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Visions of blended learning: identifying the challenges and opportunities in shaping institutional approaches to blended learning in higher education

John Hill [ID][a] and Karen Smith [ID][b]

[a]Digital Solutions and Services, University of Derby, Derby, UK; [b]School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

ABSTRACT

Although higher education has engaged in blended learning since the early 1990s and its benefits are well catalogued, research often focuses on individual programmes and less on how institutions envision and engage with it to enhance learning and teaching. This article provides a pre-Covid 19 pandemic snapshot of cross-institutional UK policy and practice, through an interpretative, qualitative study of strategy documents and expert interviews. Findings show that while not prominent in pre-pandemic published institutional strategies, commitments to blended learning are expressed in terms of flexibility, inclusivity and accessibility, recognising the need for structures and support. Experts identify strategic leadership, governance structures, professional development and ongoing support as important requirements for large-scale adoption. The article concludes that blended learning, pre-pandemic, had not normalised. Post-pandemic, to normalise blended learning and support sustained widespread adoption, institutions should heed research literature recommendations and devise institutional visions that establish support, structure and shared strategy.

Introduction

Higher education institutions have been engaging in blended learning, or the 'thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences' (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 5), since the early 1990s (Mirriahi et al., 2015). Throughout this period, the benefits of blended learning, for students, staff and institutions, have been well reported in the research literature. Vaughan (2007), for example, summarised the benefits as including: time, flexibility, improved student outcomes, opportunities for staff–student interaction, student engagement in learning, flexibility in teaching, opportunities for continuous improvement, the enhancement of institutional reputation and reach, and a reduction in costs. Research that leads to conclusions such as these tends to be practical in nature, small-scale, individually focused and outcomes orientated (Smith & Hill, 2019). The benefits of blended learning, however, have the capacity to extend beyond the individual and to offer the potential for transformative institutional learning (VanDerLinden, 2014) through the rethinking and restructuring of pedagogic practice (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004) not just within individual courses, but across higher education institutions. This institutional level is the focus of this article, with consideration of the implications for post-pandemic practice.

To achieve institutional adoption and the benefits that this can bring, researchers suggest that a more strategically led approach to blended learning and its implementation should be championed. Garrison and Vaughan (2013, p. 28) highlighted the importance of committed and collaborative leadership that creates strategic direction and commits to implementation. Equally, Garrison and Kanuka (2004, pp. 100–101) indicated that there should be clear institutional policy, strategic and operational planning, with the addition of dedicated resources, scheduling of programmes and support. For VanDerLinden (2014), seeing blended learning as strategy, rather than a label in a course catalogue, is a means to develop learning beyond individual courses to the institution, and she provided questions that institutions can ask themselves in relation to their understanding of blended learning, the structures that support it, and how the impact of blended learning is measured. Moskal et al. (2013, p. 23) emphasised the importance of institutional context, suggesting that any plans for adoption need to resonate with the institution's goals and objectives and be adequately supported through organisational infrastructures and staff and student development. Bokolo (2021) used institutional theory to suggest that the implementation of blended learning is influenced by normative, coercive and mimetic pressures that can be both internally and externally driven. Finally, Graham et al. (2013) developed the influential Blended Learning Adoption and Implementation Framework. The Framework uses Rogers's (2003) *Diffusion of Innovation* to identify stages of adoption, i.e. awareness/exploration; adoption/early implementation; and mature implementation/growth, and then considers these stages in relation to three broad categories of institutional strategy, structure and support to show the evolution of blended learning implementation. The Framework grew out of analysis of six institutions' experiences of implementing blended learning and has been used to develop understanding of adoption and implementation. For example, Porter et al. (2014) used it to frame their literature review and analysis of implementation in US institutions; Porter et al. (2016) and Porter and Graham (2016) both explored the extent to which elements of the Framework facilitated or impeded the adoption of blended learning amongst higher education staff; and Bokolo et al. (2020) used it to develop a model to assess institutional readiness for blended learning. Through our research, we recognise the value of this Framework as an analytical tool to explore the different elements that support institutional blended learning adoption and apply it to our data. The categories of strategy, structure and support both encapsulate the findings from previous research and offer a means to explore other contexts; they are used to frame the research reported here. The following descriptions of the categories are developed from the initial Framework (Graham et al., 2013, p. 7) as well as other research that has employed it (Bokolo et al., 2020, p. 41; Porter et al., 2016, p. 18; Porter & Graham, 2016, p. 750).

- Strategy relates to the overall design of blended learning, including clarifying the purpose for engaging in blended learning (e.g., to increase access, improve student satisfaction, reduce costs); acknowledging the importance of institutional advocacy; clearly defining what blended learning is; recognising the extent to which blended learning has been implemented and the policies that have been put in place to institutionalise its implementation.
- Structure relates to the technological, pedagogical and administrative frameworks that support the implementation of blended learning environments and includes the technological infrastructure, governance procedures, scheduling of blended learning courses and modules, evaluation processes and opportunities for professional development (e.g., through one-to-one support, seminars, workshops, courses).
- Support relates to the ways in which institutions aid implementation and the maintenance of the blended learning design through, for example, ongoing technical and pedagogical support and the provision of incentives (e.g., time, financial reward, promotion opportunities).

Drawing on these Framework categories (Graham et al., 2013), the research reported here was part of a larger piece of work designed to shape an institutional vision of blended learning, which incorporated a review of literature (Smith & Hill, 2019), analysis of UK higher education institutions'

strategic documentation and interviews with expert practitioners to identify the key opportunities and challenges of both shaping and implementing their institution's approach to blended learning.

Approach to the study

The research was conducted prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, providing a pre-Covid 19 pandemic snapshot of cross-institutional UK policy and practice. A review of literature (Smith & Hill, 2019) provided initial understandings of blended learning. The research reported here sought to understand both the UK institutional policy contexts in which blended learning sits, and expert practitioner experiences of both shaping and implementing their institution's approach to blended learning. Here the focus was on policy drivers and strategies rather than the practice of blended learning, with an analysis of policy documents (here institutional Strategic or Corporate Plans [henceforth Plans]) providing background information prior to carrying out the expert interviews (Yanow, 2000).

Plans are important texts in universities owing to the ubiquity of strategic planning in higher education, and they reflect the specific characteristics of universities, their long-term goals and the allocation of resources (Morphew et al., 2018). They provide 'reified expressions of an organization's strategic intent' (Fenton & Langley, 2011, p. 1182) and 'insight into the "distilled" official narrative' (Holstein et al., 2018, p. 69) of an institution. The Plans publicly share the story of the institution's strategic vision, their anticipated direction of travel and a statement on the context of future practice. The Plans of 148 of the 166 institutions officially recognised as UK higher education providers (UK Government, online n.d.) in July 2017 accessible from the institution's websites were included in this analysis. While not all Plans provided a year to which the Plan was operational, of those that did 35% ($n = 57$) stated 2020, with $n = 3$ outdated even at the point of retrieval, and 28% ($n = 37$) extending beyond 2020. Of the $n = 105$ Plans that provided a year-range for their Plans, the majority 76% ($n = 80$) were written to span five years.

The analysis of the Plans provided an overview of the visibility of blended learning in the visions of themselves that universities wished to portray, but not how blended learning was led within institutions, which was subsequently explored through qualitative interviewing. Expert interviews were carried out with 10 leaders in blended learning, technology-enhanced learning, digital literacy and flexible learning roles in the UK following the granting of ethical approval (EDU/SF/UH/03200). The interviewees were purposively selected because they were deemed to be in an 'expert role' and have relevant knowledge and skills (Gläser & Laudel, 2009, pp. 117–118). Their expert role was based on their professional experience and leadership. The interviewees were employed, mostly, in senior management roles and had had worked within the field for many years, ranging from 8 to 21 years (with a mean of 17 years). The interviews were carried out by one of the authors, who was positioned as 'co-expert' (Bogner & Menz, 2009, p. 58), through work within the field in a leadership position. There are benefits to this approach, as the interviewer and interviewee have equal status and have an assumed shared knowledge base, which can both facilitate and focus discussion. The interview discussions, which were carried out via telephone or online, were recorded, and summaries, with verbatim extracts, were sent back to the interviewees for member checking.

Analysis of the Plans used basic corpus linguistic techniques including frequency counts and concordances (Baker, 2006), which were carried out using the qualitative data analysis package Nvivo's text search and word frequency queries, with subsequent analysis of key words in context to identify themes. The interview data were also coded through a combination of inductive and deductive coding before developing themes to identify and report patterns in the data. Themes were developed with reference to the Blended Learning Adoption Framework (Graham et al., 2013), which supported the deductive coding (Saldaña, 2021, p. 40) and provided the analytical framework. Quotes from the interviews are indicated by an 'I' and a number (e.g., I:1), and the Plans by a 'P' with a letter (e.g., P:A), with the referenced Plans listed in Appendix 1. There is no institutional linking of the interviewees and the referenced Plans.

Presentation of findings

Strategy

Blended learning – issues of terminology and definition

Within the Plans, mention of *blended learning* is infrequent; in contrast to the most frequently used words (i.e. *university* (n = 6202), *research* (n = 5833), *students* (n = 4901), *student* (n = 3024) and *staff* (n = 3065)), the exact term *blended learning* appeared only n = 30 times in 25 different plans (i.e. 17% of the Plans). A closer look at the use of blended learning was carried out by expanding the search to *blend* and its stemmed words (as a noun and a verb). The n = 71 keywords that were returned were examined within the context in which they occur (Baker, 2006, p. 71); n = 19 did not relate to the combination of online and face-to-face learning experiences in our definition, rather to the blending of cultures, study and learning spaces, learning and research, knowledge, practice and professional experience, skills and attitudes, consultancy, and work/study opportunities. The result was n = 52 references, coming from 37 different Plans. There is, then, limited reference to the blend of face-to-face and online learning provision within the Plans. While used infrequently, however, *blended learning* is referred to more frequently than the alternatives suggested by Drysdale et al. (2013, p. 91): *hybrid learning* (not used) and *mixed-mode learning* (not used), and the alternatives provided by the expert interviewees themselves: *flexible learning* (n = 21), *technology-enhanced learning* (n = 16) and *digital literacy* (n = 6).

An indication for the lack of reference to *blended learning* in these Plans can, perhaps, be garnered through one institution's Plan, where blended learning was positioned as a predominant method of learning in higher education, suggesting, perhaps, that as normal practice, it was no longer a feature of strategic visions, rather an accepted way of doing things.

> [...] digitalised learning environments are becoming the norm across all modes and levels of education and blended learning is now the predominant method of learning in higher education. (P:B)

Yet, the expert interviews provided other views, competing and contradictory, around the use and acceptance of the term *blended learning*. For some interviewees, they recognised that this was a term that was well understood by colleagues within their institutions, and was therefore useful for starting conversations:

> it's an accepted term, academics seem to understand it. (I:1)

> it gives a broad framework that can help conversations. (I:8)

Although deemed a relatively well-understood term, it was recognised that not everyone might understand it in the same way, and that local definition might well be needed.

> We have to recognise that it's a term that can be problematic and has to be used with some sort of caution; you can't necessarily assume that people you are talking to are using it in the same way as you. (I:8)

> Terminology can always be misinterpreted, but I think what is important is you establish your definition of it locally. (I:5)

> I think the difficulty with the term as a generic term is what it means when you come down to levels of individual practice or practices within modules or programmes. [I:2]

Some interviewees did not use the term *blended learning* at all, suggesting that terminology changed over time and other terms were more current:

> We haven't talked about blended learning in the last 10 years or so. (I:10)

> We don't tend to use it, we tend to use technology-enhanced learning, we have used blended learning in the past [...] technology-enhanced learning tends to be the one that's used, but again it's a very loose term [...] Flexible learning is also used, that's got a lot of uses as well [...] they don't only mean different things to different people, but over time their meanings change as well. (I:3)

While others actively resisted labelling the mix of online and face-to-face teaching as anything particular, noting that this made blended learning sound alternative rather than just one of a number of pedagogical decisions that are made during curriculum design:

> all of our courses should be blended now and it's nothing special and actually by saying we're going to do blended learning is pointing out some courses as special when it should just be across the board. (I:10)

> I don't want to call it anything [. . .] I don't see why we bother calling it anything at all. It should just be part of the support we provide for students. I think students coming through now are probably absolutely amazed that we are even thinking of it as a separate sort of entity [. . .] when isn't it [blended]? It just seems redundant now to be honest. (I:7)

Yet, it was recognised by some that there was still a need to use *blended learning* as a label, particularly in terms of transparency:

> Because of many reasons, including marketing reasons, you've got to be explicit and [. . .] be transparent about how we do things, so not doing it or not calling it, not using the term blended at this point [. . .] could be seen as misleading, so although we may disagree with using the term, because it is blended by default anyway, we still have to. (I:9)

These views demonstrate the difficulties of definition and of use, and while not all respondents might refer to the 'thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences' (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 5) as *blended learning*, the Plans and the interviewees were clearer about what that fusion should be aiming to achieve.

Defining the purpose of blended learning

The Plans outlined their institutional intention and commitment to expanding and developing blended learning provision: e.g., 'we will also extend opportunities for blended learning, using materials and content developed in-house as well as externally' (P:C).

Some Plans expressed the expansion in relation to the purpose of blended learning; blended learning approaches enhanced opportunities for more geographically spread students to access higher education:

> Expanding the provision of online and blended learning in order to make the benefits of an Essex education more widely available and accessible. (P:G)

Additionally, expansion was described as a way to provide opportunities to meet the needs of a diverse student body, which included international students, and also non-traditional students, postgraduate students and those engaging in continuing professional development, e.g.:

> Many of our undergraduates are school-leavers, but other students come to us through non-traditional routes, adopting different modes of study – part time, blended learning and online. (P:I)

Blended learning was set as a target for increasing accessibility along with inclusivity and flexibility:

> To develop increasingly flexible modes of delivery including through part-time and blended learning opportunities. (P:A)

The benefits of blended learning, in terms of student engagement, were also projected and showcased, e.g.:

> This innovative blended learning package has given impressive results, showing significant improvements in student engagement, attendance, satisfaction and attainment. (P:E)

Finally, blended learning was positioned as an (often innovative) way to transform teaching and learning, moving away from 'traditional' teaching methods to more diverse approaches:

> We will ensure an outstanding student experience at Strathclyde by maintaining and enhancing the high quality of our learning and teaching and through the delivery of an effective learning environment, comprising

intelligent support, infrastructure and technologies, seamlessly blending physical and digital environments for all students. (P:J)

In a similar vein, the interviewees perceived the benefits of blended learning in terms of the extension and development of provision, the diversification of the student body and of teaching and learning approaches. The interviewees spoke specifically about flexibility (flexibility of delivery [I:8, I:2, I:1]; flexibility of learning opportunities [I:6, I:5]; mindset of flexibility [I:7]), inclusivity (accessibility [I:10], inclusive by design [I:7]) and connectivity (creating opportunities for interaction [I:8], collaboration [I:2] crowdsourcing and collective work [I:6]). For one interviewee, this entailed imagining students quite differently:

Pretending that all students are at a distance from the University even though they're not and that helps our development of an inclusive curriculum, so we're trying to build in the inclusivity at the same time. (I:7)

Re-imagining often meant extending the classroom [I:7; I:8] and engaging in more mixed modes of delivery [I:8]. The aim of 'maximising the benefits of on campus, face-to-face delivery, and we are maximising the benefits of our online infrastructure' [I:5] and also making 'more meaningful use of a greater number of technologies that reflect the type of digital tools and spaces and technologies that a learner is going to experience when they leave the University' [I:2]. Engagement in blended learning programmes could ensure that students developed digital literacy skills, becoming 'confident, competent technology users by the time they leave the course' [I:10]. The interviewees reported that blended learning approaches could support very different kinds of authentic learning opportunities, for example, simulations and virtual internships [I:1; I:4].

In contrast, interviewees emphasised the focus on more active and individualised approaches to student learning more strongly than was articulated in the Plans. Blended learning was positioned as a way of 'taking things out of the didactic classroom' [I:6], and supporting students to be more independent learners:

Where students are engaged as content authors, or even teachers within a course in terms of the performance of activities, which are placing them at the centre of the knowledge creation and dissemination process, this concept of the reversal of the student/teacher relationship. (I:4)

This emphasis on student agency was also apparent in discussions around individualising the student experience:

Tailored learning offerings, whether they want to be adaptive learning for people's particular needs or very tailored towards a very particular set of skills that students want to acquire. (I:6)

This might well be achieved through micro-credentialing of 'pick and mix' [I:8] courses.

Rather than being something 'special' [I:10] or 'something different' [I:7], the interviewees felt that blended learning 'should be the default model for delivery' [I:5] and that 'blend will be normalised' [I:9]. The reality, however, was that not everyone was there yet; interviewees reported 'innovation takes places around the edges' [I:8], 'inconsistency' of blended learning [I:7], and 'pockets of good practice' in institutions [I:9] and could cite other institutions that were doing interesting things.

It was felt, however, that there was no one institution 'leading the way' [I:5] in terms of blended learning, which perhaps explains why the transformational change aims of blended learning were still aspirational, and why the interviewees were engaged in transformational projects, using a range of levers for change and facing challenges regarding institutional adoption.

Institutional policies to support adoption

The expert interviewees indicated that strategic direction is not always provided solely through statements within Plans, but through a wide array of supporting strategies around education, learning and teaching, student experience, and more specifically digital strategies. Generally,

however, the interviewees were quite ambivalent about strategic documents, noting that they were often replete with rhetoric that was difficult to put into practice:

> We see a lot of inspirational language in terms of university mission statements and teaching and learning statements [. . .] about the digital university, but [. . .] when you boil that down what does that mean in terms of the drivers, the incentives, the support that has been provided for academics. (I:4)

So, processes and procedures were important, but so too were people.

Advocacy for blended learning

Having a senior and strong champion for blended learning was perceived to be particularly helpful for the adoption of blended learning to support 'institutional strategic buy-in' [I:5], while recognising that it is 'never a good idea to force anybody to do anything' [I:5], and some institutions drew on 'influential people' to ensure a 'middle-out strategy' [I:6] whereby:

> People who are very visible within their industries and their disciplines as leading practitioners and [. . .] effectively using them as the stone that you throw in the pool and because their stone is bigger it creates bigger ripples and bigger impacts on the people around it. (I:6)

These champions brought people along with them and here institutional support structures and infrastructure were key.

Structure

In relation to structure, the Plans and the expert interviewees highlighted different provision. Expert interviews brought to the fore pedagogical infrastructure, governance and professional development, while the Plans focused on technological infrastructures and, to a limited extent, evaluation.

Technological infrastructure

In relation to the technological infrastructure, some Plans provided a commitment to develop their information technology systems, processes and technologies to support the blending of online and face-to-face experiences, e.g.:

> These spaces will be supported by a strong IT infrastructure that will, for example, support the blending of the physical campus with digital technologies; the mixing of face-to-face interactions with virtual learning and research [. . .] (P:F)

The focus here is on the technological and infrastructural capacity to support blended learning rather than the human capacity through, for example, professional development opportunities.

Evaluation of blended learning

Only one institution indicated a commitment to the evaluation of blended learning, within a broader educational research framework (P:H).

The blended learning context is depicted as a valid site for research into pedagogic practice, thus validating blended learning within developing research agendas. The importance of pedagogic practices, and support for those, were, however, more a feature of the expert interviews.

Pedagogical infrastructure to support blended learning

Physical spaces can be built to 'drive the change in practice' [I:8] and encourage staff and students to work in more blended ways. This might mean making a space 'not conducive to that very didactic model of teaching' [I:6] and, instead, making informal spaces more blended:

> It means taking a dead staircase and converting it into six different types of learning spaces with six different functions and telling students [...] you can go and do all these cool different learning type functions in that space and off you go. (I:6)

Informal spaces are important and can encourage bottom-up and middle-out, rather than top-down, change, as one interviewee noted:

> We've had social spaces put in where students are encouraged to congregate, [...] the learning that takes place there is far more of a blended approach than takes place traditionally and what's happening is, I think, lecturers are adopting ways of teaching that optimise these spaces. (I:3)

These informal spaces were contrasted with the more formal spaces, which were often not so effective and frequently over-designed.

Institution-wide decisions around virtual learning platforms can, however, act as a driver for change, as one interviewee identified: 'VLE has been a lovely Trojan horse to get us in' [I:7], so here the choice of the technological infrastructure, as identified in the Plans, is also important for adoption.

Governance and blended learning

The use of existing quality assurance procedures and approaches to curriculum design was recognised as a means to ensure that blended teaching and learning activities were designed into programmes and articulated as part of programme approvals and review.

> We are actively involved in coordinating and advising programme leaders on the review of their programmes and we don't start off talking about technology, far from it, what we do is actually help them with the review of their statements of purpose for their programmes, the actual crafting of their programme learning outcomes. (I:4)

> Everything should be at that programme level rather than at module level. We are taking a more holistic view of the student experience and how things knit together and ensuring that there's a shared understanding across course teams of what some of these things mean [...] for example, what are digital literacies meaning to particular courses and how are they being developed. (I:8)

The coupling of quality assurance procedures and curriculum design approaches provides an opportunity to offer different kinds of support for more blended approaches, namely team-based support. This could be as simple as including the support of a learning technologist in collaborative curriculum design:

> Programme team in a room together is key as collaborative process with key players including learning technologists. (I:6)

There are other, more structured, approaches; one institution, for example, described the successful use of a learning design workshop, which is a required part of the validation and high-level approval processes. Training and development can be targeted and purposeful.

Professional development for blended learning

While not a feature of the Plans, the importance of professional development was highlighted in the expert interviews. One area where development can effectively introduce blended learning training is through new lecturer development programmes, which are often a mandatory requirement in UK higher education. Here the modelling of blended learning approaches can be used in programmes that new lecturers engage in when they enter academia [I:5; I:4; I:2]:

> Our [new lecturer development programme] means every new member of staff without a teaching qualification experiences blended learning as they start their academic career. [...] They experience it as a student, but we also take them through the process of designing blended learning curriculum, pedagogic models around that, so they really get an understanding of what blended is. (I:5)

> We have always had a really innovative [new lecturer development programme], so we have always tried to make sure that the experience that the new lecturers get is as technology enabled as we can possibly make it [...] it is taught both face-to-face and online in real time synchronously. (I:10)

New lecturer development programmes can be a catalyst for change within institutions as they showcase the kinds of practice institutions are aiming for and allow the staff engaged within them to experience the impact of blended learning and technology-enabled provision. For new staff, these experiences offer something they can emulate.

Support

Support for blended learning was not a prominent feature within the Plans, with only one Plan offering a commitment to providing support (P:D), perhaps reflecting the more operational focus of support provision. The expert interviews, in contrast, identified the importance of technological and pedagogical support, and of recognition and incentives.

Ongoing technological and pedagogical support for blended learning

In addition to the newer lecturers' professional development, ongoing training is required to develop staff capacity, for those who may not be 'equipped to handle it' [I:8]:

> Ensuring technology is at the forefront of academic minds, in terms of their awareness of how they can design in and support active student learning [...] it is easy to talk about that, but that is still a [...] quantum leap for a lot of academics from the way they were taught, and they've learnt to teach themselves. It's a long way ahead to scale that up. (I:4)

Staff may lack the confidence, capability and understanding to facilitate blended learning [I:3]. It is not only the staff who might need additional training; students also benefit from additional support. While some students might arrive at university with specific expectations of a 'technologically saturated learning experience' [I:9] that are sometimes not adequately met, equally, there are students who may not have previous experience or established skills for the demands of independent learning within more blended environments:

> The biggest danger is that we over emphasise student competencies on a number of levels [...] we assume that just because students use social media in their leisure time that they have the skills and aptitude to use learning technologies effectively for learning. (I:4)

> They are very capable of managing their personal lives whether it's online banking or connecting with friends, or creating their networks [...] when it comes to their learning lives those skills are either not transferred easily or maybe as an institution, we are not doing enough to enable them to transfer them. (I:1)

The interviewees recognised the work required to meet the expectations of students and ensure that they were adequately equipped to fully operate in a more blended learning environment. Finally, the blended learning offering needs to be consistent across courses, programmes and the institution:

> Inconsistency either within a course or between courses I think that is always one of the biggest problems. Because you will always have the innovators, you will always have people that will do exciting things, [...] but then if students are getting that in one module or see that their mates having it in another course [...] that can cause resentment (I:7).

This is the consistency that can come from a transformative and strategically driven cultural change project.

Recognition and incentives

A small number of the interviewees noted the important role that both professional recognition and incentivisation can play in supporting staff to engage with blended learning. Professional

recognition for the use of technology to support learning might come through existing external recognition schemes, such as Advance HE's UK Professional Standards Framework, or through the internal showcasing of good practice [I:2]. One institution had offered project funds and teaching buy-out time to encourage further engagement in innovative digital practice [I:1], and another expert praised initiatives where academics were seconded to engage in scholarly and research activity around the role of technology in learning [I:4].

Discussion

The initial analysis of the Plans provided a view of the context of blended learning within UK higher education and its strategic importance to institutions. Through analysis of the expert interviews, an understanding of the operationalisation of blended learning was garnered. In terms of the Framework categories (Graham et al., 2013), strategy was the most prominent in the data. While blended learning did not feature prominently in the Plans analysed here, lower-level strategies and action plans (e.g., around learning and teaching, e-learning or digital literacy) were described by the expert interviewees. Such lower-level strategies have been recognised elsewhere as useful to promote adoption (e.g., Sharpe et al., 2006) or more likely to be the focus of academic staff management attention than high-level strategies (Habib & Johannesen, 2020). The expert interviewees showed, however, that even those policies are not sufficient without advocacy, through local, often grassroots, champions, but also requiring strong senior leadership support. This aligns with research that makes claims for strategic leadership to support blended learning adoption, including collaborative strategic leadership (e.g., Garrison & Vaughan, 2013; Taylor & Newton, 2013). The purposes of blended learning were well articulated in both the Plans and the expert interviews, and there was significant overlap between them and those that have been articulated in the literature over time (e.g., Graham, 2006; Poon, 2013; Smith & Hill, 2019). In terms of definition and use of terms, there were complications. The Plans do not make much mention of the term *blended learning*. This may mean that the approach has become normalised (as others predicted it would be – e.g., Norberg et al., 2011; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005) – and unworthy of mention in the strategic vision of a university. Such legitimising of blended learning practices may have led to what Bokolo (2021, p. 707) termed the 'normative pressures' that can subconsciously drive implementation as those practices are seen as *the way* of working. The findings from the interviews, however, did not suggest this was the case, as the interviewees spoke of the challenges of developing capacity, ensuring consistency and providing the technological and pedagogical infrastructure to support blended learning. Some interviewees struggled with the term *blended learning* itself; some using it reluctantly, some not at all and others offering alternatives which were more accepted within their own contexts. While the analysis of the Plans suggested that the alternatives are not as frequently used as *blended learning*, it does raise the challenge posed, and noted elsewhere, about the difficulties of definition (e.g., Hrastinski, 2019; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005; Smith & Hill, 2019; VanDerLinden, 2014). Without a shared understanding of what blended learning is, it is difficult to effectively adopt, implement and evaluate blended learning institutionally.

In relation to the Framework (Graham et al., 2013) category of structure, a commitment to processes, spaces and technological infrastructure was apparent in the Plans. This commitment paints a picture of a dynamic and modern learning environment helping to support a more marketing and promotional function of Strategic or Corporate Plans. The expert interviewees identified the importance of governance models to influence change when designed to drive specific ways of working and routes to adoption. The interviewees spoke about collaborative approaches to programme/course design, where learning technologists are part of design teams, or drawing on their support during approval and review procedures, an approach that others have reported useful (e.g., Burrell et al., 2015; Ooms et al., 2008). Here the design processes facilitate the embedding of blended provision more widely, to avoid relying solely on innovators and early adopters, to influence change from the bottom up and ensure adoption across programme/course teams. The interviewees

referred to the physical environment and how this could be developed to more easily support blended approaches (e.g., in informal spaces), but equally how the introduction of a specific technological infrastructure (e.g., a new VLE) can be a catalyst for change, as well as professional development structures, here shown through a commitment to blended new lecturer development programmes. Although investment in new technology could be achieved, a failure to address the required support to enable staff and students to use it was identified as a hindrance for adoption.

The ongoing institutional support for blended learning was not frequently mentioned in the Plans but was prevalent in the expert interviewees' accounts. The interviewees identified the importance of targeted support for staff and students who might not feel comfortable with the new technologies that sit within the online environment. This focus on the challenges that staff face and the support they require resonates with other research into the implementation of blended learning (e.g., Antwi-Boampong & Bokolo, 2022; Harris et al., 2009; Mirriahi et al., 2015; Rasheed et al., 2020) and also in the need to better understand the blended practices of staff in order to design the necessary professional development and support (Torrisi-Steele & Drew, 2013). The interviewees recognised the importance of timely support, and that, without the engagement and capability of staff or students, attempts at implementation will fail or the full potential of blended learning will not be realised.

Implications for practice, limitations and opportunities for future research

Implications for practice

The research has implications for practice through the identification of the need for institutional-level vision to deliver large-scale, high-quality blended learning. The research was conducted prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, identifying the opportunities and challenges facing blended learning adoption at that time. The findings will continue to aid practitioners to understand the underlying issues that need to be addressed as the 'new normal' is established. To achieve sustained widespread adoption of blended learning requires institutional approaches to strategy, structure and support, rather than small-scale changes in localised practice. Institutional change cannot be reliant on the academic and student communities to lead adoption as these efforts will be stalled as they meet the identified restrictions and barriers to practice (lack of institutional advocacy, limited technological and pedagogical investment, administrative and quality barriers, and lack of support). This position, identified through the research, has been further evidenced through the blended learning provision put in place during the Covid 19 pandemic period, with institutional mobilisation to scale blended learning occurring at pace, evidencing that those previous barriers to adoption could be overcome by institutional appetite and investment in change agendas based on strategy, structure and support.

The central argument, identified through this research, is that there needs to be a strategic positioning within institutions, which is more explicitly indicated in institutional strategic documentation, including Strategic or Corporate Plans, to ensure vision for strategy, structure and support. This research provides the picture pre-pandemic of the barriers to maturity in blended learning and demonstrates the risk to current practice of a return to the local level deployment. The interviewees were able to share examples of the ripple effect of early adopters (within their own and other institutions), but this is a rarity, or a component of institutional roll-out, rather than an effective model for growth.

Practitioners should work within institutions to help shape institutional, context-specific visions of blended learning and ensure that they are sufficiently supported institutionally and professionally to implement them, and to lobby that adoption does not return, post-pandemic, to localised activity. The benefits of blended learning have been mainstreamed through the pandemic, but this research suggests that there remains the underlying need for institutional vision to avoid the pendulum swinging too far back to face-to-face only provision, with the result that blended learning practice is marginalised rather than normalised in the 'new normal'.

Limitations of the research

A limitation of the research is the central focus exploring the institutional positioning, through strategic documentation and experts occupying central leadership university roles, rather than from the academic practitioner and student communities. This was a deliberate construct for the scope of this research to explore institutional drivers for institutional change. It is acknowledged, however, that the focus on high-level institutional plans means that more operational strategies were not explored, although some insight was gained from the expert interviews, and that the focus on those centrally sited experts with responsibility for institutional digital practice does not represent the whole university community engaged in and responsible for blended learning.

These limitations provide opportunities for further research.

Opportunities for future research

The lack of academic practitioner and student voices from the research presents an immediate opportunity for future research to explore their understandings in relation to the future of blended learning and would fill gaps that have been identified by others (e.g., Bokolo, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020). This research provided a unique view of the strategic vision and the views of sector experts in the period leading up to the Covid 19 pandemic. The timing of the research also provides a platform for future research, with the opportunity to explore if the blended learning that was offered during the pandemic was a fruitful blend or merely an 'at pace' pragmatic approach to navigate through the pandemic. Future research can explore to what extent the strategies put in place during the Covid 19 pandemic have shaped long-term future institutional visions and subsequent blended learning policy and practice, or if the pre-pandemic challenges, as identified through this research, remain.

Concluding remarks

This article has shared findings from an exploratory project designed to support the development of an institutional vision for blended learning through gaining greater understanding of the representation of blended learning in UK higher education through the analysis of strategic documentation and expert interviews. The research provides a snapshot of policy and practice in the run-up to 2020. As the higher education sector emerges from the pandemic period, these insights throw light on underlying issues that may need to be addressed if sustainable, high-quality, wide-scale adoption of blended learning is to be achieved in the long term.

Our focus was on *blended learning*, and it was apparent this terminology was problematic and not universally used by the expert interviewees within their everyday interactions with staff and students, despite its enduring use in sector guidance (e.g., Alexander et al., 2019). The research indicated, however, that the terminology of blended learning had remained important in the identification of a range of practices that have perhaps, even after three decades of blended learning, not yet been normalised, owing to barriers including pedagogic and technical support, time, capability and confidence, governance and shared vision, as already discussed. Yet, during the pandemic periods, institutions used the terminology at scale as part of their strategic deployment of blended learning in response to the Covid 19 pandemic. Rather than falling into terminology traps, in envisioning the future of blended provision, it is more fruitful to acknowledge the range of developing language in the sector that is also being used to identify or promote the importance of the thoughtful fusion of technology and modes of delivery to support learning and teaching, thus focusing on the underlying rationale or purpose for that fusion. This research has shown that, while the technologies associated with approaches to blended learning change rapidly, alongside the terminology used to describe them, institutional approaches that engender transformational change benefit from more strategically led approaches, here described in terms of the elements of strategy, structure and support outlined in the Blended Learning Adoption and Implementation Framework

(Graham et al., 2013), used by others (Bokolo et al., 2020; Porter & Graham, 2016; Porter et al., 2016), and developed here.

Blended learning, prior to the pandemic, progressed patchily and relatively slowly, often with pockets of thoughtfully fused provision at the fringes, rather than large-scale uptake within and across institutions, or as virtual bolt-ons to more traditional face-to-face lecture and seminar provision rather than well-designed activities for learning, teaching and assessment.

Owing to the still relatively low level of maturity of blended provision in the period leading up to the pandemic, institutions and practitioners may require ongoing recognition that the limited adoption of blended learning may have been the result of an absence of institutional support, structure and shared strategy. While the disruption caused by the Covid 19 pandemic provided an impetus for change, there is a risk that as the institutional support, structure and shared strategy put in place for blended learning during the pandemic recede, there will be a return to the barriers faced pre-pandemic, as identified through this research.

As the sector emerges from the pandemic, the challenge will be to ensure that a fruitful blend of face-to-face with online learning opportunities is in place to provide flexible, authentic, equitable and extended learning that develops the skills needed in the increasingly digital society. If the pre-pandemic challenges identified through this research are successfully navigated, blended learning may then become 'normalised' and established as part of institutional visions of how opportunities for learning are designed and supported.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

John Hill is Head of Digital Learning at the University of Derby. He has institutional responsibility for the development and embedding of digital learning and leads University-wide strategies and policies that ensure a high-quality digital learning experience for students.

Karen Smith is Reader in Higher Education and Director of the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) in the School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, at the University of Hertfordshire. She has also published widely in the field of higher education, focusing specifically on how higher education policies and practices impact on those who work and study within the university system.

ORCID

John Hill 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5519-9534
Karen Smith 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0408-5377

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Appendix 1

Corporate and Strategic Plans referred to in this article

Institution	Title of Strategic Document	Reference
Canterbury Christchurch University	Strategic Framework. 2015–2020	P:A
Cardiff Metropolitan University	Strategic Plan 2017/18–2022/23	P:B
Norwich University of the Arts	Strategic Plan 2014–2019	P:C
Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance	Strategic Plan 2017–2022	P:D
University of Brighton	Practical Wisdom. University Strategy 2016–2021	P:E
University of East Anglia	The UEA Plan 2016–20	P:F
University of Essex	Strategic Plan 2013–19	P:G
University of the Highlands and Islands	Strategic Vision and Plan 2015–20	P:H
University of Stirling	Strategic Plan 2016–2021HT	P:I
University of Strathclyde	Strategic Plan 2015–2020. A Place of Useful Learning	P:J

Note: All Plans were accessible from the universities' websites between July and October 2017.