



1: Getting the blend right – preparing for transition to HE at 6th form through blended learning pedagogies

Name and role

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Background

The University of Wolverhampton has a history of successful partnership working with schools and colleges in the area. One particular focus is on supporting pre-entry institutions in developing their learners as independent learners with a high degree of 'HE-readiness'. For this pilot, learners were drawn from the Sixth Forms (students aged 16-18) of the University's partner schools as part of a small-scale pilot of two existing University modules in a blended format. In the case of both modules, delivery at the University constituted three visits during the semester and the majority of the course was studied through the University Virtual Learning Environment (WOLF) or its e-portfolio (PebblePad). The WOLF module was closely linked to discipline-based school curriculum and some work was undertaken in class time.

Intended outcome(s)

This case study investigates what role blended learning has in delivering higher level learning to sixth form students and preparing them for the transition process to higher education. By focusing on whole modules, rather than restricted taster sessions or one-off workshops, the university was able to introduce students to HE level study prior to entry to HE. Two different blended learning models were investigated in terms of their effectiveness; one which was directly linked to a qualification at level 3 of the English National Qualifications Framework and one which explored academic skills in a more generic sense. The curriculum was drawn from a successful programme of first year undergraduate modules delivered to students currently studying at L3 ie Higher Education Modules in Schools (HEMiS), with the added dimension of blended delivery.

The challenge

Whilst the current programme of HEMiS modules is relatively well established, it is relatively restricted in its reach and scope; students who might benefit from engaging in the programme with a view to influencing their post-16 choices and to developing their skills, but who go to school or a college further afield were hitherto unable to join. Furthermore, the entirely University-based delivery of HEMiS modules lacked sufficient opportunities for the development of autonomous learning strategies by the students due to the contact based delivery.

Established practice

The delivery of modules to sixth form students is an established initiative. However, the development of blended delivery based on a combination of asynchronous learning activities and campus visits was not a facet of this existing programme. Students following this 'blended

approach' were given their own virtual space within University systems (apart from Undergraduates) for child protection purposes. Early intentions included the recording and uploading of lectures and to add a verbal explanation of PowerPoint materials. However, the need to ensure delivery fitted with a largely virtual audience meant that this was revised to become snappier podcasts.

The authors of this case study have previously published a study (see reference below) that showed that students studying the Website Fundamentals module (which was directly linked to their school based level 3 curriculum and delivered through WOLF) showed a marked disparity between excellent scores in coursework and poorer scores in the end of module multiple choice, time constrained assessment. As a result, the VLE topic was amended to record weekly scores to measure progress and a revision session was built into the programme.

The module pilots took place in the context of the development of specific 'Blended Learning Targets' following the implementation of an institution-wide Blended Learning Strategy in 2006. Thus, these targets, have impacted on the delivery of all University courses, including those offered as part of the HEMiS Programme.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

The utilisation of blended technology as a vehicle for enhancing transition skills helps address other preconceptions of Higher Education and we consider this a significant outcome of the work. The use of a native technology (a term which is based on the concept on sixth formers being assumed to be digital natives) with students, whilst debunking conventions of dusty lecture theatres, delivered a learning experience which was familiar and intuitive. It enabled learning to be undertaken at a time and location convenient for the student. Students all appeared to enjoy using e-technologies as they were able to work at their own pace as information was available to them when they needed it and collated for future reference. E-technologies also allowed students (and staff) to monitor progress and assess knowledge acquisition utilising online formative assessments, which appeared less intimidating (and formal than any classroom based measure).

Key points for effective practice

Reflecting on the module following completion, students identified their school teacher and other students as the key source of support rather than the university academic tutor highlighted personal and academic skills that they needed to develop in order to facilitate transition to university. These included time management and planning skills such as "not leaving tasks until the last minute" (Employability Skills Student) and the need for a high level of self-motivation. Completers recognised the value of the experience to their future academic development identifying that they had a better understanding of the expectations of university study

Conclusions and recommendations

Through linkage with the level 3 curriculum, the HE experience becomes contextualised and relevant rather than an 'add on'; an extension of study rather than an experience in isolation. There are also advantages in universities and schools developing an experiential understanding of curricula similarity and difference and mapping academic content at the point of transition. Furthermore, the students engaged in the blended HEMiS modules achieved very highly in terms of their marks. Building on this case study we are currently investigating the relevance of the delivery model in respect of student achievement with further cohorts.

Additional information:

Harnisch, H., Taylor-Murison, L. (2011) Transition and Technology – evaluation of blended learning delivered by university staff to 6th form students. *British Journal for Educational Technology*