

Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) - Digital Transition, Law, and International Markets: a case study

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Abstract

The Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), hosted by the Polytechnic of Porto in collaboration with European partner institutions, exemplifies an innovative approach to interdisciplinary education in the context of European higher education transformation. This article examines the programme's design and implementation, combining virtual and onsite methods to address global challenges related to digital transformation, legal frameworks, and international trade. Through a qualitative methodology, incorporating document analysis and participant observation, the study explores how the BIP model successfully integrates diverse pedagogical approaches while fostering cross-cultural collaboration among participants from six European countries. Key outcomes are presented, emphasizing participants' development of intercultural and digital skills, as well as challenges encountered during the programme's implementation, including technical difficulties and time constraints. The findings underscore the significance of the BIP model in promoting internationalization and interdisciplinarity in European higher education, while also suggesting improvements for future iterations such as expanded thematic scope and enhanced IT infrastructure. This case study contributes to ongoing discussions about innovative educational practices in the Erasmus+ framework and offers insights for institutions seeking to implement similar blended learning initiatives.

Keywords: *Blended Intensive Programme; interdisciplinary education; digital transformation; legal frameworks; international trade.*

1. Introduction

Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), an initiative under the Erasmus+ framework, combine both virtual and face-to-face components to foster innovative pedagogical practices. These programs are organized by, at least, three Higher Education Institutions from different countries

participating in Erasmus+, aiming to promote innovative teaching and learning methods. Research literature widely recognizes these programs' potential to enhance educational flexibility and accessibility while developing students' digital literacy and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, blended learning represents the thoughtful integration of face-to-face and online learning experiences, fundamentally redesigning the educational approach to optimize student engagement through the effective combination of both modalities, as conceptualized in Garrison and Vaughan's Community of Inquiry framework.¹ Additionally, blended learning is recognized as an effective strategy for promoting intercultural collaboration, since it facilitates preliminary virtual interactions between participants from diverse cultural backgrounds prior to in-person engagement.²

Collaborative learning approaches further enhance academic performance and interpersonal skills, providing students with essential competencies for international collaboration.³

The Erasmus+ Programme Guide emphasises innovative teaching methods, including blended learning, stating that “*blended learning enhances flexibility and accessibility in education, combining face-to-face interaction with virtual tools*”.⁴

Nevertheless, scholarly discussions about BIPs have predominantly relied upon official Erasmus+ documents and perspectives, rarely incorporating complementary theoretical frameworks or critically examining diverse scholarly viewpoints.

Thus, this article aims to fill this gap by critically examining the structure, methodology, and outcomes of the Blended Intensive Programme conducted by the Polytechnic of Porto, specifically addressing the interconnectedness of digital transformation, law, and international trade within an interdisciplinary educational setting.

The BIP, conducted in October 2024, involved participants from six European countries (Lithuania, Germany, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Spain), combining virtual instruction and onsite immersion. Its primary goal was to address pressing global issues by engaging students and academics in challenge-based learning. This paper examines the programme's structure, pedagogical innovations, thematic challenges, and outcomes. It also highlights the BIP as a model for interdisciplinary and internationalised higher education.

¹ Garrison, D. R., & Vaughan, N. D. (2008). *Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. DOI:10.1002/9781118269558. Publisher: John Wiley & Sons. ISBN: 9780787987701, pp 13-30.

² Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241-266.

³ Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2014). Cooperative Learning: Improving University Instruction by Basing Practice on Validated Theory. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 25(4), 85-118.

⁴ European Commission. (2021). *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021–2027*.

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The study sample consisted of a total of 33 students, 22 of whom were female and 11 male, with an average age of 21. Students from the following universities took part: Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (Lithuania) - 6 participants; Schmalkalden University of Applied Sciences (Germany) - 3; Universidad de León (Spain) - 6; Kauno Kolegija (Lithuania) - 6; Romanian-American University (Romania) - 2; International School for Social and Business Studies (Slovenia) - 3; and Porto Polytechnic School of Technology and Management (Portugal) - 7. With regard to the areas of study of their respective degrees, the participants were divided into: Business and Administration (14), Law (7), Marketing and Advertising (7), Information and Communication Technologies; Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (2) and Economics (1). As for the level of study, 28 students are studying for a bachelor's degree and 5 for a master's degree.

The teaching staff in mobility is characterised by 6 professors, one male and 5 females. They came from universities in Spain (2), Lithuania (2) and Romania (2). In addition, 11 professors from the host institution took part in the activities.

2. The Structure of the Blended Intensive Programme

The BIP unfolded over two distinct phases: a virtual phase (7th–11th October) and an onsite phase in Felgueiras, Portugal (20th–26th October). Each phase contributed uniquely to the programme's objectives.

The virtual phase laid the theoretical groundwork through interactive webinars on topics such as digital governance, trade compliance, and the regulatory impact of emerging technologies. This stage fostered cross-border collaboration by grouping participants into multinational teams, ensuring diverse perspectives and mutual learning. Participants prepared for the onsite phase by engaging with preliminary readings, discussions, and resource-sharing via digital platforms.

The onsite phase focused on practical applications and cultural immersion. Participants engaged in workshops led by academic and industry experts, exploring complex topics such as consumer protection, digital arbitration, and artificial intelligence. In addition to academic activities, visits to cultural and industrial landmarks, such as the city of Guimarães and the “Quinta da Lixa” winery, provided context to discussions on local economic practices and global markets.

This combination of academic depth and cultural engagement exemplified the holistic nature of the BIP. So, we can say that: *“Collaborative programs foster intercultural competence, teamwork, and problem-solving skills among students.”*⁵

3. Pedagogical Approach and Methodology

The BIP employed a blended learning model that merged theoretical insights with hands-on problem-solving. This approach leveraged the strengths of virtual and in-person formats, ensuring a robust and multifaceted learning experience.

⁵ Deardorff, D. K. (2006). *op. cit.*

A key feature of the programme was its challenge-based methodology. Participants were assigned specific global issues to investigate and propose solutions, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. These challenges spanned a range of interdisciplinary themes, requiring participants to combine knowledge from law, economics, technology, and social sciences.

There were interactive sessions; lectures on which experts discussed several topics; group projects, giving the opportunity to students from different countries to collaborate on projects; cultural exchange (as we already told) and final presentations, giving the opportunity to each group to present their project at the end of the event.

Assessment criteria were designed to evaluate both individual and group contributions. Participation during sessions accounted for 20% of the assessment, while research depth and collaboration contributed 30%. The remaining 50% was allocated to the quality of final presentations, which included poster displays and oral defences. This comprehensive evaluation framework ensured that participants were rewarded for active engagement, teamwork, and intellectual rigour.

There are several benefits for students: *“Blended learning can enhance student engagement, improve learning outcomes, and provide greater flexibility.”*⁶

We also highlight the impact of collaborative learning: *“Participatory and collaborative learning approaches have a positive impact on academic performance and interpersonal skills.”*⁷

4. Thematic Challenges

The Blended Intensive Programme was structured around twelve thematic challenges that addressed real-world issues at the intersection of digital transformation, law, and global markets. These challenges served as focal points for research and discussion, requiring participants to draw upon multiple fields and fostering an appreciation for the complexity of global issues. Although diverse, these challenges can be grouped into four major thematic clusters, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the digital transition in international contexts.

The first cluster focused on digital trade and economic integration, encompassing challenges such as Digitalisation and International Trade Agreements, Global Trade Compliance, and Digital Taxation in the EU. Participants analysed the modernization of customs, the integration

⁶ Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2010). Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>

⁷ Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2014), *op. cit.*

of e-commerce into trade policies, and the legal implications of digital services taxes. Teams specifically explored blockchain's role in trade transparency, regulatory technology (RegTech) adoption, and the design of digital services taxes in accordance with OECD initiatives for international cooperation.

A second group addressed regulatory and legal frameworks, including topics like Data Privacy in the Digital Age, Consumer Protection in E-Commerce, and International Arbitration in the Digital Era. Students explored the application of GDPR in cross-border data transfers, AI-assisted arbitration, and mechanisms like online dispute resolution systems, all of which exemplify how digital transformation reshapes traditional legal procedures. Key discussions centered on privacy-enhancing technologies, transparency in digital transactions, and the enforceability of digital arbitration agreements in virtual proceedings.

The third cluster highlighted technological innovation and governance, with challenges such as Artificial Intelligence and Legal Systems, Regulation of Digital Assets and Cryptocurrencies, and Digital Identity and Global Mobility. Participants critically examined emerging regulatory frameworks for AI and blockchain, including the rise of central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) and digital identity solutions based on biometric verification. Important topics included liability in AI-driven decision-making, anti-money laundering measures for cryptocurrencies, and blockchain-based identity verification systems.

Finally, a fourth cluster considered socio-political implications of digitalisation, exploring challenges like Social Media's Role in International Relations, Intellectual Property Rights in the Digital Context, and The EU Digital Single Market. These discussions raised questions about platform governance, IP enforcement in the context of AI-generated content, and the impact of the Digital Services Act on harmonisation across the EU. Teams analyzed strategies for combating disinformation campaigns, digital copyright enforcement, and the implications of geoblocking and platform interoperability within the European context.

By tackling these grouped challenges, participants developed interdisciplinary solutions while engaging with diverse legal, economic, and technological dimensions of digital transformation, demonstrating the programme's commitment to addressing complex global issues through cross-disciplinary collaboration.

5. Outcomes and Reflections

Students reported gaining valuable digital and intercultural skills, and many expressed interest in future collaborations. The staff praised the engagement and creativity of the students, as well as the smooth coordination and cooperation between institutions.

The BIP achieved significant outcomes that underscore its success as an educational initiative.

The programme successfully met its goals, fostering teamwork, innovation, and intercultural exchange. The programme also strengthened ties between partner universities, paving the way for future projects and collaborations.

Students gained new perspectives on sustainability, digital education, and global collaboration. The BIP left a positive impact on all participants, highlighting the power of combining virtual and physical learning experiences.

Academically, it enhanced participants' understanding of critical global trends, equipping them with tools to navigate the legal and economic dimensions of digital transformation. The collaborative nature of the programme encouraged the exchange of ideas, leading to innovative solutions to complex problems.

Culturally, the programme promoted intercultural understanding. Students from diverse backgrounds learned to appreciate different perspectives, an essential skill in today's interconnected world. The onsite phase further enriched this experience by exposing participants to Portuguese culture and its integration into global markets.

However, the programme also highlighted areas for improvement. Time zone differences during the virtual phase occasionally hampered interaction, and some technical issues disrupted digital sessions. Additionally, the intensive onsite schedule left limited time for deeper exploration of certain challenges.

6. Discussion and Implications for Higher Education

The BIP demonstrates the potential of blended programmes to address complex global challenges while fostering academic and cultural growth. By integrating virtual and onsite components, the programme maximised accessibility and inclusivity, allowing participants from diverse locations to engage meaningfully.

This model has broader implications for higher education. First, it highlights the importance of interdisciplinarity in tackling global issues. Legal frameworks, technological advances, and market dynamics are increasingly interconnected, requiring students to adopt holistic approaches. Second, it underscores the value of international collaboration in fostering innovation and mutual understanding.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The BIP represents a paradigm shift in higher education, combining academic rigour with real-world relevance. Its success lies in its ability to integrate diverse disciplines, cultures, and pedagogical methods into a cohesive learning experience.

To build on this success, future iterations of the programme should consider expanding its thematic scope to include emerging areas such as environmental law and digital ethics. Enhanced IT infrastructure and extended timelines for onsite activities would also address some of the challenges identified. Furthermore, longitudinal assessments of participants' career trajectories could provide valuable insights into the programme's long-term impact.

By promoting innovation, collaboration, and cultural exchange, the BIP offers a model for preparing students to thrive in an increasingly complex and digitalised world.

We can summarize with an overarching statement about the importance of programs like BIP: *"Blended learning programs under initiatives like Erasmus+ play a crucial role in fostering international collaboration, developing key skills, and addressing sustainability goals."*⁸

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