

PREPARING FOR RESPONSIVE BLENDED LEARNING: A STARTING POINT FOR COURSE TEAMS

This guide introduces seven themed conversations that course teams are encouraged to engage in as they implement Responsive Blended Learning for AY2020-21. These key questions will help frame course team planning, encourage innovation in learning and teaching to meet the challenges of the current context, and support staff collaboration across the academic year.

This guide refers to 'course teams'. Other teams e.g. programmes, professional services and project teams may also find it useful to work through these conversations and actions.

INTRODUCING RESPONSIVE BLENDED LEARNING

Responsive Blended Learning combines active, supported online learning and face-to-face support in a way that is pedagogically appropriate and practically deliverable, responding dynamically to particular local contexts.

This approach ensures students can actively participate in their course learning, wherever they begin their studies. Engagement at a distance will be facilitated through provision of resources, live online sessions, tutorials, discussion forums, collaborating on projects, sharing insights from practical work and other appropriate activities. When campus spaces become accessible, appropriate use will be made of these through the priority opening of specialist learning spaces such as labs and studios, and an initial focus on small group interaction.

The move to Responsive Blended Learning is not simply transferring the activities you would have delivered face-to-face into online spaces. It will require some rethinking of how you design and deliver your course. You may need to develop new skills and embrace new practices to inspire learning in online spaces. And you will need to consider how to blend together online and face-to-face support, building community and supporting student learning across a cohort that is likely to be globally dispersed for at least part of the year.

This guide introduces key themes to consider with your course team colleagues. You will be able to pick up and explore these ideas in greater detail in the Learning and Teaching Academy's *Introducing Responsive Blended Learning* module. We encourage you to participate in this module as you develop your plan for AY2020-21.

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Throughout your planning and preparation for the new academic year, be pragmatic about what can be achieved in the time available. This is not the time for wholesale redesign of your course or the development of swathes of high specification new resources. Rather, consider how you can use and adapt available resources. Prioritise developing a clear structure or pathway through the materials and make links to appropriate activities that will support students to engage

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with their learning. Alongside this, take time to familiarise yourself with the tools available and build your confidence in communicating and teaching in online spaces.

The move to delivering more learning online, making enhanced use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) may seem daunting. However, the underlying principles that will guide your practice will remain the same: focus on inspiring learning, on engaging students to learn through 'doing', on encouraging learners to become active participants in their own studies and our global Heriot-Watt learning community.

Keeping care and compassion for your students and for colleagues should remain your top priority across all learning and teaching decisions. The conditions we are living, studying and working in are likely to remain challenging for some considerable time. These [Top Tips for Supporting Learning Online](#) at a time of crisis may be helpful in guiding your practice.

RESPONSIVE BLENDED LEARNING IN PRACTICE



THEMED DISCUSSIONS FOR COURSE TEAMS PREPARING FOR AY2020-21

As course teams, you are encouraged to consider seven key questions as you prepare for AY2020-21.

1. How can we strengthen course teams, build collegiality, and work across campuses?

Moving to deliver courses via the RBL model will work best if a strong course team approach is adopted. Supporting learning in a blended way will require staff time and will involve the upfront adaptation of learning resources and courses. Having a course team with complementary skills, ensuring individuals are not working in isolation, will help you to pool resources, share materials, and work together to tackle challenges. This also ensures flexibility and sustainability of teaching should a team member become unavailable for any reason. On a practical level, delivering teaching in a blended model can benefit from team teaching, particularly when supporting large groups or when there are cohorts split between on-campus students and those who remain at a distance.

ACTION: In preparation for a move to RBL, take practical steps to strengthen your course team.

- Course teams work best when they encompass a breadth of expertise, bringing together academic and professional services colleagues. Consider who you need on the course team, taking into account the skills and experiences

of colleagues on all campuses. Ensure that staff are working collaboratively on the course and have clear and complementary roles. Arrange regular team meetings to share insights on the cohort and keep communication open.

- Prioritise building a positive course team culture that recognises the contexts in which colleagues are working in. This includes practical issues such as time zones, working week, and consideration of team members' work-life contexts and constraints. Be inclusive in how you meet and work, rotating meeting times and establishing lines for asynchronous communication as well as 'live' discussions.
- Create opportunities for student participation in course team work. Including student voices in the design of teaching can bring fresh ideas and perspectives to your work.
- Reflect on how your course currently operates across different campuses. Do you work as one course, sharing resources or do you have distinct delivery across each campus? Are there strengths you can build on or synergies which can be developed? Closer collaboration, team-teaching and resource sharing will strengthen the course team and the global learning community that students and staff are part of.
- Take into consideration global time zones in scheduling 'live' sessions. Make best use of your global staff team (if applicable) to support active engagement, particularly any proposed live sessions, at campus / time zone appropriate times. Establish a strong team-teaching approach. This will help you support student interaction across online and face-to-face contexts with care, focusing on unified communication and joined-up working.

2. What does adapting the course for responsive blended learning really mean? What will the course team need to do to blend online and face-to-face learning?

You will need to adapt elements of your teaching practice to ensure they can be delivered effectively in an online environment. This requires you as a course team to consider how the course is structured so that students are clear on what they should be doing at each point in the course, and so that the learning is well paced across each block of study. Providing a study schedule for students explaining what they should do each week, identifying key activities and points of 'live' engagement is an effective means of ensuring students are clear on when and how to engage. Alternatively providing study materials on a week-by-week basis can help students pace their learning and focus their studies.

You need to consider how course learning outcomes are delivered. Given the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that physical distancing restrictions will impact on how face-to-face support can be offered. This may mean that some aspects of the course will need to be delivered differently in order to meet the learning outcomes. You may even have some learning outcomes that you cannot deliver in the current context. Identify these as a priority to ensure any adaptation and associated institutional and / or accrediting body discussions / approval of the adaptation can take place. Even if the learning outcomes remain the same, the method of delivery or the activities undertaken to achieve them may need to be changed. This may require changes to the course materials.

Focus particular attention on induction and early course support for students, the majority of whom will have experienced significant disruption to their studies in AY2019-20. Students may not be starting their studies with the same experience or understanding as previous groups. Take time to explore with students how their learning has been impacted by the global disruption. Reassure them that you are able to support them. Consider adapting the pace of learning to enable them to develop / consolidate the foundation skills and knowledge needed for the course and to develop their confidence from the start.

Thinking through the learning outcomes and overall course structure will then lead you to consider the activities and learning events you ask student to participate in. Consider, for example, whether lectures (either delivered 'live' or recorded) are really the best way of engaging students with the material. Shorter audio-visual input, combined with activities to inspire discussion and engagement, can be more effective in encouraging active participation and engagement with materials. The course activities you introduce should all contribute to students meeting the course learning outcomes (and by extension the programme learning outcomes). Use appropriate activities to achieve this. Don't just use activities as a form of virtual presenteeism.

Many students are likely to begin their learning at a distance. Be sensitive to time zones, potential challenges with internet access, and shared home / learning spaces.

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ACTION: In preparation for a move to RBL, review your course learning outcomes and the pace of learning and teaching through the semester.

- Review your course learning outcomes. Are there any that will be challenging / impossible to deliver in a blended or online format?
- Review your existing course structure. What are the critical features that you need to retain? Will a rescheduling of aspects of the course be needed? Where is there scope for adaptation to deliver in a structured and supported way through the VLE?
- Consider the pace of study and the expectations you have of the knowledge and experience students will have when they join the course. Can you add additional support e.g. as part of induction, to support students whose study through 2020 has been disrupted?
- Review the coursework and activities. Will they meaningfully contribute to the students achieving the learning outcomes? Will students be able to engage effectively with these in online or blended mode? Will students be able to engage even if they have limited access to the internet, are in different time zones, or have disabilities or other additional requirements? Discuss what activities may help scaffold, support and extend student learning in each week of study. Ensure these are meaningful and relate directly to the learning required and / or strengthen the course learning community.
- Are there any professional and accrediting body considerations and requirements that will need addressed?
- The Introducing Responsive Blended Learning module will offer practical hints and tips on how to develop appropriate live and asynchronous learning activities and structure your course content. You may find it useful to undertake this module alongside your course team colleagues.

All students will remain part of the same cohort. While they may experience the blend of face-to-face and online support in different ways, the academic experience will be equivalent and the academic standards identical.

3. What will assessment look like in Academic Year 2020-21?

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has ruled out the possibility of traditional face-to-face exams for the present time. Where face-to-face exams were planned, staff will need to develop alternative ways of assessing their students.

This may involve repurposing existing exams as take-home assessments, as many courses did for the spring 2020 exam diet. As we look to AY2020-21, course teams do have a little more time and opportunity to rethink their assessment in a more comprehensive way.

The most important factor when developing an alternative assessment is that it remains focused on the course learning outcomes. Not every assessment needs to address every one of these learning outcomes, but every learning outcome should be assessed at some point in the course.

ACTION: In preparation for a move to RBL, identify the key assessments in the course and consider how they could be adapted for remote delivery and submission.

- Consider whether all proposed assessment is required. Reducing the number of assessments may be possible whilst still ensuring all learning outcomes are addressed.
- Review existing assessments and consider what adaptations to the assessment content and / or marking regime will be required to enable remote completion and submission.
- Ensure that any proposed changes are in alignment with course and programme learning outcomes and highlight any potential challenges associated with professional body expectations that may need explored. Check the current position and what opportunities exist to work with professional bodies to work through alternative approaches to meeting learning outcomes.
- Plan how you will communicate assessment requirements and expectations to students well in advance of the assessments. Will they require support or practice opportunities to engage in alternative assessments? Students will only be able to accurately demonstrate their ability if they have a good understanding of what the assessment requires them to do.
- The Introducing Responsive Blended Learning module will offer ideas on alternative assessments, including the use of VLE assessment tools.

4. How can we create an engaging Learning Hub for our course?

Heriot-Watt's virtual learning environment (VLE) will be the key hub for learning in academic year 2020-21. Course teams are encouraged to develop their course site as a space for interaction and engagement. Students will use this to access course resources, participate in group discussion and activities, and work collaboratively to shape their own learning and share insights with peers.

A common VLE structure has been introduced to ease navigation for students and staff. Course teams are encouraged to familiarise themselves with this and use it as the starting point when developing their course for the start of the new academic year.

Engagement in the virtual learning environment should focus on active learning rather than simply be a repository for materials. This will be a key space for interaction across the course learning community. Students will be able to use this space to interact formally and informally with peers to establish connections that will support and inspire learning.

Having a clear course team presence in the VLE will encourage students to engage in the learning community. This includes offering defined virtual office hours, and providing regular communication and engagement in the course e.g. through announcements, activities and engagement in discussions with students. It is also important to set clear expectations regarding communication with the team and the etiquette required of everyone participating in the course.

ACTION: In preparation for a move to RBL, review your existing course VLE site (including any campus-specific variants) to identify areas for enhancement.

- Review your existing course site(s) on the VLE. If there is more than one course site relating to the same course, identify the reasons for this and consider whether this is necessary for AY2020-21. It may be possible to create variants of a course within the same course site rather than creating duplicates. The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Service (LTES) can provide advice on this.
- If working across multiple campuses, share your resources and materials and discuss the approach you will be taking. Where you are required to have campus-specific versions of a course site, ensure that you are sharing resources across the whole course team and that a common structure and approach is adopted across the whole course.

We will need to be creative in our approaches, focusing on the learning outcomes and developing new ways of enabling students to achieve them.

- The VLE provides tools to engage in live and asynchronous learning. Consider which activities can be delivered and engaged in asynchronously and where synchronous learning is essential. The *Introducing Responsive Blended Learning* module and associated guidance notes will support you to update your course site on the VLE to incorporate the Heriot-Watt VLE structure.

5. What can we practically do to support students who are on campus alongside those who are still studying at a distance?

This is perhaps the most important – and most challenging – aspect of Responsive Blended Learning. It is likely that students will begin their studies in a range of locations. Some students may be able to return to campuses and engage in a blend of face-to-face and online activity, others will remain off campus and engage solely online. All students will remain part of the same cohort. While they may experience the blend of face-to-face and online support in different ways, the academic experience will be equivalent and the academic standards identical.

ACTION: In preparation for a move to RBL, focus on how you can provide opportunities for students to learn from each other and work together.

- Develop student collaborative activity that includes on campus and distance students working together. For example, use discussion boards to provide opportunities for formal and informal discussions across the whole cohort.
- Use the VLE Learning Hub activities as a focal point for student engagement, reflection and sharing of learning.

For continuing students, check that you are aware of any additional requirements and that all students are aware of the student wellbeing services and disability support provided by the university.

6. What can we do about practice-based learning that needs to take place in labs, studios or maker-spaces, through fieldtrips, or requires access to specialist equipment?

As we begin to work through our plans for learning and teaching in AY20-21, there are specific areas of teaching practice that will be particularly challenging to provide in online environment. How to support lab work, fieldtrips, studio work and maker space activity, for example, will need significant adjustment. There are no simple answers. We will need to be creative in our approaches, focusing on the learning outcomes and developing new ways of enabling students to achieve them.

ACTION: In preparation for a move to RBL, map out possible scenarios and consider the action you will take as a course team in each case.

- Four scenarios require consideration.
 - + No access to campus learning spaces (labs, studios, etc) or fieldwork.
 - + Staff only access to learning spaces (labs, studios, etc).
 - + Physically-distanced campus attendance or fieldwork.
 - + Differential attendance by campus, home country of students.

Think about how you might address each of these scenarios, ensuring that students and staff will remain safe whilst engaging in each space. Consider how you might prioritise access.

- Keep focused on learning outcomes as the focal point of your decisions: Can they still be met, or do they need to change? If they cannot be met in the timeframe of the course as it stands, is there the possibility of addressing these at later points in the programme? Consider creative alternative approaches to meeting learning outcomes.

7. How can we ensure our course is accessible to all students?

Learning and teaching in blended mode provides opportunities to enhance accessibility for some students, however it can also create barriers for others. It is important to consider what accessibility requirements students may have. Many of the VLE tools have accessibility features built in or interact well with assistive technology. There are also steps you can take to ensure that your sessions are accessible for as many students as possible e.g. checking resources for accessibility, providing materials in formats which can be personalised to suit the student's needs.

Regular / reliable access to the internet may be challenging for some students. Providing asynchronous activities which they can engage with at a time and location convenient to them will facilitate access. Similarly, if providing live online sessions, remember that not all students will be in a quiet study place when they join the session. This may impact on their ability to engage fully e.g. speak using a mic, use their video etc. Design live sessions with this in mind and consider what alternative options can be provided for students.

ACTION: In preparation for a move to RBL, consider how you will ensure accessibility for all of your students.

- Think about the blend of live and asynchronous activities. Are there any activities which could be provided on an asynchronous basis to ensure more students can engage with them?
- Review course materials and your course site on the VLE to ensure that they are designed to promote accessibility.
- For continuing students, check that you are aware of any additional requirements and that all students are aware of the student wellbeing services and disability support provided by the university. Encourage students to get in touch if they have any additional requirements or their requirements have changed due to working online or in blended mode.
- Read the **Supporting Accessible Learning Online guide** for further suggestions on how to ensure your course is accessible. The Introducing Responsive Blended Learning module provides further guidance on ensuring accessibility of your course for all students.

FIRST STEPS IN PREPARING FOR RBL

- Download the **Preparing for Responsive Blended Learning: Record of Actions** and **RBL Course Mapping Tool**.
- Get to know your Global Course Team and establish a common approach to student learning and support for AY2020-21.
- Share and review existing materials, considering how they will be used in a blended approach.
- Familiarise yourself with your course site(s) on the virtual learning environment.
- Review Heriot-Watt's **Supporting Student Learning Online (SSLO) Toolkit**. It offers a useful refresh of the basic communication and learning tools available.
- Sign up to participate in the **Introducing Responsive Blended Learning module** available to Heriot-Watt University staff. This can be undertaken via a self-study or cohort-based pathway.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Further support is available from the **Learning and Teaching Academy** and **Learning and Teaching Enhancement Service**.

Resources are available to support individuals and course teams to develop the skills and confidence to deliver Responsive Blended Learning. As a starting point, you may find it useful to explore these resources:

Supporting Student Learning Online Toolkit. This offers an introduction to communication and supporting student learning online.

Digital education Watt Works Guides. This collection contains a range of written and video guides on digital education.

Assessment Watt Works guides. These introduce a range of practical and pedagogic consideration related to assessment and feedback.

In At The Deep End: Starting to Teach at Heriot-Watt University. This provides a general introduction to learning and teaching in higher education, offering practical hints and tips across a range of topics.



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