



The Future of Learning and Teaching:

Defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital/blended offering

Summary Report

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**The state of the nation: findings of research
conducted by QAA Scotland, College
Development Network, Education Scotland and
sparqs**

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February 2024

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Introduction

This report presents research findings brought together by four Scottish quality agencies - QAA Scotland, Education Scotland, College Development Network (CDN) and sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) – on the topic of digital and blended learning. These findings are based on research conducted between April and September 2023 as part of an ongoing cross-agency project on the topic. The project has been made possible by the strong partnership approach to enhancing the quality of learning and teaching in Scotland, including partnership between the quality agencies and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). It supports SFC’s ambition for high quality provision in a changing learning and teaching context.

Key findings

1. **Our focus should be on getting the blend right.** The term 'digital' describes something that is business as usual, and this is already reflected in institutions' strategic commitments and the way we communicate with learners. Active blended learning is becoming the norm and 'digital' is a tool for delivering this.
2. **All provision should be accessible and inclusive.** There are specific challenges relating to this in terms of blended provision, such as digital poverty, which is widely recognised and is being addressed.
3. **Learners' sense of belonging is key** to encouraging their engagement regardless of mode, and active and peer learning are essential to promote and sustain this.
4. **Learners struggle when terminology is used in a way that is unclear or inconsistent.** It is important that all staff and learners are given clear information about what 'blended' means within their institution.
5. **The ongoing promotion of digital literacies is vital for staff and learners.** Staff development must include a focus on pedagogical understandings of digitally enhanced learning spaces rather than focusing on how to use different technologies.
6. **There is tension between institutional estates and learning and teaching,** both in terms of current delivery (for example, in scheduling) and future development (ensuring that learning spaces are aligned with learning and teaching strategies).

Our conclusion is that institutions need to build in time, and to have a particular strategy, for designing and delivering high quality active blended learning.

Context

Online and blended learning have been expanding steadily over time. There are a range of drivers for this. Blended learning has the potential to offer flexibility for learners, while supporting institutions to respond creatively to changes in the composition of the learner body; there are also sound pedagogical reasons for building on the opportunities and learning created by the shift towards online learning. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 catalysed further expansion of online provision, with educators responding rapidly and creatively to restrictions that made face-to-face provision challenging.¹

Post-pandemic, the sector is in a period of transition. While the shift to emergency online provision was challenging, it led to reflection upon what was being offered and how. Our learners continue to value the flexibility offered by blended learning, and this is unlikely to change. Institutions are rebalancing resources in order to ensure that face-to-face provision is enhanced by digital provision. However, the question must be raised: *how can institutions respond adequately to the variety of learner preference to get the blend right?*

There are several other important contextual factors at play. With environmental sustainability high on institutional agendas, a shift towards blended learning (and its

¹ It is important to acknowledge that online provision during the early period of COVID-19 restrictions was an emergency response and marked the beginning of a period of intense upskilling for educators and learners across the sector.

consequential increase in online provision) offers both opportunities and challenges. It has never been easier to offer learners opportunities to interact with educators and researchers from other countries; this can also support internationalisation. However, online provision comes with its own carbon footprint. Video calls are energy-intensive, as are other technologies (such as generative AI) that are likely to play a greater role in future learning and teaching. Institutions must address a range of questions about each technological development. How can this technology enhance blended learning? Will it improve accessibility and inclusivity, or will it create barriers? What is its environmental impact? Can it be sustainably resourced in a challenging economic climate? How can we ensure that both staff and learners have the skills to use the technology effectively? And what are learners' expectations about access to technology?

In its guidance on quality for 2022-23 and 2023-24,² SFC identified through review outcomes and discussion across sector networks that there was a need for focused attention on the design and delivery of an effective and inclusive digital/blended offering and established this as a **tertiary enhancement topic** for the two years. The Scottish Government and other stakeholders including learners and educators have an ongoing interest in this issue.

The project is overseen by a Steering Group with members from each partner agency involved (QAA, Education Scotland, CDN, and sparqs) and SFC's Learning and Quality Team.

Definitions

The table below summarises the four key terms that will be used in this report, along with their proposed definitions. These draw on two documents: CDN's *Digital Capability: A Scottish Landscape Review*³ and QAA's *Building a Taxonomy for Digital Learning*.⁴ The latter does not offer definitions of any of the following terms but outlines the nuances of how they are used and possible negative connotations they may carry. Nonetheless, taking a pragmatic approach, the following terms and definitions have been used. We have also consulted with colleagues at Jisc, who advised that they do not have set definitions as terminology is often dependent on context.

Term	Definition
Online	Learning that takes place in a digital environment, whether synchronous or asynchronous.
Blended	A combination of face-to-face learning with separate periods of typically asynchronous online activity.
Face-to-face	Learning or teaching that takes place with the learner and educator in the same physical space at the same time - this may be, for example, a lecture theatre, classroom, laboratory or workplace.
Hybrid	Teaching a mixed group of face-to-face and online learners simultaneously.

² www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/guidance/2022/SFCGD222022.aspx

³ www.cdn.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Digital-Capability-A-Scottish-Landscape-Review.pdf

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/building-a-taxonomy-for-digital-learning.pdf

Method and caveats

To accommodate the different review methods and sources of intelligence available for colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)⁵, we adopted a flexible approach to data gathering. We planned and enacted our research in such a way as to minimise the burden on staff and learners, drawing wherever possible on existing evidence including institutional learning and teaching strategies and reports from regular review activity. It is worth noting that access to data differs across the two parts of the sector: for example, it was more challenging to find learning and teaching strategies for colleges than for HEIs, while colleges were able to provide a more detailed breakdown of mode by subject and level. This meant that our blend of research methods was different for each part of the sector, and this is reflected in the presentation of our findings.

For colleges, we examined data collected via: a survey conducted by CDN in February 2023, to which 17 colleges responded; analysis provided by Education Scotland based on a summary of engagement of HM Inspectors during session 2021-22;⁶ and institutional learning and teaching strategies where available. We then invited a sample of four colleges to participate in interviews to explore the quantitative evidence gleaned in the survey. We selected these colleges on the basis of: their relatively low face-to-face delivery (two rural colleges); their relatively high hybrid delivery, where learning is 100% synchronous (one college); and one college with little in the way of hybrid delivery and where delivery is 100% synchronous.

For HEIs, desk-based research was conducted for all 19 institutions, focusing on the findings from Quality Enhancement and Standards Reviews (QESR) carried out in session 2022-23 along with institutional strategies (learning and teaching, digital, and any other relevant documentation). As part of the QESR method, HEIs were required to submit a short document reflecting on the institution's engagement with this topic, and these documents provided valuable insights. All HEIs were then invited to participate in short interviews with QAA Scotland officers to address remaining questions. We interviewed 13 out of the 19 HEIs.

Opportunities to engage with learners through these review methods were limited, and the involvement of sparqs was therefore critical to ensure that the learner voice was captured. The question set was adapted for both individual student officers and students' associations, and was used as the basis for discussion with student officers and students' association staff in a range of face-to-face settings, including meetings of the National Education Officers Network (NEON) and Student Engagement Staff Network (SESN) (March 2023). Colleagues at sparqs also had access to data from surveys on the online learning experience carried out by students' associations in two HEIs and one college.

In September 2023, we organised a face-to-face event in Glasgow on this topic, bringing together staff and learners from colleges and HEIs. As well as offering a professional

⁵ Scotland's universities plus Glasgow School of Art, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Scotland's Rural College

⁶ education.gov.scot/media/tiggxfip/hmie-engagement-in-scotlands-colleges.pdf

development workshop on curriculum design, we took the opportunity to test our initial findings with attendees, and to gather further data. Delegates were asked to work in small groups for much of the day. We allocated groups in advance to try to ensure a mix of college and HEI representatives, and of staff and learners, as far as was possible. Each group was provided with a pre-printed sheet that included prompt questions and space to record their answers. They were also asked to engage in an online (Menti) poll.

Student voice

While learners' views have remained relatively consistent since pandemic restrictions were first introduced, research conducted by sparqs has provided some new perspectives. Below is a summary of themes emerging from discussions with student representatives and student engagement staff during session 2022-23. It is important to caveat this summary by saying that learners' views are not disaggregated here by level of study. However, across the events at which there was consultation on the topic, participation was well-balanced between colleges and universities:

- SESN (Student Engagement Staff Network) meeting (12 attendees from universities, including 4 from the University of the Highlands and Islands); 7 attendees from colleges
- NEON (National Education Officer Network) meeting (8 attendees from colleges)
- Student Learning Experience workshops (11 held at universities, including 1 at the University of the Highlands and Islands; 8 held at colleges)
- Other online workshops that attracted a mix of attendees from colleges and universities.

Community and belonging

Learners who had experienced all or most of their learning online expressed a desire for more sense of community and belonging. Learning exclusively online meant that some learners had not been able to form relationships with their classmates/peers, which could lead to feelings of disengagement and isolation, with knock-on effects on mental wellbeing. Additionally, some online learners felt that they were 'second class citizens', as in a few institutions they had not been included in learner groups and services or mailing lists, and the support they were receiving had not been consistent with that received by learners who attend classes on campus (for example, online counselling does not work for everyone). In cases of hybrid learning, some online learners felt that they were forgotten, and did not participate in classes in the same way as learners who were attending in person. Learners emphasised that attendance is not the same as engagement, and that this was sometimes particularly evident during online classes, as learners felt that they did not talk enough to their peers or have the opportunity to work collaboratively. Learners expressed concerns that online learning can hinder peer support and is often not as engaging as in-person learning.

Learners identified that the risks of exclusively online learning include a lack of a sense of belonging as well as a lack of focus when studying online, and a lack of support, all of which heightened the risk of withdrawal and therefore possible negative impact on retention. Learners suggested that on campus/in-person classes should be used to build community,

encouraging peer-to-peer collaboration, learner projects and groups, while more information-based lessons can be delivered online.

Organisation

In a few institutions, learners reported that timetabling of online classes changed from week to week, which made it difficult to plan their personal and work commitments. Learners would prefer online classes to follow a fixed timetable. Learners also suggested that timetabling could be better arranged so they can travel to campus only once a week and have all their in-person classes in one day, rather than travelling multiple days. They suggested that it was often not worth it to travel to campus to attend a single class. Moreover, reducing the number of days learners travel to campus meant that they could save money on travel.

Technical issues could also hinder learning: for example, online platforms and tools could be unintuitive, broadband unreliable, links outdated, technical support slow, and teaching staff difficult to reach to get access to materials. It is clear that digital poverty also remains an issue.

Flexibility

Online learning allows students to be more flexible and accommodate for their personal commitments, whether these be caring responsibilities or work; there is a wide range of digital resources and material, and they are easily accessible online, so learners can catch-up in their own time. Attending classes online also means that learners are not spending money to travel to campus, which can have a big impact on their finances, especially considering the current cost-of-living crisis. These findings are consistent with those from HM Inspectors engaging with Scottish colleges during 2021-22, who additionally praised the use of simulation software within vocational specialism, facilities to submit assessments electronically, and the ability to receive instant feedback on their work from staff.⁷

However, learners reported that despite the fact institutions advertise courses as delivered in hybrid or blended mode, learners did not always have a choice in how their course is delivered. They expressed a desire to be able to choose their preferred learning mode. Rather than focusing the enhancement topic on 'digital and blended learning', they argued that there should be more discussion about personalisation and flexibility of learning, so each learner can choose the mode that suit them best.

Learners also argued that a return to in-person learning should not be at the expense of the positive aspects that have emerged from online learning: if a learner cannot attend a class on campus for some reason, they should have the opportunity to catch up with it online, rather than missing a class.

⁷ education.gov.scot/media/tiggxfip/hmie-engagement-in-scotlands-colleges.pdf

Consistency of the learning experience

Learners commented on the lack of consistency from lecturers about resources, as not every lecturer uploads materials online or records classes. There is also inconsistency of delivery, as this can be dependent on how the skills and confidence of individual lecturers. Learners therefore advocate for better staff upskilling and support so that they can plan and deliver engaging online classes. Learners increasingly expect this to be a core competency of teaching staff.

As noted above, learners also have the perception that if someone is learning online, they do not have the same learning experience as learners who are learning on campus, in terms of academic support, peer support, or learner services support.

Accessibility

Related to flexibility, online learning can be more beneficial for certain learner cohorts, such as disabled learners, learners with commitments and caring responsibilities, and commuters. However, in more than a few institutions learners are required to use up to four different platforms, which can be confusing.

Communication and expectations

Sabbatical officers and students' associations were consulted as part of steering groups working with senior management on the post-pandemic offer, and most institutions ran surveys to consult learners on whether they preferred studying online or in-person. The results were often split nearly 50/50, indicating that learners clearly preferred having the choice of where and how to study. Learners were not really consulted on which programmes would move back to in-person delivery and which would stay online, and there was no real debate in classrooms about whether to return on campus. Programme structure was not always clear when learners signed up for their course, as there was still confusion about terms such as blended and hybrid learning. While the difficulties of agreeing on definitions have been well-rehearsed there would no doubt be benefit in each institution having clear definitions and communications around key terms, as learners do not always feel that what is on offer matches what they have been told they can expect.

Learners who had never experienced in-person exams found it hard to know how to behave and how to handle anxiety. They felt that there was not enough information and support about the move to in-person exams and often could not understand why open book exams were not always an option, as they resembled 'real life' conditions. Closed book exams require a different set of skills (such as memorizing large portion of information), and learners felt that this was not always clearly communicated, or support offered to develop the requisite skills.

In more than a few instances, pre-recorded material and classes gave learners the feeling these have not been updated and learners feel they were not getting the best experience as lecturers were recycling materials. Learners also reported that they felt lecturers expected all learners to know how to behave on campus, while some of them have never been on campus before and are anxious about the experience.

There are several best practice examples where learners feel they were kept informed about all changes to their courses and that communication was clear.

Key similarities between colleges and HEIs

The research team was tasked with identifying commonalities and differences between the different parts of the sector. We in fact found that there were no significant differences between colleges and HEIs, but the evidence does point to a number of similarities, which are outlined below.

General points

Recognition that digital provision is part of the learning environment, as reflected in institution strategic commitments. There is a recognition that digital provision is part of the learning landscape, be it in face-to-face, online or hybrid learning spaces. This is reflected in regional and institutions' learning and teaching strategies, digital learning strategies, values, and standards. In almost all institutions, digital has become a core part of the student experience, enhancing learners' experiences of onsite and offsite provision and providing rich and innovative blended learning.

Digital poverty is recognised, and steps are being taken to address it. All learners need access to the correct hardware, software and connectivity; this is seen as essential. However, institutions realise that not all learners have reliable access and have developed schemes to address this.

Blended

Promotion of learner digital literacies. There is an assumption that, in most cases, learners will start their studies with the requisite IT skills for learning. However, sometimes this is not the case. One potential explanation for this is that social media skills are not the same as skills and abilities needed to flourish in blended learning environments. Consequently, support staff, such as, learning technologists are required to support students in digital learning spaces. This promotion is linked to institutions' belief that learners need opportunities in which they can develop digital skills and capabilities.

Increasing use of online resources. Even when delivery is synchronous and face-to-face, there is a general move to increased online resources, such as e-books and recorded lectures.

Increasing use of digital in communications and interactions with learners. From enrolment to induction to learner support from professional services, such as referral to mental health online, digital is now an increasing part of communications between learners and institutions. Whilst this has significant benefits, such as accessibility, it also has challenges with some learners having unrealistic response expectations, for example, quick responses to queries at midnight on a Sunday.

Online

Limited, targeted implementation of fully online, distance learning. A few colleges and universities have fully online, distance learning programmes with no campus attendance. Usually, these initiatives are chosen because there is a particular requirement or a specific gap in the market has been identified.

Face-to-face

The importance of accessibility, inclusivity and well-being. As learners have returned to campus, there has been a raised awareness of the importance of accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that all offerings, regardless of the mode can reach out to all learners, wherever possible. Digital is being harnessed to signpost and support learners.

Social learning through active and peer learning. Part of the move to blended learning has been an increased emphasis on social learning through active learning especially peer learning. This has seen a rise of digital implementation in synchronous face-to-face learning environments as well as augmenting asynchronous, independent learning.

Promotion of learners' sense of belonging to encourage learner engagement. Learners' sense of belonging, widely accepted to be linked to attainment and reduced attrition, is a key focus for institutions and a renewed focus on learner engagement in all modes is hoped to increase learners' sense of belonging.

Review of physical estate. Changes in the way that education is offered, incorporating digital, has led almost all institutions to review their physical estates and re-evaluate how space is used efficiently and how digital technologies can be incorporated effectively to enhance the learning environments available.

Staff development is addressing digital capabilities and pedagogical understandings of digital enhanced learning spaces. There is a general acceptance, reflected in organisations' strategies, that educators need on-going support in developing their digital capabilities including both improving technical skills but moreover their understandings of pedagogical developments to provide rich, digitally enhanced learning spaces for their learners. Frameworks are particularly helpful in guiding educators.

Hybrid

Limited trials of hybrid. There is confusion regarding the term 'hybrid' as is used in this report. Quite a few institutions refer to hybrid when they are actually describing 'blended learning'. Colleges and universities have trialled 'hybrid' for increased flexibility and accessibility for some learners and in response to some circumstances. There have been varying degrees of success with this approach.