Master in Innovative Tourism Development:

A blended learning experience in the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo

Sandra Vasconcelos

*Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, Portugal*

Ana Balula

*Research Centre for Didactics and Technology in Teacher Education/ Águeda School of Technology and Management, Portugal*

Pedro Almeida

*Cetac.Media/ University of Aveiro, Portugal*

**Abstract**

This chapter analyses a Portuguese HEI’s first experience with blended learning. Focusing on the Master in Innovative Tourism Development currently being held at the Superior School of Technology and Management of the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, it presents the institutional background and rationale behind the course’s implementation, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas of potential development. Based on an evaluation research carried out throughout the course’s first three editions and that involved students, faculty and institutional leaders, it summarizes the main results of a long term-study, putting forth a set of recommendations for improvements and defining potential areas of intervention in future editions of the course.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Distance Education, Higher Education, Portugal, SWOT, Program Evaluation and Tourism Education

INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly competitive world of Higher Education, institutions are constantly being challenged to adjust their educational offer to both the students and the market’s demands for more interactive and flexible learning experiences. Considering how technological developments have deeply affected people’s relationship with information, knowledge and learning, more and more Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have been turning to ICT looking for ways to upgrade their practices and enhance their on-campus and distance education offer. Considered to be a viable, versatile and adaptable solution, blended learning has become a prominent method of course content delivery and teaching in this context, which has led to a growing interest surrounding this topic and ensuing research.

Focusing on a specific case (the Master’s course in Innovative Tourism Development), in this chapter we analyse an institution’s first experience with blended learning and the steps taken in order to improve it. After discussing the concept of blended learning and where it stands within the current state of the art of Portuguese HEI, we describe the way the Master is being implemented and draw a general profile of those involved in the course (faculty and students). This will contextualize our research and frame the ensuing data analysis, as well as the subsequent course of action taken.

After describing the methodology behind our research (that comprised a mixed method approach and the collection of data through observation, questionnaires, interviews and a focus group), we thoroughly analyse the first 3 editions of the course and describe the preliminary findings. Considering the pragmatic nature of the study, we then give an account of the intervention plan carried out in order to improve the course and its outcomes, briefly discussing areas of future research. As part of the chapter’s conclusion, we also outline a series of final recommendations regarding the course to be made to institutional leaders and coordinators.

HEI: PAVING THE WAY FOR BLENDED LEARNING

Over the last decade, in order to meet the challenges of an increasingly globalized world and technological evolution, HEI have had to adapt and review their instructional models and offer. This is particularly evident in Europe, where most institutions are also facing the need of complying with the principles of the Bologna Declaration and the improvement of the overall quality and quality assurance processes in Higher Education. Therefore, moving away from the idea that education in European institutions is mainly based on conservative models, traditionally relying on face-to-face and expository models, more and more HEI are gradually shifting towards the adoption of more student-centred and flexible approaches.

Overall, these changes have had an impact on the way stakeholders perceive the curricula and content distribution. Considering that learning no longer relies solely on the number of contact hours and classroom activities, most HEI have turned to ICT in order to enhance learning experiences, facilitate off-campus interaction and develop students’ autonomy and collaboration skills.

Considered to “offer great opportunities for using student centred approaches” (Bielschowsky et al., 2009, p.10), distance and blended learning have come to play a very important role in HEI, as they support the creation of constructivist learning environments “where learners (…) work together and support each other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities” (Wilson, 1996, p. 5).

Initially thought of as a trend that was associated and subordinated to the much broader terms of Distance Education or distance learning, blended learning has gradually emerged as a specific domain in its own right, having gained recognition as a feasible and promising alternative to exclusively online courses. Considered to be more flexible and adaptable to different settings and users, as it encompasses “the best of both worlds” (Chew, 2009; Davis & Lindsay, 2010; Graham, 2006; Roscoe, 2012), blended learning can be defined as “learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course” (Heinze & Procter 2004, p. 12). The concept conveys the idea of blend, in opposition to juxtaposition, in the way that it is not an addition of new elements to traditional approaches, but “a significant departure from either of these approaches” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 97). In the words of Garrisson and Vaughn (2008, p. 3 ), it “represents the transformation of how we approach teaching and learning”, thus having a significant impact in the way students work and learn in and outside the classroom.

Blended learning environments are expected to meet the needs of HEI, as they are considered to be flexible and responsive, can help overcome time and spatial constraints and support the use of ICT (Hua, Goodwin, & Weiss, 2013). Students will, therefore, have access to a wider array of learning experiences, ranging from more traditional lectures to interactive online sessions, available anytime, anywhere. As a result, blended learning is also described as being collaborative (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003), participated (Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006), dynamic (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004) and personalized (Thorne, 2003), features that are aligned with the needs of the so called digital generation and the development of ‘21st century skills’.

Achieving the potential of blended learning, however, is not without its challenges. In Portugal, for example, it wasn’t until recently that it started to emerge as a distinctive concept. Up until 1988, the year the first autonomous distance learning university (Universidade Aberta) was created, blended courses were virtually non-existent and limited to private corporations. The creation of this university was a turning point in the history of Distance Education in the country, as, following suit, other HEI started working on their own elearning and blended learning projects.

In the absence of a common policy and strategy, Portuguese HEIs have followed different paths when it comes to implementing blended learning. Based mostly on the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) most institutions started off by creating repositories that supported face-to-face learning and have since gradually opened up to the use new tools, services and alternative pedagogical models (Magano, Castro, & Carvalho, 2008). This transition has, however, been taking place at a seemingly slow pace.

Studies carried out in 2009 and 2010 determined that from all the Portuguese HEIs, with the exception of the Universidade Aberta, only 3.5% offered blended courses (Dias, 2010) making up for only 3.0% of overall enrolments in Higher Education (Bielschowsky et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, even though there is no general official policy regarding distance education or an observatory that monitors the current situation in the country, there are some positive indicators that suggest that the number of blended courses is on the rise. Projects like the e-U (electronic University) initiative that aimed at creating a common technological infrastructure that made wireless access available to all users in Portuguese HE institutions, as well as other governmental programs, are starting to yield results and, as supported by the recent interest and research on the theme, the number of online and blended courses is increasing and expected to grow on a short term. An example of this can be found at the School of Technology and Management (ESTG) of Viana do Castelo, which in 2010 created its first blended course, the Master in Innovative Tourism Development, which was the focus of our research.

Master in Innovative Toursim Development

The Master in Innovative Tourism Development was the first blended course to be held at the School of Technology and Management (ESTG) of the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo. Looking towards expanding the school’s degree offer and giving current students and alumni the opportunity to pursue further studies (as it already offered an undergraduate course degree in Tourism), institutional leaders and coordinators decided on a blended format as a way of reaching out to new markets and people who were already working in the hospitality industry. From a strategic standpoint, this format would also help the course stand out from similar courses being held in neighbouring schools, giving it an edge over the competition.

The course has a two year/four semester duration. In the first two semesters, following an introductory week over which they become familiar with the online platform and the different courses, students attend a period of four weeks of intensive face-to-face sessions. After this time, they work autonomously, having regular meetings and follow up-sessions with teachers (either remotely or on-site). At the end of the semester they must present their final projects/assignments. In the 3rd semester, students can chose either to complete another period of four weeks of face-to-face classes, followed by autonomous work; spend a semester at another HEI; or attend a programme or internship at a partner institution. Students are also expected to start working on their final projects and presentations (that should be finished by the end of 4th semester). Each student must write a thesis or a report (depending on whether they attended classes or decided to do an internship) and can use up to 200 hours of tutorial guidance sessions (face-to-face or online) to help prepare their final assignments (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Curricular structure

Considering this was a new experience, involving a course which was designed from scratch, our study sought out to describe the rationale behind its creation, collecting data concerning students, staff and institutional leaders’ expectations and perceptions and the use of technology within the course, as well as identifying the benefits and/or disadvantages associated with the chosen model and the way it was implemented. Our research also entailed a more practical dimension, as this assessment was the driving force behind an intervention plan that aimed at improving future editions of the course, taking full advantage of its potential.

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter we describe the key findings of a long-term evaluation research that analysed the first three editions of the Master in Innovative Tourism Development. Working with data collected through observation, questionnaires, interviews and a focus group, this mixed method research involved students, faculty and institutional leaders and focused on 4 core dimensions: organizational, personal, pedagogical and technological.

Based on the data collected and the ensuing analysis (carried out by combining quantitative methods and qualitative content analysis) we were able to define different categories and subcategories that were then clustered in those dimensions. Following an in-depth description of these categories, we cross-referenced the data, having used a SWOT analysis matrix to synthesize the key findings and identify not only the course’s strengths and weaknesses, but also the existing external threats and opportunities for its development. Based on these findings we were then able to define an intervention plan that acted on the course’s frailties and capitalized on its strengths. Following up on that plan and its implementation we studied its impact, having come up with a final set of recommendations and suggestions regarding the course’s development, that were then presented to the faculty and institutional leaders.

**Participants**

The first step towards analysing the course was getting to know those involved (faculty and students) and drawing their general profile. This was a particularly important step to explore the practices and preferences of students and understand the role technology plays in their everyday lives. Even though they could generally be described as being “digital natives” (Prensky, 2010; 2001), previous studies have shown that this is not a clear-cut issue, as situations and backgrounds may vary significantly and have an impact on students perceptions and results when attending blended courses (Holley & Oliver, 2010; Taylor, 2013).

Besides getting to know the participant’s academic background and overall motivation for attending the course, we sought out to understand their perceptions regarding blended learning and the use of ICT both in general and within the course. In the case of students, we designed two different questionnaires that were applied at different times. This made it possible to draw some comparisons between their initial perceptions and their opinions after attending the course for 1 year.

Having inquired all faculty members involved in the Master and 83.3% of students enrolled in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th editions of the course (35 out of a total of 42), it was possible to determine that, overall, both faculty members and students had a positive attitude towards blended learning. Before attending the course, 10 out of the 13 teachers (77.0%) and 19 out of 35 students (54.3%) had had previous contact with either online or blended courses, describing those experiences as being satisfactory. All faculty members and 82.9% of the students also mentioned the fact that they had already worked with a LMS (namely Moodle, the platform used in the course).

Another relevant aspect was the fact that, of the 35 students attending the course, 13 (37.1%) originally came from other countries (including Azerbaijan, Brazil, Georgia, Armenia, Canada, Poland and the Republic of Uzbekistan), even though they were living in Portugal throughout the duration of the Master (namely in Viana do Castelo). As for their work situation and availability, 17 (48.6%) students were student-workers, 10 of which within the hospitality industry.

All participants had access to the Internet at home and were able to use the wireless network at school. As for the services and tools they used and how frequently, teachers regularly used email services (92.3% stated that they checked their emails on a daily basis) and chat rooms (53.8%), with 46.2% also referring to the frequent use of social networks. Even though students also used email very frequently (they all stated they checked their emails at least once a day), they were also keen users of social networks (94.0%), chats and file sharing sites (54.0% used them everyday). Overall, students had a more diversified and frequent use of technology and would like to see more services and tools integrated into the course. This information is

Data Analysis

Bearing these profiles in mind, we proceeded to analyse the remaining data. After reviewing our corpus (that included the answers given in the questionnaires, interviews and focus group’s transcripts, evaluation reports and log and activity reports from the Moodle platform), we first divided the available data according to their nature. All statistical data was imported into Microsoft Excel, where it was organized into frequency tables and all the qualitative data was imported into the web qualitative data analysis software WebQDA. This content analysis program, which was specifically designed to work with non-numerical and non-structured data, makes it possible to save, code, index and classify different kinds of information segments (Lopes, Vieira, & Moreira, 2013; Souza, Pedro, & Moreira, 2011) that you can then cross-reference according to different questioning matrixes.

After importing the data, and based on pre-established dimensions, we defined different categories and sub-categories that guided the coding process. Following an exploratory approach, we analysed and coded each paragraph individually, cross-referencing them with context related information (who said what and when).

As mentioned previously, our research and analysis relied on four core dimensions, according to which the master course was assessed: organizational, pedagogical, personal and technological. These dimensions derive from not only the goals of the research, but also from the concept o blended learning itself, as it combines all these different elements.

As depicted in the tables below (Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4), stemming from the data, different categories and subcategories emerged:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Category** | **Descriptor** |
| **Organizational**  **Dimension** | Institutional promotion | The role the course plays in promoting the hosting HEI. |
| Performance | How the course and the different curricular units work; information related to schedules, calendar and overall curricular structure. |
| Resources | Equipment, facilities and infrastructures. |
| Partnerships | Protocols with other HEI and mobility programs. |
| Human Resources | Profiles. Role played by teaching and non-teaching staff. |

Table 1 – Organizational dimension: categories and descriptors used throughout the analysis

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Category** | **Subcategories** | | **Descriptors** |
| **Personal Dimension** | Training | Lack of training  (faculty) | | Knowledge and teacher training gaps regarding blended learning and the use of ICT and the impact they have on the course. |
| Diversity in training  (students) | | Students’ diverse academic background and how it impacts the development of the course. |
| Motivation | Personal | | Personal aspects (interest, need…) that influenced the participation in the course and the development of activities, as well as suggestions for future improvements. |
| Academic | | Aspects referring to participants’ qualifications and their wish to pursuit further education and how they influenced the participation in the course and the development of activities, as well as suggestions for future improvements. |
| Professional | | Aspects referring to the participants professional life and ambitions (career prospects, schedule…) and how they influenced the participation in the course and the development of activities, as well as suggestions for future improvements. |
| Cultural | | Aspects referring to culture (participants’ interest in languages and history…) and how they influenced the participation in the course and the development of activities, as well as suggestions for future improvements. |
| Work overload | | Problems related to the amount of available time and the difficulty of completing tasks and activities. | |
| Time management | | Issues involving the time allotted for each task and activity and how it was managed. | |

Table 2 – Personal dimension: categories, subcategories and descriptors used throughout the analysis

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Category** | **Descriptor** |
| **Pedagogical Dimension** | Learning impacts | How blended learning relates to students’ learning and their results. |
| Space and schedule flexibility | The role of geographical closeness and time availability and how it relates to the way the course is organized. |
| Coordination | Articulation between the different curricular units (content, methods, strategies and procedures employed and monitoring mechanisms). |
| Assessment | The role and weight of remote activities and the use of technology in students’ assessment. |
| Personalization | The course’s and the model’s adaptability to the student’s needs. |
| Strategies | Sharing and suggesting experiences and activities in blended settings. |

Table 3 - Pedagogical dimension: categories and descriptors used throughout the analysis

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Category** | **Subcategories** | | **Descriptors** |
| **Technological Dimension** | Expectations | Use of tools | | Participants’ expectations regarding the integration of technology in the course (tools and services they would like to use). |
| Motivation | | References to the perception participants have of blended learning and how it influenced their choice and participation in the course. |
| Communication | | Participants’ opinions about communication and the role it plays in the course (ways, tools and timing). | |
| The use of Moodle | | The use of the Moodle platform within the course. | |
| Limitations | | Technical restrictions (malfunctions, usability problems and computer illiteracy…) | |
| Advantages | | Technology-related advantages (ease of access, speed, the fact it’s innovative…). | |

Table 4 – Technological dimension: categories, sub-categories and descriptors used throughout the analysis

**FINDINGS**

**SWOT Analysis**

After having coded the data, we broke down the analysis by weighing in the number of references in each category and dimension and cross-referencing the sources. After analysing each category and dimension separately and in-depth and in order to facilitate the reading of the data, we then developed a SWOT analysis matrix in which we summarized the key-findings on the course.

A SWOT matrix is a very common and structured analytical model that is used to identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of an organization, initiative or project. Initially used in business settings as a way of evaluating companies, products and strategies, SWOT analysis are currently being used in other contexts, namely in Education. According to Thomas et al (2013, p. 5), this analysis breaks down complex issues, turning them into “manageable tasks”. By separating information into internal (controllable) and external (uncontrollable) issues, this strategic way of presenting data makes it easier for analysts to establish connections between a project and the context in which it takes place and is useful when setting intervention priorities and taking action. According to Serra et al. (2010), in a SWOT analysis the strengths will leverage the opportunities, whereas weaknesses will constraint further development. On the other hand, threats will make it possible to identify internal vulnerabilities and limits.

Based on Serra’s model (that illustrates the complex web of intersecting issues and how different issues leverage and/or restrain each other) we came up with the following diagram that summarizes our research’s preliminary findings (Figure 2):

Figure 2- Preliminary results: SWOT matrix

Based on this analysis, we can see that the fact that the course keeps a steady and highly qualified teaching staff and has signed protocols with many institutions is considered to be a strength. This translates into an advantage because it makes it possible for students to take part in mobility programs and internships. In this situation, students can still take part in courses and interact with teachers remotely as they work on their final assignments.

Overall, having a blended course is perceived as positive. In fact, data suggests that the delivery model played a pivotal role in determining the students’ choice when enrolling in the course. Institutional leaders believe it is a good way of promoting the institution’s image and that it can be a driving force for other courses to develop similar initiatives. In addition, the way the course is delivered is considered to be innovative, reflecting positively on the institution and its appeal on potential future students. In terms of leverage and potential opportunities, the fact there is a growing need for specialized training in the region and a greater demand for elearning and blended learning courses in Higher Education, can play an important role in diversifying and stepping up the current educational offer in this setting. On the other hand, faculty members, despite their lack of specific knowledge regarding the use of technology and pedagogical approaches to blended learning, are open to develop their personal and professional skills on this matter, which can easily become an asset for the course.

Nonetheless, there are important issues that must be addressed in order to ensure the course’s quality and endurance. Even though the Master has attracted a significant number of foreign students, all of them do in fact live in Viana do Castelo for the duration of the course. Most students live in the region or in adjacent districts, which can become a serious problem, as it can hinder the course’s long-term sustainability.

Even though faculty members are willing to attend training programs and learn more about ways of integrating technology into their practices and fulfilling the full potential of the course, the fact they have reservations about the usefulness of blended learning, believing it to be responsible for an increased workload, can hurt the course’s development prospects.

In addition, participants seem to agree that the excessive concentration of face-to-face sessions at the beginning of each semester is a disadvantage. In fact, given the fact that most students live in areas adjacent to the school, the schedule doesn’t seem to adjust to their needs (classes take place on weekdays from 5 to 12 pm). Most students would prefer having face-to-face sessions throughout the semester, a preference that is shared by the teachers involved in the course. Despite having a negative effect on motivation and participation, barriers in communication and conflicting points of view have prevented any changes in the course’s delivery model and scheduling. As a result, the course has fallen short of participant’s expectations, namely in what the use of technology is concerned. Unlike students, who would like to see technology embedded in the course, both faculty and the course’s coordinator seem to undermine the role it plays.

A closer look at the way technology is used within the course shows that the course’s LMS (the institutional Moodle platform) is underused, as you can see in Figure 3, data gathered directly from the platform referring to the 2nd and 3rd editions clearly shows that teachers only take full advantage of the “send files” function (used in all curricular units). As for other resources, throughout the 2nd edition, out of 11 curricular units, 8 resorted to “tags” and 2 to “folders” as ways of organizing information within each course page. In the 3rd edition there was a slight increase in the number of “folders” (from 2 to 6) used, whereas the number of “tags” decreased (from 8 to 6).

Figure 3 – The use of Moodle resources within the Master’s first 2 editions

As for the activities available in the platform (Figure 4), only 4 out of the 11 curricular units used “discussion forums” throughout the course’s 2nd edition. In the 3rd edition that number increased to a total of 5, with 2 curricular units also resorting to “assignments”, giving participants the opportunity to hand in their work through the platform. All other available activities were not used.

Figure 4 – The use of Moodle activities within the Master’s first 2 editions

As for content found in the platform, teachers basically posted information related to schedules, assessment and tutorial guidance sessions and files related to their curricular units, specifically Microsoft Word and Excel documents (in respectively 5 and 2 curricular units) and PowerPoint presentations, videos and Internet links to other sources (also in 2 curricular units). The platform was, therefore, used as repository. In fact, participation in the discussion forums was limited to the teachers. This fact is fully acknowledged by the teachers involved in the course, as only 53.8% (7) consider that they have encouraged the use of Moodle, which is corroborated by the platform’s activity logs and records.

As you can see from Figure 5 (referring to the course’s 2nd and 3rd editions), throughout the semester there were 2 significant peaks in the number of accesses to the platform. Both students and faculty logged in at the beginning of each semester (corresponding to the face-to-face sessions) and in weeks 9, 10 and 11 (corresponding to the time teachers publish students’ grades). The only exception was the 3rd edition’s Sustainable Tourism and Economic Development course, in which accesses are more equally distributed throughout the semester, with another significant peak in week 6 (Figure 6). This can be explained by the fact that in this particular course and at this particular time students were asked to upload an assignment directly into the platform.

Figure 5 – Moodle: weekly course views (2011-2012)

Figure 6 – Moodle: weekly course views (2012-2013)

Adding to the restricted use of the platform’s resources and activities, online communication is also lacking, with only 14.4% of teachers agreeing that the available communication tools promoted participant’s interaction. Students, on the other hand, have a more positive attitude towards the platform’s communicative potential and emphasize the use of email (84.0% agree that it is a practical feature within the feature) and the fact they can contact professors directly.

If you consider the specific role and importance of discussion forums, however, 68.0% of students do not believe they are relevant or promote interaction within the different courses. As for the chat tool, there are no records of it being used, which can account for the fact that only 8.0% of students (vs. 23.1% teachers) consider it to be relevant in this setting.

The data suggests that faculty members are aware of this limitation. When asked about their willingness to attend a workshop dealing with the use of technology, 61.5% (8) answered positively, with 40.0% (6) specifically referring the use of Moodle as being particularly important.

Notwithstanding, and despite all these limitations, participants noted the platform’s usefulness. Besides providing them with an easy way of accessing course materials and information, the platform is considered to be efficient, practical and user friendly. As for the use of other services and tools, all participants have found it necessary to resort to external communication channels such as email, telephone, chats and web conferencing services and social networks. Besides Moodle’s limitations, participants argue that the need to use these tools arises from the fact that they allow a more personal and private contact. Moreover, participants are also more familiar and confortable with these channels, seeing no reason to change.

Apart from communication, and considering the use and role of technology must not be limited to the use of Moodle (even though its use is compulsory), some teachers felt the need to incorporate other services into their courses. From the 46.2% (6) that stated to have used other alternatives, all have mentioned blogs and file-sharing services, whereas 2 turned to micro-blogging services and social networks as ways of enhancing their courses. Even though in some cases (Strategic Marketing and e-Commerce) these tools were actually part of the syllabus, some teachers argued they felt the need to have more open discussion spaces and admitted to have followed an exploratory approach as they experimented with different tools and communication channels.

This effort, was, nonetheless, considered to be insufficient as students were expecting more from the course on this particular area. In fact, faculty, course coordinators and students seem to be at odds when discussing the importance and role of technology within the course. The course coordinator argues that teachers are responsible for their own courses and are free to decide the methods and resources to use, considering, however, that technology shouldn’t take the focus from content, assuming a rather conservative standing concerning the use of tools other than Moodle, email and video-conferencing services. Meanwhile, even though some have strong reserves regarding the use of social networks like Facebook, at its use raises privacy questions and issues dealing with informality and student-teacher relationships, teachers have a more open stance. However, only 1 faculty member (7.6%) agrees that diversifying the use of technology within the course would increase students’ participation or improve their opinions on the course.

As for students, this is a key issue. Even though they are keen users of social networks, when asked to specify the kind of tools and services they would like to see used in the course, their focus mostly turns towards media and content. While 88.6% stated they would like to have access to online eBooks and other schools resources (65.7%), respectively 71.4% and 40.0 % make reference to video content and audio as something they would like to see integrated into the course. 45.7% also mention video-conferencing services.

The contrasting points of view, the discrepancy between student’s, faculty member’s and the course coordinator’s standing on technology and the resistance to change could explain the contrast between students’ initial perceptions and expectations regarding the course and their opinion after attending the first year.

**INTERVENTION PLAN**

**Spreading the Message**

Based on the analysis presented above and aligned with our research’s initial goals, we designed an action plan intended to help solving some of the unveiled issues. First of all, in order to assure participants’ involvement, it was necessary to disseminate the study’s preliminary results, making people aware of the course’s potential and the foreseeable difficulties it was expected to meet in the near future. Having met with the course’s coordinator to discuss the study’s key findings, it was decided that the topic would be discussed on an upcoming conference (the “10th CIRCLE Conference”[[1]](#endnote-1)) to be held at the school and attended by both faculty members and students. Following the presentation at the conference and the ensuing discussion, taking advantage of the fact that faculty members expressed their willingness to attend training on blended learning, we started to work on a specific training program aimed at teachers involved in the Master’s course.

**Blended learning workshop**

When first designing the training program, and considering it targeted a very specific audience, we started out by mapping out all the key issues that emerged from the SWOT analysis. In order to maximize results, we clearly outlined each problem and came up with possible solutions based on the Master’s specific setting. Considering the circumstances (the number of participants, their profile and the time available for training) and the ultimate goal (to improve on the existing course), we decided on a practical, focused and hands-on approach that promoted discussion between those involved, allowing them to reflect on and share their practices. Because this plan would entail both a more theoretical and reflective component and the actual use of technological tools, we agreed upon developing a training workshop (instead of a more traditional teacher training program) that would mimic the Master’s model by including face-to-face sessions and autonomous online work periods.

Working on a specific plan, we focused two main goals: to help participants review and reflect on their practices and to help them develop collaborative projects, actively contributing toward their professional and academic development.

Going back to the literature and the data, and echoing teacher’s opinions, we determined that there were 3 key priority areas on which the workshop should focus: social web (specifically the use of social networks, collaborative writing tools, discussion forums, wikis and blogs), the use of Moodle and workload management (including communication). Based on these key issues, we agreed the workshop would cover the following topics:

* Blended Learning (concept, models, advantages and disadvantages, and the role of teachers and learners).
* Online vs. face-to-face activities (synchronous and asynchronous activities; best practices)
* Teaching/ learning strategies, resources and content (collaborative writing and social bookmarking tools, wikis, blogs, microblogs, social networks, podcasts, screencasts, video and open content).
* Assessment tools (automatic records, discussion forums, portfolios, concept maps and rubrics)
* Moderation Strategies

By putting this plan into action we intended to give teachers the opportunity to have a blended learning experience, by simultaneously playing the role of teacher and student. Each participant was expected to choose a topic from his or her syllabus and come up with activities that other participants should complete and comment on. Making use of the Moodle platform and other tools and services, participants were expected not only to collaborate and work together in order to complete tasks and achieve goals, but also reflect on and discuss the processes taking place at each stage.

The workshop was set for the month of June (2013). However, despite the initial enthusiasm, scheduling conflicts limited teacher participation, leading to some changes in the original plan. The fact that only 4 teachers involved in the Master were able to attend the workshop, which deterred us from implementing the original idea of having participants playing different roles and acting as students in each other’s courses. This resulted in having each participant developing a module/specific topic of interest, to be discussed by all at the end of the workshop instead. Despite these adjustments, however, the workshop went on as originally planned and took place in the following 6 weeks.

In the first (face-to-face) session, after discussing the research’s preliminary results and each teacher’s standing regarding blended learning, each participant talked about his or her curricular unit and how they managed it and incorporated blended learning. This debate brought forth the concept of blended learning, its evolution and the advantages and disadvantages to be found in this model. Participants were confronted with their own experiences and with case studies from other HEI (and more specifically cases dealing with Tourism Education and Training). After discussing these examples, participants put forward the topic they intended to work on as part of the workshop and to what purpose. These topics and goals were then reviewed and talked over by the group.

In the second session (also face-to face) the focus was set on tools. After analysing different examples of specific web 2.0 services and outlining tools used for assessing students’ work, as well as moderation strategies that could help boost the creation of online communities and improve participation, participants worked on their individual projects. In addition to designing a plan, they set out goals and described the content and strategies they would use. Besides Moodle, participants suggested using a Facebook group and a blog to exchange views and share resources.

After this session, participants developed their individual projects, working autonomously and sharing their questions either on Moodle, the Facebook group or the blog. The limited number of participants, made it possible to monitor the projects very closely, with questions and problems being dealt with very quickly. After a 3-week period in which they worked individually, participants came together to present and discuss their work, having concluded that the workshop had had a positive effect on their outlook on blended learning.

**Outcomes**

After concluding the workshop and in order to evaluate its impact and repercussions, we repeated some of the methods used previously to analyse the course. Resorting to observation, Moodle activity and log reports and questionnaires, we monitored the course’s 4th edition and looked for possible changes. Focusing on faculty’s opinion and the way each curricular unit was developed, we looked into the communication and web 2.0 tools used within each course, also asking each teacher to specifically identify the service used and the type of activity carried out. This data was then cross-referenced with the teacher’s workshop plan and evaluation, in order o determine whether this intervention was a driver for change within the course.

With regard to the use of Moodle, a comparison against previous editions revealed that all teachers continued to use the “send files” feature and that there was a slight increase in the number of teachers who used folders to organize the information within their curricular unit 6 to 7). Similar to what happened in other editions, the “URL” resource was used in two curricular units, whereas no one used the “book” and “IMS content package” options. As for “tags” and “page” there was a slight decrease of use within the different curricular units (respectively, from 6 to 3 and 3 to 2). As for the use of activities, there were no significant changes, with only a slight increase in the use of forums (from 5 to 7) and assignments (from 2 to 3), with a curricular unit also resorting to databases.

If this can hardly be considered a big adjustment, the same can’t be said about content and overall activity in the platform (number of logs and page views). An analysis of the different areas in Moodle showed that even though pdf files continue to prevail (they are found at every curricular unit), there was an increase in the number of PowerPoint presentations (found in 4 curricular units), videos (also in 4) and Excel and Word files (respectively in 2 and 5 of the 11 curricular units) uploaded into the platform. As for the frequency of access, even though there were still activity peaks at the beginning and end of the semester, the number of accesses is more equally distributed over time (Figure 7).

Figure 7 - Moodle: weekly course views (2013-2014)

As for the use of other tools other than those available within Moodle, even though it wasn’t possible to collect data regarding every curricular unit, indicators point towards an increase in the number of curricular units resorting to social networks (5 out of 7) and file sharing services (7/7). Besides, 3 teachers also referred to the use of blogs.

With regard to communication, all teachers continued to highlight the use of email, with 6 out of 7 also mentioning chat/videoconferencing services and 5 out 7 the telephone. 3 teachers also reported the use of social networks to communicate with students.

Even though there is insufficient data to clearly state that the workshop had a significant impact on the use of technology in the Master’s course, the fact that teachers continue to use the blog to share resources and discuss their practices, and that both the coordinator and institutional leaders refer to its importance in the interviews held within our research, we can speculate that further similar actions might be important for the course’s future.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

We began our research by trying to understand the role a blended course played within a specific institution. In the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, the Master in Innovative Tourism Development is part of a broader strategy and has added value to the institution, as it appealed to new targets (namely foreign students), fostered the creation of partnerships and is considered to be a driver for other similar initiatives. Grounded on the results of our research, we have also concluded that blended learning supported student mobility and was overall perceived as an advantage. Therefore, not only can it be considered a positive distinctive feature, but it also adds value to the course, which is described as flexible.

However, it was also possible to pinpoint several constraints that can ultimately pose a threat to the course’s long-term sustainability and success. First of all, student’s initial overwhelmingly positive expectations dramatically wane over time. The grounds for this growing lack of excitement lie on a series of reasons. Even though students recognize its general advantages, in practice and in this particular context, blended learning did not answer their specific needs, namely in what concerns time and spatial flexibility. Despite being perceived as an advantage in blended settings, in this particular case students stated that they would have preferred having more face-to-face contact (even if that meant spending more time at school and commuting frequently). It should be noted that this opinion echoes the thought of working students, as the model used had no significant weight on their decision to attend the course, and is shared by full and part-time students alike.

Adding to this is the fact that the use of technology is underrated and lacking in many ways, which has weakened participant’s initial enthusiasm and negatively affected their engagement. This reluctance in taking full advantage of available media and technological tools and services is of particular relevance, particularly if you consider that the use of ICT in Tourism training is believed to facilitate the adaptation to the job market and enhance the transfer of knowledge and development of comprehension, communication, management and organization skills. On the other hand, considering the fact that today’s students were mostly “born digital” and place a greater value on visual and multimedia communication (rather than just text-based communication), the course seems to be off-centre, as it misses out on the opportunity of addressing the student’s needs in a more direct and prolific way.

Taking all these issues into consideration, we have made the following recommendations, which were later presented to the course’s coordinator and institutional leaders:

Based on the opinion of teachers, students and institutional leaders and the fact that the data collected pointed towards problems with: 1) time management (a disproportionate amount of activities developed over a short period of time); 2) the excessive concentration of face-to-face sessions at the beginning of each semester; and 3) a perceived additional workload for teachers involved in the course, it would be beneficial to the revise of the current model and look for alternative distribution and organizational methods, namely by extending the number face-to-face sessions throughout the semester.

On the other hand, data also pointed towards the impact that teacher training courses and workshops can have in improving future editions of the course. As described, the workshop developed within the scope of our research, though informal, had some positive results regarding participants’ openness to new practices and the use of different technological services and tools. This can help close the gap between faculty and students. So, it is advised that similar workshops take place in a near future.

From the technological standpoint, it would be helpful to review some of the institutional Moodle’s permissions, as the role assigned to students is restricted and limits their participation (e.g. a default setting prevents them from posting in custom discussion forums or creating new discussion topics).

As for communication, it would also be important to open up more channels and improve the information flow between all of those taking part in the course. On the one hand, faculty and coordinators should have access to data collected by the school’s Quality Management System, as well as other information regarding audits and other evaluation procedures. On the other hand, the course would also benefit from a more frequent and closer contact between faculty members. Improvements at this level may involve the creation of a common space in Moodle or another platform where relevant information regarding the Master can be exchanged. Teachers, coordinators and institutional leaders should also meet periodically in order to discuss and share their experiences, as well as articulate their practices and the work within the different curricular units.

CLOSING REMARKS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Europe is undergoing a major transformation of Higher Education structures, making it necessary to create new traditions and teaching methods that ensure that students and institutions can contribute with critical knowledge and be instrumental in promoting innovation. At a time digital native students expect their learning environments to include technology, blended formats have achieved considerable levels of success and are in high-demand. However, developing blended courses is an on-going process and there is a need to constantly do more and better, i.e. adapt and update, which can only be achieved through continuous evaluation that considers the perspectives and opinions of all stakeholders.

Having emerged at a time when Portuguese HEI are invested in integrating technology and updating their pedagogical offer, this research, though focusing on a specific course being held at a particular institution, has contributed to a broader discussion surrounding Distance Education and blended learning. As we pointed out, even though blended learning and its applications in Higher Education are widely discussed in literature, there is little research focusing on Portuguese HEI. The same applies to Tourism Education. In that sense, we believe that, even though it focuses on a context that may not be easily transferrable to other settings, this research gave a valid and necessary contribution towards understanding the current situation of blended learning in Portuguese HEI and the issues surrounding it. As this is an emerging area, the analysis of practices associated with blended learning in Higher Education and more specifically Tourism Education, provides a fertile ground for the development of future research. For that reason, HEI should be invested in and support long-term studies that can help them improve their offer and ultimately benefit student’s learning experiences and satisfaction.

Even though it does not present a definite solution for the problems that were brought to discussion, this study raised participants’ awareness towards issues surrounding blended learning, giving them a better understanding of the changing roles of teachers, students and institutions in this setting. As never before, HEI are expected to promote collaborative and active learning environments and adopt effective, innovative and partnering pedagogies. This is a collective effort worth pursuing.

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ENDNOTES

1. More information available at <http://10thcircleconference.ipvc.pt> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)