

*A MANUAL GUIDE FOR
BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAMME (BIP)*

SKILLS@UNI

DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS THROUGH
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT
UNIVERSITY

AN INTERNATIONAL PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE

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through experiential learning at
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Chapter 1

Blended Intensive Programmes: Definition, Structure, and Educational Value

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Introduction

International mobility has long occupied a central position in European higher education. Within the Erasmus framework, studying abroad has been associated with linguistic development, intercultural learning, academic openness, and the construction of a shared European educational space. Yet traditional long-term mobility has also revealed structural limitations. A semester or full year abroad requires financial resources, time availability, family support, linguistic confidence, and the capacity to reorganise one's academic and personal life for an extended period. For this reason, international mobility cannot be treated as an equally accessible opportunity for all students. Participation is often shaped by socioeconomic background, institutional support, previous international experience, and the degree of flexibility allowed by curricula and personal circumstances (Souto-Otero et al., 2013; European Commission, 2024).

The disruption produced by the COVID-19 pandemic made these issues more visible. Physical mobility was interrupted, postponed, or radically reconfigured, while universities were forced to experiment with online teaching, digital collaboration, and hybrid academic formats. This period did not replace the value of face-to-face

international experience, but it contributed to a broader reconsideration of what internationalisation could mean when physical displacement is limited, unequal, expensive, or environmentally demanding. In the post-pandemic phase, European higher education has increasingly moved toward more flexible models that combine mobility, digital cooperation, inclusion, sustainability, and institutional partnership (European Commission, 2020; European Parliament & Council, 2021; European Commission, 2025).

Short Blended Mobility

Blended Intensive Programmes, usually referred to as BIPs, are one of the most significant instruments introduced within the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 framework. A BIP is a short, intensive and transnational educational programme jointly designed by higher education institutions from different countries (at least three). Its defining feature is the combination of a virtual component with a short period of physical mobility. Students work together online before, during, or around an intensive in-person period, usually organised over a few days. To be eligible for Erasmus+ organisational support, a BIP must involve at least 10 Erasmus+ mobile learners. The format is therefore based on blended mobility: it preserves the educational value of physical co-presence while reducing some of the barriers associated with longer mobility schemes (European Commission, 2022; European Commission, 2025). This structure gives BIPs a distinctive pedagogical profile. They are not simply shorter Erasmus experiences, nor are they ordinary online courses supplemented by a final meeting. Their educational value depends on the integration between the digital and physical phases. The virtual component can introduce the topic, prepare students for collaborative work, support intercultural familiarisation, and allow partner institutions to share materials, tasks, and expectations. The in-person phase then concentrates interaction, experimentation, discussion, and collective production into a limited but intensive period. When the two

components are coherently connected, the BIP becomes a structured learning trajectory rather than a sequence of disconnected activities (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024; de Prada et al., 2025).

For universities, BIPs offer a flexible way to internationalise curricula. They allow institutions to develop joint teaching activities with international partners without requiring students to commit to long-term mobility. They also make it possible to involve teachers from different countries in shared educational design, to test innovative formats, and to create interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary learning environments. In this sense, BIPs are aligned with broader European priorities concerning inclusion, digital transformation, cooperation, and sustainability. They can extend access to international learning opportunities to students who would otherwise be excluded from conventional mobility because of economic constraints, work responsibilities, care obligations, health conditions, or curricular rigidity (European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2025; Frank & Hogendoorn-Schweighofer, 2026).

Design and Competences

The short duration of BIPs is both a strength and a challenge. On the one hand, it lowers the threshold for participation and makes international experience more feasible for a wider student population. On the other hand, it compresses the time available for group formation, intercultural adjustment, and collaborative production. Students from different countries, universities, disciplines, and linguistic backgrounds are required to work together quickly. For this reason, a BIP needs careful pedagogical design. Learning outcomes must be explicit, tasks must be realistic, and the sequence of activities must help students move from initial contact to meaningful collaboration. The online phase cannot be treated as a merely administrative preparation, and the in-person phase cannot be reduced to a dense schedule of lectures. The format works

best when students are actively involved in producing, discussing, designing, comparing, solving problems, and reflecting together (Tsvetkova, 2023; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024; Tritter et al., 2026). Recent studies on BIPs confirm this potential across different disciplinary contexts. For instance, research on dental education, nursing, social work, clinical pharmacy, management education, multilingualism, and cross-cultural collaboration suggests that BIPs can support student engagement, intercultural learning, professional awareness, and reflective participation when they are organised around active learning and collaborative tasks (Duś-Ilnicka et al., 2024; Sletnes et al., 2025; Frampton et al., 2025; Ryan et al., 2026; Frank & Hogendoorn-Schweighofer, 2026). These findings are relevant because they show that the format is not limited to a single field of study. Rather, it can be adapted to different academic objectives, provided that the blended structure is used intentionally. A central dimension of BIPs concerns the development of transversal competences. Short-term international programmes place students in situations that require communication, negotiation, adaptability, teamwork, leadership, and intercultural sensitivity. These competences are increasingly important in European higher education and in labour-market-oriented discussions, where graduates are expected to combine disciplinary knowledge with the capacity to collaborate across social, cultural, institutional, and professional differences (European Commission, 2018; Council of Europe, 2018; UNESCO, 2013). A BIP can make these competences visible because students encounter them in practice. They do not merely discuss collaboration as an abstract value; they experience its difficulties through shared tasks, time pressure, linguistic asymmetries, divergent expectations, and the need to reach common decisions.

However, the development of transversal competences cannot be assumed as an automatic outcome of international contact. The presence of students from different countries does not in itself guarantee intercultural learning, just as the use of digital tools does not in itself produce meaningful blended education. The educational

effectiveness of a BIP depends on facilitation, debriefing, reflective activities, and the quality of the tasks through which students interact. Studies on BIP implementation underline the importance of organisational coordination, shared methodological planning, communication among partner institutions, and coherent alignment between objectives, activities, and assessment (de Prada et al., 2025; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). In this respect, the BIP format requires a substantial design effort from teaching teams and administrative staff.

BIPs can therefore be understood as compact educational laboratories. Their limited duration intensifies the social, cognitive, and organisational processes that usually unfold over longer periods. Students must enter a new academic environment, negotiate roles, understand expectations, and cooperate with unfamiliar peers within a short timeframe. Teachers must create the conditions for productive interaction while managing linguistic diversity, different academic cultures, and uneven levels of prior knowledge. Partner institutions must coordinate calendars, credits, selection procedures, digital platforms, mobility logistics, and recognition mechanisms. The apparent simplicity of the format conceals a complex architecture of pedagogical and institutional work.

Within this broader framework, a BIP devoted to play, collaboration, and soft skills represents a particularly relevant case. Play-based activities are well suited to short intensive programmes because they can accelerate group formation, make interaction observable, and create situations in which participants must communicate, decide, adapt, and cooperate. Games and playful tasks can provide low-risk environments where students test strategies, experience failure, negotiate rules, and reflect on their own role within a group. When connected to explicit theoretical and reflective framing, play can therefore support the educational aims of a BIP by linking socialisation, experiential learning, and competence development.

The BIP format responds to a crucial question for contemporary higher education: how can universities make international learning more accessible without emptying it of pedagogical intensity? Its answer lies in a careful balance between virtual preparation and physical encounter, flexibility and structure, inclusion and academic rigour. BIPs do not replace longer forms of mobility, but they expand the repertoire of internationalisation. They offer students a shorter and more accessible experience of transnational learning, while providing universities with a platform for collaborative teaching innovation. Their value depends less on the mere combination of online and in-person modalities than on the quality of the educational design that connects them. When this design is intentional, BIPs can become meaningful spaces for intercultural exchange, collaborative learning, and the development of transversal competences.

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