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UWLFlex – a flexible approach for blended and hybrid learning and teaching at University of West London

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INTRODUCTION

The University of West London has implemented an university-wide blended and hybrid approach UWLFlex to learning and teaching in order to accommodate its students' preferences and needs.

GENERAL CONTEXT OF THE HYBRID TEACHING PRACTICE

- Implementer: University of West London (London, United Kingdom)
- Course/programme: all programmes of study (Master and Bachelor degree, full- and part-time)
- Lifetime: Ongoing since September 2020
- Reference: Based on conversation with Dr. Antony Aleksiev (University of West London)
- Website: https://campuspress.uwl.ac.uk/uwlflex/
- Compiled and structured by Universidade Aberta (Portugal)

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ABOUT UWLFLEX

UWLFlex is an active blended learning approach that combines face-to-face with online teaching according to the preferences of the student. In 2020, The University of West London (UWL) designed a model of learning that enabled accommodating learning online and learning on campus, as the UWL went through the pandemic. Although online components of synchronous teaching were more common during the pandemic, they are still available for students that cannot attend traditional face-to-face sessions. Furthermore, students still have online access to resources, activities, and opportunities to revisit and review module content.

The pedagogical structure of UWLFlex is defined by the following three key elements:

- **Investigate (Introduce):** watching short lectures and narrated presentations or completing a short task to assess conceptual understanding and mini-lectures with questions and answers for student engagement.
- **Apply (Engage):** Using case studies, problem-based tasks and links to professional/work practice, live sessions with the tutor, group work, peer work and feedback.
- **Consolidate (Practice):** conducting follow-up tests/tasks, reading and discussion forums, receiving further feedback which is paramount. This stage can be extended with research, extra study or by producing an artefact.

Synchronous mode is usually a core part of the apply stage whether students attend on-campus or online through live sessions with the tutor when they can do group work or problem-based tasks.

Participants and their previous experience

The number of participants varies. UWL is currently perceived as a widening participation institution meaning that a significant part of its students´ body is from a Black Minority Ethnics background and typically more mature. This means that they usually are working students often part-time.
Teachers and students did not have significant experience with online education before UWLFlex. They used online tools as a content repository, managed online assessment and feedback and often deposited lecture recordings which the university did in some programmes through automatic lecture capture.

Initial situation

The UWL had planned already for a blended learning approach with rich content and online activities to support its students, particularly having in mind their background which was mainly adult learners or part-time students with professional and personal commitments.

Current reason

COVID-19 meant that the UWL needed to move to a completely online scenario as there was a full lockdown and universities closed. From 2020-2021 onwards, the UWL started a hybrid approach where some students could attend with heavy restrictions on numbers meaning that other students would stay online. Although things came back to their normal state, there are still some students that attend online either because they are at work or because they are shielding. UWLFlex accommodates all these scenarios.

Benefits for the student

UWLFlex enriches the student experience by providing a diverse range of learning activities and resources. Also, the approach promotes more autonomous learning and similarly trains the academic staff in different pedagogical approaches as they had to be trained in both, pedagogy and the technical elements of hybrid teaching.
Based on the subject-oriented learning outcomes, students would be achieving more generic learning outcomes, such as:

- Autonomous learning skills,
- Resilience and personal responsibility,
- Assessment skills.

Objectives

UWLFlex aimed at developing an university-wide initiative with the view to implement a pedagogical model for hybrid and blended education that would be suited for the UWL typical student. Students that work or have personal requirements and therefore appreciate the possibility of having a flexible learning process. Furthermore, UWLFlex allowed for accommodating different learners' preferences, in particular, as students live in London and would need to commute several hours to attend university.

Hybrid teaching scenario

Content was mainly delivered online and asynchronously (video lectures). That meant that live sessions (face-to-face or online) were used to engage with the tutor, do group work, do peer work and for feedback purposes. They were also used to access labs and other practical settings, use case studies and problem-based tasks, and link to professional/work practice. Students engaged with it online through video links (Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate). Sessions were recorded meaning that students could attend from home and watch the sessions asynchronously when they wanted to.

Hardware and software used

Learning spaces varied from lecture rooms to small labs. Technology used included Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate for video streaming (occasionally, MS Teams), and Blackboard Ultra as a virtual learning environment. Rooms were equipped with microphones, but no cameras and specific software for hybrid teaching were available as lecture capture was done automatically via the computer (screencast) and sound. The lecture capture was done via Panopto.

Content creation

There was pedagogical and technical support for content creation. The pedagogical support was given by school champions and by an academic expert. Each school had its own school champion, academic expert and instructional designer to help prepare, create and develop each individual module.

Interaction among participants

The teacher mainly relied on tools such as Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate to foster student interaction. Some colleagues also used MS Teams. The interaction was ensured by using live quizzes, chat discussions and group work.

Assessment

An informal assessment included two self-tests at the beginning and end of the lecture series, provided via the online campus portal.
The final assessment consisted of submitting a written study paper on a topic from the lectures.
Feedback on assessments could be provided online via tools, however, it was usually delivered asynchronously. Reflections and assessment were a core part of the third stage of consolidation. The activities were as follows: follow-up tests/tasks, reading and discussion forums, provide further feedback, extend with research, extra study or by producing an artefact.
Assessment tools were online tests and submitted work. Both were done through Blackboard Ultra.

Student evaluation

Modules were evaluated every year. According to the student evaluation results, the satisfaction increased and students were very positive with this new approach, particularly during COVID-19. Now, although they are happy to go back to campus, they recognise the effort from the institution, and they praise the quality of resources and activities available in Blackboard Ultra.

Teacher evaluation

For the teachers UWLFlex was a way to accommodate students' different preferences and needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic this approach contributed to deliver their teaching online with rich content and activities.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Ensuring quality of UWLFlex approach was considered part of standard institutional quality assurance processes. Module evaluation questionnaires and National Student Survey were implemented.

TIME COMMITMENT

Time dedicated to the development and implementation of the hybrid settings was significant for the academic staff and needed heavy resources, as it basically meant that the course was fully blended. There was an investment that needed to be made in creating content and activities online. As part of setting-up the project, the university invested in instructional designers that needed to be recruited to help teachers with proposing pedagogical activities and ensuring the modules accessibility and usability. Weekly activities were designed beforehand and thus at least eight hours of planning and producing materials per week were required.

TRANSFERABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The model is applicable in other institutions and not particularly expensive. However, it is worthwhile evaluating if it is proper hybrid teaching at the moment.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Consistency across the UWL,
- Focus on diversity, inclusion and degree of choice.