

BLENDLED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: REVIEW FROM POLICY PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning, the integration of traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning components, has gained significant attention in higher education. This paper presents a comprehensive review of blended learning in higher education from a policy perspective. It explores the policies and initiatives implemented by educational institutions and government bodies to promote and support blended learning approaches. The objective is to examine the impact of policy decisions on the adoption, implementation, and effectiveness of blended learning in higher education settings. The review encompasses a wide range of policies and initiatives, including national strategies, institutional guidelines, funding schemes, and regulatory frameworks. It explores how policies have shaped the integration of online technologies, learning management systems, and digital resources into traditional classroom settings. Furthermore, it investigates the role of policies in fostering collaboration among faculty members, promoting professional development opportunities, and ensuring quality assurance in blended learning initiatives. By understanding the policy landscape, stakeholders can make informed decisions and create an enabling environment that supports the effective implementation of blended learning, ultimately enhancing the quality and accessibility of education in the digital era.

Keywords: *Blended Learning, Higher Education, Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning, ICT Tools.*

Introduction

Blended learning in its simplest form, the thoughtful integration of online and face-to-face instruction (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, 2006; Graham, 2013), is being used with increased frequency around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic epidemic has disrupted and caused uncontrollable declines in a number of industries, including education. (Shahzad et al., 2021). Due to the emergent lockdown, the age-old tradition of physical classes had to give way to online classes. However, the trend is expected to continue (Ketchell, 2021). However, due to its phenomenal rise since the COVID-19 pandemic, technology resources have taken a prominent position among other resources. Due to COVID-19, "two years of digital change have happened in two months," as Microsoft's Satya Nadella put it (Spataro, 2020).

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In recent years, the phrase "blended learning" has become widely used to refer to specific uses of technology in teaching. By influencing policy and strategic initiatives in higher education at almost every level, blended learning serves as a bridge between the old and the new.

In a recent study, the U.S. Market for Self-Paced Learning Products and Services predicted a precipitous drop in the percentage of higher education students taking traditional face-to-face courses in favor of blended and online modalities (Ambient Insight, 2011).

Driscoll (2002) also argued that blended learning has taken on several forms, such as combining modes of web-based technology, pedagogical approaches, instructional technologies, and actual job tasks. Graham, Allene, and Ure (2005) described the three mostly mentioned definitions of Blended Learning as Combining instructional media (Bersin & Associates, 2003; Ore, 2002a, 2002b; Singh & Reed, 2001; Thomson, 2002), which describes a purely distance course of learning, Combining Instructional methods (Driscoll, 2002; House, 2002; Rossett, 2002); and Combining face to face and online instructions (Reay, 2001; Rooney, 2003; Sands, 2002; Ward & LaBranche, 2003; Young, 2002): This is a doubtfully classic definition. Here, traditional teaching is done by classroom setting physical and online instructions involving a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as 'Blackboard' or 'Moodle' and comprising the use of synchronous and asynchronous electronic tools, such as, 'chat' and 'bulletin boards' respectively.

Online and blended teaching and learning in higher education have been extensively discussed extensively in research since the 1990s, when universities began adopting the Internet to deliver courses (Liburd, 2015; Liburd & Christensen, 2013; Liburd et al., 2011; Marasi et al., 2020). Although the term blended learning was coined in the late 1990s (EPIC Learning 2013), it could still be characterized as pre-paradigmatic, searching for generally acknowledged definitions and ways of conducting research and practice. In the absence of a paradigm, or some candidate for a paradigm, all of the facts that could pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. (Kuhn 1962, p. 15).

Bichronous Learning: Synchronous and Asynchronous Blend: The blending of Synchronous and asynchronous learning is regarded as Bichronous Learning. (Martin et al., 2020) suggest that to create innovative learning sequences and methods that go beyond what can be achieved with a single approach, bichronous online teaching and learning places a focus on the purposeful blending of synchronous and asynchronous components. (Stein & Graham, 2020) found that blended learning focuses on offering a variety of learning activities that capitalize on the advantages of both in-person and online interactions to keep learners interested. Both synchronous and asynchronous learning are methods of delivering e-content in an online classroom. Other aspects include instructors, students, interactive technologies, ways of engagement, and many others. Synchronous engagement may be text based but in real time at the same time. Khan (2006) defines synchronous learning as "Participants interact with an instructor through the Web in real time. But more frequently, it makes use of technology to deliver the complete range of visual clues typically available with in-person, location-based engagement, and the communication style is mostly vocal, allowing for real-time discourse. These technologies include live webcasting, video and audio conferencing, online chat, and instant messaging, to name a few. Video, audio, and chat are available through popular but proprietary programmes like Skype, Zoom, Blue Jeans, or Adobe Connect; Big Blue Button is an open-source alternative made for online learning that can be directly incorporated into most learning management systems. (Clark et al., 2007) found that the classroom, the media, and conferences are the three main sources of inspiration for the development of synchronous online learning. Asynchronous learning is comparable to synchronous learning, which employs online learning tools to enable information sharing across a network of people independent of time or location restrictions. Khan (2006) stated that "Asynchronous learning refers to training that is not bound by geography or time" based on these elements. The constructivist theory, a learner-centered approach that emphasizes the value of peer-to-peer interactions, is the foundation for asynchronous online learning. This method can be used to aid learning in traditional on-campus or regular education, remote education, and continuing education. It mixes self-study with asynchronous interactions to increase learning. Asynchronous learning activities take place in a sophisticated environment with a variety of activity options known as the online learning management space. Even though students are frequently alone themselves in the area, they can still feel active and dynamic by interacting with the textual dialogues, artifacts, and other signs of student and instructor involvement. A "news" forum can also be included, where relevant developments or applications connected to the course's topic can be found and debated. A weekly discussion board where weekly content is delivered and discussion topics are brought up is the cornerstone of asynchronous learning.

ICT and Blended Learning: Due to the emergence of technological breakthroughs, the increasing usage of ICT and blended learning has altered the nature of the teaching and learning process. It is clear that putting more emphasis on ICT is urgently needed since it helps educational institutions increase their capability while maintaining high standards. Through blended learning, pedagogy and technology are connected. It combines the right methodologies with technology to improve efficiency in learning. Blended learning is a collaborative approach that improves comprehension. In India, the Ministry of Education has taken certain ICT initiatives to make teaching and learning more effective.

ICT initiatives in higher education by the Ministry of Education

Resource	For students/Researchers	For Institutions
Digital content: access journals and e-books		
National Digital Library: e-content	Access e-content on multiple disciplines	Get your E-content listed - Form NDL Club
e-PG Pathshala: Gateway for e-books upto PG	Get free books and curriculum-based e-content	Host e-books
Shodhganga: A reservoir of Indian Theses	Access Research Theses of scholars of Indian Institutes	Get research theses of your scholars to get listed on Shodhganga
e-ShodhSindhu: e-journals	Get access to full text e-resources	Get access to full-text e-resources
Audio-Video e-content		
SWAYAM: Massive Open Online Courses	Earn credit through online courses	-Encourage your extraordinary faculty to develop online courses - Accept credits awarded under SWAYAM - Form SWAYAM local chapters
SWAYAMPRAKASHA: View digital courses on TV	Watch high-quality educational programs. 24*7	Provide facility for viewing SWAYAMPRAKASHA content

Accelerated Hands on learning		
e-Yantra: Engineering for better tomorrow	Get hands on experience on embedded systems	Create e-Yantra labs for training in embedded systems in collaboration with IIT Bombay
FOSSEE: Free/Libre and Open Source Software for Education	- Access and volunteer for the use of open source software - Become FOSSEE fellow	Run labs in open source
Spoken Tutorial: Tutorial in IT application	Self-training in IT fields	Encourage eminent faculty to provide training content for self-learning
Virtual Labs: Web-enabled experiments designed for remote – operation	Try curriculum based virtual experiments	develop virtual experiments for Virtual labs suited to course curriculum in gap areas
E - Governance		
University Enterprise Resource Planning(Samrath)	Student development Life Cycle	E-Governance for Institutions/Universities
Track your progress		
VIDWAN: Expert Database and National Research Network	Register on VIDWAN	Get your faculty registered on VIDWAN - Monitor research outcomes at different levels
Shodh Shudhhi (PDS): Plagiarism Detection Software	Unique ideas, concepts, and information without duplication.	- Encourage original information by preventing plagiarism. - Better research outcomes. - Reputation of the institution or university.

- Policy Perspective on Blended Learning:** UGC has given regulations that clearly suggest transformation of education through recognizing the dire need that students are centric stakeholders. This accepts the various modes of learning, such as face-to-face, online learning, and distance or virtual learning. Additionally, it encourages the use of multidisciplinary, multimodal, and vocational courses, with a focus on blended teaching and learning. Multiple access and departure points are available due to student-centricity, the promotion of native language and other languages; emphasis on the humanities and culture; changing the testing procedures to include group exams and open-book testing; the ready support for older students, especially the idea of the ABC (Academic Bank of Credit) that takes into account the possible effects of time, place, method, pace, and language. This will change how we approach education in many ways. When it comes to education, there is enough space for various things, especially considering flexible and quality, student-centeredness, interests, and needs.

The University of Toronto made the first serious attempt at the same in 1986 (Bates, 2016), testing internet conferencing as a tool for collaborative learning with notable success. Similarly in India, the National Education Policy (NEP) drafted from 1986 extensively covered the need for distant learning to provide access to technical and management information, as well as the need to expand the Open University System (IGNOU). It also considered the use of technology to address the issue of time and distance, which are key obstacles for students in the same. Of all, the internet was just a crude network in 1986, so it wasn't precisely thought of as the answer. As a result, the NEP of 2016 highlighted the use of ICT as a requirement to support learning at higher education levels and skill development. It also covered the necessity for MOOCs to deliver cutting-edge education and meet the demand for ongoing knowledge upkeep.

The 2019 NEP draft also addresses the need to create a repository for all educational data and make sure that Tier 1 institutions are not the only ones who can access it. It also recognises the disparities in access to internet-enabled devices and the negative impacts of the same, and it encourages institutions to create their own online programmes as well as accept and give credit for those offered by other institutions. The strategy suggests inviting foreign organizations to operate in India, which is a significant departure from the nation's customary practices. Early in 2020, the UGC formally allowed top 100 NIRF universities to provide online degrees, which is a significant advancement in the field (Gohain, 2020). Plans also call for integrating the programme with Digital India, enabling student verification, and connecting them to a national academic repository. Until now, IIT Madras and Amity University have both offered scaled online degrees, while IGNOU has a large selection of online certificate programmes. NEP (2020) recommended for Blended models of learning as while promoting digital learning and education, the importance of face-to-face in-person learning is fully recognized.

Practical implications

- Without fundamentally sacrificing the quality of the education being offered, educational institutions can offer blended learning study modes with less time in the classroom.
- Teachers' perception on course materials, course design, effective communication and set up of a blended learning environment gives crucial information to educational institutions looking to create or develop their blended learning approach and improve student experience.
- With the advent of blended learning, classroom instruction has shifted from being mostly teacher-directed, top-down, and one-size-fits-all to being more student-driven, bottom-up, and customized, with differentiation as the key component.
- Online assessment for receptive language abilities (listening and reading) can both lighten the load on the teacher and give the students the freedom to pursue their own course of study.

Conclusion

A blended learning strategy can be very helpful because it will enhance learning because the new generation is well-versed in technology and will provide access to information for pupils while improving its quality. Combining technology with in-person training can inspire, create more opportunities for group learning and teaching. Universities need to start adjusting to such changes at this point. Change is necessary to keep up with the rising expectations of both students and employers.

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