

# The BlendEd project: collaborative blended learning

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## 1. The organisation

BlendEd is a two-year, £1million, collaborative blended learning project funded under the joint SFEFC/SHEFC e-Learning Transformation Initiative. The project, led by Reid Kerr College, aims to introduce a pedagogically sound blended delivery model within HNC Social Care and HND Business. The emphasis is on producing a practical working model which demonstrates the benefits for institutions and their students.

## 2. Overview

The project began in March 2005 and is led by Reid Kerr College working in partnership with five other further education (FE) colleges (Cardonald, Coatbridge, Dundee and Langside colleges, plus Glasgow College of Nautical Studies) which enrol 75,000 students collectively each year. This equates to 17% of the total number of students enrolled within Scotland.

The consortium also contains two supporting centres: COLEG, which represents 42 colleges and is committed to the development of resources to support the FE sector, and JISC South and West Scotland RSC, which promotes and supports the use of learning technologies in 21 colleges, including five of the consortium members.

## 3. Details

### Approach

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BlendEd intends to improve delivery in specific curriculum areas (HNC Social Care and HND Business) through a complimentary mix of technology and traditional teaching which combines "the best of the old with the best of the new". The consortium colleges are collaborating to re-engineer the curricula topic by topic, rather than at a unit level, as this will allow greater re-use throughout the curriculum.

Blended Learning Technologists (BLTs) at each college work with teaching staff identifying where technology can help them to improve delivery. BLTs also liaise between teachers and a specialist technical team, based at one of the colleges, who develop the multimedia elements required. Technology used includes not only personal computers (PCs) but any technology which can help or add interest, add value or make delivery more effective.

The project aims to encourage lecturers to use the most appropriate and effective blend of teaching and learning strategies to deliver courses which currently contain a minimum of 45 credits, a notional 1800 teaching hours. By introducing educationally sound blended delivery the colleges hope to realise benefits such as efficiency, flexibility and an enhanced student experience.

BlendEd's aim is not to adopt wholly e-learning materials but to examine the appropriateness of creating information, communication and learning technology (ICLT) materials to compliment teaching to create a student centred learning environment.

## **Scale**

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The first step in the process is the collaborative identification of the make-up of a typical course in the mainstream curriculum. This is followed by a practical approach to course redesign that involves using a mix of existing, modified and newly developed resources.

Five of the consortium colleges are involved in the development of resources, but all six will deliver and evaluate the learning. Each of the five development colleges have appointed a Blended Learning Technologist (BLT), in some case two 0.5 posts rather than a single position. All BLTs have a teaching background within FE but come with different skills. The role of the BLT is essentially to support the curriculum staff in pedagogical matters, especially within e-learning, and be a source of advice and support on e-learning technologies.

Tutors have been given 6 hours remission per week for 18 weeks to enable them to take part in the project.

The approach taken to the re-engineering of resources is topic-based rather than unit-based, to allow for resource re-use throughout the curriculum wherever the topic occurs. Resource materials for each individual topic will be packaged electronically to allow for flexibility in the delivery of a unit, giving the lecturer the ability to choose how to assemble a blend of resources to suit the needs of a particular group of learners. The discrete electronic packages will be stored in a repository allowing the materials to be shared widely.

Non-consortium member colleges will be able to benefit from the project as the outcomes (including methodologies, staff development programmes and course materials) will be made available to the sector via the COLEG and JISC.

## **Impact**

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The extent of the impact on learners will start to become tangible after the first delivery stage of the project, which was due to commence in January 2006.

Impact on the staff will result from the project providing a series of outputs to help them to develop a blended approach in all curriculum areas including:

- Creation of standards and tools that reflect the sector's requirements.
- Quality assured resources to support the delivery model.
- Best practice guides, procedures, case studies, development standards and technical standards.

The staff who become BLTs will gain new technical and pedagogic skills and will pass on some of these skills to the teaching staff they support and advise. The BLTs will provide a bridge between technical developers and teachers that is often missing.

BlendEd is unique in that it is applying a blended learning model systematically across two curriculum areas and collaboratively in six colleges using curriculum developers supported by the BLTs, COLEG and JISC RSC. By adopting a collaborative approach to development the project should prevent duplication of effort and reduce development costs.

## Costs and benefits

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The four highest costs, which account for almost 85% of the BlendEd budget, are salaries for:

- The BLTs (30%)
- Curriculum developers and technical support team (27%)
- Project management (17%)
- Quality assurance peer and technical reviewers (11%)

Monies related to staff development and the associated travel and subsistence are not taken from the BlendEd budget but from an individual institution's own contribution. The cost of piloting the BlendEd materials are almost negligible as the units have to be taught anyway.

The BlendEd project is expected to improve the teaching and learning process used within the colleges and change the way in which resources are generated. It is hoped that the re-engineered curriculum delivery will be more efficient and flexible and will enhance the learning experience, therefore contributing to attracting and retaining students.

The project will allow the six colleges to explore and consider their own position in relation to the sector's needs, and what further development is required.

## 4. Lessons, caveats and implications

As the project is still in its infancy most of the lessons and implications are yet to be identified. In relation to staff training, we have learned that it is important to deal with all BLT training requirements in the early stages of the project prior to working with the curriculum developers.

It is also necessary to ensure that the curriculum developers have an agreed IT skill level and are committed to both the blended model of teaching and to the development of the resources for use collaboratively.

Copyright and IPR issues have caused some problems for consortium members, who report struggling to gain access to resources including some believed to be available to all colleges.

In many cases the problem is not using the resources but gaining permission to re-purpose them or to put them in a repository. It is believed that creative commons licensing will help improve this situation.

## 5. Contact details

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