

## **PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION INTO BLENDED LEARNING AT UHI, ITS USES AND EFFECTIVENESS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this research project was to investigate the extent to which blended learning was employed at the University of the Highlands and Islands, whether it is an effective teaching method. The main part of the study consisted of a literature review which looked at a range of studies, published and unpublished, including those conducted about, and by staff working for, the University of the Highlands and Islands.

### **OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS**

External studies did not produce conclusive evidence for the ability of using blended methods alone to enhance learning. It does not guarantee better learning outcomes than traditional (or face-to-face) methods and may be associated with difficulties in communication and social cohesion for students (particularly those with low technical abilities), and possible staff concerns over their role as teachers.

Those studies highlighting successful instances of blended learning suggested that the technology by which teaching is delivered does not itself define the success or otherwise of student learning. What matters more is how the technology is utilised. This includes innovative course design, and staff who are motivated and supported to use different technologies effectively, both in terms of practical skill and teaching style.

Studies undertaken with students at UHI generated mixed results. Some studies showed that students were less satisfied with courses that were delivered using a blend of methods, others showed a high level of satisfaction with the use of videoconferencing. Where students were dissatisfied with blended learning they cited the following as contributing factors: that they had not expected this delivery method; that they felt unsupported in the use of technology.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The authors come up with a number of recommendations including those concerning future research, and how to improve data collection methods at UHI in order to assist with this research. The following of their recommendations focus on how to improve the student experience of blended learning:

- Provide clear information on delivery modes to students to avoid issues with misconceptions
- Use induction to identify and redress any technological skills gaps between students' digital competency and the requirements of the blend.
- Review current arrangements for staff training, to ensure a co-ordinated and comprehensive training programme for all lecturing staff on selection of appropriate delivery modes and effective use of blended learning technologies.