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Pre-Conference Webinar on Institutional Blended Learning Policy (IBLP)

**Empowering Higher Education Institutions Through Blended Learning:
A Deep Dive into the Institutional Blended Learning Policy (IBLP)**

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Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, importance and best practices

Remarks by

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The idea of Blended Learning is not new. The first adopters of the concept of Blended Learning have been the Open and Distance Learning institutions. It is often said that Sir Isaac Pitman launched the first ODL course in the 1840s when he sent out the course texts in shorthand form by postcards to his students. The students were expected to send back their response for grading and correction. For Pitman, apart from course delivery remotely, feedback, assessment and grading too were important components of blended learning! We seem to have lost the opportunity to study the effectiveness of blended learning in a non-technological era. The literature on blended learning comes alive almost 130 years after Pitman. In this century, we find more use cases of blended learning.

Educational reforms around the world recognise the use of technology in learning. Compared to the conventional face to face learning where most of the learning happens in classrooms, technology-enabled techniques were embraced first by the ODL institutions, be it delivery over radio or television or even, until recently, through podcasts and other techniques where learners were provided with content at their comfort. And, today, with the advent of generative AI, access to learning material is not difficult. The main challenges revolve, therefore, around accessibility, access to devices, internet connectivity and more so, affordability. That said, what about the learning design?

Learning design for blended learning is quite different from the learning design of conventional face to face learning. How does this differ? Is there special training for blended learning? With multi-modal delivery, interaction, feedback, assessment and grading now becoming possible through various blends, the idea of Blended Learning has caught the attention of educators, especially those who live it each day, i.e., the open and distance learning practitioners.

Recently, I read an article on the web by Christopher Pappas. In this, he says that the educators have explored Blended Learning and have come up with various models of delivery – Educational, Flex, Virtual and A La Carte Models! There are sub-models within the above models that highlight the practice in the light of a) station rotation; b) Lab Rotation; c) Individual Rotation; d) Flipped Classroom; e) Collaborative Learning; f) Personalised interventions; g) Classroom Training; h) Virtual Instructor Led Training; i) Supplementary Online Training, etc.

The Indian National Council for Vocational Education and Training recognises seven forms of Blended Learning in the context of skill education, and states that each form is important. These are: a) Theory/lectures that impart theoretical knowledge; b) Soft skills, life skills and employability skills and mentorship to learners; c) showing demonstration to learners; d) imparting practical skills of working with hands and in labs; e) tutorials, assignments, drills and practice; f) proctored assessments and evaluations; and g) on-the job training, internship and apprenticeship training.

In the context of Open Universities, especially in Asia where world's three fourth of OUs exist and a region where approximately more than 10 million students pursue higher

education through Open and Distance Learning mode, the concept of Blended Learning has been a reality. Each year, these students pursue their studies in Blended Learning mode through formal education systems. However, it is also understood that through a variety of initiatives in TVET and Skill Development, the post-secondary education system attempts to cater to the learning needs of adult learners through open learning. By these standards, one may assume that at least 100 million learners are exposed to Blended Learning approaches. Yet, the question remains if our teaching and non-teaching staff are fully trained in Blended Learning? What does it take to provide education and skills through Blended Learning! Especially at Open Universities in Asia!

Before we set out to highlighting what the OUs in Asia can do to promote Blended Learning, I am reminded of an article that I perused recently which talks about some of the myths about Blended Learning. These include the following:

- Blended Learning is Instructor-led Training plus eLearning
- Blended Learning is expensive
- Blended Learning is a stepping-stone into eLearning
- Blended Learning leaves no role for instructor or facilitator
- Blended Learning demands one to be tech-savvy

In the context of OUs, especially in a nation such as Pakistan, what should Blended Learning mean? Where is conducive policy support required? Let us examine the recent ODL Policy Provisions and Regulatory Framework, being considered by colleagues at the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. The Regulatory Framework, indeed, relies a lot on Blended Learning!

In the Preamble itself, after recognising the Allama Iqbal Open University as the first Asian and the second most global Open University, we find the Government of Pakistan recognising the emergence of the Internet and related technologies to have had radical effects on the transformation of education, especially in the form of eLearning. The Preamble goes on to highlighting the HEC Vision of 2025 where it identifies the urgency of opening more opportunities and alternative ways of higher education for those who cannot continue tertiary and further education due to the challenge of time and travel.

Here, it is recognised that the pathways pursued through Open and Distance Learning are the only alternative!

The policy provisions of the regulation pay enough attention to curriculum and instructional design. It pays attention to content and material development. The regulation pays attention to the need for resource sharing; the need for student support services and the delivery mechanisms of the programmes and courses. The regulation also focuses on evaluation and assessment mechanisms and finally, it recognises the need for capacity building of human resources, further classifying them as academics, instructional designers and non-teaching staff. In all these, quality is of paramount importance.

On the regulatory front, there are guidelines for each of the above aspects where policy provisions are made available. And, a special provision for blended methods that combine both synchronous and asynchronous learning; thus, paving the way for technology-enabled learning processes to be recognised and mainstreamed.

It is in this light that Blended Learning Policies, both at the national and institutional levels, become important. In Asia and many of the Commonwealth nations, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia and the Commonwealth of Learning have worked closely with the national governments in pronouncing conducive policy instruments. In this pursuit, a national level BL policy and a template for institutional BL policy become an imminent requirement.