



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Sustainable
Development
Goals

Bangkok Office
Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau
for Education



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization
联合国教育科学及文化组织



International Centre
for Higher Education Innovation
under the auspices of UNESCO
联合国教科文组织高等教育创新中心

With the support of



UNESCO-Shenzhen
Funds-in-Trust



 POLICY BRIEF

Building ecosystems for online and blended learning: Advancing equity and excellence in higher education in the Asia-Pacific

With support from the UNESCO-Shenzhen Funds-in-Trust

Executive Summary

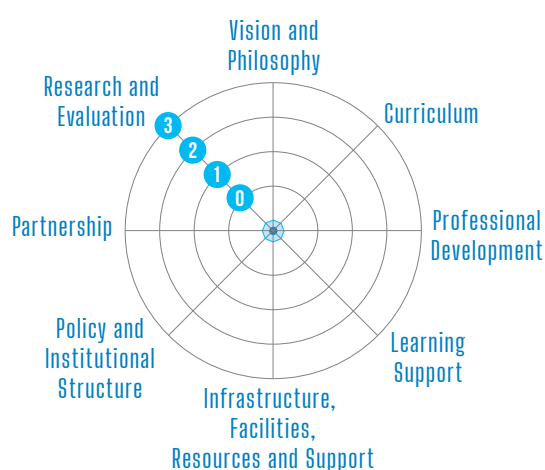
As COVID-19 upends lives and livelihoods worldwide, the rapid growth of online learning is challenging the relevance of traditional higher education systems. Although efforts to promote and enhance the use of ICT in higher education in the Asia-Pacific have rapidly increased, progress is far from sufficient.

This brief highlights important questions for national policy makers in the Asia-Pacific to enhance online and blended learning for quality higher education. Blended learning – the deliberate combination of online learning with face-to-face classroom-based learning – requires eight key dimensions: ① institutional vision and philosophy; ② curriculum; ③ professional development; ④ learning support; ⑤ infrastructure and

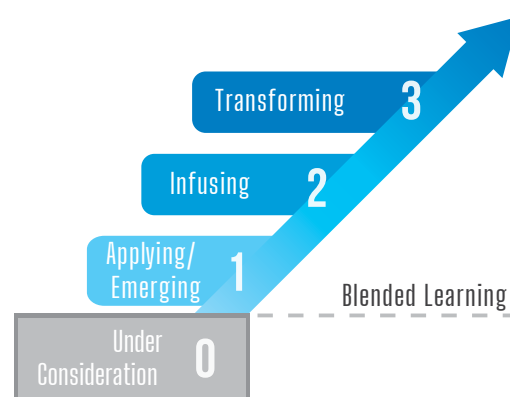
support; ⑥ policy and institutional structure; ⑦ partnerships; and ⑧ research and evaluation (Exhibit 1). These dimensions are based on institutional case studies, regional consultations hosted by UNESCO and the International Centre for Higher Education Innovation under the auspices of UNESCO (UNESCO-ICHEI), and fieldwork in the region. As a result, higher education leaders can draw on lessons learned to self-assess their institutional readiness across the eight dimensions and four progression stages, namely, from building readiness/under construction, to applying, infusing and transforming higher education through blended learning.

Exhibit 1: Eight key dimensions to build institutional readiness for blended learning

① Institutional self-assessment tool for blended learning



② Progression stages in blended learning practices



Source: blendedlearning.bangkok.unesco.org

To address multiple levels of need, a systems approach is critical. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing disparities in higher education systems by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable learners.¹ With a focus on higher education, this policy brief explores institutional level capacity needs. Higher education institutions are part of a broader ecosystem to support blended learning for quality higher education, including national policy measures, enablers and platforms to ensure access to technology, education and training providers, the role of youth and adult learners, and effective partnerships. Envisioning a post-COVID-19 world with skilled human capital in every country, an effective ecosystem is illusive and constantly in flux. More rigorous and methodical efforts are needed to establish higher education systems that are responsive, equitable and locally relevant.

¹ UN. August 2020. [Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond](#)

What is the issue?

The importance of equity and excellence in higher education

COVID-19 has transformed access to learning and teaching. Traditional boundaries between learning environments in higher education institutions are being blurred by formal, non-formal and informal education, and training pathways. As a result, blended learning has become an indispensable part of formal education and lifelong learning systems. Higher education institutions, government, industry and community must collaborate in a variety of roles to ensure the quality and relevance of education and training. To meet learner needs, expected learning outcomes must be defined and assessed in the context of each country's desire for equitable access to quality higher education learning and teaching.

However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for countries having different approaches in introducing technology into teaching activities. Some countries employ a top-down approach from policy makers while others use bottom-up initiatives from classroom and school educators. This brief aims to help policy makers assess key areas of blended learning for quality higher education across local contexts and respond to development challenges posed by COVID-19.

Promising Practices: The International Institute of Online Education (IIOE) as a Springboard Towards Quality Higher Education and SDG4



Launched in April 2020, IIOE (<https://www.iioe.org/>) is a collaborative effort of UNESCO, UNESCO-ICHEI, its partner HEIs, enterprises and international organizations to accelerate progress to achieve SDG4. IIOE is an educational platform providing tailor-designed online professional teacher development programmes/courses for partner HEIs with both pedagogical and infrastructural support through the Smart Classroom project. It serves as an advisory body to facilitate institutional digital transformation and quality enhancement through its comprehensive ICT Competency Framework for Higher Education and its quality assurance mechanism for partner HEIs. IIOE is also the secretariat for different partners (leading HEIs, enterprises and international organizations) to support the IIOE implementation at scale in developing countries and build a partnership network for sharing resources and experiences, and facilitating knowledge exchange.

IIOE aims to meet the increasing demand for digital transformation and quality improvement in higher education in the countries requiring support. By working in partnership with HEIs and enterprises, IIOE will enhance the ICT-related competencies of teachers, educational professionals and administrators in the partner HEIs. With its foci on competencies in online/blended teaching and learning, ICT-enabled administration and management, and ICT-related disciplines in industries for higher education programmes, IIOE aims to become a catalyst and an incubator for innovative governance, administration, teaching and learning environments in partner HEIs that will promote the consistent enhancement of partner HEIs' progress in digital transformation and capacities to realize higher education reform.

What can be done?

Driving innovation across eight dimensions of blended learning

Blended learning offers opportunities for governments to address the key educational challenges of quality, equity, and efficiency. The focus of quality higher education is to nurture skills among learners, balance humanistic values and technology, and ensure equitable access to lifelong learning opportunities for all. Despite these trends, concerns remain about how access to technology will continue to shape national education systems.

Together with experts throughout the Asia and the Pacific region, UNESCO and the Education University of Hong Kong developed an analytical tool for higher education leaders to self-assess their level of readiness to deliver blended learning for quality higher education.² The self-assessment process is based on eight dimensions:

1. **Institutional vision and philosophy:** Clear vision grounded within an institution's philosophy for learning and teaching in blended learning environments;
2. **Curriculum:** Systematic curriculum consisting of established competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes that are underpinned by values) that learners should acquire through formal and non-formal contexts;
3. **Professional development:** Professional development of teaching staff to ensure successful implementation of blended learning skills;
4. **Learning support:** Learning support to bridge the digital divide in higher education institutions;
5. **Infrastructure and support:** Establishing an appropriate plan for the technological infrastructure, facilities, resources and support;
6. **Policy and institutional structure:** Driving organizational change and development through policies that are supported by appropriate institutional structures;
7. **Partnerships:** Building internal and external partnerships; and
8. **Research and evaluation:** Research and evaluation to assess lessons learned throughout higher education institutions (see Annex for citations and dimension indicators).

Based on these dimensions, an online institutional self-assessment tool was developed by UNESCO and project partners to review the levels of readiness for quality teaching and learning, and effective institutional governance of blended learning practices.³

² UNESCO. 2016. [Blended Learning for Quality Higher Education: Selected Case Studies on Implementation from Asia-Pacific](#).

³ UNESCO. 22 July 2019. [Blended Learning for quality higher education: Introducing a new self-assessment tool for Asia-Pacific](#).

Promising Practices: Promoting blended learning step by step

In collaboration with UNESCO, the blended learning project at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka included all faculty deans, institute directors, and the campus rector. The project coordinator used an online course environment to share all materials and messages related to the project. The stakeholders received messages and notifications via emails once a month.

During the first phase, the university identified two capable entities: the University of Colombo School of Computing (UCSC) and its Staff Development Centre (SDC) to conduct capacity development programmes on blended learning. All permanent academic staff members were invited for the training programmes and those who expressed their willingness to participate were grouped into a series of workshops. The workshops of SDC focused more on teaching-learning methods, while the workshops at UCSC supported participants to develop blended learning activities using their own learning management systems. The project coordinator provided templates and guidance to prepare syllabi, and checklists to evaluate the new blended learning courses and course materials. At the end of the first phase, the participants who successfully completed the workshops were awarded with certificates.

The second phase of the project was conducted by selecting five entities that each created teams of senior academic staff as subject matter experts and junior academic staff as content/course developers. Each team conducted applied research on blended learning practices and developed one blended learning activity addressing a problem they identified in their traditional approach to teaching and learning. Schedules were prepared to identify deliverables and evaluate each stage of the blended learning development process. Finally, the best courses were selected from each entity and the respective lecturers (course developers) were invited to present their course materials and evaluation results at a blended learning symposium.

Way Forward

Towards locally relevant ecosystems in higher education

Sustainable development, including access to decent work – and the skills needed for it – are inextricably linked to quality education. When students enter formal education today, they are making decisions about their future careers. Their anxiety about the roles of technology and automation on future employment is lowered by being prepared with the right skills and competencies to thrive in an ICT-driven work environment and surrounding. Online and blended learning can help policy makers and practitioners to identify and address needs for the future of learning, working and sustainable living.

Going forward, there are noteworthy trends to support the development of viable ecosystems for equity and local excellence in higher education:

- ✈ Flexible and diversified learning are becoming the new normal for university teaching and learning;
- ✈ National qualifications frameworks provide overarching umbrellas for learning-outcome-based flexible and diversified higher education programmes;
- ✈ Enabled by the Tokyo Convention, individuals have the right to have their studies and qualifications recognized and/or assessed fairly and transparently, including online and blended learning;
- ✈ Learning outcomes should be the focus of attention when it comes to ensuring fair recognition, and facilitating mobility and employability; and
- ✈ Quality assurance is the backbone of recognition for flexibility and diversity in the provision of higher education programmes.

Promising Practices: Providing higher education learners with anytime access to digitized, portable transcripts and credentials online

A new public-private partnership is emerging in Japan to ensure anytime access to higher education transcripts and credentials through a nationwide rollout. Together with Japan's Research Consortium for Sustainable International Education (RECSIE) and the global EdTech firm, Digitary, the Japanese higher education community will see the creation of the country's very first "credential wallet" for post-secondary learners.

Once fully operational, the national network will enable learners and alumni of Japanese higher education institutions to access and share their official digitized transcripts and credentials online – anytime, anywhere in the world. "The National Network will have a strong impact on the realization of UNESCO's Tokyo Convention which promotes the mobility of students and talent in the Asia Pacific region," said Professor Shingo Ashizawa of Toyo University and Director of RECSIE.

Beyond the immediate threats raised by COVID-19, the central importance of online and blended learning will continue to grow. This brief has outlined important tools for higher education institutions to self-assess their progress and make skills and knowledge acquisition more inclusive, accessible, and recognized throughout the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

Acknowledgements

This project was supported by the UNESCO-Shenzhen Funds-in-Trust. Thank you to Cher Ping Lim of the Education University of Hong Kong, and to our colleagues at UNESCO-ICHEI, Curtin University, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Universiti Putra Malaysia, University of Colombo, peer reviewers, and stakeholders throughout the Asia-Pacific who were involved in UNESCO's work on blended learning for quality higher education (2016–2020).

Further Reading

[Achieving access to quality blended learning for all](#) (UNESCO)

[Blended Learning for Quality Higher Education: Institutional self-assessment tool for the Asia-Pacific](#) (UNESCO).

[Blended Learning: Level descriptors for the self-assessment tool](#) (UNESCO)

[COVID-19 Response Toolkit](#) (UNESCO and Global Education Coalition Partners)

[International Centre for Higher Education Innovation under the auspices of UNESCO](#) (UNESCO-ICHEI)

[International Institute of Online Education](#) (IIOE)

[Shenzhen Funds-in-Trust Project for Higher Education: Building staff capacity for ICT-driven innovation in Cambodia and Sri Lanka](#) (UNESCO)

[Statement on COVID-19 by Parties to the Tokyo Convention: Confronting COVID-19 by strengthening cooperation in qualifications recognition in the Asia-Pacific and beyond](#) (UNESCO)

Coordinators:

Libing Wang, Han Wei and Wesley Teter

Reviewers:

David Gibson (Curtin University, Australia); Fan Li and Hassan Adeel Shehzad (UNESCO-ICHEI); Habibah Ab Jalil, Ismi Arif Ismail, Steven Eric Krauss, Aini Marina Ma'rof, Mohd Zairul bin Mohd Noor, Mohd Mursyid Arshad, Shariffah Intan Sharina Syed Abdullah (UPM, Malaysia); Tim Denny (ADB Consultant, USA); and Qobil Yunusov (Westminster International University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan).

Published in 2021 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France and UNESCO Bangkok Office

© UNESCO 2021



This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

THA/DOC/EISD/20/060-EN

UNESCO Bangkok Office Section for Educational Innovation and Skills Development (EISD)

Mom Luang Pin Malakul Centenary Building
920 Sukhumvit Road, Prakanong,
Klongtoei, Bangkok 10110, Thailand

 eisd.bgk@unesco.org

 +66 2 391 0577

 <https://bangkok.unesco.org>

 www.facebook.com/unescobangkok

 www.twitter.com/unescobangkok

 www.instagram.com/unescobangkok



UNESCO-ICHEI SUSTech Convention Center

No.1088, Xueyuan Blvd., Nanshan district,
Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518055, China

 office@ichei.org

 +86 755 88010925

 www.ichei.org

 www.facebook.com/unescoichei

 www.linkedin.com/company/unesco-ichei

 WeChat ID: UNESCO-ICHEI

