

## UQ Teaching Community

### Explainer: What is blended learning?

If you ask five people 'what is 'blended' learning?', I suspect you'll get ten different answers. Is it as simple as students learning from face-to-face interactions as well as online resources? If so, then all courses at UQ are 'blended', right? But it is not that simple, nor should it be.

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#### Take home message

**We can understand blended learning as a learning process or we can talk about it as a way to deliver educational products to students. How we understand blended learning matters. Because how it is understood influences how it is enacted in practice.**

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#### Why we started talking about blended learning

The confusion about 'blended learning' makes sense. The term resulted from the emergence of digital technologies becoming commonplace in our everyday lives. Technologies that have changed teaching and learning.

Here is an example.

[Craig Nelson](#), a retired Professor of Biology, started his academic career in the 1960s. His lectures were unmissable. Not only because he was a good lecturer. Craig had an enviable collection of biological specimens that students could only see and study by coming to his lectures. Now, students can search online and find images and dynamic 3D models of an endless array of specimens.

We could easily argue that handling those specimens and hearing Craig's stories of collecting them are invaluable learning experiences. The point is teaching has changed because of the internet. Students now have access to learning resources and experts they can interact with online and whenever they want. In other words, we have had to change our teaching because how we relate to information has changed.

#### Aren't all our UQ courses blended already?

Blended learning, as a term, arose at the time when educational systems were navigating entry into the digital world. Thus, most early thinking about blended learning was focused on figuring out how to mix or blend learning that happens online with learning that happens on campus.

In this sense, blended learning offered students and lecturers a new kind of flexibility. Learning and teaching, and all the communication between learners and teachers, were no longer constrained to a physical location or dependent on face-to-face contact.

In a very short period of time, 3-5 years, all courses at UQ had an online presence through Blackboard (learning management system) and the ECP (electronic course profile).

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## Blended learning replacing on-campus learning

An important point of distinction. Some universities, including UQ, went down the pathway of creating totally online courses enabled by new digital platforms and organisations (UQx through the edX platform). Other universities, including some degree programs at UQ, have a rich history of distance learning through external programs. Blended learning signals face-to-face interactions in a physical location combined with online learning. UQ's stance on blended learning is that face-to-face learning is central as we are a campus-based university.

*'Blended' learning does not imply exclusively online content. Nor does the 'blending' of a course necessarily result in a reduction in face-to-face teaching time. – [UQ ITaLI website](#)*

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So, all UQ courses are already blended, right? Well, yes and no. It depends on what we mean by blended learning. This is where confusion makes sense and is sensible. [Mindflash](#) summarises what a quick read over the literature would conclude:

*No single, reliable definition of blended learning exists, or even a universal agreement on the term itself.*

If we define 'blended learning' narrowly, then yes. As a technical exercise, content that was once offline is now available online and students still come on campus to learn through formal contact in their courses. However, this narrow conception infers that teaching is just a technical task in which we simply translate content from one medium to another.

## The risk of defining blended learning as just a technology

The conversations, practices, and scholarly debates have evolved. More than adding things online, the interesting questions are arising when we consider how blended learning is changing teaching practices and student-lecturer dynamics.

At UQ, like other universities, the current focus is on leveraging the opportunities of blended learning to transform how, when, where, and with whom students learn. This is best evident in the UQ2U project arising from the [Student Strategy, 2016-2020](#).

*UQ2U will provide students with a signature UQ experience that maximises campus-based 'face time' with academics and peers, in combination with high-value, flexible online learning.*

Blending learning at UQ is interdependent with terms like flexible learning and active learning. The hope is that teaching practices change and student learning becomes more meaningful - more meaningful than regularly watching academics talk to them, be it online or in a lecture theatre.

For UQ, this notion of blended learning draws heavily on research demonstrating the effectiveness of 'active learning' compared to 'passive learning' ([read more](#)).

To this end, UQ is heavily investing in blending courses (via [UQ2U](#)) to promote flexibility and encourage students to participate in highly interactive campus-based learning (that can not simply be recorded and watched).

## The importance of thinking together about blended learning at UQ

Whether or not blended learning transforms how students learn is dependent on how teaching staff understand blended learning and how UQ2U processes facilitate the process of blending.

If we think blended learning is simply transferring content online or making students prepare more online (be it through Blackboard or Edge or any online platform) before coming to lectures, then our teaching has not changed at all. We will probably just annoy most students and stress them out by adding more for them to do.

If we think that blended learning means transforming our teaching practices to better engage students in a meaningful and rich and deep and messy and social learning process, then we might still annoy some students because we are demanding more intellectually from them, but we are also more likely to transform students' learning experiences.

In short, we can understand blended learning as a learning process or we can talk about it as a way to deliver educational products to students. How we understand blended learning matters. Because how it is understood influences how it will be enacted.

This is why we need to continue talking about blended learning at UQ.

**What do you think? What does blended learning look like in your teaching? Do you have a blended learning story you want to share? If so, [click here](#).**