**UQ Blended Learning Report***Authors: Jasmine Huang, Caelan Rafferty, Robin Allsopp, Chanon Kachorn, Kelly E Matthews*

**Aim**

The aim of this report is to explore how UQ academics experienced blended learning (BL) at UQ as a learning process intended to enhance their courses, teaching, and the learning of their students.

**Context**

This work explores the implementation of the Student Strategy blended learning initiative at UQ. UQ2U was conceptualised as a novel opportunity to revitalise curriculum and explore new pedagogies through re-designing courses with large cohorts. The aim was to deliver exceptional educational value to students, including increased learning flexibility, better student outcomes, self-directed learning, and more interaction both online and on-campus between staff and students.

UQ2U saw 16 courses from a range of faculties blended over a semester, which were rolled out in the first semester of 2019, with over 9000 students enrolled in total. Over the period 2018 - 2020, more than 70 courses are being re-imagined and redeveloped to align with the UQ2U approach, and progressively rolled out across the University.

**Method**

Qualitative research is grounded in participants’ perspectives and how they make meaning of experiences. It is beneficial for exploratory studies as it allows the researcher to explore complex issues and to develop theory (Creswell, 2012), allowing flexible and open insight into complex and unfamiliar topics (Kember and Ginns, 2012). We are not attempting to represent groups of people, but rather present differing perspectives, not necessarily shared by all individuals, to highlight the range of conceptions about academic BL experiences.

**Data collection**

Data for this study were collected through audio-recorded interviews with academics who received blending support from the Institute of Teaching Learning and Innovation, pre and through UQ2U. A learning designer conducted interviews using a semi-structured interview guide with three questions. Participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of blended learning, including their understanding of blended learning, what they learnt in UQ2U, and the broad benefits of UQ2U.

**Participants**

All academics and course/discipline-based learning designers (as opposed to UQ2U learning designers central to unit) involved in the UQ2U initiative were invited to attend a focus group. There was a total of 10 staff (8 academics, 2 learning designers) in four interviews, with the table below outlining participants’ institutional roles and their sex. Speaker numbers have been assigned to maintain confidentiality.

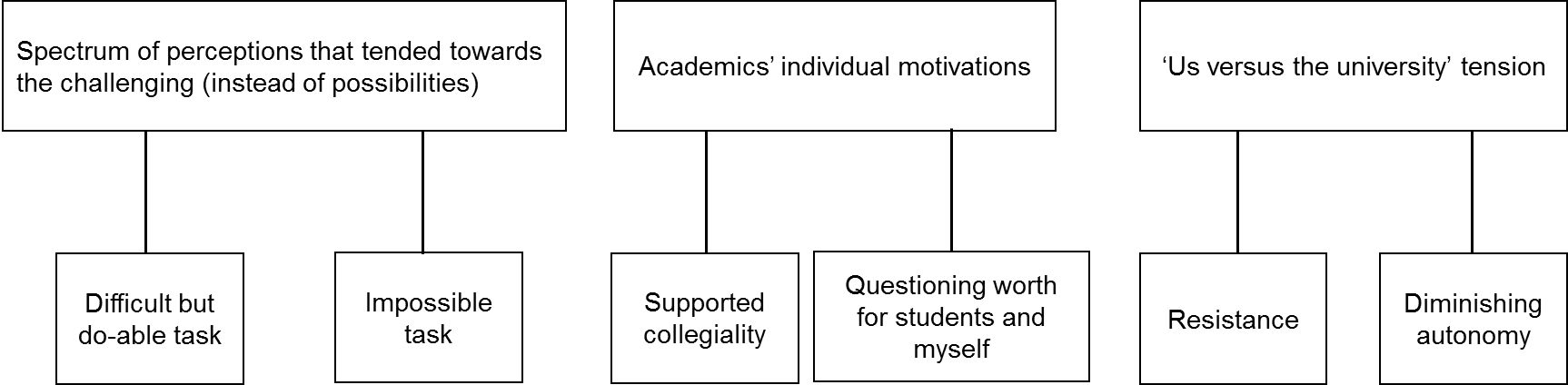
|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Participant data |  |
| Gender | 6F, 4M |
| Role | 8 Academics (5 TF), 2 Professional (LD) |
| Faculty | BEL 4, HABS 2, Medicine 2, Science 2 |
|  |  |
| UQ2U Production schedule |  |
| Deployed | 1 (2018-S2), 3 (2019-S1) |
| Deployment | 5 (2019-S2), 1 (2020-S1) |
|  |  |
| First experiences with blending | 5 (Pre-UQ2U), 3 (Through UQ2U) |

**Data analysis**

Three winter student scholars and one young alumni inductively analysed the interviews using thematic analysis over a 6-week period. All were novices under guidance of an established qualitative researcher. Having students from different degrees, with their own experiences of academics and blended learning, afforded a diverse perspective without the pre-conceived expectations and assumptions an insider, such as academic staff, would have on the topic. The analytical framework utilised in this research was modelled on the process for thematic analysis in Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising six phases: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report**.**

Before analysing the focus group transcripts, we collectively reflected on and acknowledged our individual assumptions and perceptions of blended learning that we would bring to the analysis process. Each person transcribed one interview each, which was checked by other members before finalisation. All transcript content was coded, with each person coding their own initially transcribed interview. We got together to discuss codes found across all four interviews and assigned descriptions to all codes. After another round of individual coding, we had a group session to go through each transcript together and finalise codes. Any conflicts were addressed with the senior researcher. From these initial codes, we developed a series of latent themes that we felt represented the transcribed conversations, which were then collated into potential themes. After observing the relationships between the themes, a thematic map with sub-themes was created. These themes were again reviewed by reading of all data extracts.

**Results**

Our analysis illuminated three emergent and overlapping themes on the blending process: spectrum of perceptions that tended towards the challenging (instead of possibilities); academic individual motivations; and an ‘us versus the university’ tension. These final themes are displayed in Figure 1, with sub-themes.  
  


**Spectrum of blending perceptions tended toward the challenging (instead of possibilities)**

For academics interviewed, blending was an extremely novel experience requiring serious adjustment to their professional practices, given the wide scope of the imagined change and paradigm shift in pedagogy. While the spectrum of experiences varied, academics frequently characterised the blending process as an endless series of hurdles rather than as possibilities for change. While academics acknowledged there would be inherent challenges in UQ’s institutional blending process, they frequently felt the ‘newness’ of blending was difficult to accommodate. Prevalent throughout the interviews were discussions of how stressful and disruptive the experience was to staff wellbeing, and the environment was often emotionally charged with staff expressing fear, frustration, and a sense of being overwhelmed. This atmosphere contributed to the creation of two sub-themes in experiences of the blending process: *difficult but do-able*, to *impossible.*

**Difficult, but doable.** While support from UQ2U was provided to all academics, the actual amount of resources received differed among academics. Academics, generally those with more seniority and experience with running their courses, were able to navigate the system in garnering additional support with managing the blending process. While this offered relief in terms of tech, teaching and project support, it created new responsibilities in managing a diverse team of people:

*Speaker 1, Interview 2: Yeah okay, the university is putting all this money and resources and people’s time into it, yeah let's go for it. It was a bit of that attitude, you know, particularly from [Person 2] and I, but even the team bought into that... there's risks involved, but let's just go for it... So, you know, a day a week for me has been managing my team, and providing the interface between here and there, and you know, and that. I don't think... if I hadn't taken care of that a lot, we would have not gotten to where we got... And see that's the model we operate in our school, that everybody usually, um, does lectures and pracs around their content expertise, right, we don't have these things where you do a whole course.... Which means then that the coordinator has to play a huge role in actually making it work... you've really got to make it work for the whole team. (Blending through UQ2U)*

While there was a focus on the different logistical hurdles these new responsibilities brought about, there was a note of muted positivity in identifying opportunities for change within. Academics acknowledged that while there were challenges, they also treated blending as a personal learning opportunity to improve teaching and learning practices. While new to the blending process, they had a chance to take a step back and reflect on their involvement and engagement with the blending process.

**Impossible task.** Academics who found the process impossible found themselves in completely different circumstances to those who found the process ‘do-able’, creating an entirely different experience:

*Speaker 6, Interview 4: There's a lot of animosity, there are staff on stress leave and I don't think it's funny…When you could have given people - and not saying you (Interviewer)- whoever was responsible for this could have... planned this? Talked to us about it. Given us the time to actually... think about what we were going to do instead of giving us six or seven months. We were lucky, we asked for an extension of time. We have another course, they had to do it within the six month period. I've seen the effect that's having on the staff and I've spoken to students who are currently in that course. They are not happy. (Blending through UQ2U)*

Staff felt trapped with the responsibilities of blending, and thought it impossible to keep up with the standards dropped on them. A strong part of this experience related to perceptions of the amount of support received as insufficient, and the career stage academics were at played an important role. Junior staff charged with blending courses expressed being met with too many expectations on maintaining research publications, teaching and service, while managing any potential impact on long-term employment. They were unable to shift these responsibilities and focus on blending course content they were unfamiliar with, which markedly affected other areas outside of blending:

*Speaker 1, Interview 4: I can say that our faculty, uh while we've been given funds and things, haven't really acknowledged the workload that academics have been placed under. So they went to the forums, it's going to be two days a week plus other things, and then they're sort of like why this has been such a burden, why is your other work sort of decreasing? And then the academics are now sort of having to articulate that actually, this is really what the workload is and then justify that to the faculty which isn't really supporting them financially, or by re-rearranging resources to give them more time to focus on, UQ2U. (Blending through UQ2U)*

In both scenarios, regardless of support provided, academics were new to blending and had to adjust to intense pressure and novel responsibilities from the additional workload. This understandably created a focus on the logistical aspects of blending a course, where they did not have the time to properly reflect on the long-term possibilities afforded in such a mammoth investment stretching their capabilities. While there were elements of this understanding, it was not strongly voiced. In contrast, academics with years of experience blending prior to UQ2U expressed a much more positive outlook:

*Speaker 2, Interview 1: For me it's been almost life-changing in terms of my career… I think if this course did not come along I would not actually have a continuing appointment today… So for me, it was really one of those... sliding door moments why I took on the opportunity to coordinate this course…And, and that's one of the things you just do, You just say yes to, because...It makes a difference and you know that, there's going to be...Opportunities that come up... I would do it again, you know..... Because now I think I'm also a lot more prepared... it's been a great learning journey for me so, it's stretched me but I've grown from the process. (Blending pre-UQ2U)*

Given that this was only the first stage of blending iterations, it is possible that with the passage of time, academics retrospectively looking back would have a more balanced view of the benefits and challenges blending offered.

**Academic individual motivations**

Academic motivations on whether the incentives promised by UQ2U was worth the change varied. As teaching academics, they faced the unique responsibility of overseeing course design, and were driven by collaborations with other teachers to develop their own knowledge about teaching with technology in enhancing student outcomes. However, while course roll-out revealed informal evidence of such improvement, most academics had yet to see formal evaluations, and saw limited value in the short-term ‘success’ of blending without a continuity of effort moving forward. These uncertainties led to the sub-themes below.

**Supported collegiality from other “teachers”**. The sharing of experiences between colleagues going through similar experiences drove academics’ continued participation in the blending process, despite it being considered by some an impossible task at times. The nature of the collegiality resulted in feelings of connectedness and a shared sense of purpose, which mitigated the stressors of the journey:

*Speaker 1, Interview 3: Because you do go off and do what you think what you should be doing but you know when responses were took to others by poll and all, I kinda went ‘oh you know we're all kinda going the same direction but we're doing it differently but we're kinda got the same sort of elements in it’ and I think that was reassuring in a way that you're not getting that when you're just working with your team of learning designers... you can still feel that you've been on this isolated journey and I think professional learning wise I do think there needs to be a teacher do this, whether in the staffroom or whatever…They kinda go ‘oh I'm trying this bit out and I've find I've struggled with this’ and then I'll go ‘oh have you tried this’ you know, and I think it's that sort of shared practice that's really important.  (Blending pre-UQ2U)*

As signalled in the quote above, there was also a collaborative synergy with other teaching colleagues that academics highly valued in managing uncertainties of blending, and in helping them feel that they were on the right track. While logistical support from UQ2U was crucial in initiating the blending process, its facilitation was driven by the collegiality between academics involved in the teaching and blending process.

**Questioning the worth for students and themselves**. While academics found their experiences bolstered by collegiality, some academics questioned whether the process was truly beneficial for them. There was a limited sense of motivation they found through the process itself. While the premise of blended learning was built on increasing student and staff satisfaction and flexibility with the teaching and learning experience, this did not seem to emerge for academics:

*Speaker 1, Interview 2: In the end, when there's process of change like this, there's got to be wins all around. I can see major wins to students around flexibility of learning, but I don't see many for academics in this, to be honest… And I said to my team, putting in the effort to remodel your modules, yes, there's many of us doing those modules elsewhere, so that's going to be easy. But also to give to others that then... To do that, it's about making sure the initial bit is really good, that then is translatable... and that is a huge win. And most academics in our school would see that…Otherwise... Most people in our team would see it as extra work.... only slight benefits of contact time within the course, for them. If there's something else bigger than that, that's...... Really would help drive that.*

However, academics did perceive benefits for student outcomes, such as enhanced understanding of student discrepancies in knowledge, and being able to feed it back into their teaching practices:

*Speaker 1, Interview 3: Another surprise probably for me was urm... some of the activities we did … have actually revealed such issues that they might become part of our assessments or change the exam suddenly to make students actually pay more attention to… there was an amazing sort of flaw in their thinking that came out through what they submitted to the extent that 50% of students put in an incorrect drawing... some students picked up from Google the wrong structure and then everyone, a large number not everyone, of students then looked at what other students had done, ‘oh that looks sensible’ [laughing]…. We had to deliberately address it in class which is good because that's the whole point. But then again I was just thinking, well I would never see that before because it's been in exams… so it'll change the way we do that.*

These benefits were balanced by concerns on the diversity and sustainability of the blended learning experience. Academics questioned if it was ultimately worthwhile for student experience if it was too diverse throughout a programme, or if it would even be continued after UQ2U support was withdrawn. With each course blended differently, and some non-blended, they feared the waste of time and confusion in adjusting to the expectations each new course would bring. There were also concerns in managing quality control in large courses with massive staff pools over the teaching delivered, supplementary to the course coordinator, which were vital in blended courses to facilitate engagement and student learning.

*Speaker 1, Interview 2: I think there's got to be some sort of process going forward around looking at the more... student experience angle of it as they progress…The reality is if you end up… you could end up with a hotch-potch of different blended experiences. Now, you probably have that in courses somewhat anyway, but in the end, you actually have to get to a programmatic level. Like, you know, I can just think of the variations around flipped classrooms to what we're doing here.*

What made academics continue investing into the process, and frame it as desirable change, was centred on personal learnings about student perspectives, enhancing learning and teaching practices, and solidarity with their colleagues. There was little questioning to whether blended learning was a good approach for UQ. Instead, academics struggled to reconcile whether the experience was truly a wonderful learning opportunity worth the massive upheaval for them and their students, sensing a disconnect between the lofty benefits espoused by UQ2U and their own personal experiences.

**‘Us versus the university’ tension: UQ’s blended learning expectations**

Academics experienced a huge difference between their own, and UQ’s approach, to blending as a teaching and learning practice. There was a strong mismatch in expectations of what blended learning looked like at UQ, and in how support was implemented to enable that vision. From this tension two subthemes emerged.

**Diminishing autonomy.** Staff were not made privy to how decisions about deadlines, finances, and support were made in executing the process, and felt at no stage was there consultation of the ones ‘doing the doing’ as to whether it was feasible*.* This top-down communication gap greatly undermined staff sense of autonomy over the blending:

*Speaker 2, Interview 4: We're missing the control with the academics. It's massively important because I have ambitions for this course - oh I used to- and then I've got to finish it so, but um I had visions for this course, this money would have been well spent.*

*Speaker 6: Exactly.*

*Speaker 2: I'm just going through like, one year we establish, we blend our workshops, perfect, and cheap! Because we know what we're doing. And then the next year, OK we go from two lectures to three. (Blending through UQ2U)*

Some academics felt they had no autonomy in deciding if and when they wanted to blend, which was extremely undermining in feeling ownership in driving the process. There was also a strong perception that it was a second job as there was no reprieve from other responsibilities:

*Speaker 5, Interview 4: I've written up there, we were army volunteered. It was like, you're doing it. And then - no consideration of workloads. Our workloads had already been set, full teaching loads, full research loads, including me finishing a Ph.D., and then this was laid on top. So I'm not sure when we were supposed to do it, within the thirty-four and quarter hours a week that we're paid to do. (Blending through UQ2U)*

Parallel to the above sentiment, Speaker 6 below expresses that, more important than the constrained timeline and added responsibilities, was that they had no voice; that no thought seemed to be given to academic wellbeing in the process.Their opinions, efforts and contributions were not acknowledged; only the students’ mattered.

*Speaker 6, Interview 4: You know, and I think what, what you guys have said- I think a lot of people do want to do this. Like I'm, I'm really pleased with some of the changes we've made. We're going to be rolling out more next semester we'll see how they go. But it has been really nice being able to dedicate time to this.*

*Speaker 3: But you want to be recognised.*

*Speaker 6: I do. But at the same time...*

*Speaker 3: And you should be.*

*Speaker 6: We've been - it has still been incredibly hard and I think it just, it feels like, it's not so much the time. It's the fact that it feels like the university doesn't care about the impact that it's having on us.*

**Resistance.** Notably, in the quotes above and in the rest of the academics interviewed, there was very little resistance to the idea of blending, or in changing up pedagogical design. Most echoed the idea that they and other staff wanted to, or were willing to attempt it. The resistance was aligned with dis-inclinations of the UQ2U specific-approach, where time was highlighted as a crucial missing resource that led to wasted opportunities in blending experiences; money and resources were also squandered due to tight deadlines. The standardisation of blended learning was also seen as anathema to the core tenet of pedagogical design, as expressed in the quotes below:

*Speaker 1, Interview 3: Yeah cause I think um, when we first became sort of on the table for the UQ2U initiative, my first reaction was a little bit concerned because I felt that there was this predetermined structured expectation for the way the course is being run and I um.. .my prior experiences tells me that actually different discipline do things in very different ways and you have to pay respect to ways the teachers brings together the artefacts of learning in their courses because they usually have reasons for it and so that sometimes doesn't fit in as set structure…*

Another core tension was that academics viewed evaluation as an integral part to blending and best practice,which UQ2U did not allow for with a short timeframe and limited formal opportunities for evaluation.

*Speaker 3, Interview 4: Yes the first one I did, someone asked me in 2012 to do it in one go I said woah. No way. I did two lectures next semester, two lectures next semester, two lectures... It took me four years to get to the point... but it took me that learning curve and not have the burden to get it, can this work, how do students react... (Blending through UQ2U)*

These concerns were expressed by both academics in the UQ2U process and those with experience blending outside of UQ2U; that expectations were too structured and did not represent the way academics designed and implemented their courses. Academics felt that course differences were not acknowledged, and there was no personalisation of support to different levels of blending. They also perceived UQ drivers for blending to be different from theirs**,** where the UQ2U focus was aligned towards indiscriminately translating all courses, necessary or not, to an online format, akin to a polished MOOC product:

*Speaker 5, Interview 4: I think it might be, again, backing up the track a bit, the perception of blended learning is putting all materials online… blended learning is not putting everything online. So, it's a course like ours which is about organization behavior, they need experience at what organizations run like. So it's good to be in a face to face format. So you can't -it's, it's not this MOOC everything goes online. That is not what blended learning is about. That's what some people might say. I've blended my course. I go oh, What did you do? I just put all my lectures online.*

As such, there was a sentiment that the university was unwilling or unable to comprehend the realities of blending a course, such that academics had to adjust to institutional expectations of how blended learning would be carried out, instead of it being the other way around – where discussions were engaged with academics as the content and pedagogical experts, to ensure student learning outcomes were maximised through the endeavour.

**Recommendations** (co-create with staff)  
Given the experiences expressed, initial recommendations that we will be building on with academics are:

1. Blending should be voluntary and at the discretion of the course coordinator who knows what is best for the course in delivering student outcomes.
2. There should be clearer parameters for securing support and funding, and if needed, sources and guides on how to access more
3. More time should be provided for course design
4. More evaluation opportunities available, either informal or formal, to see if it is making a difference for students
5. Link BL to professional learning opportunities
6. Involve the ‘early adopters’ as change agents in leveraging change within the faculty

**References**

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Creswell, J. (2012). *Educational research: planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research.* Boston: Pearson

Kember, D., & Ginns, P. (2012). *Evaluating teaching and learning: a practical handbook for colleges, universities and the scholarship of teaching*. New York: Routledge

**Appendix**

Blended learning literature review [S:\Projects\Student Strategy Share Space\8 Interim Report\Appendix documents\Literature review\_UQ2U.docx](file:///S:\Projects\Student%20Strategy%20Share%20Space\8%20Interim%20Report\Appendix%20documents\Literature%20review_UQ2U.docx)