

POLICY BRIEF

INTEGRATING TEACHING - LEARNING
AND DIGITAL EDUCATION

Developing Inclusive Blended Learning Practices for the Higher Education Institutions of Jammu & Kashmir

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Evidence-based policy recommendations derived from the large-scale empirical study titled 'Integrating Teaching Learning and Digital Education' (ITLDE) for the Higher Education Institutions of J&K and Ladakh, funded by IIT Jammu

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ITLDE is a large-scale, empirical, multi-institutional, longitudinal study spanning over three years and covers more than 30 Higher Education Institutions from Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh

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Introduction

Contemporary trends in higher education clearly show that digital technologies have become an integral part of the system. However, there is a need to integrate or blend digital technologies with higher education for effective learning and development of the educated and skilled youth.

Blended Learning is universally acclaimed for its potential to customise learning experiences, enhance the quality of education, and extend the reach of higher education and lifelong learning opportunities. Its prevalence promises a paradigm shift in educational delivery, emphasising a more personalised, accessible, and flexible learning environment that aligns with the evolving demands of the global economy and the diverse needs of learners. Its effective planning and implementation can work as building blocks towards an *Atmanirbhar Bharat*.

However, the proliferation of blended learning illuminates a dichotomy underscoring the persistence of educational disparities, demarcating the landscape between traditional learners and their digital counterparts. This division not only echoes but also exacerbates the transmission of social inequities within the educational realm. Consequently, implementing inclusive blended learning practices in higher education becomes imperative as it is a critical step towards fostering sustainable development and constructing a resilient higher education framework that prepares both students and teachers for the future.

Equipping them with the requisite digital competencies for the 21st century is essential for navigating the complexities of the contemporary digital era.

The recent surge in demand for higher education in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) with the societal expectation of better placements and upward mobility resulted in heightened enrolment rates, with the current Gross Enrolment Ratio standing at 24.8% for 2021-2022, pronouncing the massification stage

The increase in enrolments is accompanied by a diversified group of learners from different socio-economic statuses, including first-generation learners. This phenomenon places unprecedented pressure on the traditional educational ecosystem. The need to accommodate this exponential demand has spurred experimentation with alternative technologies and blended learning, a trend accelerated as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the critical issue of ensuring quality and inclusivity in blended learning practices emerges as a significant concern in the context of expanding the higher education system in J&K. The inertia of higher education institutions to adapt to changing paradigms and the reflection of societal inequalities within the educational sector manifest in the limited success of blended learning initiatives.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief aims to highlight the multifaceted barriers obstructing the effective implementation of blended learning in the higher education institutions of J&K. It also proposes a series of evidence-based recommendations aimed at fostering the development of inclusive blended learning practices that could pave the way for a more equitable, accessible, and resilient higher education landscape in J&K.

Policy Thrust and Persisting Barriers

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for the widespread adoption of blended teaching and learning. This endorsement is spearheaded by the University Grants Commission (UGC) directives issued in 2021, suggesting that up to 40% of the curriculum for each course may be delivered online. The emphasis on digitisation is pivotal to various policy initiatives, including multidisciplinary, credit transfer, virtual mobility, and internationalization, which are proposed for implementation in Indian states and UTs, including J&K, with some already in effect.

However, despite policy endorsements, the integration of blended learning is not smooth in J&K. Empirical evidence of the prevailing blended learning practices reveals a few significant concerns. Persistent inequalities within higher education continues, further being transmitted in digital and blended learning environments. This disparity not only influences the academic achievements of the learners, but also significantly shapes their future prospects.

Notably, access to quality blended learning appears to be reserved for those hailing from privileged backgrounds, who often enjoy a conducive home environment and motivation. Blended learning in its present practice is immersed in conventional pedagogical approaches.

As a consequence, it often remains exclusionary and favours individuals with access to adequate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and a supportive learning environment. This paradoxical scenario, wherein blended learning is championed as a vehicle for enhancing educational quality while simultaneously catering to escalating demand, underscores a critical oversight. The inherent promise of blended learning to democratise education is compromised, thus perpetuating the educational divide.

Manifestations of Barriers

This section highlights the barriers hindering the successful implementation of blended learning in the higher education institutions of J&K. The manifestation of barriers also paves the way for evidence-based policy recommendations in the subsequent section.

Absence of Robust Blended Learning Policy at J&K:

The implementation of blended learning in J&K is hindered by a lack of comprehensive policy at the J&K UT level tailored to the integration of ICT in higher education. Consequently, higher education institutions in J&K often lack clear directives on the implementation of blended learning approaches, reflecting a broader deficiency in strategic policy support.

Additionally, there is no specialized unit within the J&K higher education department tasked with the promotion and facilitation of blended learning methodologies in the colleges and universities of J&K.

Furthermore, there is an absence of enough push for research focused on blended learning within the higher education institutions at J&K.

Excessive Focus on Technology over Learning:

Empirical studies indicate that the comprehension of blended learning among institutional leaders and teachers in J&K is restricted primarily to the deployment of smartboards in the classrooms and the utilisation of online applications for transferring traditional classroom lectures to online platforms.

The focus predominantly concentrates on deciding the proportion of online and offline teaching-learning elements, limiting the emphasis on innovative pedagogies and learning outcomes.

Lack of Measurement of Blended Learning Preparedness:

Prior to the adoption of blended learning, there is a noticeable deficiency in evaluating the preparedness of institutions, teachers, and students for engaging with such an educational approach.

Implementing a uniform blanket policy across diverse contexts may fail to account for the distinct readiness of the institutions, teachers, and learners from different regions, disciplines, and with varied digital competencies, resulting in limited success.

Deficiency of Institutional Strategic Planning for Blended Learning:

A shortfall of comprehensive planning for blended learning at the institutional level is evident from the absence of guiding Institutional Blended Learning Policies, coupled with the lack of a dedicated unit for supporting students and teachers for blended learning in terms of both human and material resources.

Notable to add, significant financial investments are made to upgrade conventional classrooms to smart classrooms. However, major curricular innovations to match the new teaching-learning infrastructure are yet to occur.

In some instances, the distribution of smart classrooms exhibits a disciplinary bias, with a preference for allotting the infrastructure to Science and related subjects first, thereby marginalising Humanities and Social Sciences. Furthermore, the effective management of educational resources is hampered by the lack of a dedicated Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Learning Management System (LMS).

Due to the absence of clearly defined ethical guidelines, privacy protocols, and intellectual property rights by the institution, there also exists a notable discomfort among teachers regarding the uploading of digital educational content.

Ineffective Teachers' Training for Blended Learning:

The teachers' training or faculty development programmes are often generic and fail to equip higher education teachers with the necessary skills and pedagogic knowledge enhancement for the blended environment.

The inadequacy and limited effectiveness of teacher training intensify the challenges of generating quality digital content and lead the teachers to continue replicating traditional teaching methodologies online. Such practices dilute the essence of blended learning, reducing it to merely content-dumping sessions without leveraging the potential for innovative and engaging teaching practices.

Additionally, there is a noticeable insufficiency in training for conducting virtual laboratories, leading to an overreliance on available online videos demonstrating lab experiments as a convenient shortcut, lacking necessary hands-on for the students.

Inertia to Curricular Changes:

The transition to blended learning in higher education institutions is marked by a significant resistance to curricular innovation. It is often characterised by the mere transplantation of traditional teaching methodologies onto online platforms without incorporating any novel strategies to integrate the two effectively.

This resistance is further evidenced by the static nature of curricula, content, and timetables, which remain unaltered to accommodate the nuances of online education.

In a few recent instances, the integration of SWAYAM courses into the curriculum is executed superficially, with a lack of genuine effort to harmonise them with the institution-run courses. This approach highlights broader concerns that are constrained by a lack of purpose in online educational activities, often undertaken as a formality rather than for meaningful educational engagement.

The underlying cause of these challenges is deep-rooted inertia among stakeholders towards fully internalising and embracing the principles of blended learning. This inertia fosters a preference for conventional pedagogical approaches and undermines the development of a new set of skills among learners.

Assessment-related Challenges:

Online examinations pose several challenges for higher education institutions. Administratively, there is a concern about the potential for mass cheating and the perceived degradation of the examination system.

There is a lack of understanding in designing question papers suitable for online assessment that can effectively measure learning outcomes. Consequently, the examinations resort to lengthy traditional formats or simplistic multiple-choice questions that often fail to stimulate critical thinking. The accessibility of answers online further complicates the integrity of online assessments. Empirical evidence suggests that students and institutions prefer traditional examinations, as they perceive them as better indicators of merit and appreciate the healthy competition they foster.

As a result, most examinations are back to traditional modes, leaving the opportunities to assess learning outcomes in online and blended spaces.

Gender Divide in Blended Learning:

Female enrollment in the higher education institutions of J&K surpasses that of males, as evidenced by the 2021-2022 Gross Enrolment Ratio of 27.2% for females compared to 22.6% for males. Despite this impressive trend, empirical evidence indicates a lack of conducive learning environments for female learners engaging in online education from home.

Factors such as marital obligations and household responsibilities significantly disrupt their learning experiences, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural norms. Similar challenges related to household duties and childcare responsibilities impede female teachers' ability to conduct online classes effectively from their homes.

Female students expressed their discomfort while switching on cameras during live online classes, resulting from cultural factors and privacy concerns. Female teachers also exhibit similar concerns while uploading self-recorded video content. Additionally, safety concerns arise from the widespread use of WhatsApp groups, where phone numbers are publicly shared, leading to further privacy concerns among female participants.

Moreover, the onset of the pandemic introduced a new dimension to gender disparities, with male learners, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs) and from rural backgrounds as many of them were compelled to drop out of online classes to assist their families in agricultural activities.

Socio-Economic Disparities in Accessing ICT resources:

Socio-economic inequalities persist in accessing ICT resources, manifested through income differentials, rural-urban divides, and social stratification. The limited availability of stable internet connectivity, particularly in remote areas, aggravates these inequalities. Lower-income households face challenges in obtaining essential ICT resources such as mobile phones, broadband services, and data recharge plans, thus hindering their participation in blended learning.

Rural-urban disparities underscore the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure, with empirical evidence highlighting significantly lower internet access among students residing in rural locales, often necessitating long commutes to access online resources.

Moreover, social disparities further compound these issues, as marginalised groups experience disproportionately limited access to higher education. The prevalence of graded inequalities, wherein students from higher socio-economic strata exhibit greater Gross Enrollment Ratios. This also underscores the enduring challenges faced by disadvantaged social strata in accessing educational opportunities, including blended learning.

Effects of Barriers

The ambitious target set forth by the NEP 2020, aiming for a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio by 2035 as a step towards the universalisation of higher education, may face impediments due to barriers hindering the effective implementation of blended learning practices in J&K.

There is a need for effective implementation strategies that are suitable for different kinds of higher education institutions, disciplines, teachers, and students.

The absence of such strategies may not only undermine the integration of youth into the modern labour market, but also can constrain opportunities for intergenerational mobility, thereby perpetuating pre-existing socio-economic inequalities.

This scenario is further augmented by the educational performance gap among disadvantaged students in blended learning, often leading to dropout from the education system. Moreover, it may impede progress toward achieving the objectives outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Areas of Intervention

Addressing the disparities in access to quality blended learning calls for robust public policies and institutional strategies. The following actionable steps can be considered towards fostering inclusive and resilient blended learning practices in the higher education institutions of J&K.

- **Formulating a comprehensive Policy in J&K on Blended Learning** along the lines of NEP 2020 and the recommendations by UGC to provide clear guidance and directives to its higher education institutions, tailored to the specific context and requirements of the region.
- **Developing institutional policies on blended learning**, addressing institutional capacities, availability of infrastructure, disciplinary needs, teacher competencies, taking cognisance of ethical concerns, privacy protocols, and intellectual property rights. These policies should draw inspiration from international best practices while accommodating local needs and realities.
- **Setting up blended learning units within each higher education institution** to facilitate the implementation of blended learning initiatives. These units would play a pivotal role in providing technical assistance, fostering motivation among students and teachers, and coordinating intervention strategies in collaboration with the nodal centre.
- **Encouraging institutions to collaborate with teachers in the submission of blended teaching-learning plans.** These plans can then undergo refinement through coordinated efforts and feedback loops between the nodal and institutional blended learning centres / units.
- **Conducting periodic surveys of preparedness for institutions, teachers, and students** to gauge their readiness for blended learning. Feedback obtained from these assessments will inform the dynamic evolution of institutional policies and practices.
- **Designing comprehensive training modules for different academic disciplines** in the backdrop of blended learning with a focus on learning objectives, outcomes, and impact assessment.

- **Organising well-structured orientation programs and training sessions** for institutional leaders, teachers, and students to enhance their understanding of blended learning principles and technologies. Peer coaching programs should be instituted to facilitate knowledge exchange and skill development among teachers.
- **Providing support to instructional designers and multimedia developers** to assist teachers in content development, coordinated through nodal blended learning centres.
- **Integrating micro-credentialing and digital badges** to recognise teachers' and students' achievements and innovative practices in effective blended teaching and learning.
- **Exploring technological solutions to address internet connectivity issues**, such as utilising low-data and low-bandwidth applications. Additionally, identifying and providing ICT resources to underrepresented student groups within colleges and universities to promote equitable access to blended learning.
- **Promoting and funding research on blended teaching learning** across various disciplines and fostering partnerships between internal and external stakeholders to support innovation and knowledge dissemination based on empirical evidences and needs assessments.
- **Expansion of government support** for reinforcing higher education as a public good, with targeted allocation of funds to higher education institutions for ICT integration and necessary training, with a particular focus on colleges located in remote rural areas.
- **Encouraging collaboration between academia and industry** and facilitating philanthropic contributions from industry partners, alumni, and local stakeholders to enhance institutional resources and capabilities.

Conclusion

The NEP 2020 envisions blended learning as one of the pathways to becoming a Vishwaguru in the higher education system. A set of robust and evidence-based policies and strategies related to blended teaching and learning for the higher education institutions of Jammu & Kashmir could contribute effectively in implementing the vision of building a nation based on the advanced capacities of the youth.

Therefore, policymakers and institutional leaders must understand the obstacles hindering the successful implementation of blended learning and devise strategies to foster an inclusive and resilient blended learning culture across the higher education institutions in Jammu & Kashmir.

This policy brief is prepared by Dr. Sayantan Mandal and Sheriya Sareen, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Indian Institute of Technology Jammu (IIT Jammu), J&K.

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The data was collected in two phases employing questionnaire-based surveys of more than 4700 students and 370 teachers, 100 focus group discussions with students, 100 interviews with teachers, 25 interviews with administrators, and 50 classroom observations in 25 higher education institutions across six districts of Jammu & Kashmir.



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Policy Brief 1: Developing Inclusive Blended Learning Practices for
Higher Education Institutions of **Jammu & Kashmir** - March 2024

Policy Brief 2: Developing Inclusive Blended Learning Practices for
Higher Education Institutions of **Ladakh** - Upcoming

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POLICY BRIEF 1