

*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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An international pedagogical
experience***

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Chapter 15

Students' Reflections on the Skills@Uni BIP

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Blended intensive programmes (BIPs) are designed to combine the flexibility of online learning with the depth and face-to-face experiences from the onsite component. In case of the Skills@Uni BIP the learning journey started before students travel to Madeira Island (Portugal), continued through a week long of activities and it is our hope that it extends beyond it through new networks, perspectives, and skills.

In this context, this chapter focuses more specifically on the feedback obtained from how students experienced this BIP, the online and onsite parts and also in how they perceived the programme as a single, integrated learning experience. In this sense, it is relevant to mentioned that most students had not previously participated in international mobility programmes, although a minority reported extensive Erasmus experience in several European countries. Motivations for enrolling in this particular BIP included seeking a new international experience, improving English communication skills, testing oneself in a new context, gaining additional ECTS credits, and exploring the specific topic of soft skills and employability in an international environment.

The virtual component

Students generally agreed that they acquired new subject-related knowledge during the online phase, and that the online materials were clear, relevant and well designed. Several participants particularly appreciated the use of a forum-like environment, which allowed them to read peers' contributions and respond at their own pace.

One positive aspect mentioned was the virtual component flexibility. The self-study structure enabled students to organize their work around existing academic and professional commitments, but at the same time it created an initial familiarity with names and topics, facilitating the social and academic integration during the onsite week.

Some of the students comments highlighted that the virtual materials were "well-chosen and not exhausting" and that the asynchronous structure allowed students to "do it on our own in our time limits." Others noted that the online activities helped them arrive at the physical mobility feeling that "some initial interaction had already taken place," creating a more comfortable atmosphere once in Madeira.

Nevertheless, despite the overall positive view, students identified some challenges related to the virtual component. The most frequent aspect for improvement was the management of online discussion, which was also highlight during the final reflection on the onsite week. Some students found it difficult to follow threads in the forums because "there were too many replies at the same time," with ideas "lost in dozens of messages.". In this sense, participants recommended organizing discussions in smaller groups (e.g., subgroups of four to five students) to facilitate deeper interaction and to avoid that more active participants dominate large discussion spaces. Additionally, others suggested an "English only" policy in group work to prevent the exclusion of non-native members when local language is used within subgroups.

During this reflection another topic that emerged was concerned with timing and workload in the virtual component. Working students in particular reported difficulties in keeping up with deadlines and catching up with discussion posts. Some proposed extending the online component by one or two weeks or starting it earlier, to distribute activities more evenly and reduce the need to concentrate tasks in the final week. Technical access issues (e.g., repeated log-in problems to the platform) were also mentioned as a minor but frustrating barrier for some participants.

The onsite component

Evaluation of the onsite component was overall positive, with most students strongly agreeing that they acquired new subject-related knowledge, engaged regularly in the activities, and participated in learning experiences not available in their regular courses. Students widely appreciated the balance between academic work, cultural visits, social activities, and independent time.

Some of the comments repeatedly referred to the onsite week as “one of the best experiences of my life” or “one of the most beautiful experiences I’ve ever had.” Participants valued the opportunity to step out of their comfort zone, collaborate in international teams, and experience Madeira’s culture in an integrated way.

Furthermore, group projects and small-team work were perceived as central learning mechanisms, fostering both soft skills (communication, collaboration, problem solving) and deeper understanding of the programme’s thematic content. Students emphasized that the onsite activities reminded them “of the importance of trying new things and stepping out of my comfort zone,” and motivated them to participate in future international or blended programmes.

Overall, students described the onsite component as very well structured, with clear instructions, well-chosen activities, and careful logistical planning (transport, meals,

and schedule). The selection of local restaurants and the farewell dinner were explicitly appreciated as part of the cultural learning experience.

Nonetheless, the main suggestions for improvement related to the time allocated for certain tasks, especially the final group project (and essay on the virtual part). Some groups reported that the time available felt tight and that one or two extra days would have allowed deeper development of outputs without compromising the quality of the work and the engagement with the activities. A few participants also mentioned the need for fully functioning computers at the start of group work, as technical issues initially slowed some teams.

In general, several students indicated that they would have liked the onsite phase to last longer, either to explore more parts of the island culture or to engage more intensively with the academic content. Minor suggestions included the possibility of including an additional hike or extended thematic sessions to deepen specific topics.

The online and onsite components as a whole

When considering both components together, students mostly agreed that the overall sequence of online and onsite activities supported their learning and that the total workload was manageable alongside other academic responsibilities. Many explicitly stated that the two components complemented each other. The virtual component provided an introduction to content and peers, while the onsite part consolidated relationships and learning in a more intense and embodied way.

At the same time, there was a clear pattern in perceived “weight” of both components. Students tended to find the onsite part more engaging and less challenging than the virtual one, often describing the virtual workload as more demanding relative to their daily routines. As a result, several recommendations converged on maintaining the blended model but slightly rebalancing it, for instance by extending the onsite days and adjusting or spreading the online tasks.

Overall students' evaluation

The evaluation showed that the levels of satisfaction with the programme were very high. Students agreed or strongly agreed that the BIP met their expectations, was worth the time and effort invested, and that they would recommend it to other students. Overall satisfaction with the blended intensive programme as a whole and willingness to recommend it reached the top of the scale for most respondents.

Participants also reported that the BIP increased their interest in future international or blended learning opportunities, such as additional BIPs or Erasmus+ mobilities. Beyond academic benefits, many comments emphasized personal growth, like improved English communication skills, increased confidence in working in international teams, and a broader understanding of other cultures and educational systems.

Comments such as "It was the best experience I have ever done," "I would be happy to participate again," and "I would have stayed longer" also demonstrate the emotional and motivational impact of the programme. Several students also explicitly thanked the organising team and teaching staff by name, acknowledging their support, care, and professionalism throughout the experience.

Key lessons for future BIPs from students' perspectives

Taken together, the students evaluation suggests that the current BIP design was highly successful in delivering meaningful academic, social, and cultural experiences in a relatively short time frame. The following lessons or key components emerged as particularly relevant for future BIPs, namely:

- Preserve the blended structure, as the combination of online and onsite activities was perceived as coherent and pedagogically effective.

- Maintain the strong emphasis on small-group work, project-based learning, and rich cultural immersion during the onsite component.
- Re-organize online discussions into smaller, moderated subgroups to enhance interaction quality and reduce work overload.
- Consider extending the duration or redistributing the workload of the virtual component, especially to better accommodate students who work alongside their studies.
- Explore the possibility of extending the onsite component by one or two days, particularly to allow more time for final project development and deeper exploration of the host community.
- Implement clear language policies (e.g., English as the working language in mixed groups) to ensure inclusive participation for all students.

By incorporating these suggestions, future BIPs can perhaps further strengthen student engagement and learning in this unique learning environment, since as the students' reflections suggest that carefully designed blended intensive programmes can create transformative learning experiences that extend far beyond traditional classroom settings, which is ultimately one of the biggest goals of BIP programme.