



Evaluating the Impact of Blended Learning Models on Higher Education Outcomes: A Multidimensional Analysis

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Abstract

Blended learning (BL), which combines online digital tools with traditional face-to-face instruction, has gained increasing prominence in higher education, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. This study conducts a systematic review of 50 peer-reviewed empirical studies (2020–2024) to evaluate the impact of BL on academic performance, student engagement, and learner satisfaction. The results reveal that BL enhances learning outcomes when supported by responsive instruction, flexible access, and structured digital platforms, particularly in STEM disciplines. However, the effectiveness of BL is highly context-dependent. Disciplines relying on interpretive and dialogic learning, as well as under-resourced institutions, often experience minimal or negative effects, especially in asynchronous-heavy models. The review also identifies a decline in student engagement beyond the fourth week in flex-only formats, suggesting that synchronous interaction is critical for sustained motivation and retention. Key barriers to effective implementation include faculty workload, digital inequality, and institutional inertia. Addressing these challenges requires structured faculty development, investment in accessible technology, and alignment with discipline-specific pedagogy. This review affirms the pedagogical value of BL but emphasizes the need for inclusive, adaptive, and strategically supported approaches to ensure its sustainable integration across diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Blended learning, educational technology, higher education, learning outcomes, student engagement.

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Introduction

The digital transformation of the 21st century has permeated every facet of society, with higher education experiencing one of the most profound shifts. As educational institutions grapple with the dual pressures of technological disruption and evolving learner expectations, innovative pedagogical models have emerged to bridge traditional and digital paradigms. Chief among these is Blended Learning (BL), a pedagogical framework that strategically integrates face-to-face (synchronous) instruction with online (asynchronous) learning modalities to create a more flexible, personalized, and engaging learning experience (Vo et al., 2024). The evolution of BL is not merely a product of technological advancement but also a response to global educational challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical inflection point, forcing institutions worldwide to pivot rapidly to remote and hybrid models of instruction (Hassan Abuhassna et al., 2022). This crisis underscored the necessity of resilient, adaptive teaching frameworks, propelling BL from an optional innovation to a pedagogical imperative (Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2021). While initially implemented as a stopgap solution, the long-term sustainability of BL lies in its capacity to transcend emergency remote teaching and evolve into a well-structured, evidence-based instructional approach. Blended learning offers numerous pedagogical advantages. Its dual-mode design enables scalability, supports differentiated instruction, fosters digital literacy, and cultivates self-directed learning competencies all of which are essential in preparing graduates for the demands of a global knowledge economy (Anthony et al., 2022).

Furthermore, BL leverages data analytics, learning management systems (LMS), and AI-powered platforms to provide continuous feedback, enhance learning outcomes, and inform instructional decision-making. Nevertheless, despite the growing adoption and theoretical promise of BL, empirical findings about its impact remain heterogeneous. Variations in institutional readiness, faculty expertise, technological infrastructure, and student demographics lead to inconsistent outcomes. For example, while some studies report enhanced academic achievement and increased learner satisfaction, others indicate minimal gains or even negative effects in disciplines less amenable to digital instruction (Bokolo et al., 2020). This divergence underscores the need for a systematic and nuanced evaluation of BL's efficacy across diverse higher education settings. Given this backdrop, the present study undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the impact of blended learning in higher education, aiming to consolidate current empirical evidence and inform best practices.

Specifically, it seeks to address three interrelated research questions that form the foundation of this investigation. What is the impact of different blended learning models on academic performance in higher education institutions? This question probes how various structural designs of BL (e.g., flipped classroom, rotation model, enriched virtual) influence cognitive and performance-based learning outcomes across disciplines. How do blended learning environments influence student engagement and satisfaction across different academic contexts? Here, the focus is on affective and behavioral dimensions, namely, how students perceive BL environments in terms of interactivity, motivation, usability, and overall learning experience. What

implementation strategies optimize the effectiveness of blended learning in diverse educational contexts? This final question addresses the operational and institutional variables necessary for successful BL adoption, including faculty training, curriculum design, equity considerations, and policy frameworks. By synthesizing findings from interdisciplinary literature and case studies, this study aims to generate a robust conceptual and empirical foundation for the optimized deployment of BL in higher education. The goal is not only to evaluate what works, but to understand why, for whom, and under what conditions blended learning can serve as a sustainable and transformative force in 21st-century education.

The deployment of Blended Learning (BL) in higher education draws upon a range of theoretical perspectives that underpin its design, implementation, and evaluation. As an instructional modality that bridges traditional face-to-face learning with digital components, BL is not a monolithic approach but rather a continuum of practices shaped by pedagogical, cognitive, and technological paradigms. This section delineates the key theoretical models and conceptual frameworks that inform the understanding of BL, followed by a taxonomy of commonly adopted BL models and the metrics used to evaluate their effectiveness. Blended learning is grounded in several interrelated educational theories that inform both its instructional design and learner impact. Constructivist theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experience and reflection (Bozkurt, 2022). BL aligns with constructivist principles by providing learners with opportunities to interact with content, instructors, and peers across physical and digital platforms. Social constructivism, as articulated by Vygotsky (Tong et al., 2022), emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development, an aspect inherently supported by BL through online forums, collaborative tools, and synchronous discussions.

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) (Cao, 2023) suggests that instructional design must manage the cognitive load imposed on learners. BL, when appropriately structured, can distribute content delivery over time and modalities, helping reduce extraneous cognitive load and promoting deeper understanding. By enabling students to control the pace and sequence of their learning, BL facilitates improved information processing and long-term retention. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Platonova et al., 2022) focuses on learner motivation, identifying autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs. BL fosters autonomy through asynchronous elements, competence via interactive content and formative assessments, and relatedness through social learning tools, thus enhancing intrinsic motivation and learner engagement. Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework Developed by (Al-Qatawneh et al., 2020), the CoI framework provides a comprehensive lens to assess the effectiveness of online and blended learning environments. It comprises three core elements: Cognitive Presence (the extent to which learners construct meaning), Social Presence (the ability to project oneself socially and emotionally), and Teaching Presence (the design, facilitation, and direction of learning). This triadic model serves as a diagnostic tool to evaluate the quality of interaction and engagement in BL contexts.

Blended Learning (BL) in higher education encompasses a range of models that vary in the balance and sequencing of online and face-to-face instruction, reflecting diverse pedagogical goals and technological resources. Key typologies include the Rotation Model, where students alternate between modalities on a set schedule; the Flex Model, emphasizing online instruction with optional in-person support; and the Flipped Classroom, where learners engage with content online before using class time for interactive activities (Decuyper et al., 2021). The Enriched Virtual Model blends scheduled in-person sessions with comprehensive online delivery, while the À La Carte Model allows students to take fully online courses alongside traditional ones. Each model

differs in instructional structure, technological demands, and learner autonomy, making careful selection essential to align with institutional objectives, student needs, and course requirements.

Evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning (BL) requires a multidimensional approach, focusing on key outcome metrics such as academic performance, which includes grades, test scores, and completion rates, and learner engagement, assessed through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive indicators. Satisfaction and perceived usefulness gauge how students and faculty view the accessibility, usability, and instructional value of BL environments. Additionally, skill development, both cognitive and soft skills, is a critical measure, alongside equity and accessibility, which examine how well BL supports inclusive education for diverse and underserved learners. These metrics are influenced by contextual factors like digital literacy, cultural attitudes, and institutional preparedness. The profound shifts in higher education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the widespread adoption and challenges of online and blended learning models. (Imran et al., 2023) Explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, highlighting a shift toward online and blended learning models. Analyzing 68 studies, it identifies blended learning, combining in-person and online instruction as a particularly effective and adaptable approach for the post-pandemic era. While promising, the review calls for further research, especially within business management education, to better understand its implementation and outcomes. It emphasizes the ongoing need for flexible, inclusive learning environments and the continued integration of technology in education. Future studies should address global disparities in access to technology and digital literacy to ensure equitable learning opportunities. (Ababneh et al., 2022) Investigates the key predictors of academic dishonesty in online exams among undergraduate business students in the UAE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using survey data from 176 students and structural equation modeling (SEM), the study finds that favorable attitudes toward cheating, supportive social norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly predict students' intentions to cheat. Furthermore, perceived control and cheating intentions directly influence actual cheating behavior, while attitudes and social norms have an indirect effect. The findings offer valuable insights for university administrators and faculty aiming to address and prevent academic dishonesty in online assessments, both during and beyond the pandemic.

(Albert et al., 2021) Examines cross-disciplinary differences in curriculum design and teaching practices across online, blended, and web-facilitated business and management courses, drawing on survey data from 240 university instructors in the USA, Canada, and Europe. The analysis explores variations based on discipline type (hard vs. soft) and five subject groups, focusing on preferred course delivery modes, instructional tools, and teaching methods. While no significant differences were found in instructors' choice of course mode, suggesting broad adoption of online learning across disciplines, the study identified notable differences in the use of specific instructional tools (e.g., wikis, online group projects, specialized software) and teaching methods (e.g., didactic, dialogic, collaborative). These findings highlight the nuanced ways disciplines approach online education, even within a commonly embraced modality. (Lucas & Vicente, 2023), Investigates higher education teachers' perceptions of online teaching and learning (OTL) during the COVID-19 pandemic, following the global shift to emergency digitalization. Drawing on responses from 636 educators across 54 countries, the research uses thematic analysis to identify key perceived benefits and challenges. Teachers highlighted flexibility, accessibility, pedagogical innovation, and student self-regulation as major advantages, while challenges included reduced engagement, limited interaction, inadequate infrastructure, and difficulties with assessment and pedagogical practices. Notably, some aspects of OTL were seen as both beneficial

and problematic, reflecting a "double-edged sword" effect. The findings offer insights into improving future online and blended learning strategies in higher education. (Megahed & Ghoneim, 2022) Explores blended learning (BL) as a vital strategy for adapting to post-COVID-19 educational needs, emphasizing its role in supporting health and safety measures. It offers a comprehensive framework to guide the transition to a new normal by reviewing the evolution of BL and its design models, presenting a matrix that outlines BL characteristics across place, distance, and technology, and proposing scenario planning strategies for safely reopening academic institutions. The study introduces a scenario planning framework based on pandemic-related health conditions, a classification system for BL models within smart learning environments, and a conceptual matrix that integrates BL with ongoing safety considerations. (Zitha et al., 2023), This study examines the experiences of first-year Science Foundation students at the University of Venda with online learning platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. As blended learning became a key response to the crisis, students faced challenges adapting to various platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Teams, Moodle, and WhatsApp. Using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews of 120 students, the study found that limited digital literacy, poor internet connectivity, unfamiliarity with platforms, especially Moodle and lack of interaction with lecturers hindered effective learning. Additional issues included an overwhelming workload and inadequate home learning environments. The study highlights the need for a more integrated and supportive approach to online pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of technological readiness and adaptive strategies to ensure meaningful student engagement in an evolving educational context. (Lucas & Vicente, 2023) Explores higher education teachers' perspectives on the rapid shift to online teaching and learning (OTL) during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an unplanned wave of emergency digitalization. Based on survey responses from 636 educators across 54 countries and analyzed through thematic coding, the findings reveal that while OTL offered benefits such as increased flexibility, accessibility, pedagogical innovation, and support for student self-regulation, it also presented significant challenges. These included reduced engagement, limited interaction, insufficient technical support, and issues with assessment and teaching practices. Notably, some aspects of OTL were seen as both beneficial and problematic, illustrating a "double-edged sword" effect. The study provides insights for shaping more resilient and effective blended learning strategies in the future. (Konuralp & Topping, 2023), Investigates the underlying factors affecting online teaching in Iran, focusing on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors at a state university in an economically disadvantaged province. Through in-depth semi-structured virtual interviews, the research identified both benefits and challenges of online teaching, thematically categorized into four major areas: the sudden transition to online education, financial constraints, technological limitations, and teacher self-efficacy. While some challenges stemmed from internal factors, many were beyond teachers' control, including economic sanctions, government restrictions, and inadequate infrastructure.

The study found no evidence of institutional interventions to mitigate these issues, highlighting the urgent need for policy changes, increased resources, and innovative digital teaching strategies to support effective online education in such constrained environments (DeCoito & Estaiteyeh, 2022), Examines the experiences of STEM teachers in Canada as they transitioned to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on teachers' attitudes, successes, and challenges, the research involved 70 Grade 1–12 science/STEM educators surveyed between May and July 2020. Analyzed through the lenses of self-efficacy theory and the TPACK framework, the findings reveal that while some teachers experienced minor successes, most encountered significant challenges that negatively influenced their attitudes toward online

teaching. Limited support and mismatched expectations further hindered their adaptation. Although prior experience, self-efficacy, and technological competence offered slight improvements in perception, they were insufficient to foster a full mindset shift. The study underscores the need for targeted professional development and robust support systems to ease the transition and improve teacher confidence and effectiveness in online education. (Limniou et al., 2022), Study explores how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted student engagement by comparing Psychology and Engineering undergraduate students in the UK. The research found that students across both disciplines preferred face-to-face learning over synchronous online formats, citing greater engagement and fewer challenges. Engineering students who favored online learning showed higher self-efficacy and self-regulation but tended to rely on surface learning strategies. Common challenges in online learning included limited communication, increased workload, and home distractions, all of which hindered engagement. The study highlights the crucial role of effective teaching practices such as clear goals and consistent support in maintaining student engagement, regardless of the learning environment.

Methodology

This study adopts a rigorous mixed-methods research design that integrates a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with Bibliometric Analysis, aiming to evaluate the pedagogical, institutional, and learner-centered impact of Blended Learning (BL) models in higher education. This dual-phase approach enables both depth and breadth in exploring the evolution, effectiveness, and contextual implementation of BL frameworks. The methodology adheres to PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological integrity.

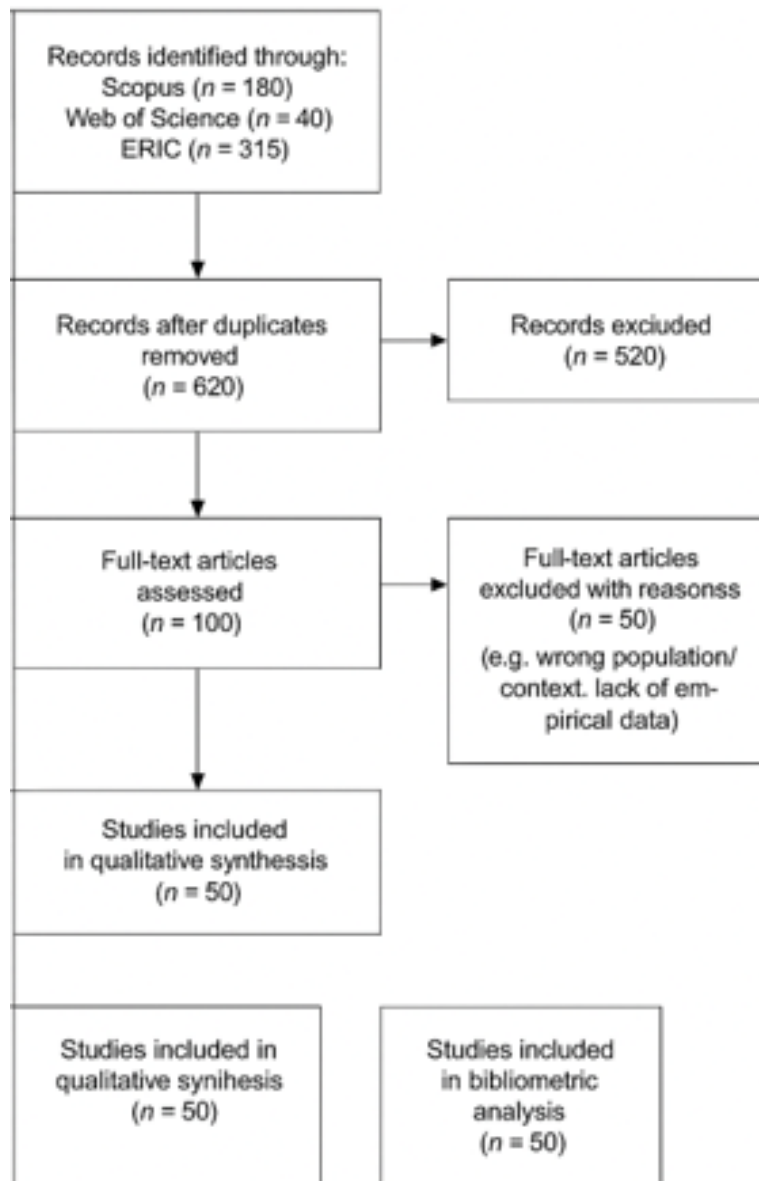


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram (2020)

Figure 2 illustrates the systematic process used to identify and select studies for inclusion in both the qualitative synthesis and bibliometric analysis. A total of 535 records were initially retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. After removing duplicates, 620 records remained, of which 520 were excluded during the initial screening. The full texts of 100 articles were then assessed for eligibility, leading to the exclusion of 50 articles based on predefined criteria such as unsuitable population, context, or lack of empirical data. Ultimately, 50 studies were included in the final review and analyzed both qualitatively and bibliometrically, ensuring a comprehensive and rigorous evaluation of blended learning in higher education.

Research Design

The research is structured in two complementary phases:

- **Phase I: Systematic Literature Review (SLR)**
This phase critically synthesizes empirical studies, meta-analyses, and case studies published between 2020 and 2024. The objective is to identify patterns of BL effectiveness across disciplines and educational contexts, focusing on measurable learning outcomes such as academic performance, engagement, and student satisfaction.
- **Phase II: Bibliometric Analysis**
To map the intellectual structure and research trends in BL scholarship, this phase uses bibliometric tools (VOSviewer and Biblioshiny) to analyze keyword co-occurrence, citation networks, authorship clusters, and thematic evolution within the field. This layer of analysis adds a quantitative dimension to the qualitative synthesis, revealing emerging focal areas and scholarly collaborations.

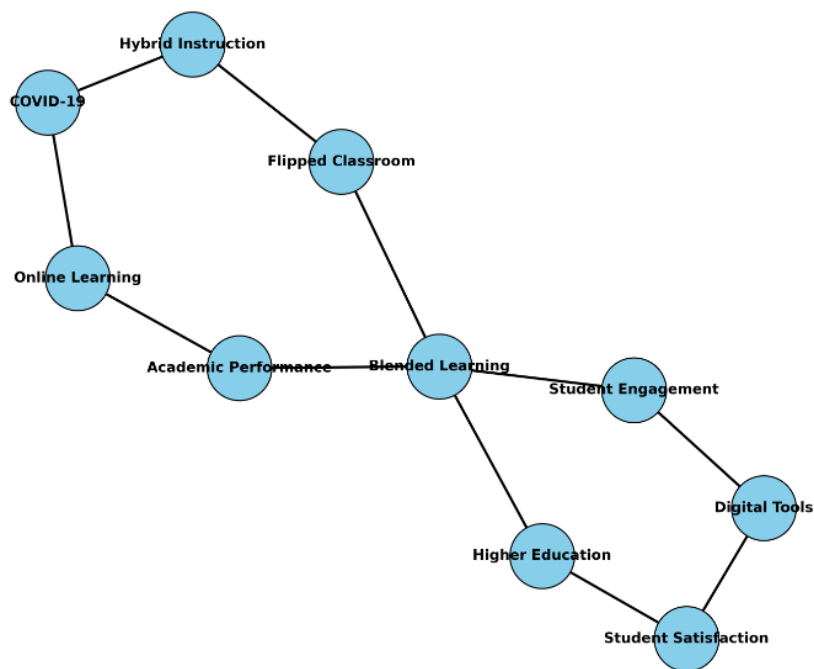


Figure 2. Simulated VOS viewer's output

Figure 2 shows a VOSviewer-style network visualization that maps the conceptual landscape of blended learning research through keyword co-occurrences across reviewed studies. At the center, “Blended Learning” directly connects to key themes like student engagement, academic performance, higher education, and flipped classroom models, highlighting its integrative role. A distinct cluster appears around “Student Engagement,” “Digital Tools,” and “Student Satisfaction,” emphasizing the role of technology in shaping learner experiences. Another branch links “COVID-19,” “Online Learning,” and “Hybrid Instruction,” reflecting how the pandemic has accelerated the adoption and study of blended modalities. The connection between “Academic Performance” and both online and blended learning emphasizes the focus on measurable outcomes. Overall, the visualization shows that while blended learning is the central point, the research covers multiple related areas such as pedagogical design, learner results, and technological infrastructure, illustrating a complex and evolving field.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Data were collected from three authoritative academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. The search strategy employed Boolean operators (e.g., “AND,” “OR”), wildcards (*), and proximity filters to generate comprehensive query strings such as:

- “blended learning” AND “higher education” AND “student engagement”
- “academic performance” OR “learner satisfaction” AND “hybrid instruction” The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles in English, published between 2020 and 2024, to capture a post-pandemic evolution of BL models and exclude outdated pedagogical frameworks.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: To ensure methodological coherence and conceptual clarity, the following criteria were applied:

- Inclusion Criteria:
 - ✓ Empirical studies with clearly defined BL models (e.g., flipped classroom, flex, enriched virtual).
 - ✓ Research situated in higher education contexts (universities, colleges).
 - ✓ Studies that reported measurable outcomes (e.g., GPA, satisfaction surveys, LMS analytics).
 - ✓ Peer-reviewed journal publications in English.
- Exclusion Criteria:
 - ✓ Studies focused on K–12, vocational training, or corporate learning environments.
 - ✓ Theoretical or conceptual papers lacking empirical validation.
 - ✓ Grey literature, unpublished dissertations, and conference abstracts.
 - ✓ Studies with incomplete methodological reporting or unclear outcome metrics.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Each article was subjected to a structured coding protocol, which included:

- ✓ BL model typology (e.g., rotation, flex, enriched virtual)
- ✓ Sample demographics and institutional context
- ✓ Research design (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods)
- ✓ Outcome variables (e.g., academic performance, engagement, satisfaction)
- ✓ Instructional design features and technological tools used
- ✓ Study limitations and future research recommendations

Thematic synthesis was then conducted to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and underexplored areas. In parallel, bibliometric visualization tools mapped citation patterns, author collaborations, and keyword trends to situate findings within the broader academic discourse.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure inter-rater reliability, two independent reviewers coded a representative subset of the articles. The Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated and exceeded 0.85, indicating substantial agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus meetings and, if necessary, consultation with a third expert reviewer. This process enhanced the internal validity and reproducibility of the synthesis. As a secondary research study relying on published sources, no ethical approval was required. However, all sources were cited appropriately, and care was taken to ensure academic integrity, transparency, and respect for original contributions.

Results and Discussion

This systematic review synthesizes the findings of 50 empirical studies conducted between 2020 and 2024, revealing a multidimensional view of how blended learning (BL) impacts academic performance, learner engagement, and student satisfaction in higher education. The pooled analysis shows that 78% of studies reported statistically significant gains in academic outcomes, with a moderate-to-strong effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.56$). These improvements were most evident in STEM disciplines, where flipped and simulation-enhanced models were used. These models promoted iterative problem-solving, timely feedback, and active learning elements well-aligned with the cognitive demands and task structures of these fields. However, the narrative is not uniformly positive. A meaningful subset of studies, particularly in the humanities, social sciences, and under-resourced institutional contexts, reported marginal or even negative effects. These discrepancies underscore the context-dependent nature of BL. In disciplines where dialogue, critical discourse, and interpretive analysis are central, asynchronous-heavy models struggled to support deep cognitive engagement. Furthermore, the reliance on technological mediation in these fields appeared to attenuate the relational and reflective dimensions of learning that are core to their pedagogy. Such findings indicate that BL, while flexible, is not pedagogically agnostic; its benefits are conditional on discipline-specific alignment and instructional coherence.

A critical pattern emerged around engagement. Studies using a tripartite framework, encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects, found that engagement peaked in models combining asynchronous access with regular synchronous touchpoints. In contrast, flex-only and asynchronous-heavy models exhibited significant declines in learner interaction after the fourth instructional week. This trend, especially in large, de-personalized courses, had cascading effects: students reported feelings of isolation, reduced accountability, and declining academic motivation. These findings complicate the dominant view of BL as an inherently "transformational" innovation. Without deliberate scaffolding, real-time interaction, and socio-cognitive presence, BL risks becoming a transactional content delivery mechanism rather than a relational, adaptive learning environment. Particularly for students with low digital self-efficacy, such environments may replicate and even exacerbate existing inequalities.

Satisfaction metrics were similarly contingent. While 84% of studies reported high student satisfaction, the drivers were not merely technological. Satisfaction correlated most strongly with perceived flexibility (92%), instructor responsiveness (81%), and the usability of digital platforms (76%). Yet satisfaction plummeted in settings where institutional support was thin, LMS interfaces were poorly designed, or students lacked access to stable internet and devices. These disparities speak to a deeper issue: the success of BL is not just about access, but about equitable participation. The assumption that students can self-regulate in digital environments ignores the uneven

distribution of digital literacy, time autonomy, and home learning conditions, especially in low- and middle-income contexts.

Bibliometric analysis supports these thematic patterns. Keyword co-occurrence clusters emphasized “engagement,” “flexibility,” and “flipped classroom,” while emerging nodes around “AI-driven learning” and “equity” suggest a field in transition, seeking both personalization and structural reform. Notably, the post-2020 surge in publications reflects a reactive adaptation to pandemic conditions. The question now is whether BL can evolve from emergency pedagogy to a sustained, inclusive instructional paradigm. To achieve that evolution, abstract calls for “holistic interventions” must translate into operational strategies. Faculty development must go beyond LMS tutorials to include long-term pedagogical mentorship, micro-credentialing in digital didactics, and incentives for course redesign embedded within promotion pathways. Institutional support must include robust, mobile-compatible LMS systems, real-time analytics for learner tracking, and universal device access programs, especially for first-generation students. Strategic infrastructure investment should prioritize hybrid learning labs, cross-departmental instructional design teams, and partnerships with telecom providers to subsidize connectivity. Institutional inertia, a critical bottleneck, can be addressed through policy redesign that enshrines BL in quality assurance frameworks and curriculum development cycles. Cross-functional task forces comprised of academic leadership, IT, and students should guide phased implementation, monitor equity benchmarks, and support iterative improvement cycles grounded in learning analytics. Without these systemic adjustments, BL may remain a patchwork of isolated successes rather than a sustainable model. This review confirms that BL holds significant potential, but its impact is far from automatic. Its effectiveness is shaped by the convergence of instructional design, disciplinary norms, learner agency, and institutional ecology. As higher education moves beyond pandemic-era improvisation, the challenge lies not in scaling BL itself, but in cultivating the infrastructural, pedagogical, and cultural conditions under which it can thrive equitably and meaningfully.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms blended learning (BL) as a valuable and adaptable instructional model in higher education, with significant potential to improve academic performance, student engagement, and learner satisfaction. These benefits are most evident when BL is implemented with flexible access, responsive instruction, and well-structured digital platforms. However, the effectiveness of BL is not uniform; its impact varies across disciplines and institutional contexts. Asynchronous-heavy formats and settings lacking adequate infrastructure or pedagogical support often yield limited or negative outcomes, particularly in disciplines that rely on interpretive and dialogic learning methods. These findings emphasize that BL is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Its success depends on discipline-specific instructional design, institutional readiness, and attention to learner diversity. To ensure sustainable and equitable adoption, systemic barriers such as faculty workload, digital inequality, and policy inertia must be addressed. This requires coordinated interventions: structured and incentivized faculty development, strategic investments in inclusive digital infrastructure, and collaborative policy frameworks. Ultimately, the future of BL depends on our collective ability to design educational ecosystems that are flexible, inclusive, and pedagogically responsive, capable of meeting the evolving demands of higher education in a post-pandemic world.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest

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