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A framework for Blended Learning

Education and Training

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A framework for Blended Learning

This framework provides a definition of blended learning that encompasses a broad understanding of learning environments and tools, appropriate to a variety of school education context and learner circumstances.

This framework also outlines a set of challenges and proposals for policy measures to ensure effective blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education.

Based on the examples and evidence discussed in the other sections of this document, it provides policy makers with guidance and examples of good practice on 10 specific areas in order to: support competence and willing practitioners; ensure access to and a competent use of appropriate learning environments and tools; support all schools within the education ecosystem, including closely-related sectors.

Definition of blended learning

Blended learning happens when an educator or learner takes more than one approach to the learning:

- Blending school site and distance[1] learning environments;
- Blending different tools for learning that can be digital (including online) and non-digital[2].

Using their professional judgement, teachers and schools will select and facilitate the use of these in a variety of combinations as part of engaging and effective learning tasks that support broad competence development, as appropriate to the age, capacity and circumstances of the learners and intended learning outcomes.

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[1] The **distance learning environment** may include: the home; public libraries, museums and galleries; farms, factories, and other places of work; parks, forests and waterways; hospitals (in the case of sick or injured children), or sports centres and film studios (in the case of children on professional contracts).

[2] **Online learning** is defined as that which takes place with the use of digital technology to connect different devices and to facilitate an interaction between the learner and: other learners; learning programmes; and other content as sources of information. **Digital learning tools** do not always need to be connected to the Internet and can include: smart boards and projectors for collaboration in classrooms; mobile devices and laptops with applications for designing, exploring and sharing work; television and radio for following recorded programmes; and Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality tools and application for enhanced interactivity.

Other tools include: scientific equipment, sports equipment, craft tools, realia (objects found and used in everyday life), published texts, and writing and visual arts tools.

In a blended learning approach, all environments that are an effective shared space for learning are given equal importance and consideration, in order to make the most of the opportunity for interaction between pupils, between staff, and between pupils and staff.

Blended learning strongly relies on the capacity of teachers and learners to be able to use and adapt the environments and tools as appropriate to the learning task and desired learning goal. Specifically, teachers and learners need to be able to:

- Work confidently and competently with peers and independently when necessary;
- Manage the learning process for oneself or on behalf of others;
- Be familiar with, and safe within, a range of environments and tools;
- Communicate ideas and ask for assistance when needed, either in person or via communication tools;
- Trust and collaborate with others in the wider school community, for example cultural professionals or work-place mentors;
- Carry a sense of learning and development across a number of different occasions, recognising how one has developed and where to progress next.

A blended learning approach can be applied at the micro level – designed as a learning process with a group of learners - , the meso level - a strategic approach by a school to facilitate blending learning -, and the macro level – embedded as a system-wide approach.

Policy measures

1) **Equal right of all learners:**

Systems need to support the <u>right of all leaners to quality and inclusive school education</u>, and ensure opportunities for all learners to develop a broad range of key competences, irrespective of their circumstances and according to their learning needs.

This ongoing challenge of inclusion was heightened by pandemic restrictions that prevented access to a variety of environments and tools and narrowed the scope of school education for all learners.

Whilst blended learning has many benefits, there is a challenge to provide sufficient targeted support to learners who may still be disadvantaged whilst learning in different environments and with different tools.

Good practice:

a) **Promoting and reinforcing the blending of school site and distance learning environments in order to create more flexibility and appropriate conditions for learning.**

b) **Supporting the development and embedding of different tools for learning, including digital tools where appropriate, in order to provide opportunities for**

individual and collaborative investigation and expression and to support creative learning across different environments, depending on the age, capacity, and specific learning needs of the pupils.

c) **Ensuring targeted support to young learners facing disadvantages, or having special educational needs, to fulfil their potential within a blended learning approach, including: language learning; additional individual support in whole class situations; emotional support; assistive technology; access to learning tools and content; peer coaching; transport costs and costs of accessing different learning environments. Ensure that teacher professional development fosters a better and more widespread understanding of these different forms of support.**

2) **System-wide approach:**

Blended learning requires a <u>system-wide approach</u> to be inclusive, effective and engaging for all learners, and to keep pace with economic and social changes. This is a problem for education systems as they can be isolated from other sectors.

Developing an effective blended learning approach for a whole education system requires input from a range of stakeholders in order to generate useful feedback and ideas for future development or policy reform.

Different elements of the education system can also be isolated from each other, whereas they must work in synergy, with no one element left unsupported. This became obvious during the pandemic by the gaps that appeared and grew, and by the increased stress suffered by teachers and school leaders, pupils, and their families. Not restricted to the pandemic, change without dialogue and engagement has faced resistance and lack of implementation.

Good practice:

a) **Supporting collaboration on educational challenges between a wide range of cross-sectoral stakeholders, including teachers and school leaders, and engage them in system development processes regarding blended learning.**

b) **Encouraging schools to collaborate more closely with local community stakeholders in order to ensure the continuity and improvement of learning in school site and distance learning environments and with different tools.**

c) **Recognising and valuing school leaders and teachers as the key "change makers", and providing them with enhanced support to develop their practice in a blended learning approach and address local-level challenges in the most appropriate way.**

d) **Acknowledging the expertise of some schools and organisations with extensive experience in blended learning, including schools in rural and remote areas, and**

those supporting learning full-time in the home or other alternative learning environments.

e) **Supporting collaboration with the educational resources industry (including technology, publishing, and other curriculum equipment) and educational research.**

3) **Supporting educators:**

<u>Educational staff</u> need help to design for blended learning design as appropriate to their learning context. They need help to be competent in facilitating learning with a range of indoor and outdoor environments, tools and tasks.

One size does not fit all. Education staff need to be able to learn from others and then develop their own blended learning approach in their specific contexts. The development of innovative approaches should be guided by – and provide further - robust evidence of improving inclusion and broad competence development. Teachers can benefit from partnerships with external learning facilitators to mutually develop their practices.

Good practice:

a) **Providing access to centres of expertise, and to appropriate resources that guide pedagogical design.**

b) **Embedding blended learning design in statutory Initial Teacher Education and Continued Professional Development programmes.**

c) **Facilitating staff exchanges and peer learning, networks, collaboration projects, and communities of practice on blended learning to improve pedagogical practice.**

d) **Encouraging teacher participation in exploratory projects or scientific research as part of school and professional development, for example: testing the use of tasks in other learning environments and testing different ways of using of digital technology to support learning.**

4) **Collaboration:**

Blended learning depends greatly on the effective <u>collaboration</u> within schools and between schools and the wider community. In the pandemic, educational staff were cut off from other local stakeholders and need increased efforts to repair the gaps and collaborate better in the future.

Diverse environments may be particularly lacking in socio-economically deprived areas or due to geographical location. Teachers and learners are then placed at a disadvantage in competence development compared to other schools.

Blended learning can support those who are part of traveller communities; young carers; those with health issues or residing in hospitals and care centres; those engaged in high-performance training; and those in long periods of vocational training or paid work. The challenge is that intermediaries are often needed to liaise between schools and families/children.

Good practice in school education:

a) **Supporting teachers and school leaders to work effectively with local employers and work-place trainers, cultural practitioners, and social partners (including in health, welfare, youth, migration).**

b) **Improving parents' and families' understanding of learning environments, tools and tasks via system and/or the school communication and guidance.**

c) **Supporting effective partnerships for infrastructure and resources between different education providers, including from business, arts, cultural heritage, sport, nature, higher education, and research institutes.**

d) **Supporting school and system collaboration with private organisations or public agencies that provide or oversee school-level education for young people who cannot attend the school site on a full-time basis.**

5) **Access:**

Even before the pandemic, some schools, teachers and learners were reported to have limited access to different learning tools: digital devices including smart white boards and projectors; equipment for practical science investigations; arts and crafts materials; musical instruments; sports equipment for different games; and simple electronics and construction tools.

Learners need a range of tools to develop a broad range of competences, including different modes of investigation and expression. They will have had limited access for over a year or may have had limited access their entire school career.

Good practice:

a) **Invest in a range of learning tools that enhances both theoretical and practical knowledge and understanding.**

b) **Provide guidance to schools and professionals as to how such tools can be used across the curriculum.**

6) **Well-being:**

School site closures increased the belief in the need of the school as a community for leaner mental health and emotional well-being. Reduced contact and exchange had a negative impact on

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the mental health and well-being of learners, teachers and families. Furthermore, "learning together" and a "sense of belonging" is an important experience that supports competence development and was reduced during the pandemic. The challenge is to rediscover and further promote social learning. Stakeholders call for supporting a school culture that promotes emotional well-being and a healthy lifestyle.

The pandemic revealed that many learners were unprepared to manage their own learning. On the other hand, there were reports that teachers and pupils discovered and benefitted from new ways to learn, independently and collaboratively, and the challenge is to build on this positive change and address any low levels of capacity.

An effective blended learning approach requires both collaborative and independent learning, adapted to the age and capacity of students. Blended learning also further develops these capacities through experience.

Good practice:

a) **Encouraging schools to provide adequate opportunities for social learning in different environments and with different tools in order to enhance learner well-being.**

b) **Including student well-being in school objectives, monitoring and quality assurance processes; developing guidance material on supporting mental health and wellbeing at schools;**

c) **Assigning dedicated staff to supporting student and teacher well-being and facilitating access to qualified mental-health professionals.**

d) **Providing support to learners to develop their Personal, Social and Learning to Learn competence (one of the eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning) which can enhance the ability of pupils of different ages to learn in different contexts.**

e) **Ensuring that all schools and learners have access to well-functioning indoor and outdoor spaces and equipment for physical education (motor skills tasks, games, sports, dance) to be blended with other learning tasks.**

7) **Digital technology and content:**

The pandemic made it clear that learners, educational staff, families and other learning providers need to know better how to use <u>digital technology and digital content</u> where appropriate as part of blended learning. The pandemic also highlighted that online learning is severely hampered where there is a lack of Internet connectivity.

Initial VET learners greatly suffered from a lack of access and continuity during the pandemic, which could have been partially avoided if the use of digital tools had been more widespread. It

is not just Initial VET learners that would benefit from software such as AR and VR to simulate real-world scenarios, but all school pupils.

Good practice:

a) **Systems developing a comprehensive national digital learning strategy for school education, which includes supporting the development of teacher and learner digital competence.**

b) **Complementing the strategy by the use of self-assessment tools, such as the SELFIE tools for schools and teachers or participation in EU initiatives such as Code Week and the Digital Education Hackathon.**

c) **Including guidance or investment in effective Learning Management Systems that support communication and organisation during the learning process in such a national strategy.**

d) **Ensuring equitable access to digital tools and software that are safe and effective for online learning, and that provide appropriate data protection.**

e) **Investing in high-speed internet connectivity of school site and distance learning environments.**

f) **Investing in digital tools, notably in affordable Augmented and Virtual Reality software and hardware, that can simulate real-world scenarios, and other tools such as ePortfolios.**

8) **Curricula and assessment:**

Even if they want to innovate their pedagogical practice, staff are constrained by rigid curricula demands that can limit the scope of learning design and stifle innovation and broad competence development.

Pedagogical change is severely hindered by narrow approaches to assessment. During the pandemic education site closures, systems and institutions were forced to consider and develop different assessment that is more appropriate to blended but were still constrained by a lack of alternatives and by a favouring of high stakes written examinations. Even before the pandemic, education stakeholders have been seeking better ways to capture the multiple dimensions of learner progression, in both school site and distance learning settings.

Good practice:

a) **Providing guidance for educational staff on what is possible within the confines of the curriculum.**

b) **Allowing for more flexibility with autonomy within school and national curricula.**

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c) **Developing new approaches to assessment and final examinations with suitable tools for formative and summative assessment, that are appropriate for different levels of school education and equally valid for school site and distance learning settings.**

d) **Making better use of digital technology for different types of assessment.**

9) **School strategy and leadership:**

Reports from the pandemic highlighted that schools could better adapt when they could design a clear strategy and rapidly reorganise their resources and routines as appropriate to their own staff and learners.

Change at school level requires effective leadership but not all school heads and leaders have the necessary competences, particularly for embedding a blended learning approach.

School heads and leaders have suffered equally with "emergency" approaches that are not necessarily of high quality or sustainable.

Good practice:

a) **Ensuring a sufficient level of autonomy for school-level decision-making (by school boards, heads, leaders) regarding the timing, logistics and resources for learning.**

b) **Supporting schools and associated education providers to reflect on a blended learning approach within their own strategic planning, in a way that is coherent with system development. This may include the use of self-assessment tools to guide school and staff development.**

c) **Supporting school heads and school leaders in managing organisational change to facilitate blended learning, with dedicated professional development and guidance for their roles.**

10) **Monitoring:**

Supporting positive change across the system also requires a regular generation of data that can contribute to the ongoing monitoring of blended learning practices and new developments across the system.

The great concern in the pandemic was an inability to generate data and robust analyses that could inform decision-making. School evaluations and inspectorates were not set up to appropriately support positive change, although a small number of systems are known to have addressed this.

Good practice:

a) **Monitoring and reporting on experiences and progress in developing a blended learning approach in primary and secondary education.**

b) **Combining system-wide collaboration with the timely generation of a range of data and feedback that creates "real-time" evidence of recent developments and current needs.**

c) **Considering including a focus on the blend of learning environments and tools to annual school evaluation (by the school or inspectors). Such internal and/or external reviews and school development planning should also consider the school climate and culture from both a school site and distance perspective: sense of community and identity, student and teacher well-being, working conditions, and relationships with stakeholders.**

d) **Considering including external resource providers in school evaluation.**

e) **Considering complementary approaches to monitoring, such as a call for research proposals.**