

Blended Learning and International Partnerships: Enhancing Education for a Globalised Future

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the transformative potential of blended teaching and learning and international short-term study trips, emphasising their role in fostering student engagement and preparing learners for global challenges in an interconnected world. By integrating traditional methods with digital technologies, blended learning creates dynamic educational environments that address diverse learner needs while promoting collaboration and autonomy. The paper highlights the added value of short-term faculty-led study trips, which provide immersive, real-world experiences, enhancing cultural competence and interdisciplinary learning. Based on a literature review, the paper identifies strategies for combining blended learning with international educational programmes. These include leveraging interactive digital tools, fostering learner-centric environments, and employing diverse assessment methods to promote critical thinking and adaptability. Technology integration emerges as a cornerstone of this model, enabling accessible, flexible, and engaging learning experiences. However, the digital divide, financial barriers, and institutional coordination require strategic attention. The case study of the Irish-Canadian academic partnership between Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and Niagara College (NC) illustrates the practical implementation of these approaches. Initiatives like the “Spaces, Places, and Relationships for Learning, Wellbeing, and Collaboration” (SPRLWC) module demonstrate how blended learning and cross-border collaborations can deliver meaningful educational outcomes. The paper concludes with recommendations for addressing operational and logistical challenges, emphasising inclusivity, financial sustainability, and cultural integration. It advocates for continued innovation and collaboration to refine and expand blended learning and international educational programmes, ensuring they remain impactful and accessible in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

1. Introduction

The evolving landscape of higher education

necessitates innovative approaches to teaching and learning, particularly as institutions strive to prepare students for global challenges in an interconnected world. Among these innovations, blended teaching and learning have emerged as a transformative model that integrates traditional methods with digital technologies, fostering dynamic and adaptable learning environments. This approach effectively engages diverse student populations, including adult learners, by combining flexibility with meaningful collaboration. Additionally, when complemented by short-term faculty-led study trips, blended learning becomes a powerful tool for connecting academic knowledge with real-world applications, offering students immersive experiences that enhance their cultural competence and global perspectives.

This paper explores the critical role of blended teaching and learning in supporting student engagement, particularly in international and interdisciplinary educational contexts. Drawing on a literature review, it identifies key strategies that align blended learning principles with short-term study abroad programmes, emphasising their ability to address varied learner needs while cultivating skills essential for global citizenship. Integrating technology, a cornerstone of blended learning further enhances these experiences by creating interactive and accessible platforms for learning and collaboration. However, the success of these models depends on addressing challenges such as the digital divide, financial accessibility, and effective institutional coordination.

The Irish-Canadian academic partnership between Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and Niagara College (NC) exemplifies the potential of cross-border collaborations in implementing these approaches. Through initiatives like the "Thriving Communities" programme and the development of the “Spaces, Places, and Relationships for Learning, Wellbeing, and Collaboration” (SPRLWC) module, this partnership demonstrates how blended learning and international exchanges can transform education. This paper examines the theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and lessons learned from these efforts, offering insights into how institutions can

refine and expand such programmes to prepare students for success in a globalized world.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Blended Teaching and Learning to Support Student Engagement

The educational landscape is rapidly transforming, with blended teaching and learning emerging as a powerful approach to support student engagement, particularly in international and adult education contexts. This literature review critically examines the blended teaching and learning model, its integration with short-term faculty-led study trips, and its role in fostering student engagement. By synthesising a wide range of research, the review identifies strategies to cultivate communities of learners and enhance pedagogical practices for adult learners in international programs.

2.2. Defining Blended Learning

Blended learning, a fusion of traditional teaching methods and digital technologies, creates versatile and dynamic educational experiences. According to Garrison and Kanuka, blended learning represents "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" [1], [14]. Race [2] complements this definition, describing it as a "joined-up thinking" approach that seamlessly combines the benefits of both modalities. Students engage in diverse activities within this framework, including digital discussions, collaborative projects, and in-person lectures [3].

Blended learning is particularly effective in addressing varied learner needs and preferences. Incorporating self-paced digital resources with interactive face-to-face sessions empowers learners with autonomy while fostering community through in-person collaboration. Such flexibility and adaptability make blended learning a preferred model for diverse and globally connected classrooms.

2.3. Defining Short-Term Faculty-Led Study Trips

Short-term faculty-led study trips are intensive educational experiences that blend academic coursework with experiential learning through international travel. Typically lasting one to eight weeks, these programmes provide students with immersive opportunities to engage in cultural, academic, and professional activities [4]. Unlike long-term study abroad programmes, short-term trips are accessible and focused, offering students a concentrated window into global education [5]. These programmes foster experiential learning by

connecting classroom knowledge with real-world contexts. For example, site visits and cultural activities allow students to contextualise theoretical concepts, enhancing comprehension and retention [6]. Moreover, students often broaden their academic horizons by engaging with disciplines outside their primary areas of study, promoting interdisciplinary learning [5].

2.4. Technology's Role in Blended Learning and International Travel

The integration of technology into blended learning and international study programs has transformed educational practices. New digital tools enable educators to create dynamic, interactive, and accessible learning environments. However, the effective implementation of these tools requires careful consideration of pedagogical objectives, technological compatibility, and user accessibility [7].

Blended learning offers a unique advantage in accommodating individual learning styles and promoting lifelong education. Martin and Godonoga [8] highlight how blended models allow learners to progress at their own pace while benefiting from face-to-face engagement. This symbiosis fosters a holistic learning experience, addressing diverse competencies and preferences.

However, challenges remain. The digital divide, characterised by unequal access to technology and digital skills, poses a significant barrier to inclusivity. Addressing these disparities requires strategic investments in infrastructure, training, and support for both educators and learners [7]. Furthermore, educators must continuously adapt to evolving technologies to maintain the relevance and effectiveness of their teaching practices [9].

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of blended learning, highlighting its potential and limitations. While the hybrid model facilitated continuity during disruptions, it underscored the need for equitable technological infrastructure to ensure access for all learners [1]. Without deliberate efforts to bridge these gaps, the benefits of blended learning risk being confined to privileged populations.

2.5. Enhancing Student Engagement in Blended Learning

Student engagement is central to the success of blended learning. Effective engagement strategies include interactive elements such as gamified assessments, multimedia content, and virtual simulations. These tools make learning enjoyable and encourage active participation and critical thinking [10]. Fostering a learner-centric environment through self-directed exploration and peer-to-peer interaction strengthens community and collaboration.

Blended learning also emphasises diverse assessment methods that evaluate knowledge, practical application, and teamwork. This approach aligns with the evolving demands of the workforce, where collaboration and adaptability are prized skills.

2.6. The Value of Short-Term Study Trips

Short-term study trips amplify the impact of blended learning by immersing students in real-world contexts. These programmes enhance learning outcomes by connecting theoretical knowledge to practical experiences, promoting deeper understanding and long-term retention [6]. Additionally, they provide opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, exposing students to diverse academic perspectives [5].

Such trips also nurture essential communication, networking, and intercultural competence skills. Interacting with peers and professionals across cultures enables students to develop adaptability and problem-solving abilities, attributes highly valued in the global job market [11]. Employers often view study-abroad experiences, even short-term ones, as evidence of cultural awareness and willingness to engage with diverse environments [12].

However, financial barriers remain a challenge. Institutions must address these concerns through scholarships, grants, and cost-sharing strategies to ensure broader accessibility [13]. Raising awareness about available resources is equally crucial to increasing participation in such programs.

2.7. Bridging Technology and International Learning

The integration of technology into short-term study trips enhances their accessibility and effectiveness. Virtual platforms facilitate pre-departure orientation, post-trip reflection, and continuous engagement, extending the learning experience beyond the physical journey. However, ensuring compatibility and usability of technological tools remains critical [7].

Educators must balance technological innovation with cultural sensitivity, aligning digital tools with pedagogical goals while considering students' diverse backgrounds. Adequate training and support are essential to empower educators and learners alike to navigate the digital landscape effectively.

2.8. Challenges and Considerations

Despite the benefits, blended learning and international study trips face challenges that demand careful attention. Coordination between institutions with differing academic calendars, governance structures, and policies can be complex. Establishing clear

agreements and frameworks, such as Memorandums of Understanding, is vital to streamline collaboration.

Financial sustainability is another concern. Institutions must develop cost-effective models to ensure the long-term viability of these programs without compromising quality or accessibility. Additionally, addressing the digital divide requires concerted efforts to provide equitable access to technology and training.

Blended teaching and learning, complemented by short-term faculty-led study trips, represent a transformative approach to education. These programmes foster student engagement, cultural competence, and lifelong learning by integrating traditional methods with digital innovations and experiential learning. However, realising their full potential requires addressing challenges such as financial barriers, technological disparities, and institutional coordination.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, blended learning and international study programs will play a pivotal role in preparing students for a globalised world. By embracing innovative pedagogies, fostering inclusivity, and leveraging technology effectively, educators can create dynamic learning environments that empower students to thrive academically, professionally, and personally. This review underscores the need for continued research and collaboration to refine and expand these approaches, ensuring they remain accessible and impactful for diverse learner populations.

3. Case Study

3.1. Development of the Global Classroom: The Irish Canadian Academic Partnership

International academic partnerships are increasingly recognised as vital mechanisms for enhancing education and equipping students to address global challenges in an interconnected world. By fostering collaborative learning and cultural exchange, such partnerships create opportunities for transformative educational experiences that extend beyond institutional boundaries. This case study outlines the partnership between Atlantic Technological University (ATU) in Ireland and Niagara College (NC) in Canada, a pioneering model of cross-border collaboration. The "Thriving Communities" programme is central to this partnership, an initiative designed to promote leadership, inclusive learning spaces, and cross-cultural understanding. By integrating both institutions' academic strengths and unique perspectives, the partnership demonstrates the potential for meaningful educational outcomes that address local and global needs.

3.2. Institutional Context and Shared Vision

ATU, a prominent multi-campus institution in northwest Ireland, is distinguished for its commitment to innovation and inclusivity. Its Mayo campus, known for pioneering environmental initiatives, focuses on disciplines such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Nursing, and Outdoor Education. These areas align with ATU's broader mission to cultivate community resilience and ecological stewardship through sustainability and applied learning.

Similarly, NC, located in Ontario, Canada, emphasizes experiential learning across a diverse array of programs, mainly through its School of Community Services. Specializations such as Child and Youth Care, Recreation Therapy, and Social Services integrate rigorous academic curricula with industry-relevant training. This approach ensures that students graduate with the skills to transition seamlessly into professional roles.

Although geographically and culturally distinct, ATU and NC share a common commitment to vocational and applied learning. Both institutions prioritise student-centred approaches and experiential education, emphasising practical applications of academic knowledge. This alignment in values and missions provided a strong foundation for their collaboration.

3.3. The Development of the Partnership

The partnership between ATU and NC evolved over several years, marked by deliberate planning and key milestones:

- i. Initial Connections (2014–2019): The relationship began with initial introductions in 2014, culminating in formal collaboration by 2018 when ATU faculty participated in NC's Early Childhood Education (ECE) programme review. This engagement led to the signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2019, formalizing the institutions' commitment to joint initiatives.
- ii. Experiential Exchanges (2020–2022): Significant step occurred in 2020 with the appointment of a Programme Lead at ATU to oversee the partnership. The first experiential exchange occurred in 2021, with NC students travelling to Ireland for the "Be World Ready" initiative. Reciprocal visits in 2022 further deepened the collaboration.
- iii. Academic Innovation (2023–2024): Collaborative curriculum development culminated in the creation of a new module, "Spaces, Places, and Relationships for Learning, Wellbeing, and

Collaboration" (SPRLWC). The module exemplifies the partnership's commitment to integrating academic rigor with real-world applications.

The evolution of this partnership reflects the institutions' shared vision and determination to create impactful educational opportunities.

3.4. The SPRLWC Module

The SPRLWC module is a cornerstone of the ATU- NC partnership. It is designed to address key themes such as leadership, inclusive learning environments, nature pedagogy, sustainability, and well-being. Developed collaboratively by faculty from both institutions, it reflects their commitment to academic excellence and practical relevance. Learning Outcomes; The module equips students with critical skills and knowledge, including the ability to:

- i. Plan and travel internationally to evaluate learning environments in diverse cultural settings.
- ii. Analyze the role of physical spaces as the "Third Teacher," influencing learning and development.
- iii. Explore pedagogical principles of nature pedagogy from domestic and international perspectives.
- iv. Evaluate leadership theories and their application in educational contexts.
- v. Assess how connected spaces can promote well-being and engagement while addressing challenges.

By focusing on these outcomes, the module fosters a holistic understanding of the interplay between environment, pedagogy, and educational leadership.

3.5. The "Thriving Communities" Programme

The "Thriving Communities" programme offers a unique blend of remote and immersive learning experiences, allowing students to engage dynamically with diverse cultural and academic contexts. Through week-long intensive study trips and asynchronous learning components, the programme bridges theoretical knowledge with practical application.

3.6. Key Benefits

Cross-Cultural Communication Skills: Engaging with peers and faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds enhances students' ability to navigate and collaborate across global contexts.

- Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving: Collaborative projects challenge students to

address real-world issues, fostering adaptability and analytical skills.

- **Sustainability Awareness:** The programme prepares students to address global sustainability challenges by emphasising environmental responsibility.
- **Digital Literacy:** Remote learning components improve technological proficiency, a crucial skill in today's digital economy.
- **Professional Networking:** Opportunities to connect with international professionals and peers expand students' career prospects.

The programme's structure encourages active learning and collaboration, preparing students for success in an increasingly interconnected world

3.7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

The partnership and associated programmes have achieved significant success, challenges emerged that provided valuable lessons for future collaborations.

- **Coordination of Schedules and Processes:** Differing academic calendars and institutional governance structures required careful planning to align timelines and ensure smooth implementation.
- **Data Sharing and Credit Transfer:** Ensuring seamless transfer of academic credits between institutions highlighted the importance of clear agreements and consistent communication.
- **Financial Sustainability:** Balancing program costs with accessibility underscored the need for robust financial planning and support mechanisms.
- **Terminology and Communication:** Differences in terminology, such as "module" versus "course," occasionally led to misunderstandings, emphasising the need for precise communication.

While significant, these challenges were addressed through proactive measures and ongoing dialogue, ensuring the partnership's continued growth and success.

3.8. Future Considerations

The insights gained from the ATU-NC collaboration offer a roadmap for successful international academic partnerships. Key considerations include:

- **Shared Objectives:** Clearly defined goals ensure alignment between institutions and streamline decision-making processes.
- **Consistent Communication:** Regular meetings, both virtual and in-person, foster collaboration and address emerging challenges.
- **Curriculum Co-Design:** Joint development of academic content ensures relevance and alignment with institutional standards.
- **Cultural Integration:** Orientation programs and cross-cultural workshops prepare participants for immersive experiences, enhancing inclusivity.
- **Technological Compatibility:** Integrated learning management systems facilitate seamless access to course materials and assessments.
- **Sustainable Financial Models:** Collaborative funding strategies ensure long-term viability without compromising quality or accessibility.

By prioritizing these elements, future collaborations can replicate and build upon the success of the ATU- NC partnership.

The partnership between Atlantic Technological University and Niagara College exemplifies the transformative potential of international academic collaboration. Through initiatives like the "Thriving Communities" programme and the SPRLWC module, the institutions have created enriching educational opportunities that blend academic excellence with practical applications. By addressing challenges and implementing lessons learned, the partnership has set a benchmark for innovative and impactful cross-border education.

As global education continues to evolve, partnerships like ATU-NC will play a pivotal role in preparing students to navigate complex, interconnected challenges. Their shared vision, commitment to innovation, and emphasis on experiential learning underscore the power of collaboration in shaping the future of higher education.

4. Recommendations for Future Cross-Institutional Programmes

The ATU/NC initiative highlights the transformative potential of cross-border academic collaborations to enrich learning experiences and develop global competencies among students. However, the challenges faced during its implementation offer valuable insights for refining and improving future international programmes. These recommendations provide a framework for

addressing operational, logistical, and pedagogical issues, ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of such collaborations.

Differences in academic schedules and timelines between partnering institutions, such as those encountered by Niagara College and Atlantic Technological University (ATU), complicate programme coordination. Addressing this requires the creation of a unified academic calendar that identifies overlapping timelines and critical deadlines. A shared calendar can streamline the synchronization of key activities, including enrolment, programme delivery, and assessments. Furthermore, a dedicated coordination team comprising representatives from both institutions is essential. This team should oversee communication and logistics, ensuring smoother collaboration and mitigating scheduling conflicts. Employing project management tools to track milestones and responsibilities would further enhance operational efficiency.

Clear and consistent communication is vital for managing cross-institutional programmes. Establishing structured communication protocols, including regular virtual or in-person meetings, precise reporting mechanisms, and centralized documentation, ensures that all stakeholders are informed and aligned. Pre-departure orientation sessions for students and faculty are essential to clarify programme objectives, expectations, and operational processes. These sessions can address credit transfer mechanisms, cultural adjustments, and academic requirements, reducing misunderstandings. Workshops focused on intercultural communication can also prepare participants to navigate the complexities of diverse cultural and academic contexts, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect.

Robust academic frameworks are fundamental to the integrity and credibility of international collaborations. Institutions should prioritise collaborative curriculum design, ensuring that learning outcomes, course content, and assessment criteria meet all participating institutions' regulatory and academic standards. A joint curriculum committee can facilitate this process, ensuring alignment and consistency across the programme. Precise credit transfer mechanisms are equally important. Institutions should formalise these through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) that detail equivalencies between grading systems, course structures, and academic credentials. Transparent communication about these agreements will enhance students' confidence in the programme's academic rigour and value.

Financial sustainability is another critical consideration for cross-institutional programmes. Institutions should explore diverse funding sources, such as government grants, private sponsorships, and institutional subsidies. Providing scholarships or low-interest loan schemes can increase accessibility for

students from varied socio-economic backgrounds. Collaborative budgeting between partner institutions is also crucial. Formal agreements on cost-sharing for programme delivery, faculty travel, and administrative support will ensure that financial responsibilities are distributed equitably.

Technology is a cornerstone of successful international programmes, enabling seamless communication, learning, and data sharing. Ensuring compatibility between partnering institutions' learning management systems (LMS) is critical to providing students and faculty with uninterrupted access to course materials and assessments. Incorporating virtual components, such as online lectures, asynchronous discussions, and digital collaboration tools, can complement in-person activities while enhancing the programme's resilience to disruptions. Adequate training for faculty and students using these technologies is essential to maximize effectiveness.

Cultural competence is integral to the success of international collaborations. Institutions must prioritise cultural sensitivity training for faculty and students to prepare them for intercultural engagement. Pre-departure workshops and ongoing cultural orientation can help participants adapt to different academic and social environments. Furthermore, programme activities should celebrate cultural diversity by incorporating local traditions, languages, and community engagement opportunities. Such efforts enrich the learning experience while fostering greater participant empathy and understanding.

Terminological differences, such as "module" versus "course," can confuse students and faculty. To address this, institutions should develop a shared glossary of terms to standardize language and ensure consistency in communication. This glossary should be included in programme materials to promote clarity and reduce misunderstandings.

In conclusion, the ATU/NC initiative illustrates the value of international academic partnerships in providing transformative educational opportunities. At the same time, it highlights the complexities of implementing such programmes. Addressing scheduling, communication, academic alignment, financial planning, technological integration, cultural awareness, and terminology challenges is crucial to future collaborations' success. By incorporating these recommendations, institutions can create more inclusive, efficient, and impactful cross-border educational programmes, offering students and faculty enriched learning experiences that prepare them to thrive in a globalised world.

5. Conclusion

The evolving landscape of higher education demands innovative approaches to teaching and learning, with blended teaching and learning

emerging as a pivotal model for fostering engagement, flexibility, and inclusivity. This paper underscores the potential of blending traditional methods with digital innovations, especially when complemented by short-term faculty-led study trips. Together, these strategies create dynamic educational environments integrating theoretical knowledge with practical applications, enhancing students' academic, professional, and personal development.

Blended learning has been shown to address the diverse needs of learners by combining the autonomy of online learning with the collaborative benefits of face-to-face interactions. Its integration with short-term study trips further strengthen the impact, offering students immersive experiences that deepen their cultural competence, broaden their academic horizons, and prepare them for the demands of a globalized workforce. However, achieving these outcomes requires deliberate efforts to address challenges such as the digital divide, financial barriers, and institutional coordination.

The case study of the Irish-Canadian academic partnership between Atlantic Technological University and Niagara College illustrates how cross-border collaborations can transform education through initiatives like the "*Thriving Communities*" programme and the "*Spaces, Places, and Relationships for Learning, Wellbeing, and Collaboration*" (SPRLWC) module. These efforts exemplify how institutions can successfully implement blended learning and international exchange programmes to create meaningful educational experiences.

Despite its success, the "*Thriving Communities*" initiative highlights the need for ongoing refinement and collaboration. Addressing challenges related to scheduling, communication, financial sustainability, and cultural integration is crucial to ensure the long-

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