



## Example of Practice 2: Using Blended Learning ('Fusion') in Edinburgh Futures

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### Context to the implementation of active blended learning

The use of blended learning on this programme was driven by the vision for the Edinburgh Futures Institute's (EFI) new postgraduate portfolio to be accessible to mixed cohorts of online and on-campus students, and to suit the different working patterns, flexible study needs and professional ambitions of a wide range of students. The challenge has been to design and create courses that include and involve students wherever they are based. In the 2023-24 academic year cohort, just over half the students were studying full-time on campus, and just under half - part-time online (with a few people pursuing full-time online study or part-time on-campus study). The timeframe for development was 2019-22, when the programme launched. The desired outcome was for Education Futures students to feel like they belonged to a single cohort, and to experience the different learning environments as coherent, interconnected and supportive of their learning.

### What is the initiative and why?

Significant planning was required to enact blended learning in Education Futures (and across EFI), particularly to achieve the form of blended learning that we call 'fusion', which involves synchronous learning in mixed cohorts of online and on-campus students. In addition to creating new postgraduate programmes, EFI was redeveloping the Old Royal Infirmary building in Edinburgh to facilitate fusion teaching. This has meant creating classroom spaces that are highly-technologised, with universal ceiling microphones, multiple video conferencing spaces for each classroom for group work, and the design of synchronous teaching to include and involve all students as fully as possible. This work is supported by a team of experienced learning technologists, and by teaching assistants, whose role includes ensuring online students can see, hear and participate fully during fusion sessions.

The structure of Education Futures courses is online, asynchronous teaching and learning which wraps around two-day, synchronous intensive days for each 10-credit, five-week course. Each course has two weeks of asynchronous activity at the start, and two weeks at the end, with the two intensive days in between. The kinds of activities that take place in the online weeks include:

- group introductions
- preparing material (individually or in groups) for the intensive days
- discussion forums with specific tasks

- collaborative whiteboard tasks
- guided reading or engagement with resources
- collaborative writing or editing of texts
- finding relevant examples of materials (for example, news reports, data sets) to share with the group
- pair or group peer feedback tasks
- self-led field trips
- sharing of assignments or assignment plans for teacher or peer formative feedback.

The two synchronous intensive days involve a wide range of different activities, including lectures and guest lectures, discussion, workshops, group work and presentations, creative happenings and opportunities for informal exchanges.

Two Education Futures courses were piloted in early 2022, before the launch of the full programme in September 2022.

## Outcomes

The blended learning 'fusion' approach has been evaluated through the standard evaluation mechanisms for courses and the programme, including course-level surveys and programme-wide feedback opportunities through student-staff liaison activities. We take care to seek a balance of input from online and on-campus students, as these two groups experience the blended learning approach differently.

We know from the very high standard of work that students are learning a great deal from their courses and from each other and experiencing the different modes of the courses as coherent and well-connected. Feedback from our external examiner endorses the innovative and well-designed approaches taken to courses on the programme, with comments particularly emphasising the originality of design (across the portfolio and between courses) and the commendable creativity and interdisciplinarity shown by students, with exceptional student achievement.

Some challenges that students and teachers have encountered include:

- Lack of confidence (particularly in the early weeks of courses) to post publicly, in new topic areas. Teachers need to understand and encourage the risks that some students are taking in these spaces.
- Students may take time to grasp and appreciate what online and asynchronous engagement can bring them. Some students need encouragement to understand the value of committing time and effort to asynchronous forms of interaction.
- Up-front investment of teacher time to design and present activities that are meaningful in the context of the course and its aims, and also to consider when different activities are best suited to take place.

As teachers have become more familiar with the possibilities and constraints of the five-week structure, and the types of activities that work well asynchronously and in real-time, the benefits of the active blended approach are becoming easier to explain and demonstrate to students who are encountering it for the first time. One key observation, then, is that it takes time for new approaches to be shaped to fit teachers, students and subject matter. The presence of experienced and imaginative learning technologists, informal feedback from students on an ongoing basis, and regular opportunities for

teachers to share their insights with each other, have all helped considerably with this process on the Education Futures programme.

## **Impact on institution**

EFI is a strategic project for the University as a whole, and the vision for EFI education came from years of research, development and thinking about the future of higher education, as well as significant experience in delivering online distance education across many disciplines. However, the implementation of active blended learning within EFI has generated additional insights, and these are helping to inform a range of developments including the [Curriculum Transformation Project](#) at the University of Edinburgh.

These insights include:

### **Interdisciplinary collaboration**

Creating new structures for teaching that cross-disciplinary contexts require, sustained attention to variations in planning processes, workload models, and ways of teaching and learning. This work 'behind the scenes' at EFI created the conditions for new forms of teaching and learning.

### **Signposting and design**

There is a need for consistent signposting, clear communication and guidance about opportunities for engagement across modes. This may include designing tasks that suit different points in the course, and designing tasks that move across the different phases of the course. For example, students might prepare group work in the online weeks that is presented in the synchronous sessions; or engage in idea-generating sessions synchronously that are taken forward into the following online weeks.

### **Flexibility and contact**

Students may be working at different times and in different ways, including in varied time zones. Designing for contact that is engaging but flexible is a key task for blended learning that is also blending online and on-campus cohorts. For instance, teachers have been experimenting with things like specified hours when students know that tutors will be engaging with student materials in shared spaces (like Miro) - perhaps recording or writing comments, for example - and can choose to join in.

### **Learning from our own experiences**

Consider what motivates teachers as professionals to engage in asynchronous work - opportunities for networking, time and space to consider controversial subjects - and think about how to adopt and adapt approaches that have worked well in these contexts.

### **Physical spaces**

Appropriate design of rooms used for synchronous hybrid sessions is essential. Acoustic treatment of rooms has been shown to be a key element of successful synchronous hybrid sessions, as it ensures that hybrid small group work can take place.

## Resources/links

<https://efi.ed.ac.uk/programmes/education-futures/>

<https://efi.ed.ac.uk/study/>

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