Empowering Teachers For Digital Transformation: A Case Study Of Aiou's Training Plan

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Objective: Higher education's digital transformation necessitates robust educational innovation, with a focus on engaging teaching staff. The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) has devised a teacher training plan to cultivate innovative practices, particularly for blended degree courses transitioning primarily to online platforms.
	Methods: AIOU's strategy involves forming working groups comprised of instructors of blended degree courses. These groups focus on standardizing course components, integrating practical elements, and fostering analysis and debate forums to drive continuous improvement.
	Results: The teacher training plan yields promising outcomes, as evidenced by the third innovation plan implemented during the 2020–2021 academic year. Key results include a SWOT analysis of AIOU's online teaching landscape, evaluations of online learning quality, insights into process planning for teaching and learning, and the identification of best practices.
	Conclusion: AIOU's innovative programs for blended and online degrees demonstrate a commitment to enhancing teaching quality and adapting to evolving educational landscapes. The outcomes of the teacher training plan underscore the importance of collaborative efforts in driving educational innovation in higher education
	KEYWORDS: SWOT analysis, digital transformation, University, and educational innovation.

INTRODUCTION:

It is impossible to have a different impact on the University given the extent of the changes that today's society is subjected to. The changes that other universities throughout the globe are going through encourage, assist, and compel us to consider the actual reasons driving this transition since only by comprehending them can we effectively plan the path forward. It will be imperative that we remain vigilant about the movement driving the upcoming waves of transformation. We need to be ready for the rougher parts of the swell. Modifying the training offering model is one of the many aspects of this mutation process; in certain circumstances, it is very significant. The second decade of the twenty-first century has seen an even greater dimension added to the factors that drive distance learning, such as the need for lifelong learning, the expense of traditional systems, advancements in teaching models, the rise in social demand for education, or technological transformations (Oliveira & De Souza, 2022).

 For instance, the methodology used by the majority of public universities in North America demonstrates the evolving global trend towards the increased offering and execution of blended and online programs, a trend whose scope and significance have been brought to light by several recent studies, including Reimagining the

Role of Technology in Higher Education. The inertia of this transformation wave is already evident despite being even less pronounced in Spain. This is due to factors like the increase in both the supply and demand for blended and online qualifications, the consolidation of training environments, and open professional training, as seen from MOOC platforms like employability-focused corporate training platforms and vertical training platforms that have begun to offer specialized training programs that directly compete with universities' postgraduate training offerings (Bonfield et al., 2020).

It is clear from this context that academic institutions and the units tasked with implementing digital transformation processes in blended and distance learning programs know successful stories, best practices, and models that make it easier to create, develop, and implement programs and strategic plans in this setting line.

Aspect of Transformation	Factors Driving Change
Evolution of Society	Extent of societal changes
Global University Trends	Increased offering and execution of blended and online programs
Educational Demand	Need for lifelong learning, cost-effectiveness, advancements in teaching models, social demand, technological transformations

Imperatives for Academic Institutions	Key Considerations
Digital Transformation Models	Understanding trends, structural factors, and dynamics
Resource Allocation	Quantifying requirements, identifying resources, evaluating performance, talent management
Innovation Adoption	Embracing innovation models, advancing processes

To understand the trends, structural factors of change, and dynamics involved in its implementation, it will be imperative in the upcoming years to maintain a sufficient perspective on digital transformation models toward blended learning systems and examine the path already taken by other universities, particularly international ones. In addition, quantifying the requirements, accurately identifying the material and human resources, their evaluated performance, and how to draw in, keep, and develop the talent required to fortify these processes must also be considered. By embracing innovation models, AIOU has advanced this process significantly, and it will be necessary to advance them in the future (Anderson & Rivera Vargas, 2020).

BLENDED DEGREES E ONLINE INNOVATION

Numerous research has previously shown that online and blended learning have different qualities. The provision of materials and content appropriate to the medium and modality, participation in communication spaces that facilitate social and shared learning, effective and ongoing tutoring that guides the learning process towards achieving these outcomes, and the measurement of results through adequate and coherent evaluation tools are all necessary to achieve learning outcomes through an online training program. Accreditation organizations for qualifications have recently identified the specifics that need to be met to verify and certify qualifications obtained through blended or remote learning, taking into account the unique characteristics of these modalities. First is skill design, as it is essential to support the significance of the suggested method of skill acquisition sufficiently (Williamson, 2021).

The second is the availability of information systems that make clear to the student how the learning process will work, including the various methods of instruction, the resources utilized to educate, the support and attention systems, and whether or not the student needs to attend the course in person: some study plan modules, subjects, or subjects. Third, students will be given training materials tailored to the in-person format. Fourth, during the evaluation process, put systems in place to verify the pupils' identities. Lastly, students will be assigned to teachers with experience with both blended and remote learning and specialized support workers who know these modalities. Students' expectations of online learning are a significant factor in its rising popularity. The institution's capacity to present a strong, dependable, shareable, and recommended brand is crucial to its ability to draw in quality students (Williamson, 2021).

However, the quality of services that meet these objectives matters most. Anticipations. Additionally, a student feels satisfied when their performance meets the requirements for the course, which include, but are not limited to, flexibility, adaptability of the learning process, a high degree of attention and assistance, or a decrease in associated expenditures. It is crucial to design innovation programs that steer institutional objectives toward a blended and remote learning offer of the most outstanding caliber since the recipients of the educational service have high normative and regulatory needs. The necessity to enhance these modalities' qualifications has encouraged the development and execution of specific educational innovation initiatives in recent years (Hai et al., 2021).

An innovation recognized structurally and organically as a metabolic process that necessitates ongoing, ongoing, and evolutionary labor for the mechanisms of adaptation and transformation to permeate naturally and syntonic. This required establishing operational protocols and frameworks that offer the prerequisites for

this. There are several areas of attention, and while they are all covered, some that have been especially important in influencing these dynamics of change are discussed below:

- The establishment of a mixed and remote learning protocol.
- The creation of a teacher preparation program based on a pathway.
- The student assistance, focus, and monitoring system.
- The way the program for academic identity is designed.
- We are establishing a framework for creating practices and content for open education.

Mixed-mode and remote learning procedure

Allama Iqbal Open University has been using a blended and remote learning procedure approved by the board of directors as of the 2019–2020 academic year. The guidelines for teaching in mixed and remote learning degree programs are outlined in this procedure. It determines what the initial training of teachers should be, how the subjects should be planned, the characteristics of the contents, materials, training activities, and evaluation system, as well as the necessary performances in online lessons and tutorials, as a result of the knowledge and work accumulated since the launch of these diplomas. Moreover, to ensure the caliber of blended qualifications, it sets up a system for tracking and evaluating remote and blended learning (Sousa-Zomer et al., 2020).

This facilitates communication between the instructors and the Virtual Teaching Support Unit's team of technical-didactic consultants, enabling them to assess the program's effectiveness and encourage improvement continuously. In this way, based on the guidelines in the Procedure for Blended and Distance Teaching, teachers are reminded at the start of every semester of the criteria that are part of monitoring the courses taught. They are then observed during each semester's progress to ensure ongoing communication with the diploma program's teaching staff. This communication helps to integrate enhancements, resolve issues, and avoid potential conflicts (El Khatib et al., 2022).

Education for teachers

Teachers for degrees offered through remote learning or blended learning must be qualified professionals with a background in these delivery methods. Teachers must have finished several courses and training exercises that prepare them for this role before beginning to teach in these ways. To do this, mixed and remote learning teachers follow an ongoing training plan implemented by the Virtual Teaching Support unit. This training plan covers using ICTs in education and innovation for all AIOU teaching staff. Most of the courses are offered virtually, but some workshops, introductory courses, and hands-on activities can be completed in person (El Khatib et al., 2022).

Four distinct pathways comprise the training offer: a general training course that covers topics such as advanced Virtual Classroom laboratories, academic fraud prevention tools, and Moodle for educational purposes; a blended and distance learning path that covers topics like tutoring, videoconferencing, and virtual teaching in the AIOU online model; a methodology course that covers ten modules on topics like methodological foundations, active teaching methods, programming, and assessment by skills; and a final training course on the creation of educational content that covers topics like best practices in material use and various techniques aimed at creating academic content (Hanelt et al., 2021).

The monitoring, attention, and support system for students

Although it may seem apparent to state that the student is the primary axis of educational action and the University's purpose when considered in the context of its pertinent instructional role, When a student first enrolls in blended or remote learning, they are given individualized attention and unique information about this mode of learning. Similarly, they have a dedicated assistance area named "Live the AIOU online experience" on the AIOU website, which is part of the reception actions. Before courses start, the student must also finish an Academic Credit Recognition (RAC) exercise that assists them in dynamically learning everything there is to know about the University (Cetindamar Kozanoglu & Abedin, 2021).

During the first week of the course, a video conference-based welcoming session supplements this information. The goal is to offer a synchronous question-and-answer session where you can ask the technical-didactic team of the Virtual Teaching Support Unit any questions you have about a range of topics, including how to use the Virtual Classroom platform, who to contact for technical support, what procedures need to be followed at the University; and which communication channels to use to get in touch with your degree course coordinator, technical teaching consultant, or fellow students (Abdulquadri et al., 2021).

Program for Academic Integrity

For its blended and distance learning degrees, Allama Iqbal Open University has created an academic integrity and honesty program with several steps to stop academic fraud through improper behavior like plagiarism and identity theft. As per the Allama Iqbal Open University's Regulations of Academic Conduct, the program comprises three components: a) an information and training plan that fosters an academic culture of honesty and integrity; b) the incorporation of technological tools that deter unethical behavior; and c) the creation of training courses that support ongoing evaluation processes. A specific module on the

biometric screening tool is anticipated as part of the mandatory training offered to teachers who use blended and remote learning methods (Kraus et al., 2021).

In this module, they will receive training on its technical use, application in various assessment tools and processes (such as regular sessions, chats, forums, and exams within the LMS), and identity monitoring through the control panel available in each subject of the taught modality. Additionally, there is a tutorial on using the plagiarism tool. Additionally, students are given training and informational materials on academic ethics. These materials cover topics such as how to cite and reference sources correctly in their work, how the biometric recognition system works, and the allama iqbal open university's regulations of academic conduct. In addition, the AIOU has integrated several technologies and applications designed to prevent academic dishonesty and fraud. These apps and solutions include systems for controlling student identities, preventing plagiarism, and videoconferencing-based training activities (Al-Abdullatif & Gameil, 2020).

Open educational resources and methodologies

Worldwide initiatives have encouraged open educational techniques, including Allama Iqbal Open University. Mainly through promoting the growth of open educational practices (OEP), which are becoming increasingly common in the academic community and in which some institutions have deliberately positioned themselves, and by helping to expand the collection of digital educational content made available through open access. OEP also involves opening up the authorial materials through institutional archives and open licenses. To achieve this, several initiatives have been developed, including the opening of its open knowledge platform, URJCx2, the development of TV URJC3, an audiovisual archive linked to the eScience system, and the encouragement of teachers to teach at any level but in a particular way in an online or blended environment to permit open access to the course materials (Joshi et al., 2021).

USING THE WORKING GROUP AS A METHOD FOR TEACHER TRAINING
The situation and strategy

Innovative and teaching improvement plans have been developed for blended and remote learning qualifications as of the 2013–2014 academic year to encourage continuous development of degree credentials founded on an innovation and training framework for teams. The overall strategy seeks to encourage a process of renewal and ongoing enhancement of the caliber of these instructions, enabling better responses to the demands of online training and the creation of new training techniques. Through the Virtual Classroom, which provides the first conditions to normalize vital components of topics and inspire teachers to include them in their subjects, a step-by-step training and innovation program has been established to encourage this process. The plan was divided into blended learning projects connected to every grade level (Renz & Vladova, 2021).

With assistance from the Virtual Teaching Support Unit, each working group comprises a degree coordinator and all participating teachers. An action-training plan provides structure to the innovation project. In addition, the AIOU Educational Teaching Innovation Awards are an annual online event that aims to promote the advancement of active methods and open educational practices by integrating ICT into teaching-learning processes. Its goals are to acknowledge the efforts made by AIOU faculty members to incorporate ICT into teaching and learning processes and to increase awareness within the academic community of the benefits and utility of ICT, particularly the Moodle platform, as a tool for enhancing educational procedures (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021).

Additionally, a wealth of effective teaching strategies is available to the general public via the AIOU website, enabling all university instructors to become familiar with and share them. This expands the reach of the blended learning innovation ideas that the AIOU is implementing and online education for master's and bachelor's degrees. The plan, currently in its third iteration, has created a series of exercises based on a working group training procedure for new teachers who begin their teaching careers via blended or remote learning (Ali & Abdel-Haq, 2021). The following actions were taken in order:

- A SWOT analysis that aided in considering AIOU's online educational environment.
- A module for the analysis and assessment of online learning quality.
- The significance of organizing the teaching and learning process is covered in the third block.
- The last module looked for best practices in these mediums of instruction and learning.

The SWOT analysis's conclusions

The SWOT analysis started with these four questions:

- What shortcomings do you see when comparing our online and semi-face-to-face distance learning programs to those offered by other Spanish and foreign universities?
- What dangers do you see?
- Which of your strengths do you emphasize?
- What are our opportunities?

A point of concern that has been brought up is the potential disparity between colleges that focus solely on online education and those that don't. The former have faculty members who are committed to this mode of

instruction and have been doing so for a while. The AIOU's blended and online distance learning courses have evolved academically. While this development is welcomed, the teaching staff finds it challenging to balance this modality's adaptation with in-person instruction, TFG and thesis tutoring, and aspects of research assignments that have already been discussed. In this way, some educators emphasize the chance that specializing in online, hybrid, or in-person instruction would present for educators to fully utilize their training and their degree of expertise and experience (Porfírio et al., 2021).

Regarding this, it's thought that one of the weak points is how well teachers have adapted to teaching online and the necessity of learning and putting into practice new, targeted methodologies for this kind of instruction, in addition to the fact that the subject matter and contents can and should be the same as in-person instruction. Additional issues that are thought to exist include enrollment flows, which cause distortions in the group work process when they happen for advanced courses. Instructors are also concerned about the low participation rates of their students in forums and debates, which restricts practical activity and debate, as well as their attendance at or review of video conferences and lessons, in which their participation is still low (Lanzolla et al., 2020).

This is understandable, given that students receiving mixed teaching are typically working adults with little free time to engage in synchronous activities. Among the risks identified are those that are contextual, those that are related to the institute's organizational dynamics, and still others that are related to the circumstances facing the students. The first speaks of the efforts private colleges are making to provide more financial and human resources to implement their online program, particularly in light of the decline in in-person enrollments that have occurred recently due to the economic crisis. Among the latter, there is the worry that more meaningful standards ought to be set for selecting blended learning since it requires proper planning, a readily available and dedicated attitude toward delivering high-quality instruction, utilizing all of the opportunities presented by technology, and allocating enough time and attention to supporting students (Tsai et al., 2020).

Finally, the a priori isolated nature of distance learning creates a sense of loneliness in the learner, which is thought to impact his performance and perhaps lead to dropout rates, among other things. It is important to remember that blended and online learners have distinct profiles. With an average age exceeding 30, they are typically older than the student in attendance, employed, or have family responsibilities. Because you have less time, you usually study at night, on the weekends, or on vacations, which means that your course planning needs to be more thorough. This emphasizes the importance of providing inspiring encounters where students feel supported throughout their training. One of the University's most vital qualities is its excellent location in other universities; it is well-known at the state level and has a high level of prestige in in-person instruction, which serves as a model for blended learning (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

The advancements in teaching tools, programs, and services over the past several years are also highly regarded, as is the Virtual Classroom and the human staff that supports it and helps teachers in their day-to-day work. Through its online branding, the AIOU may be able to expand its reach and draw in more students from outside Spain who may be interested in blended and online learning, according to the opportunity analysis. In conclusion, the blended and online distance learning program is "wide, technologically advanced, and tailored to the requirements of Spanish society." The AIOU cannot overlook the significance of online education in adapting to the new social demands (Mhlanga, 2023).

Examining and analyzing the level of online education
The two critical components of eLearning that make up effective teaching are: a) didactics, which gives you the ability to know and use the best teaching strategies and tactics for educational interventions in each modality and to innovate in their application, and b) technology, which gives you the technical tools, based on information and communication technologies, to carry out and support training actions through electronic channels.

Assessments about quality analysis and online learning evaluation were completed in this work module. To guarantee appropriate quality in the various grades, the question of whether the established quality requirements, as illustrated in example 1, were sufficient, could be enhanced, or were unnecessary was posed (Schiuma et al., 2022).
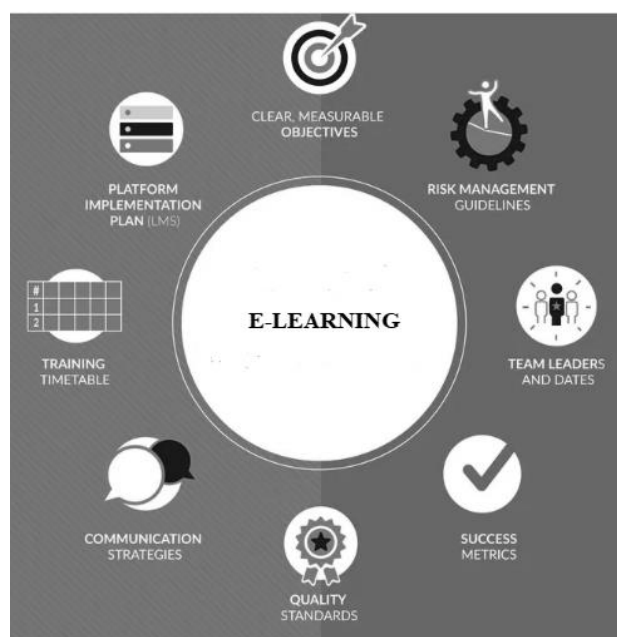
Figure 1: Criteria for quality.

Regarding this subject, it is concluded that all the categories that comprise the quality criteria set forth by the primary initiatives and quality seals in e-learning are pertinent; however, the significance of the teacher training section is emphasized to ensure that the training itself occurs continuously and consistently and that teachers are equipped with all the tools necessary to carry out a more dynamic and comprehensive teaching activity. It emphasizes the importance of outstanding content and that instructional materials cater to student's various demands and learning preferences. Similarly, the significance of quality tutoring is emphasized, with the claim that many other categories will inevitably function better if a tutor directs learning and attends to students' challenges (ElMassah & Mohieldin, 2020).

Arrange the process of instruction and learning.
Discipline planning was the main methodological topic of discussion in this thread, particularly about blended learning. This is a crucial component that enables the learner to attain learning objectives, particularly when considering the various characteristics of remote learners. Creating the teaching guide is just one step in planning online master's programs and hybrid degrees. Understanding how crucial it is to organize the subjects more accurately, a study guide is created to provide the student with details on the procedures that must be followed when working on the subject. This section aimed to comprehend the study guide's usage and value from the teacher's perspective. Generally speaking, it is a vital tool that provides security and helps educators and learners accomplish the suggested goals by providing additional information and more thorough planning (Jones et al., 2021).
Similarly, the reasons why the virtual world becomes especially important and necessary are also addressed in detail. Similarly, the creation of the Study Guide is valuable because it serves as a tool for teachers to organize the material, tasks, procedures, and assessments. This is especially true for the evaluation section, which is the area that most worries students and requires accurate and lucid information to prevent misunderstandings. Lastly, educators stress the value of having a guidebook with best practices. The course will start with practical workshops to assist in planning, designing, and teaching the subjects in blended learning (Beardsley et al., 2021).

Recognizing effective instructional strategies
To provide educators with a resource for learning about creative and fruitful academic endeavors, AIOU online has introduced a Bank of Best Practices. During the final work module, participants were asked to determine what could be deemed good practices in these situations based on their experience teaching virtually. In other words, they had to determine which issues are essential and unnecessary when creating effective learning environments for students enrolled in degree programs that combine online and blended learning (Li et al., 2021).
The first component speaks to the necessity of having the most prestigious practices in the Bank of Good Practices, both in terms of caliber and successful outcomes attained, for them to serve as both internal and external references. One of the most essential qualities of good practice is that it has to be practical; this comes from recognizing a need and providing a workable solution. Simultaneously, the need to disclose the challenges faced in executing the practice, the program, and its assessment of the teaching and learning process is highlighted, as this data is crucial for their replication and eventual surmounting (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

CONCLUSION:

The rise of online and mixed learning environments is one of the waves of changes affecting higher education, and students are beginning to value and select these options more and more. Universities must conduct a planning exercise to establish new organizational models and work routines that address these instructional approaches' unique characteristics to adequately adapt to this new setting. To achieve this goal, AIOU has created a training and educational innovation program to incorporate enhancements into its online and hybrid degree offerings to help create high-quality degrees that benefit students and society.

Creating working groups composed of university professors involved in blended qualification instruction played a part in developing these innovation programs, which were then contextualized within a larger innovation action plan. The output of these groups allowed for a more accurate portrayal of the University's position within this transformation process. In this way, the SWOT analysis identified the significant potential that this transformation brings, as well as the University's current strengths. However, it also clarified the dangers and weaknesses that must be addressed.

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