# A close up of a logo Description automatically generatedlogo of the higher education commission Call for Evidence: Digitally Enhanced Approach to Blended Learning

**Overview**

Policy Connect, through the Higher Education Commission, is conducting an inquiry into how higher education (HE) providers, learners, and educators can leverage the benefits of blended learning, defined as the combination of on-site and online/digital learning.[[1]](#footnote-2) The resulting report will make practical recommendations for an engaging and immersive education system that prepares graduates for the modern workforce.

The purpose of this Call for Evidence is to gather insights from industry professionals, academics, and members of civil society. We want to learn about the practices, case studies, and frameworks for blended learning that are being used across the HE sector.

# Instructions

The questions are grouped into 5 themes:

1. Inclusion, accessibility, and widening participation
2. Digital skills, capabilities, and literacy (of staff and students)
3. Graduate outcomes and employability
4. Emerging technology and edtech procurement
5. Regulation and governance of the transition to digital

You do not have to respond to all the questions. The deadline for submission of evidence is **Friday 22nd December 2023 at 11:59 pm** (we are unable to extend this deadline). Evidence should be submitted to: [alyson.hwang@policyconnect.org.uk](mailto:alyson.hwang@policyconnect.org.uk).

For more information about Policy Connect or the inquiry, please [visit our website](https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/education-and-skills) or contact [alyson.hwang@policyconnect.org.uk](mailto:alyson.hwang@policyconnect.org.uk)

**Research Questions**

Inclusion, accessibility, and widening participation

1. How can universities deliver blended learning in a way that helps improve the experience and outcomes for traditionally disadvantaged students? Please provide any examples that demonstrate this.
2. What steps can HE providers take to address digital poverty among students and/or reduce the impact of digital poverty on the learning experience? Please provide examples.

Digital skills, capabilities, and literacy (of staff and students)

1. How can universities overcome the gaps in digital literacy and confidence that some staff experience? What initiatives have been successful in motivating educators to engage with digital technology?
2. Which aspects of the current HE system must be addressed to ensure that the acquisition of digital skills, capabilities, and literacy be considered a key outcome of university degrees? How can HE providers achieve this outcome?

Graduate outcomes and employability

1. How are careers advisors in universities/colleges utilising digital tools to deliver services/guidance? Please provide an example.
2. Are you aware of any examples where teaching can be delivered online but face-to-face teaching has been used instead because this is preferred by employers, or the rules set by professional regulators (e.g. Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies*)*?
3. How can the sector improve collaboration between employers and institutions using digital technology (e.g. digital work experience)? What needs to happen to encourage this partnership?

Emerging technology and edtech procurement

1. What should policymakers do to help universities and colleges improve the way they procure edtech?
2. How can the HE sector ensure that education innovation is driven primarily by pedagogical deliberations rather than private sector interests?

Regulation and governance of the transition to digital

1. Are the current regulators succeeding in measuring or assessing the quality of blended HE provision? If no, what can they do to make assessments more effective?
2. [The Department for Education has a digital standard for schools and colleges.](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/meeting-digital-and-technology-standards-in-schools-and-colleges) What should be included in a standard for HE providers? You may wish to focus on an area of particular interest, e.g. cyber, digital poverty, or data ethics.

**Additional Evidence**

Please feel free to send any additional evidence or information that might support our inquiry but has not been covered in our research questions (please do this by attaching a separate document to your email in either **Microsoft Word or PDF format**). We are particularly keen on papers, data, or reports that you or your organisation have completed. We would appreciate any data submissions, statistics or case studies showing what works and what does not.

**Submission Permissions**

Kindly let us know whether we have your permission for the following:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Yes** | **No** |
| Do you give permission for the report to quote your submission? |  |  |
| May we attribute the submission to the organisation you belong to? |  |  |
| May we attribute the submission to you personally, listing your job role? |  |  |

You can contact us to remove permission at any time before the report is published in 2024.

**About Policy Connect**

Policy Connect is a cross-party think tank. We specialise in supporting parliamentary groups, forums, and commissions, delivering impactful policy research and event programmes, and bringing together parliamentarians and government in collaboration with academia, business, and civil society to help shape public policy in Westminster and Whitehall, so as to improve people’s lives. Our Work focusses on five key policy areas which are: Education & Skills; Industry, Technology & Innovation; Sustainability; Health; and Assistive & Accessible Technology.

We are a social enterprise and are funded by a combination of regular annual membership subscriptions and time-limited sponsorships. We are proud to be a Disability Confident and London Living Wage employer, and a member of Social Enterprise UK.

**Appendix: Background of Inquiry – Blended Learning**

Terminology

The terminology of ‘blended learning’ has been heavily contested, with multiple interpretations of how it should be implemented across higher education (HE). According to the Quality Assurance Agency of Higher Education (QAA), the terms ‘blended learning’ and ‘hybrid learning’ are used interchangeably across the HE sector. They both describe different delivery models that use mixed methods to engage students, with providers using both terms to describe students’ engagement with learning that partly occurs in a digital environment, and partly in-person. Digital environments can encompass both remote and onsite learning, whilst in-person learning refers to onsite learning. It is important to note that the term ‘blended’ refers to the mixture of modes, rather than the mixture of on-site and remote teaching. Blended learning is more prevalent in the UK HE sector, and thus our current proposal is the terminology used for this inquiry.

Development of blended learning in UK HE

Blended learning combines digital materials and opportunities for online interaction with in-person delivery. Use of blended learning has long been an established aspect of teaching in higher education, in the UK and around the world. However, in response to the first national Covid-19 lockdown, in March 2020, HE providers paused in-person teaching and moved to fully online provision. By November 2020, 93% of undergraduates and 89% of postgraduates received all or mostly digital teaching and learning.[[2]](#footnote-3) As social distancing guidance was relaxed, most providers resumed in-person delivery. But the sector has not returned to provisions pre-pandemic*.* In many cases, the model of blended learning now favours digital delivery more than before the pandemic – and includes fewer in-person ‘contact hours.’[[3]](#footnote-4)

1. Refer to appendix for further context. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Barber, M. (2021). “[Gravity Assist: propelling higher education towards a brighter future](https://ofslivefs.blob.core.windows.net/files/Gravity%20assist/Gravity-assist-DTL-finalforweb.pdf)”, Office for Students. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)