TOWARDS A EUROPEAN MATURITY MODEL FOR BLENDED EDUCATION (EMBED)

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are challenged to maintain quality and innovative education for large student numbers while working with lower budgets, and to accommodate the needs of a great variety of learners. As a consequence, new course and programme delivery modes emerge at universities. Since the turn of the century, convergent formats of online and onsite teaching and learning have received increased attention and it is expected that these will become the most common approaches in higher education (HE) (Daniel & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2016). Several scholars reported that such blends lead to better student experiences, higher efficiency and offer opportunities for more personalised and inclusive HE. Furthermore, they seem to be suitable for teaching large groups (a)synchronously and organize mobile or multi-campus HE (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006; Laurillard, 2014).

Nevertheless, some important questions remain. First, little is known about the status of affairs across Europe in terms of adoption and diffusion of blended teaching and learning. Though a lively discourse is taking place among academia, practitioners and HE administrators there is a lack of consistent use of related terminology, leading to a great deal of confusion with monitoring in terms of depth and breadth. The concepts of blended learning, teaching and/or education are far from clear-cut; the literature spans various definitions and meanings. The existing methodologies nor the quality assessment frameworks comply; they are solely oriented towards e-learning and/or targeted at specific groups of learners (e.g., Excellence, eMM). Secondly, the quest for 'the best of two worlds' has flared up the recent debates. Notwithstanding there are a great number of innovative experiments and projects going on in HE it has been difficult to consolidate these in HE institutions. Further scrutiny is crucial in order to thoroughly understand the drivers of successful online and onsite teaching and learning, and in particular to know how to incorporate their best characteristics in order to enhance HE. Its sustainable embedment not only involves often a thorough course and curriculum redesign but also multiple institutional reforms in terms of staff support, workload and training, leadership, or policy development and strategies oriented at continuous improvement (Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Lim & Morris, 2009). In this regard, assessment and empowerment are key. Thirdly, some critical reports were published with regard to instructor roles and student expectations, learner dropout (Holley & Oliver, 2010; Lee, Choi & Kim, 2013) and first-rate support strategies (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). University policy makers and administrators, curriculum developers, as well as teams of or individual

instructors are confronted with questions related to the set-up of blended learning programmes and courses, their evaluation or appropriate capacity building to tackle difficulties and barriers for a successful adoption and diffusion of blended learning across HEI. Typically, project managers responsible for implementing blended scenarios are in search of proven practices (Martyn, 2003; McGee & Reis, 2012) and a sound, validated set of guidelines for educational design, adapted to their organisation. Institutions for HE characterised by a strong quality assurance (QA) culture, will try to identify insufficient or missing practices, plan and test (new) alternatives. Nichols and Gardner (2002) as well as Barrie, Ginns, and Prosser (2005) showed such evidence-based approach offers opportunities to significant changes in teaching and learning. In the view of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) this type of R&D activities are crucial in order to achieve an excellence level (Kear, Rosewell, Williams, Ossiannilsson, Rodrigo, Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, Santamaría Lancho, Vyt, & Mellar, 2016).

The EMBED project

Given these considerations, recently, a strategic Erasmus+ partnership between seven organisations and HEIs was established: EADTU (coordinating body), Aarhus University (Denmark), Delft University (The Netherlands), KU Leuven (Belgium), University of Edinburgh (United Kingdom), DCU Ireland (Ireland) and Tampere University of Applied Sciences (Finland). During a period of three years (2017-2020) experts in the field of quality assurance, online and blended learning will work closely together to achieve different objectives related to the introduction and sustainable implementation of BE. The "European Maturity model for Blended Education" or EMBED project aims at:

- developing and validating a monitor for mapping blended learning, institutional strategies and governmental policies for blended education across Europe, including criteria to assess their degree of maturity;
- empowering European HEIs in order to achieve up-scaled quality BL programmes and courses by means of professional development activities and community building across institutional frontiers.

The project partners embrace a multilevel framework in order to tackle conceptual and implementation issues at the course level (micro), at the strategic level (meso) and with the intent to give relevant input to governmental policy (macro).

During this EDEN session we will present the main outcomes of the first phase of the EMBED project. This includes the conceptual framework which delineates the focus and scope of the multilevel maturity model, and the monitor. Both were developed on the basis of a literature review, expert reviews, a websurvey followed by in-depth interviews in each partner university. The framework is built around a consistent terminology and well-demarcated (operational) concepts. This will allow researchers, practitioners and policymakers to talk common language and assess blended education in a more systematic, comprehensive manner. The monitor is conceived as a multi-layered instrument with dimensions and indicators that where newly developed or adapted from previously validated instruments. Its goal is to grasp in detail

practices and conditions for blended learning. All instruments are piloted across different institutions, programmes and courses.

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