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The First Steps of Blended Mobility in European Higher Education: A Survey of Blended Intensive Programmes

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Abstract

Blended Mobility refers to the strategic combination of phases of online learning with periods of short physical mobility. This approach to international learning has gained considerable interest in European university education in recent years due to the introduction of Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) in the new Erasmus + programme. BIPs are defined as a form of Blended Mobility which involve short, intensive programmes that use innovative ways of learning and teaching, including online cooperation. This article reports on the results of a survey of BIP academic coordinators which was carried out to establish an overview of current practices in the area. The study provides an overview of the perceived benefits of Blended Mobility and also identifies the main challenges which practitioners encounter when running such programmes. A series of good practices which are recommended by organisers are presented and this is followed by a discussion of the survey's major conclusions.

Keywords

Blended mobility, blended intensive programmes, virtual mobility, virtual exchange

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Introduction

Although there was already considerable interest in exploring the role of digital technologies in international education in recent years (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities et al., 2019; Richardson, 2016), it was undoubtedly the COVID-19 pandemic which drove institutions and researchers to seriously consider the potential of online contact and collaboration for providing students with international learning experiences as part of their studies. Sabzalieva et al. (2022), in their report for UNESCO on online international education initiatives in the wake of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, suggest that these developments "lead to the conclusion that the future of student mobility will combine physical international experiences with digitally driven virtual opportunities that reach a wider range of students and build greater cross-cultural awareness and skills" (p. 41).

This integration of online approaches to international education has come in the form of two very distinct, but often confused, activities - Virtual Mobility and Virtual Exchange. Rajagopal et al. (2020) define Virtual Mobility as a form of learning where "learners enrolled as students in one higher educational institute have the opportunity to follow a course at another higher educational institute in the online mode" (n.p.). Although this was often used as an alternative to physical mobility during the recent pandemic, research has highlighted the limitations to this form of international education (Schueller & Sahin, 2022) and indeed many have questioned whether it should even be considered a form of 'mobility' at all (The European Students' Union & the Erasmus Student Network, 2022; Van Hove, 2021). Virtual Exchange, on the other hand, is a distinct activity which refers to the numerous online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage participants in sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their educational programmes (O'Dowd, 2023). This term includes a wide range of approaches to online collaborative learning such as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), telecollaboration and e-tandem and there has been a great deal of research on its learning outcomes (EVALUATE, 2019; EVOLVE Project Team, 2020; Hackett et al., 2023).

Blended Mobility is a much less well-known form of international learning which also involves digital learning. In the context of international higher education, this approach entails combining phases of online learning with teachers and students from other educational institutions, with a period of travel to work together in person. Essentially, blended mobility can be seen to integrate activities such as online lectures (Virtual Mobility), online intercultural collaboration (Virtual Exchange) with periods of short-term physical mobility.

This article focuses on one particular application of Blended Mobility which has been introduced in European Higher Education by the new Erasmus + programme 2021–2027 (European Commission, 2021). Known as 'Blended Intensive Programmes' (BIPs), these programmes provide funding for European institutions to develop international courses between institutions coming from at least three

countries which combine online collaborative activities and periods of short-term mobility in one of the participating countries. BIPs allow for a certain degree of liberty in terms of structure and implementation. With this in mind and considering that Blended Mobility is generally a new form of international learning, this article reports on a survey of common BIP practices which was answered by almost 200 BIP coordinators. The survey identified how BIPs are being organised and implemented, and provided insights into the experiences of the academic organisers of these programmes. In particular, the results identified the challenges that BIP coordinators encountered and also their recommendations of good practice in the area. As BIPs are likely to become an important part of European universities' internationalisation strategies in the coming years, the results of this study may provide valuable insights for different stakeholders in this process, including university management, academic staff and members of international offices.

Blended Mobility in International Higher Education

Blended mobility is a relatively new activity and very little empirical research can be currently found (see Purg et al., 2018 for an isolated example). However, practical reports of blended mobility programmes being put into practice are growing. Bruhn (2020), for example, identifies several institutions that are using blended models for joint and double degrees. Various reports of pre-mobility projects also exist which illustrate how Virtual Exchange initiatives are being used to prepare students for their physical mobility programmes (Batardière et al., 2019; Cappellini & Macre, 2020). Welzer et al. (2018) report on the Blended AIM project which brought together a multidisciplinary group of students from 10 countries in order to solve real-life challenges presented to them by international companies. Online collaboration by the international teams of students was bookended by physical meetings at the beginning and the end of the project. Purg et al. (2018) describe a Blended Mobility course on the theme of 'Advancing Digitally Renewed Interactions in Art Teaching' where MA students from four European universities took part in a studio-based project. In this case, phases of online collaboration took place before and after an intensive period of on-site collaboration lasting 8–12 days.

The literature in the area suggests that blended mobility programs, as an emerging concept in international education, offer a range of benefits that distinguish them from traditional long-term physical mobility programs and pure Virtual Exchange initiatives. Firstly, blended mobility programs are likely to attract a larger cohort of students than pure physical mobility programs due to the shorter stays abroad that they require. This feature is considered to make the activity more inclusive and more appealing to cohorts of students who may be unable or unwilling to participate in long-term mobility abroad (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities et al., 2019; European Commission, 2022). Secondly, blending virtual collaboration with physical mobility is reported to enhance the learning outcomes and impact of physical mobility. The virtual collaboration can help to prepare students for the intercultural learning

experience and to establish good working relationships with their partners before travelling to meet and work with them (Buiskool & Hudepohl, 2020; Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy, 2020; Welzer et al., 2018). Thirdly, it is argued that blended programs offer the "best of both worlds," as students have the opportunity to benefit from the experience of coming into contact with another culture in person while also developing skills associated with online collaboration and communication (O'Dowd, 2023).

Blended mobility is such a new concept which combines, what have been until now, two very different types of learning – study abroad and online learning – it is inevitable that the activity raises a number of questions for the international education community. Some of these include the following: First, how should Blended Mobility projects best be structured? In other words, should the online phase bookend the period of on-campus phase - or vice versa? And how long should the online and on-campus phases last? Second, how should students' work be recognised? For example, if one of the participating partners in a blended mobility programme does not actually travel during the on-campus stage but simply 'receives' the other groups in their institution, do they deserve the same credit as their mobile partners for their participation in the project? If not, does that mean credits are being awarded for the actual physical effort of travelling instead of the actual intercultural collaborative activities which are organised online and on campus?

Finally, what should ideally be done during the online and on-campus phases of the project? Initial assumptions can be made about this, but they require confirmation through research. For example, lectures by teachers and invited guests may best be suited to the online format as they can be easily recorded and then viewed by participants at different times according to their time zone and study schedule. Initial 'getting to know you' collaboration activities and meetings can also be easily carried out online as well as discussions of reading and viewing materials. However, more intensive group work, team presentations and 'field work' or laboratory work obviously lend themselves more to the period of physical mobility.

Blended Intensive Programmes

The Erasmus + programme guide for the period 2021–2027 advocates for the adoption of "Blended Intensive Programmes" (BIPs) which are a form of Blended Mobility defined as "short, intensive programmes that use innovative ways of learning and teaching, including the use of online cooperation" (p. 52). These programmes necessitate a physical mobility component lasting between five and thirty days, coupled with a virtual component that facilitates collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork.

The European Commission views BIPs as opportunities to focus on transdisciplinarity and innovative approaches to learning which may include online collaboration, research-based learning and challenge-based approaches which will focus on challenges "linked to the United Nations' sustainable development goals or other societal

challenges identified by regions, cities, or companies" (European Commission, 2021, p. 52). BIPs are also seen as a way to facilitate collaboration between educational institutions and businesses, organisations and local authorities (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022, p.5). Finally, BIPs are expected to focus on at least one of the four priorities of the new Erasmus + programme - inclusion and diversity; digital transformation; environment and fight against climate change, and finally, participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement (European Commission/DG EAC/Unit B.1 2021, p.8).

BIPs have the following key characteristics: They have to involve at least 3 higher education institutions coming from at least 3 EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme. The physical phase of a BIP must last between 5 and 30 days and this phase can take place at the receiving institution or at any other location in that institution's country. BIPs have to award at least 3 ECTS credits for students. As regards financing, the travelling students request funding for travel and subsistence from their home universities' Erasmus + funds in order to take part in the physical mobility phase, while the host institution also receives a certain amount of funding to cover organisational costs during this phase.

One of the interesting aspects of BIPs is the relative liberty allowed to participants to design the methodology and activities of the online and on-campus phases. The BIP handbook (European Commission/DG EAC, 2022) recommends that the online phase should not be reduced to a series of online lectures and one-way transfer of content from lecturers to students and should instead promote online collaborative learning (thereby reflecting the principles of Virtual Exchange). The handbook proposes that the online phase should "not only give access to educational material in the form of online lectures or videoconferencing, but also support online cooperation through cooperative exercises and discussion through suitable online platforms. This is to ensure that participants benefit from the virtual component as well as the physical component and are able to improve their digital and online cooperation skills" (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022, p.9).

Rationale for the Study and Research Questions

The impetus for this survey stemmed from an interest in establishing how university institutions and networks were employing BIPs and to learn what were the experiences of the academic coordinators running these programmes. Blended Mobility is a relatively new and unexplored concept in European higher education and the BIPs initiative was the first attempt by the Erasmus + programme to promote the concept of combining physical mobility and online learning. The overall aim was therefore to establish an overview of current practices and to identify examples of challenges and good practice which could later be shared with stakeholders. Following the gaps in knowledge identified in the literature review, there was particular interest in identifying how BIPs were structured and recognised as well as identifying good

practices in implementation which academic coordinators had learned from their experiences.

The research questions (RQs) which underlined the survey were the following:

RQ1. How are BIPs being taken up and organised in the academic programmes of European universities?

RQ2. What do academic coordinators of BIPs perceive to be the main challenges of these programmes?

RQ3. What do they consider to be the main benefits of BIPs programmes?

RQ4. What recommendations do academic coordinators have for good practice in BIPs?

Research Methodology

The survey was developed based on the research questions, a review of the different organisational options available within BIPs (European Commission/DG EAC, 2022), as well as the authors' experience with organising a BIP. In a first step, questions were collected, sorted and sublimated. In a second step, the developed draft questionnaire was tested with focus groups of experts from different universities and the national Erasmus + agency in Spain to ensure the comprehensibility and meaningfulness of the questions. In a third step, the survey was adapted based on the feedback from the focus group and finalised. It was divided into two main sections and contained 15 open and closed questions in total. The first section aimed to establish the way BIPs were being organised and looked at such issues as the length and structure of the programmes as well as how academic credit was awarded and the types of activities used in each stage. The second section included questions that can be divided into two subsections. First, two open-ended questions asked the coordinators to name activities that they felt were particularly appropriate for the different collaboration formats. In a second subsection the respondents were asked to consider the challenges they have encountered, the perceived benefits of the programmes for students as well as recommendations of good practice for other teachers planning to run a BIP in the future. Since we were particularly interested in the practical experiences of the teachers who planned and also conducted the BIPs themselves in order to gain a practice-oriented insight, the survey was explicitly aimed at academic coordinators who had conducted BIPs in the past two years.

The survey was distributed electronically by the authors in February-March 2023 to approximately 100 university international offices, as well as to seven university networks and organisations working in international higher education in Europe. (However, as the original announcement of the survey was forwarded electronically within university networks, it is impossible to establish an exact number of recipients.)

Recipients were requested to pass the survey on to academic coordinators who had organised BIPs in their institutions or countries. In total, 196 valid responses from 27 countries were collected for analysis. Despite requests sent to coordinating authorities, it was not possible to ascertain how many BIPs had already taken place in Europe at the time of the survey.

The answers to the open questions of the second section were analysed using a qualitative content analysis approach (Kuckartz 2019; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). An inductive approach was used and no pre-existing theory, model, or hypothesis was applied in the coding of the data (Selvi, 2019, p. 443). This is partly because of the lack of existing theory or model for researching BIPs and partly because the authors aimed to explore the data as unbiasedly as possible in order to generate new insights and findings from it. This data-driven approach is characterised by the continuous organisation and systematisation of codes, which are divided into main codes and sub-codes, in a step-by-step process until saturation occurs (Kuckartz, 2019). Each researcher coded for two to three of the open questions and followed the same coding process (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). To ensure intersubjectivity, the researchers used intra-rater reliability as well as consensual coding, i.e., each coder recoded a portion of the data later to test for consistency and multiple joint coding sessions were held in which the data was coded together.

Results

In this section we report how BIPs have been carried out in European higher education, before going on to examine what challenges coordinators reported, the benefits they perceived and the recommendations they make to improve this form of blended mobility.

RQ1. How are BIPs Being Taken up and Organised in the Academic Programmes of European Universities?

The uptake of BIPs refers here to where the projects are hosted and in what subject areas they are being employed. The results of the survey illustrated that the programme has been taken up by a broad range of higher education institutions and subject areas. Altogether it was reported that BIPs had been hosted in 27 different countries. Germany was the country to have hosted the biggest number of the mobility phases (23%), but there were also six other countries which had hosted between 8% and 13% of the mobilities (see Figure 1). No one subject area was seen to dominate the focus of the BIPs. While law, economics and social sciences were seen to represent 30% of the initiatives, the remainder were quite evenly distributed among six other subject areas (see Figure 2). These can be viewed as positive findings as they demonstrate that this type of Blended Mobility can be employed across the European Union and integrated into a wide range of subjects.

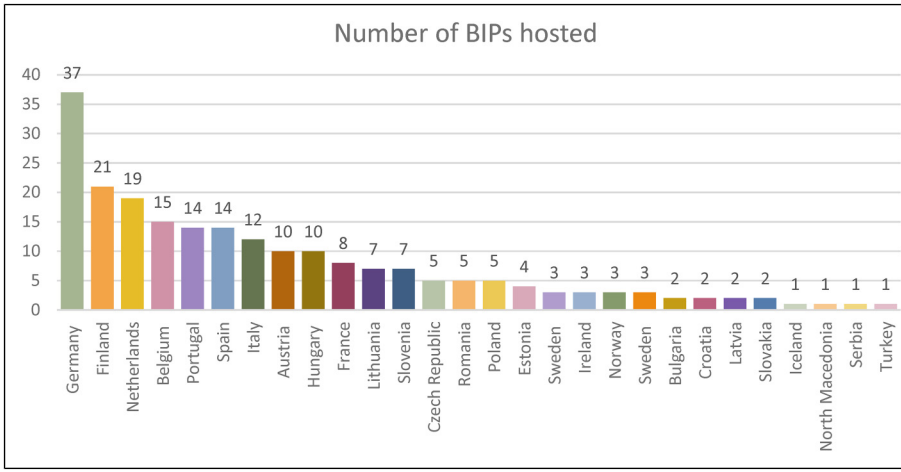

Figure 1. Number of BIPs hosted in different countries.

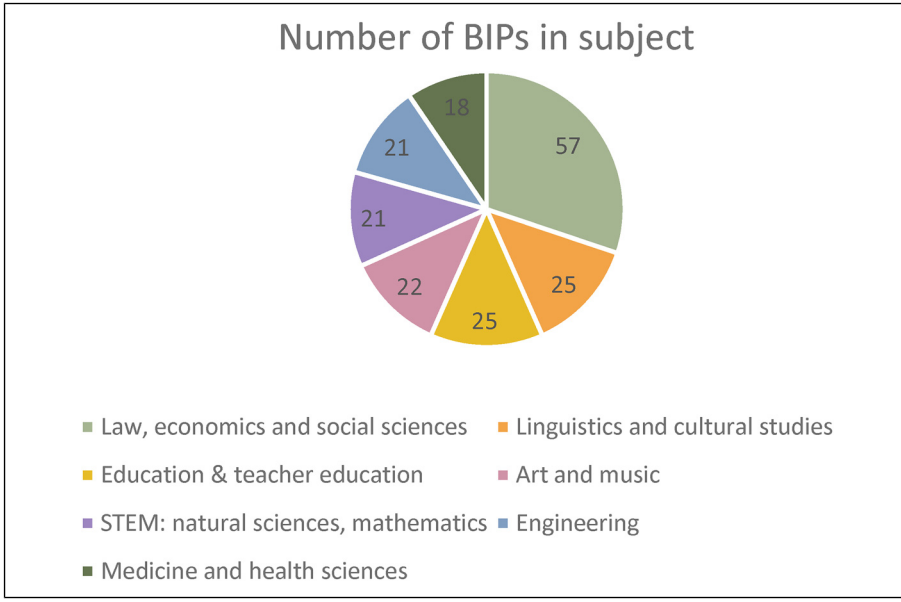

Figure 2. Number of BIPs in subject areas.

However, other results suggest that the way the programmes are being employed perhaps does not completely reflect the principles which the European Commission originally intended to promote. For example, 85% of the BIPs focussed exclusively

on student-student collaboration, while only 15% had incorporated other stakeholders such as organisations, local government etc. in the BIPs' activities. Furthermore, 20% of the respondents reported that their BIP had not focussed on any of the priorities of the Erasmus + programme and this is considered an important characteristic of BIPs by the European Commission (European Commission/DG EAC/Unit B.1, 2021).

As regards how the BIPs are organised within academic programmes, the survey looked at the length of the physical mobility stage, how student work was recognised and what types of activities took place during the online and on-campus phases. The survey revealed that, in many aspects, organisers choose the minimum requirements in order for their project to qualify as a BIP. For example, 90% of the mobility phases lasted the minimum 5–7 days, while 50% of BIPs awarded the minimum 3 ECTS credits. 89% had either an online phase followed by a physical phase or vice versa and avoided having two online phases bookending the physical mobility (see Figure 3). While this is not necessarily a negative outcome, it may reflect the intensive workload which BIPs can involve for teachers and their institutions, or a preference for educators not to overcomplicate activities in these opening rounds of the new format.

It was seen earlier that one of the interesting aspects of BIPs is the liberty allowed to participants in regard to designing the methodology and activities of the online and on-campus phases. The survey results (presented in Figure 4) showed that the most common activities that were considered particularly suitable during the online phase were 'instructional activities' (43% of the activities mentioned) which involves activities that such as lectures, presentations, mentoring or instruction on the organisation

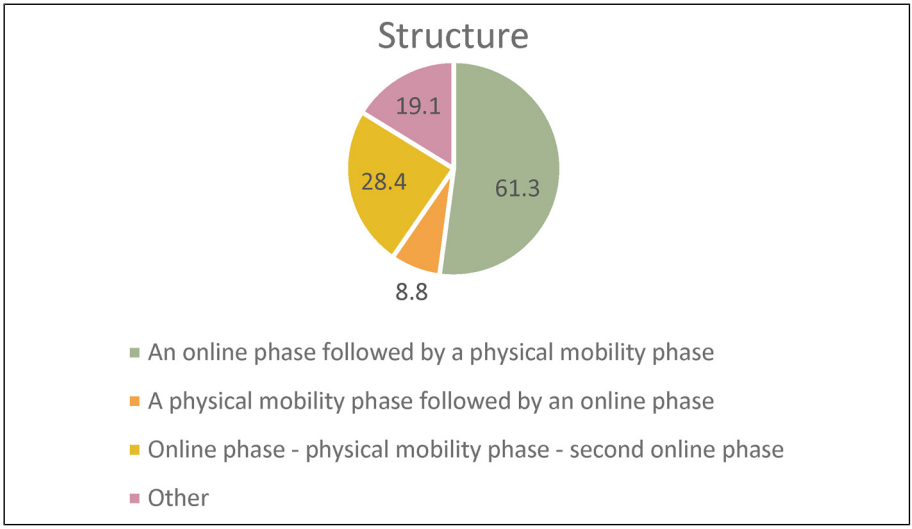

Figure 3. How BIPs were organised.

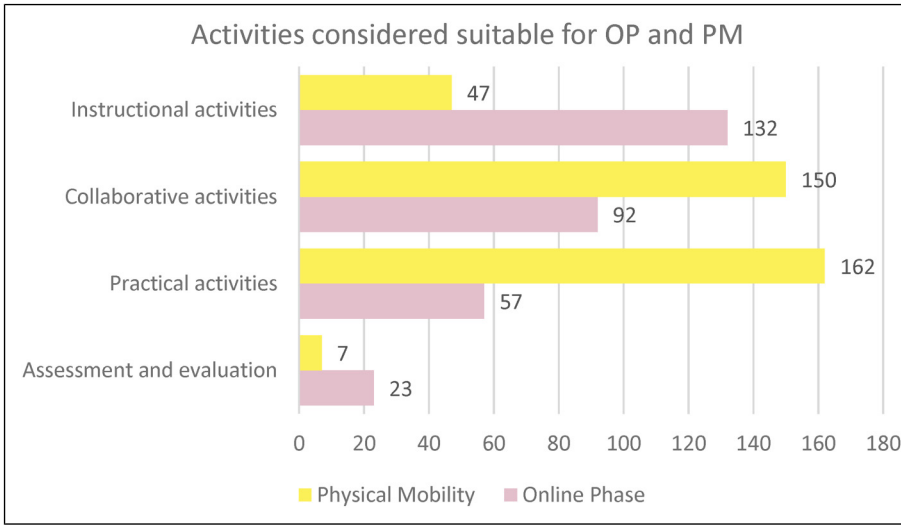

Figure 4. Activities considered suitable for the online phase (OP) and physical mobility phase (PM).

of the class. 'Collaborative activities' were also prominent (30%), involving activities that engaged students in groups or teams to achieve a common goal such as group discussions, group projects or workshops. Furthermore, 18% of the answers showed that coordinators also regard practical activities related to the BIP as suitable for this phase. This included teambuilding exercises and preparation for or follow up from the physical mobility phase.

In terms of physical mobility, the results show that the type of activities considered most appropriate can be categorised as practical activities (44%) which includes hands-on activities or experiential learning, such as visits to companies, museums, or fieldwork or opportunities for students to engage with social or cultural issues. This was followed closely by 'collaborative activities' (40%) involving activities that involved students in group work or interactive workshops or projects. Only 12% saw this phase as suitable for lectures or other forms of theoretical input.

These results would seem to suggest that there is a general approach of providing subject content, organisational and theoretical aspects in the online phase and following this up with more interactive and collaborative activities in the on-campus phase. This approach was summed up by one respondent who wrote: "Organize lectures within the online component and run a practical work programme during the physical mobility". While this approach is understandable (especially if the online phase precedes the physical mobility), educators should also keep in mind the potential of online contexts for collaborative learning. This will give student the opportunity to develop their online collaboration skills and also ensure that the online phase of the

BIP is also a source of student-centred learning. More training opportunities may be necessary to introduce BIP coordinators to online collaborative learning activities.

As regards the question of recognition, students were awarded either the minimum number of three ECTS credits (50% of all courses) or between three and six ECTS (47% of all courses). These ECTS are issued by the university hosting the physical mobility and all mobile students should, in theory, be ensured the recognition of their participation in a BIP through the learning agreement signed prior to the course. However, some respondents did mention that certain participating institutions had refused to recognise the credits their students had gained during the BIP.

In relation to the provision of credit for non-mobile students from the host institution, 49% of academic coordinators responded that the BIP was integrated into these students' usual course work and therefore fully recognised. 30% reported that the BIP was treated as extra credit from the non-mobile students' usual course work and would be indicated in students' transcripts of academic records. Only 9% recognised that the BIP was considered as a voluntary activity and therefore carried no credit for non-mobile students. 11% mentioned numerous other options.

Finally, it was also informative to observe how students were recruited for BIPs. While a majority (60%) reported having formed the BIP network by collaborating with other teachers who then engaged their own classes, 20% also reported that students had come independently to the BIPs, while 10% said they had used either their own networks or other options respectively.

In summary, it is interesting that BIPs are being taken up by a wide range of countries and also by an ample spectrum of university disciplines. However, it is also significant to observe the tendency in many cases to use the online phase of the programmes mainly for instructional activities. This issue will be returned to later in the discussion section.

RQ2. What do Academic Coordinators of BIPs Perceive to be the Main Challenges of These Programmes?

In the second part of the survey, respondents were asked to mention the main challenges or problems which they or their students experienced when taking part in the BIP and also to reflect on what they considered to be the main benefits which the BIP had had for their students. These were open questions and respondents often mentioned two or three different issues in their responses. These responses were coded and the frequency of each code was calculated.

When asked to comment on the main challenges or problems which they or their students experienced when taking part in the BIP, respondents provided an interesting range of answers. The most commonly cited problem was related to administration issues (30% of problems mentioned). This was related to an excess of bureaucracy and paperwork, the fact that they considered that international offices were not prepared to administer the BIP, or the belief that different countries used different

regulations, thereby complicating the mobility phase of the BIP. The second most mentioned issue was the low level of financial support for students (26% of problems). This was followed by a variety of other issues and problems including the challenge of reaching the minimum number of 15 mobile students (14%) as well as the fact that it was difficult to find an appropriate time for all classes to do their online activities and to attend the on-campus event (8%). The perception that the BIP meant a significant increase in the teachers' workload which was often not recognised by their institution and the challenges related to the online platforms used or how to organise online

Table 1. Problems and Challenges Encountered During the BIP.

Problems and Challenges encountered during the BIP	***% of problems mentioned***	***Example comments from respondents***
Administration problems	30%	*The biggest challenge was getting everything done on time. Every university has their own pace of process and if you don't have previous experience with organising BIP either then it is difficult to get everything done on time.*
Financial problems	26%	*[There was] uncertainty about whether we could cover accommodation and meals with organization financing. The grant for the students and the professor from East European countries was quite limited to cover these costs plus travelling costs.*
Reaching minimum number of students	14%	*We also encountered last-minute drop-out students leading to ineligibility for the E+ funding (despite enough registrations, only 14 students took part to the whole programme in the end).*
Problems combining academic calendars	8%	*One of the most difficult things was finding a suitable time window for the physical part as different universities have different academic calendars.*
Workload for teachers	5%	*Unfortunately, my experience was catastrophic, it was more than 20 h of online and in-person classes without pay and to be done extra to normal working hours. A very promising project in theory that unfortunately was made negative by an inexistent organization of funds.*
Logistics of online work	5%	*Ensuring that the online phase was adequately activated and that the students (or teams of students) were fully engaged.*

teaching activities were both themes that appeared in 5% of the problems mentioned. Various other issues made up the remaining 12% of reported problems. Some representative comments in regard to the main issues can be seen in Table 1.

RQ3. What do the BIP Coordinators Consider to be the Benefits of BIP Programmes?

When respondents were asked what they considered to be the main benefits of the BIP for their students, they mentioned a wide range of reasons. These serve to demonstrate the advantages which short-term blended mobility programmes such as BIPs can offer higher education. Coordinators mentioned various aspects related to the intercultural character of the programme, including the opportunity it offered to gain first-hand experience working in international teams (23%), the opportunity to develop networks and make international contacts for the future (19%), and being exposed to alternative cultural perspectives and engaging in intercultural collaboration (16%). Respondents also mentioned that students had been given access to subject content and teaching methods which they would not find in their home institution (11%), and that students who would normally not be able to take part in a long-term period of study abroad were able to have an international learning experience (10%). (An overview of the most commonly mentioned benefits and some representative example quotations can be seen in Table 2.)

RQ4. What Recommendations do Academic Coordinators Have for Good Practice in BIPs?

Finally, respondents were asked if they could propose any recommendations of good practice for other teachers planning to run a BIP in the future. The results (presented in Table 3) would suggest that many of the practitioners' proposals are based on the challenges they encountered and how these could be avoided or overcome in the future. For example, over half of the responses were related to the logistics of planning and preparing the BIPs (53% of recommendations for good practice). Respondents regularly underlined the importance of planning well in advance and establishing a clear and transparent structure and organisation for the programme. This is particularly important for the online stage of the project as educators may be less familiar with this type of learning. For example, one respondent suggested: "Have a clear plan of the online phase of the BIP, what is it aimed at and what do you want to achieve. If it is left obscure without clear agenda of meetings, allocating exact dates of interim presentations, this phase of BIP may not be used to its fullest." In this category, the coordinators also recommended recruiting more students than were actually needed to avoid the course not being able to take place due to too few participants.

They also highlighted the need to involve International Offices in the planning of the BIP and to maintain regular contact between the administrative and academic

Table 2. Most Mentioned Benefits of Participating in the BIP for Students.

Benefits of participating in the BIP for students	***% of problems mentioned***	***Example comments from respondents***
Students had the opportunity to work in international teams	23%	*Students get access to an international co-operation experience without high "barriers to entry".* *The setting of the course is close to business reality: You start without knowing each other as a virtual international team on a project and meet physically at a later stage to improve your concept*
Students made contacts with students and teachers from other countries that work in their area of study	19%	*They created personal connections with students and lecturers from different universities;*
Students were exposed to alternative cultural perspectives and engaged in intercultural collaboration	16%	*Cross-cultural cooperation that develops the students' cultural competence and gives them a broader understanding of the topic as such. They learn to understand both cultural and social similarities and differences regarding the topic (something very much needed in today's global societies).*
Students had access to subject content and teaching methods which they would not find in their home institution	11%	*The possibility of having specific lessons on topics of interest from qualified teachers and scholars from other European universities and institutions*
Students who would normally not be able to take part in a long-term period of study abroad where able to have an international learning experience	10%	*This offers short term mobilities to students that have difficulties in applying for longer mobility terms (like semester or year exchange).*

organisers: "Have regular checkpoints with the administration, especially with the mobility office and education department, all along the preparation steps."

In relation to preparing the BIP on an academic level, it was regularly recommended that the BIP be integrated into curricula or existing courses. This reflects common methodological principles of Virtual Exchange where it is considered essential that the online interaction is clearly linked to course content (EVOLVE Project Team, 2020; O'Dowd, 2023). Some respondents also mentioned the importance of keeping in mind the differing contexts of students when preparing the

Table 3. Themes of Recommendations for Good Practice in Future BIPs.

Themes of recommendations for good practice in future BIPs	***% of coded recommendations***	***Specific themes mentioned by respondents***
Planning and Organisation	53%	***Related to Logistics:*** *Plan well in advance;* *Have a clear and transparent structure and organisation;* *Recruit more students than you need* *Recruit more than the minimum number of students;* ***Related to academic issues:*** *Integrate the BIP into curricula or existing courses;* ***Related to students' needs:*** *Consider students' different academic levels;* *Support students in the funding process.*
Course design	24%	*Facilitate collaborative and interactive methods;* *Include social/cultural activities during the physical mobility stage;* *Provide the possibility for students to get to know each other online.*
Collaboration among partners	15%	*Ensure close cooperation and communication with partners and with students;* *Endeavour to find reliable partners.*
Other comments	5%	*Often related issues that were specific for individual BIPs, e.g., concerning learning content of the BIP*
Mindset	3%	*Be patient; Be motivated; Keep students motivated*

programme. This referred to taking into account that students from different countries could be coming to the project with different academic levels in the subject area or that some might need further financial funding to take part in the physical mobility stage.

Other insightful recommendations were related to how the different phases of the project could be organised (24% of recommendations for good practice). Many recommended that the online phase be employed to facilitate collaborative and interactive

activities and to provide opportunities for students to develop good working relationships together. Again, this corresponds to the relationship building phase which is common in Virtual Exchange methodology (O'Dowd, 2023). Others proposed using the on-campus phase to carry out social and cultural activities. In all the examples which were related to this area, there was a clear emphasis on using BIPs for an approach to learning based on interaction and collaboration and student-centred learning. For example: "Don't underestimate the importance of giving the students enough time to get to know each other from the start -this makes the group work/workshops much smoother and rewarding". This seemed to contrast with what had actually happened during many of the BIPs as many activities used during the online phase were seen to have been teacher-centred 'instructional activities' (43% of the activities mentioned).

Finally, another aspect which was given a good deal of attention was the importance of developing a good working relationship between the teachers who were organising and running the BIP (15% of recommendations for good practice). Blended Mobility, like Virtual Exchange, requires regular communication between the organisers in order to ensure that all participating groups of students have the same understanding of the projects' goals and work processes. One academic organiser recommended "a strict interaction with the partners for preparing the BIP and shaping contents and structure of the program -especially if there wasn't a previous connection among partners".

Discussion

The results of this survey offer a revealing overview of how one form of blended mobility is being employed in European Higher Education and also provides insight into the challenges which need to be overcome if this form of international learning is to take hold in university education. Some of the most important issues which the survey has raised will now be discussed briefly.

First, BIPs have shown themselves to be different to most other forms of international education (online or traditional) as they require regular collaboration and coordination between academic staff and their colleagues in international mobility offices. Most traditional physical mobility programmes are administered by international mobility offices and academic staff have little to do with administrative matters related to the movement and registration of international students. On the other hand, in Virtual Exchange, academic staff will usually organise their online intercultural projects and award students part of their final class grade based on their participation in these projects without any need for collaboration with international offices. But BIPs differ from both these contexts as they require collaboration from these groups in a number of ways. First, academic staff are required to apply for a BIP – usually through their international office. Then, both teachers and international offices are required to coordinate a range of tasks which involve, for example, ensuring funding for mobility and administering the allocation of the funds for the host

university, and, finally, achieving the expedition and recognition of the ECTS credits for all the students involved. As was seen in our survey responses, this new form of collaboration can lead to frustration on behalf of the academic staff and 36% of problems mentioned were related to administrative issues. Respondents complained of differing rules in different countries, the lack of preparedness of their colleagues in international offices and the complexity of administrative issues. Perhaps further experiences of collaboration together will help to overcome the silos which often exist between academic staff and international offices.

Two other issues related to these programmes which need to be attended to urgently are related to the funding and participation rules established by the European Commission. The lack of sufficient funding for travelling students was seen as a major problem by the academic organisers and this issue made up 31% of the problems mentioned in the survey. It is important to say that many of the academic organisers and the participating universities reported in the survey that they had adapted to this situation by using the funds provided to the host universities to help cover students' accommodation and maintenance costs during their stay. However, the relevant funding bodies should consider increasing the amounts available to students for their travel and subsistence.

A second issue related to the programme design is related to the requirement of reaching a minimum number of mobile 15 students in order to be recognised officially as a BIP and thereby for the host university to receive the appropriate funds. This was often reported in the survey responses to be a source of stress and uncertainty for both teachers and students and the recommendation to recruit a considerably larger group than 15 in case some later drop out, is hardly a sustainable solution. With this in mind, it is positive to note that the European Commission appears to have relaxed these regulations somewhat for future rounds of BIPs.

A final important outcome of the survey is related to the importance of good methodological design of the BIP programmes. Common principles of programme design which were mentioned included, for example, the incorporation of collaborative activities in the online stage in order for students to benefit from the intercultural, linguistic and digital learning opportunities which student-centred online groupwork can offer. The importance of relationship building at the outset of the project, the clear integration of the BIP with course content and the regular communication between coordinating teachers were also key methodological aspects to emerge from the survey.

In order to support the development of a good methodological design of BIP courses, institutions should consider providing training to BIP organisers on aspects such as how to support and facilitate online phases of student collaboration and how to design effective collaborative projects.

Conclusion and Future Research

Blended mobility and BIPs are clearly still in their infancy and this article aimed to provide an overview of how pioneering teachers are putting them into practice. The

article examined the perceived benefits of Blended Mobility and also the main challenges which practitioners have encountered when running such programmes. Principles of good methodological practice in the different stages of BIPs were also identified.

Future research in this area should examine the experiences of students and international office personnel as well as academic coordinators as all three sets of stakeholders have key roles to play in the integration of BIPs into university education. This survey identified many reports of misunderstandings and frustration during collaboration between academics and international office employees. Further studies could examine, for example, how these problems can be overcome and how international office staff experience this new form of collaboration with academic staff.

Other studies may wish to examine the differences in student learning outcomes between BIPs and Virtual Exchange and long-term physical mobility. Identifying the differing impact of these three forms of international learning could shed light on how they can best be integrated together as parts of internationalisation programmes.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interest

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