



Transcript

Series two, episode four: Blended learning, the new normal?

Dr Luz Longsworth:

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Natasha Lokhun:

The pandemic's most significant impact on higher education is the shift to online learning and teaching. But when we start to move back to campus, should we retain some elements of the online experience? Will blended learning, that's combining online materials with the traditional classroom experience become the new normal? What benefits does this approach bring for both staff and students?

Professor Jackson Too:

The capacity of the academics has been announced. We have had students also changing their attitudes and appreciating technology.

Natasha Lokhun:

Does blended learning give students the freedom to tailor their own experience and perhaps learn at their own pace?

Christine Koine:

The blended learning is more engaging approach compared to the face-to-face learning.

Natasha Lokhun:

We've heard in previous episodes that online learning can improve access to higher education, and that it's critical for teachers, students, and administrators to be skilled in digital technology. We've also heard that changing attitudes towards technology is crucial. So what approach should universities take to make sure blended learning is a success?

I'm Natasha Lokhun. Welcome to The Internationalist Podcast from the Association of Commonwealth Universities. My guests are academics who have extensive experience in blended learning, combining online teaching and learning with a campus experience. They are Professor Jackson Too from the Commission for University Education in Kenya and Dr. Luz Longsworth, Pro Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of the West Indies open campus. But before we hear from them, here's Christine Koine, a first-year information science student at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya. We asked her what she thinks of the blended learning experience.

Christine Koine:

The blended learning is more engaging approach compared to the face-to-face learning, enabling me to schedule and organize my learning, look up additional open education resources to improve my understanding of theories, develop of a more flexibility in the learning process. I can also easily access resource like e-book, journals, videos and other multimedia resources. And then that gives me an opportunity to collaborate with other student in my class through discussion forums, chat,

and do quizzes and assignment for which I get immediate feedback from my course instructor. On the whole, I believe technology has transformed the way we students learn in the university.

Natasha Lokhun:

So for Christine, blended learning has been a positive experience, an improvement on face-to-face learning. The Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning, known as PEBL, has been helping universities across East Africa share teaching resources, by developing quality assured credit-bearing courses delivered through blended learning. The PEBL partnership is led by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, working with institutions in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, with technical partners based in the UK and Canada. The project is supported by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Officer's SPHEIR program. Professor Jackson Too is firm partner organization, the Commission for University Education in Kenya. I asked him why PEBL was instigated and what challenges universities in the region faced.

Professor Jackson Too:

It came about in response to the challenges that the East African universities encounter in delivering content to learners. We have a lot of challenges when it comes to academic staff, the deficits for academic staff to serve in the public and private universities in the region. I'll tell you for example, that in Kenya, we have 74 universities currently, about half of them are public and other half are private. You will find that the qualified staffs are in the big universities, but the upcoming universities hardly have staff, so they use part-time academic staff. You will find that some senior academic staff members serve in different universities, so they end up moving from one institution to another. That is very challenging in terms of time, in terms of delivering quality content.

So blended learning is an intervention that comes in to promote quality teaching, quality learning with programs that are developed by qualified staff, which are packaged in a module and can be shared across the many universities. In so doing, it is possible to expand the access to university education and equity because we have well-qualified staff developing and producing quality modules that can be used online. It is blended because we haven't yet reached a level where we can be comfortable that a program can be offered 100% online.

Natasha Lokhun:

The project has been running for several years now, what changes have happened as a result?

Professor Jackson Too:

First and foremost, we have had the training of the academics in terms of appreciating technology and having a better sense of developing modules. Staff, academic staff, for the universities that have been participating, and even for us as the regulator, the change that has happened is that it has prompted us to review our QA mechanisms and framework for evaluating and assessing online programs.

So, number one, the capacity of the academics has been announced. Two, is that we have had students also changing their attitudes and appreciating technology. They are now better equipped in terms of technology use and technology consumption. It has helped the regulators to review their tools of QA with respect to online learning, that today we have been able to revise and borrow a lot cross-referenced with the QA mechanisms that were developed for PEBL learning. That has been very, very helpful in terms of building the capacity, improving the tool to make it more robust and make it more focused to this kind of platforms.

Natasha Lokhun:

I'd like to return to the point you made about attitudes towards technology and the phrase you used, an appreciation of the diversity of ways of learning. We heard a little bit about from the student from Kenyatta, she finds blended learning a more engaging approach than face-to-face learning. I wondered if you think that there's been a change or a shift in perceptions of blended learning?

Professor Jackson Too:

The COVID-19 pandemic visited us last year in March and universities were asked to shift their learning to online or some format of technology. The institutions or universities that are already interacting with PEBL became the leaders, or became the institutions that the others were learning from. There were some universities that were very quick. Those that already had made some investments in technology by investing in internet connectivity and other infrastructure that could support online learning were better off, but we had others that were completely still behind and they have had challenges.

So in a way, the appreciation of what PEBL, blended learning, those who were doing was concerned, now took it much more seriously and helped them a lot. So before blended learning, there wasn't much seriousness about using this system, but those that have not interacted have come to appreciate. In fact, the awareness of PEBL during that period last year now is now well known across the region and many were saying, "How can we join? What should we do to be part of this family of blended learning?" So, there is a demand.

Natasha Lokhun:

You mentioned earlier, there wasn't 100% confidence in the idea of a fully online course. Is that related to some of these kinds of doubts or lack of seriousness as you put it around blended learning? Or is that for other reasons?

Professor Jackson Too:

I think Natasha, you will appreciate the fact that not many people are comfortable with technology. If you belong to the old school like myself, that perhaps didn't interact much with computers and smartphones and the other, we are hesitant to quickly jump onto the new innovations in technology. The other issue that we have to grapple with is that of the tools, the equipment and facilities, because where we are in East Africa, not many academics may be owning a laptop or access to a computer, that they can interact with all the time. There could be other priorities.

So if you don't have a machine and a person that can also induct and train you, then you will feel very frustrated that you are being told to change, but you've not been given the tools and the know-how and the capacity. So, you are more likely to feel disappointed and say, "To help with this, let me do the things the way I know." So those are the issues that are around us all the time.

Quite often, I have a young son whom I consult quite often to help me navigate the smartphone because they are more adept than I am. But I too must have that understanding and willingness to learn because I know some people don't want to show that they don't know.

Natasha Lokhun:

Can we talk about course content for a second? We heard in episode one of the podcast about the challenges of software and other technology not being available in languages that are spoken in African countries and through the PEBL project, that's really about blended learning course content being developed within the East African region for the East African region. How important is that?

Professor Jackson Too:

Yeah, it's key. We know that there are some online modules that have been prepared elsewhere, but you will find that the context in which they have been prepared may not be 100% relevant and they would be made for the local academics to come up with their own content that is relevant to their contexts and relevant to their needs and resonates well with the learners, and that is an issue.

Natasha Lokhun:

You mentioned earlier that the profile of PEBL in the East African region is really high as a result of the pandemic, even though the project had been running for years before that, and that as a result, the PEBL universities have really been called upon for their expertise. What do you think

other universities, even beyond East Africa, around the world, what can they learn from the PEBL experience?

Professor Jackson Too:

One, that it's possible to use blended learning and achieve your objectives of your lesson or your course. It can actually minimize cost of learning. It can actually make learning be accessed from any quarter of the country.

Natasha Lokhun:

How do you see blended learning, developing in East Africa in the future?

Professor Jackson Too:

The future is bright. I see more and more people shifting towards blended learning, it will no longer be spreading a new gospel, it is now the gospel has spread and I see more people coming on board.

Natasha Lokhun:

So after overcoming some initial challenges, the PEBL project in East Africa is gaining traction, extending the reach of higher education for both staff and students. My next guest is Dr. Luz Longworth, Pro Vice Chancellor and Principal at the University of the West Indies open campus, that's their online and flexible learning campus. UWI is a federal university covering 17 Caribbean countries, a structure similar to the University of the South Pacific, who we heard from in episode two. I asked Luz about the motivation behind distance and online learning at UWI.

Dr Luz Longworth:

The philosophy of the University of the West Indies from its foundation was to ensure that all peoples of the region of the West Indies had access in some way to education. The idea of being able to do some amount of distance learning, at the time it was a combination of paper-based as well as resident tutors who would teach in certain courses face-to-face, while there would be examinations or curriculum sent by mail to the various islands. So the imperative was that we had to make sure that not just persons who had the financial ability or the freedom to travel to Jamaica, which was the first and only campus for 20 years almost, had access to further education.

The blended approach was at the time, the way to go clearly, because of the technology for the most part now, we certainly do, I would think, more than 70% of online learning, but it is still blended in that we do have some synchronous sessions and we do have courses that have a 50/50 or 70/30, depending on the nature of the course. By pooling the resources through the technology, we can give everyone the same level of access to a higher education at the UWI.

Natasha Lokhun:

That's clearly been a motivating factor from the staff UWI. What we've heard in previous episodes is the institutions around the world see online and blended learning as a way to reach more people. What challenges would you say universities setting off on this journey are likely to come up against? What advice would you give them?

Dr Luz Longworth:

Many of our students had difficulties in that transition in the early days and many of our faculty. I'll tell you a funny story that I was heading one of the regional campuses before I moved up in my career. When we first started doing online learning, I was so upset because the students were upset and they were like, "No, we want our tutors back into the classroom." I was one of those fighting for them. As we saw that it was a matter of just changing your approaches, it was a matter of ensuring that people were confident that this was not an inferior product that they were being given, that was the key issue we had, that people thought that online learning was, or even

a blended approach, was an inferior product to sitting in a hall with 300 other students with a sage on the stage there.

That was a major hurdle that we had to overcome, and we did that in several ways. We ensured that our programs went through the same hurdles as all the programs of the UWI. There is a single process, no matter which campus is putting forward programs. We ensure that our faculty were properly approved, that they were clearly qualified, but also that they were trained and in a way, that put us ahead because we were giving pedagogical training to faculty, to tutors who would normally have just stepped into a face-to-face classroom with no training, just their subject matter expertise.

So, we did quite a lot of work in that way to ensure that not just our students, but our faculty as well, our administration, our publics, our employers, did not think that this was some kind of inferior degree. Our degrees do not say a bachelor of science online. It says a bachelor of science of the University of the West Indies. In that regard, the University of West Indies is very, very proactive and very ahead of the curve.

Natasha Lokhun:

So you spoke about the training you offer staff and continuing professional development. I know that UWI recently announced the creation of a new interactive digital center, and that's about developing content using augmented and virtual reality. How will those tools be used in blended learning?

Dr Luz Longsworth:

Oh, this most recent development is really one that is going to take us into another level of blended and online delivery. One of the challenges we've had, and particularly in terms of growing access, has been how to deliver some types of programs online. Also, because there are limited resources in terms of professors or in terms of laboratories and so on, it has limited how much we've been able to move fully into the STEM subjects online. This is going to revolutionize that particularly.

So we are already moving into a more global environment for the UWI. As you know, we've moved up in our rankings tremendously over the past three years, we're in the top 2.5% of universities internationally, and we are forming more and more partnerships and moving our content, our intellectual property more to our global market. This is going to allow us to have more interactive types of programming, courses that will allow students to have real-time experiences without necessarily living close to somewhere that has a fully equipped laboratory or an experience. It doesn't even have to be in science, it can be in history, it can be in archeology, it can be in architecture, but being able to have that fully immersive experience, which is of course, going to accelerate their learning.

So, we see this as taking us to the next level of improved learning outcomes for our students, but also in terms of being able to continue to grow the university's reputation, to attract students from other continents, other parts of the world, without necessarily having the cost of movement. So, internationalizing our curriculum, internationalizing our student body. This will be a major tool for the entire university now to be able to achieve those objectives.

Natasha Lokhun:

On that point about broadening reach, the digital divide has been highlighted during the pandemic, how can cutting edge tools be used to bridge that divide?

Dr Luz Longsworth:

So, we've always been very sensitive to that issue of equity across the region. Yes, COVID showed us this because we had students who could not come into our nodes. As you know, we have our centers across the region, which will provide adequate bandwidth and computers for students who don't have it. When COVID came, we found that there were several without. However, one of the statistics that is interesting of this region is the access to mobile technology. So in Jamaica, I think

it's 2.3 devices per person? Per person, yes, counting babies as well. So, it is clearly the one that we are designing for.

The EON Reality platform that we have been gifted with, with our partnership with EON, has excellent mobile platform. So students are able to access the courses and programs quite easily on a mobile, on a smartphone. We're finding that that is the way that most of our students are actually learning now, not even as much on tablets, but certainly on their smartphones. As smartphones become less and less expensive, it is clearly the tool of the future.

So, we are designing particularly for access on mobile phones and we feel that that is going to make a huge difference in terms of our students' ability to access. As data becomes cheaper as well across the region, we can see going into the future that that will be the tool of choice.

Natasha Lokhun:

Looking into the future, and as countries start to think about what the post-pandemic landscape looks like hopefully, will blended learning become the new normal?

Dr Luz Longworth:

I think it will be the new normal. We've been doing some surveys and I've been reading some of the surveys being done in the US in particular. We're seeing an interesting split of students that say ... Well, about 15% to 20%, say that they'd like total online learning. They don't need to go on campus. The others are between a blended or a full face-to-face experience. As the world becomes more volatile, which is the future, as we move more into the industrial 4.0 world, maybe we're even into 5.0 some people are saying, where it's the technology and human interaction that is so important.

I think universities would be serving our societies poorly if we did not insist on blended learning, because our students will not be able to survive if they cannot manipulate this environment, because it's not just the educational environment, it's going to be their work environment. It's going to be their home environment. It's going to be finding a bus to go home or booking a ticket to travel. Even now, that's the way to do it. So, this has always been my concern when we had the resistance to online learning, that our digital skills were not up-to-date in the region. We've been forced into it and our people are tremendously easy learners. So we're seeing that that is no longer a fear, but I do feel that there may be forces that would wish to push the universities in particular, back to being the old traditional approach.

I would oppose that because I think that this allows for a rich choice for a student. So, my ideal would be that a student could want to spend one semester fully on campus so that they can enjoy the social and cultural and learning experience, but then say, "Well, next semester, I want to work in this organization, but I don't want to lose time. So I'm going to do my courses online and not go on campus," and it not be a problem, that it's seamless, that it doesn't matter. I can just choose a course that's online, and that's happening in places already.

So, that's one model. The other model could be within any course, any program. There are those modules that the students can do from home and things that they can come in for, where they have again, a group experience and you learn from that kind of interaction with your peers. So, I think it really has to be that our faculty now have to think of new pedagogical models, new curricula that will address the needs of our students who are going into a world that is changing rapidly, with jobs that are disappearing. So, they have to be facile, they have to be able to manipulate any environment that comes. The augmented reality, the virtual reality, any environment that is coming, we have to prepare them for that.

So, I would really like to see universities moving towards a more personalized approach to the students' learning, where it can be left to the student to choose how they want to complete their degree and how they really want to learn and using ... Again, the university being influenced by the change in technology and the man/machine interface, using the tools to allow them to do that so that they can have the best experience and be prepared for this world, which none of us really knows what it's going to be like, but we certainly know it's not going to be what it was two years ago.

Natasha Lokhun:

So it's not just about giving students academic skills. It's important that they also have digital skills to prepare them for the future?

Dr Luz Longworth:

Absolutely, absolutely. It was a shock for me to see how many people in the Caribbean during the pandemic really couldn't manipulate simple online activities. Instead of going into the tax office, for instance, paying online, and the infrastructure that needs to be developed. It's the universities that have to push that because this is the future. The digital divide is not going to be so much a digital divide within a country, it's going to be among countries.

So if we don't create digital natives. If we don't push it on all of our people to have a certain level of digital literacy, our countries will be continuing to lag in terms of development. I think I'd seen that in something that the World Economic Forum had said maybe five years ago, that it's no longer going to be an issue of poor countries versus rich countries. It's innovative countries versus countries that cannot benefit from innovation. That's the divide and that's the digital divide right there.

So, our role is to really prepare our young people and also, not to forget those persons who need to now retool because we can't forget those persons who have not been prepared that way. Our role as universities is really to move very much into professional skills development as well, and not see it as something that is not the role of the university.

Natasha Lokhun:

So, Dr. Longworth is saying that blended learning is not just about new technology within universities. It's also about preparing students for the world of work and for our digital future. I'd like to thank Christine Koine, student at Kenyatta University. Professor Jackson Too, from Kenya's Commission for University Education and Dr. Luz Longworth, pro vice chancellor and principal at the University of the West Indies Open Campus.

The Association of Commonwealth Universities is committed to highlighting the issues that influence learning and teaching in our world. In the next edition, we'll be asking if blended learning is the new normal, where does that leave the university campus? Should universities focus on improving their online experience rather than expanding their campuses with new buildings? Are campus still vital for the social, cultural and learning experience, or will universities be digital first? So, please do subscribe to the series wherever you get your podcasts and like, comment and share the program. You can find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

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