogy?
• Are resources easily accessible and used effectively?
• What has been the impact on the physical and human resources of the faculty/school, and of other areas such as the library?
• How are student learning preferences catered for?
• Is lecturer response to student assignments timely? Does it appear to be appropriately responsive?
• How does evaluated student performance compare to intended learning outcomes?
• How have graduate attributes been mapped to flexibly offered programs and courses?
• How successful is the program’s interactive component, as indicated by student and lecturer surveys, comments, or other measures?
• What do results from students’ routine, end-of-course and program evaluations (eg TEVALS) demonstrate with regard to overall satisfaction with the experience of flexibly offered programs?

4. The University of Adelaide

The University of Adelaide has an Online Education Service, which notes that:

“Online learning, or e-learning, as it is also referred to, has now become an essential part of University life. Educators need to be properly equipped to meet the challenge and align their teaching methods with the changing learning styles of its learners who are the emerging leaders and change agents of tomorrow. Many of our students have grown up with technology and this has impacted on their preferred ways of learning. Students born between 1982 and 1991 have been described as ‘Net Generation’ learners. They have been described as digitally literate; connected; social; prefer working in groups; achievement oriented; require structure and guidelines; crave interactivity; have short attention spans; are experiential, visual, kinaesthetic learners; and prefer working on things that matter.”

The University of Adelaide’s Strategic Plan has as a goal to use:

“Advances in innovative program delivery, such as intensive residential schools, use of online learning, and tailormade post-graduate coursework programs will ensure that universities are able to target their programs to a disparate range of students.”
Two useful sources


John Arfield, University Librarian
Professor Geoff Hammond, School of Psychology
Dr Nick Spadaccini, School of Computer Science and Software Engineering