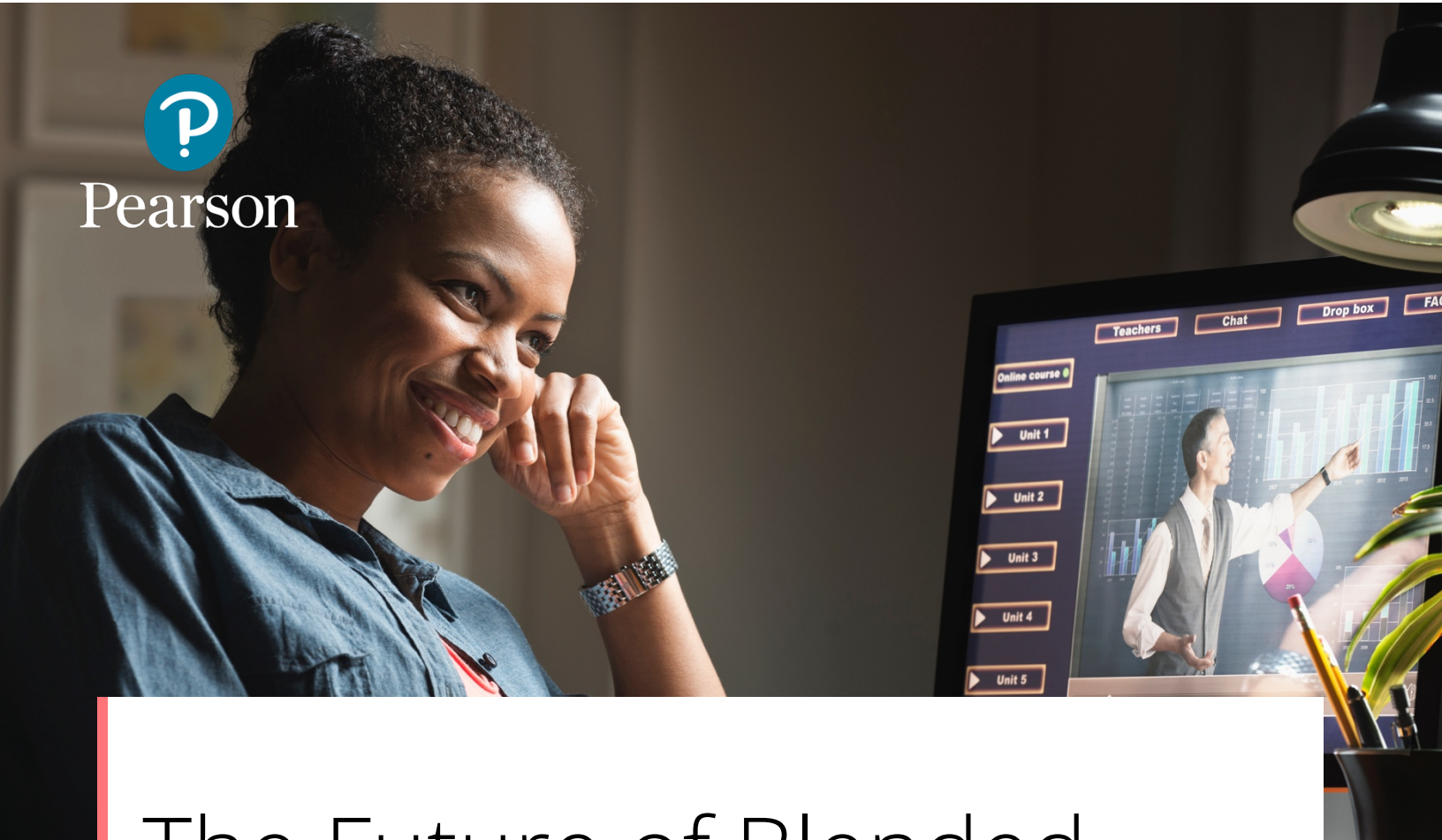# The Future of Blended Learning

A review of educator and student views and thoughts on the future.

October 2021

Executive Summary

> *Whether they call it blended or hybrid, 20 years down the line it will just be education.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

This research shows how the requirement to move rapidly and en masse from in-person to online delivery presented challenges which were largely unavoidable for both students and academics. However, the advantages have also become clear as the pandemic accelerated the use of more blended learning.

On reflection, the consensus is that improved technology will deliver even better – more considered and holistically designed – blended experiences going forward. Educators and students also agreed that in general blended learning is more likely to happen in the future – the pandemic has accelerated this.

Educators acknowledged that equitable access was an area of concern but felt that their institutions had worked hard to enable access for students, whatever their circumstances. Ensuring all students have access isn't enough though, as educators mentioned that student preparedness to use technology for learning could be another potential barrier to effective digital learning.

It was observed that some student groups, such as disabled students and international students, actually benefited from online learning and assessment. This highlighted how crucial it will be to consider *all* student experiences and needs when developing a blended approach with the widest possible access.

Why is this research important?

As record numbers of students began university the UK in autumn 2021, the learning experience that they expected and the one they were likely to receive was being covered in the national media. A September 2021 BBC News article[1] quoted the Office for Students saying, *"England's universities must take student views into account when deciding how much to teach online."* While face-to-face provision is an expectation of the government, in a snapshot survey by the BBC, 34 out of 47 universities said they would be taking a more blended approach. The Office for Students chief executive Nicola Dandridge said the experience of the pandemic had revealed *"elements of online provision which are really valuable and really useful"*. With that in mind, some online provision was likely to be continued, but as a supplement to face-to-face.

However, we must ensure we listen to students, the majority of whom *don't* want a fully online university experience (see statistics later in this paper). A spokesperson for the Russell Group of 24 universities outlined that while most learning would be in person again – i.e. small group seminars and lab sessions – an element of digital learning would continue, with many large group lectures remaining online. National Union of Students vice-president for higher education Hillary Gyebi-Ababio has expressed concerns *"that for some universities, online learning is simply a cost-cutting exercise, brought about by universities needing to stay financially afloat in a competitive market."*

In this paper, we have gathered a number of educators' thoughts on their actual experiences of blended learning and on the future. Alongside this, we consider student opinions from the many surveys conducted over the past 18 months to see what matches up and which educator predictions would receive the best reception from the student population.

Overview of the research

In summer 2021 we conducted research with users of our digital resources who were teaching across various disciplines and working at different UK universities. Of the 17 educators interviewed, nine volunteered to respond to an additional set of questions on the future of blended learning. We wanted them to reflect on what their experience had been during the pandemic and to consider what the coming years may hold.

Specifically, we asked three questions to elicit their thoughts:
1. How do you think blended learning will be used differently going forward?
2. How do you think the concept of 'blended' learning will be used differently in the future?
3. How sustainable is a blended learning approach? (Where required we used one or more of these prompts: technology issues, funding issues, engagement from faculty/students, time pressures, pressure from above, inclusivity and recruitment of students)

We analysed all the responses and identified the key themes. In this paper, we outline those themes together with some of the most poignant and interesting observations and predictions for the future. After sharing the 'educator view' on each theme we then describe the 'student view', gleaned from the findings of various surveys on online and blended higher education undertaken with university students over the past 18 months (since March 2020).

Blended learning will increase and be seen as the norm

Educator view

Of our research participants, **8 out of 9** predicted that blended learning will **grow in the future**. With everyone having had to adapt to it during the pandemic, many said that even those who hadn't embraced technology before found it worked well and now appreciate how online can be effectively combined with face-to-face going forward. However, they did acknowledge that some of their academic colleagues would likely just want to go back to the familiar, traditional style of university education.

Only one participant thought that things may return to business-as-usual after Covid-19. They also felt that while blended learning was a term used by their university, that wasn't really the experience delivered, especially at the start of the semester in autumn 2020, when academics were teaching in two parallel modes – online and face-to-face.

> *A lot of people who would have been reluctant have been forced into it [and] have realised that it's not as bad as they thought, and they have got over their fears of the technology.*
>
> Adrian Perotti, Glasgow Caledonian University

> *I think in a UK-wide context, I believe that there will be a more blended approach in future although it is hard to predict the extent of this.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

> *Whether they call it blended or hybrid, 20 years down the line it will just be education. The gap is between the potential you see and whether we can get there fast enough.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

> *I think people have seen its benefits and it will be used more. Some will really embrace this but some will go back to a traditional model, maybe with some blended add-ons.*
>
> Danielle McConville, Queen's University Belfast

Student view

Similarly, students predict a different, more blended future for higher education. Here's what they said in Pearson's Global Learner Survey 2021 as reported in the blog article *Students expect fundamental change in university education because of the pandemic* [2].

When asked 'Which option most closely matches your ideal vision for their learning environment moving forward?' **44% of UK students chose a hybrid model** (versus 48% for traditional on-campus model).

In addition, **82% of UK students somewhat agreed or strongly agreed** that 'Colleges and universities will **fundamentally change** because of the pandemic' and **81% of UK students somewhat agreed or strongly**

agreed that 'their university/college will **have better technological capabilities** following the Covid-19 pandemic.'

Weighing up online delivery

Our participants reflected on their move to online and how this had impacted their work and their students' experience – they described both challenges and benefits. Over the past 18 months students have been asked via many different researchers to assess their education experiences during the pandemic, so we looked at whether these aligned with educator observations.

Challenges

Educator view

They expressed three main **challenges**:

- Students felt that online was *not* a substitute for face-to-face and not worth the value of their student fees (where applicable).
- The situation overall had a negative effect on students' mental wellbeing.
- Full remote delivery could demand more of an educator's time, for example they could be pre-recording lectures/video clips, running live sessions, holding virtual office hours, moderating online discussion forums or creating and marking online assessments, and often doing all of this and more!

Face-to-face is still going to be what a student expects from an education. [...] I think students expect more for their money – that's not sustainable.

Dawn McCartie, Newcastle University

If you're trying to engage with the technology and still do everything else they expect, there's a risk of over-burdening. [...] they thought you could have weekly Padlets and discussion Padlets. Then you realise you have them everywhere and they're chasing for your response.

Adrian Pierotti, Glasgow Caledonian University

Students found it difficult to be motivated, they felt isolated.

UK University Educator [Anonymous]

Main complaints are that the full tuition fee is not worth it for online learning.

UK University Educator [Anonymous]

Student mental health suffered from the lack of peer support those students would get by being on campus.

Adrian Pierotti, Glasgow Caledonian University

Most colleagues have been negative because the amount of work they've had to do this year was massive.

UK University Educator [Anonymous]

Student view

We found that much of the student data supports the student experience observations made by our research participants.

Overall student satisfaction with their university experience was down, as shown by the National Student Survey[4] results:

- **75% agreed that they were satisfied** with the quality of their course, down from 83% last year.

On each annual measure student satisfaction was down by between 3 and 13 percentage points with the biggest decreases being observed around **access to resources**:

- 72% agreed that IT facilities supported their learning well (down 11%)
- 75% agreed that library resources (books, online services, learning spaces), supported their learning well (down 12%)
- 74% agreed that they were able to access course-specific resources (equipment, software, facilities), (down 13%)

More specifically, according to the 2021 Student Academic Experience Survey[3], **perceptions of value for money are low** and there is an increase in the rate at which the **experience is being judged as 'worse than expected'**:

> *"The proportion of students who feel they have received good or very good value is very low (just over one-in-four), while the proportion whose experience has been worse than expected has more than doubled."*

In the Pearson Global Learner Survey[2], **82% of UK students somewhat agreed or strongly agreed** that 'The disruption of education has **contributed to my stress, anxiety levels or mental health issues**'. Knowing that this was a concern, the National Student Survey[4] asked students about their university's support for student mental wellbeing and the satisfaction level with that support was low:

- **42%** of students agreed that their university or college took sufficient steps to support their mental wellbeing

Advantages

Educator view

Our educators found there were some surprising *advantages* to blended learning.

Four participants said that students **appreciated recorded lectures** and they expected this to continue as standard practice in the future. However, we note that there were some observations on the limitations of recording software, with not all lecture theatres set up to with the technology to do this particularly well.

Our participants found the **live, or synchronous, online sessions** useful within their blended delivery, giving the following specific reasons:

- Students with severe anxiety, or other issues which make physical attendance hard, could more easily attend.
- While students tend *not* to turn on their cameras, they are happier to use the chat box than raise a hand in a face-to-face class.
- Students feel less pressure to show their peers that they 'get it'.

Along similar lines, one participant found that students responded well to the ***anonymous* online discussion tool** Padlet.

Another participant appreciated the **logistics benefits of virtual sessions** – no commuting saves time and money. They will continue to offer student meetings via video conference as they found the flexibility of this benefitted them and their students.

...it's allowed people to be more flexible with their time. You don't have to be in on Monday at 9am.

Dawn McCartie, Newcastle University

Students prefer to be on Zoom – [they] feel the lecturer is talking to them personally.

UK University Educator [Anonymous]

Students mention they are not under the pressure from other students. That's especially good in a course like engineering maths where there is a diverse level.

UK University Educator [Anonymous]

In terms of the student engagement – online teaching was more effective. When students attend lectures and seminars face-to-face they don't answer questions but they are more actively answering in the chat box. It took me slightly longer as I have to monitor the chat box though.

UK University Educator [Anonymous]

...many students appreciate the flexibility of recordings so that they can catch-up/revisit especially as many are balancing a job and other commitments.

UK University Educator [Anonymous]

There is a lot of nice stuff [digital learning resources] that is available and it seems students enjoy it.

Student view

There was a fairly high level of student satisfaction with their ability to access and take part in online delivery, and, as noted by the educators we spoke to, there are some features of the shift to remote learning that students liked.

According to the 2021 Student Academic Experience Survey[3] **66% of students were satisfied or very satisfied** with the use of educational technology on their course, *"a clear endorsement of how technology has been deployed, in terms of the content and accessibility."* However, the authors add this caveat:

> *"While this is clearly a positive result, we should recognise that this is in the context of low scores seen earlier in this report for value-for-money. What these differing findings imply is that while the technology itself is accessible and has been deployed appropriately, this does not necessarily allay concerns about the relative value or perceived quality of technology-led learning, or even blended learning, when compared with in-person teaching."*

A Wonkhe survey[5] of 3,300 UK students in Autumn 2020 asked: "It is likely that some aspects of online delivery will continue after the pandemic. Please select which of the following you would like to see happening after the pandemic." The following notable percentage of 'Yes' responses align to our educators' observations:

- 82% recorded lectures
- 79% online tutorials/ check-ins with tutors
- 69% online discussion forums

Some further positive outcomes of the shift to remote learning are seen, for example in Pearson's Global Learner Survey 2021[2] **82% of UK students somewhat agreed or strongly agreed** that they are **more confident and skilled in the use of technology** after a year of online education.

Considering the sustainability of blended learning

Educator view

We wanted to know how easy it would be to continue with blended learning for all and if these educators had identified any barriers to blended learning becoming part of the normal practice at their university. For example, what had they experienced during the pandemic which could make it difficult for certain students to access technology and is the technology itself up to scratch?

There are clearly some **issues around access**, with **three** educators mentioning that their institution had provided laptops to students who needed them, and **another** saying that hardship funds were made available for similar purposes. They felt their institutions were generally **doing well on enabling all students to access technology** to support online learning though, and one actually hoped this could be extended in the future:

> *I hope our university might consider providing all students with laptops (in terms of inclusivity, we had a laptop support scheme which many students took up last year). Although there will be issues with laptops, the benefits are worth pursuing.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

On a more positive note, a few educators had observed online learning *enabling* **more inclusive access**; they envisage it supporting students with varying needs to access higher education more easily going forward.

> *It has a huge benefit for inclusivity. Thinking of international students, students with caring responsibilities, ongoing medical conditions including mental health and more – anything that boosts [students'] ability to engage, when and how they can, is really important in that space.*
>
> Danielle McConville, Queen's University Belfast

> *It's more inclusive – some students actually kind of struggle to be with others in the same classroom, e.g., those with anxiety issues. More respectful to a diverse range of students.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

> *It's also convenient for students with part-time jobs. Plus, some students just finish their course, and they go back to their country and start their internships. I think this makes their life easier.*
>
> Chaminda Wijethilake, University of Essex

> *International students – a couple from China – they enjoy the flexibility. I think some attend from a shopping mall.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

The educators identified some **limitations of the technology itself**, along with **student preparedness** to use it in the context of university study.

> *Improvements in assessment generally are still needed. If we continue to have online exams, I would argue for the need for proctoring or similar but there is big reluctance around this [within] the university.*
>
> Danielle McConville, Queen's University Belfast

> *There are limitations. We all make assumptions that young people are au fait with technology; and some are, but some really aren't. We make assumptions about students' willingness to engage with that type of thing.*
>
> Adrian Pierotti, Glasgow Caledonian University

> *So far, the feedback from Year 1, 2 and 3 undergraduate home students is that they find it really difficult to focus at home. There are loads of things that distract their attention – they desperately want to go back to campus.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

Two educators specifically commented that **classroom recording technology** is not good as it could be, and they feel it can restrict their ability to deliver engaging lectures:

> *You can't move out of the designated [recording] area. It's not a very engaging session now. I don't think I will enjoy my teaching as much.*
>
> Chaminda Wijethilake, University of Essex

> *Live in-class recording lectures is not good at all. The tech doesn't capture your voice as well. If you're moving around the lecture theatre the voice quality reduces.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

Student view

Although institutions have clearly done much to help students who were struggling with access to online learning, the National Student Survey[4] revealed a **sizeable access gap**. They found **78%** of students agreed that they *were* able to access the learning resources they needed – such as lecture notes, course materials, journals, or a Virtual Learning Environment, leaving **22% who disagreed**.

The level of student preparedness and the reality of their experiences of remote learning were highlighted in a phone survey of students conducted by London South Bank University, reported in a Wonkhe article[6] of May 2021. Two key findings were:

- Parents with children at home told us they were finding it hard to study, especially with the added factor that many of these households only have one laptop.
- More traditional first-year undergrads (18-year-olds joining straight from school/college) were finding it hard to concentrate and engage with their learning.

The author of another recent Wonkhe article[7] reminded us that even for those students who we may consider 'digital natives', *"we cannot... [assume] that they are digital learners.... Whilst an argument might be presented that all students are engaged with social media – yes, we know the majority of the population have Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter accounts – the pandemic has highlighted this doesn't necessarily mean they have digital learning skills."*

Thinking about students who may have had particular difficulties with the move to online learning, the **Disabled Students' Commission**[8] surveyed students between May and June 2021, aiming to uncover, amongst other things, their "experiences of adapting to remote learning, teaching and assessment".

They found that **over a third of students** surveyed found adapting to remote learning and teaching 'very difficult' (36.3%) but noted that experiences often varied by impairment type, with some **challenges**:

> A number of students with mental health conditions found the experience of remote learning and teaching *"isolating, not stimulating and demotivating"* and students with chronic illness also found it much more difficult to concentrate.

> Another student said that studying at home had made it *"Hard to focus, disruptive environments, not really an appropriate environment for someone with learning difficulties."*

and some **benefits**:

> *"... online learning allowed me to pause and play and carry out my learning at an appropriate pace during which I could fully concentrate. In a normal lecture, I got distracted very easily and miss out on a lot."*

> *"I hate in person exams. I much prefer being in a space I can control as it lessens my anxiety."*

> *"Online exams suited my disability as it gave me the opportunity to have rest breaks as needed."*

Inspiring innovative blended learning approaches

Many of the educators we spoke to were **particularly excited** about the future that the pandemic has accelerated everyone towards. They are being inspired and supported by their institutions to do even more to deliver a *truly* blended learning experience, and hope that other academics will follow suit.

I think that we'll actually do blended learning after this. The term was bandied about but we really just did a bit in the VLE. There have been challenges but it has fast-forwarded it and everyone has developed their digital skills. We've developed a proper blended learning approach. [...] The bar has been raised – it could give those people who are more of a digital nature will be thinking about what more they can do – use Teams, use Twitch, flipped learning software.
Dawn McCartie, Newcastle University

We should welcome this new way of learning, it's the way forward.
Chaminda Wijethilake, University of Essex

I think [blended learning] is more normalised and more positively viewed – Covid-19 has jumped us forward about 5 years.
Danielle McConville, Queen's University Belfast

Doing something in a blended way versus blended learning – it makes it blended learning when you think about how they connect with each other or conflict with each other. None of this happened this year. [...] As a concept I am hoping that going to the future it will be really applied.
UK University Educator [Anonymous]

Conclusion

Analysing the views of our educators, then comparing them to student opinions gathered from the many surveys conducted in the last 18 months, we found that both parties agreed that more truly blended learning will happen in the future. It was observed that much of the delivery during the pandemic wasn't necessarily blended learning in the real sense of a designed, holistic combination of online and face-to-face learning.

The challenges experienced during this, previously unimaginable, mass move to online delivery are recognised by educators and students alike. However, the advantages have also become clear as the pandemic accelerated the use of more blended learning.

To embrace and sustain a future in blended learning with all its benefits, such as accessibility and flexibility, educators will need to reflect on what worked well and on ways to overcome the challenges.

Equitable access was a concern, but institutions have worked hard to enable access for students whatever their circumstances and it's likely that more will be done to support this going forward. From an accessibility point of view, we saw that some student groups, such as disabled students and international students benefited from online learning and assessment. It will be crucial to consider all student experiences and needs when developing a blended approach with the widest possible access.

Student preparedness to use technology for learning was seen as a potential barrier to effective learning. Understanding how to support students to develop digital learning skills will be integral to a blended future.

Time was a luxury not afforded to many, if any, educators in 2020. A lack of time to prepare digital materials and get to grips with new software no doubt limited students' experience of blended approaches in some areas – assessment and collaboration for example. However, the consensus is that improved technology, alongside an impetus for change, will deliver even better – more considered – blended experiences in the future.

We conclude with some educator thoughts on the future role of blended learning. It seems fair to say that the future of a truly blended learning experience is within grasp. We recognise that in this future, students will physically attend their higher education institution to take advantage of its unquestionable benefits, but this will be alongside the use of digital learning resources which are designed and integrated into teaching to support student progress.

> *Technology will continue to improve in reliability, speed and usability, which does help improve the online benefits. However, interpersonal skills including communication, are important 'value-adds' for universities, so being physically present and engaged will be remain important for students.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

> *I think we have progressed phenomenally in this area – it would be unwise to go backwards.*
>
> UK University Educator [Anonymous]

> *There should come a point where the terminology [blended learning] is not needed because it will be the norm.*
>
> Adrian Pierotti, Glasgow Caledonian University

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