

BIP IN GLOBAL HEALTH: A MULTI-INSTITUTIONAL BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAM FOR ENHANCING GLOBAL HEALTH COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

Introduction: Blended Intensive Programs (BIP) in higher education combine short-term mobility with online collaboration, fostering innovative learning and teaching methods. These initiatives facilitate joint curricular development among students, academics, and staff in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and empower students to develop innovative solutions to global health issues. This study evaluates the self-reported impact of a BIP designed to enhance students' understanding of global health and social challenges, with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals.

Methodology: Eight institutions from six countries collaborated to develop a two-month BIP aimed at enhancing health and social students' understanding of global health and social challenges. The program involved 12 teachers and 35 students. It was structured into three online sessions followed by an in-person week. The BIP covered key topics such as migrations, non-communicable diseases, climate change, and economic impacts on global health, with a strong emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals. An online questionnaire, comprising Likert scale and open-ended questions, surveyed participants, gathering both quantitative data and qualitative feedback to provide a comprehensive overview of their experiences and learning outcomes.

Results: Survey responses (n=25) were predominantly positive. Most participants agreed that the BIP increased their awareness and knowledge of global health and social problems, enhanced their understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals, and effectively facilitated understanding of their profession's role in global health issues. Participants appreciated the emphasis on multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Teacher support during online and in-person sessions was positively rated. In terms of overall quality, the program received high ratings, with most participants rating it as "Very Good" or "Good." The recommendation rate was also high, with most participants strongly agreeing or agreeing that they would recommend the BIP to other students. While most participants found the lectures and activities relevant, a minority indicated areas for improvement, particularly regarding the relevance of certain sessions.

Conclusions: From the participants' perspective, the BIP successfully increased their understanding of global health challenges and the importance of collaborative and innovative approaches in addressing these issues. Despite some feedback on the relevance of certain sessions, the overall positive response suggests that BIPs can be an effective strategy in higher education to foster global awareness and problem-solving skills among students. This educational experience demonstrates the potential of BIPs as a valuable tool in higher education for developing students' global health competencies and promoting innovative solutions to complex challenges. However, the study's relatively small sample size and self-reported data may limit generalizability. Future research could explore long-term impacts of BIPs on students' career choices and contributions to global health initiatives, and benefit from larger sample sizes, longitudinal designs, and objective measures of learning outcomes.

Keywords: Blended Intensive Programs, Global Health, internationalization.

1 INTRODUCTION

The increasing interconnectedness of the world has led to the creation of shared spaces across various fields, with technology playing a supportive role in facilitating these developments. This trend has influenced the job market and professional environments through the forces of internationalization and globalization. In response to these shifts, educational institutions are integrating international and intercultural competencies into their curricula to prepare individuals for the demands of global work environments [1], [2].

Exchange programs between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have promoted collaboration, resulting in a growing number of students and professionals working with international partners. For example, health education programs have begun incorporating international experiences that may also fulfil clinical education requirements. These initiatives aim to provide students with a broader understanding of diverse health practices and cultural perspectives, thereby enhancing healthcare quality and fostering cross-cultural understanding within the health professions [2],[3],[4].

One such initiative is the Blended Intensive Program (BIP) in higher education, which combines short-term mobility with online collaboration to foster innovative learning and teaching methods. These programs facilitate joint curricular development among students, academics, and staff in HEIs, empowering participants to develop innovative solutions [5],[6].

A focus of these programs could be to enhance students' understanding of global health issues. Topics such as global health, migration, demographic change, non-communicable diseases, climate change, the SDGs, and economic impact are integral to the curriculum. By addressing these subjects, the programs could equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle complex health challenges that transcend national borders. Another aspect of these programs is the development of competencies related to internationalization, including language proficiency, cross-cultural communication skills, and understanding global health trends. Language proficiency is essential for health professionals to communicate effectively with clients and colleagues in international settings and to engage with scientific literature. Cross-cultural communication skills enable health professionals to deliver personalized healthcare to a diverse global population by relating to individuals from various ethnic, cultural, social, and religious backgrounds, while maintaining an awareness of their own cultural values and behaviours [7],[8].

Understanding global health developments is crucial for effective participation in international collaborations and for comprehending health contexts in different countries. Collectively, these components could equip health students with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate and contribute effectively to the evolving field of global healthcare. By engaging with pressing global health topics and developing essential competencies, students could be better prepared to address the challenges of an interconnected world and to promote health equity on a local and global scale [9].

2 METHODOLOGY

The Blended Intensive Program (BIP) titled "Global Challenges, Local/Common Solutions: Working Together Towards Sustainable Development Goals" was implemented in the spring of 2024, involving eight higher education institutions from six European countries. The program aimed to enhance the understanding of global health and social challenges among health and social work students, emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach to addressing these issues. Key topics included global health, migration, demographic change, non-communicable diseases, climate change, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic impact.

The BIP was structured as a two-month program, involving 12 teachers and 35 students, divided into two distinct phases: online sessions and a face-to-face week. The program's design facilitated both virtual and in-person engagement, providing a platform for exploration of global health challenges and facilitating collaboration among participants.

The first phase of the program consisted of three online sessions facilitated by one of the partner institutions. The initial two sessions introduced participants to the core concepts of the program, focusing on global health and related topics. Students were divided into national groups and tasked with preparing presentations on the specific realities of their respective countries and professional contexts concerning the discussed topics. These presentations were then shared in mixed international groups during the third online session, encouraging cross-country exchange and comparative analysis. This phase aimed to provide a foundation for understanding global health challenges from various national and professional perspectives.

The second phase of the program was conducted in person over the course of a week. Each day was dedicated to one of the key global health topics, with sessions led by different partner institutions. During

this week, students were also organized into multinational groups and tasked with developing a proposal to address one of the global health challenges covered in the course. This phase emphasized interdisciplinary collaboration and problem-solving, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical global health issues.

The week concluded with group presentations, where participants proposed innovative solutions to global health challenges such as climate change, demographic change, non-communicable diseases, and economic crises. The proposals integrated a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach, utilized digital health tools, and aligned with relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The final presentation, which lasted 10-15 minutes, summarized the global health issue, the proposed solution, and its potential impact.

After the conclusion of the program, each student submitted a reflection on their experience developing a proposal to a global health issue within the framework of the SDGs. The reflection involved evaluating the selected context, the insights gained from the research process, and the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary approach. Additionally, students reflected on the role of digital health tools and how the SDGs guided their proposed solution. They were also asked to consider how the experience would influence their future professional practice.

After the end of the program, an online questionnaire was distributed to all the students to gather both quantitative and qualitative data regarding their experiences. The quantitative component included Likert-scale questions to assess participants' perceptions of the program's content, structure, support, and collaborative elements. The qualitative component included open-ended questions, allowing participants to provide more detailed feedback on their learning outcomes and overall experience.

The methodology adopted for the BIP provided a structured learning experience that could enhance participants' understanding of global health challenges. By combining online sessions, in-person collaboration, and reflective practice, the program facilitated the application of multidisciplinary approaches to real-world global health problems.

3 RESULTS

We received 25 survey responses out of a total of 35 student participants, resulting in a response rate of approximately 71.4%. When asked about the about the Blended Intensive Program's content and activities, the general perspective from the responses show that participants generally had a positive perception of the BIP, particularly in terms of increasing their knowledge and awareness of global health issues, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. Most respondents reported agreement or strong agreement that the program enhanced their understanding of these topics and their relevance to their future professional practice. However, there is some variation in responses regarding the lectures and activities, with a small proportion of participants expressing neutral or disagreeing views. This suggests that while the program appears to be effective in many areas, there may be aspects of content delivery that could benefit from further development (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Student feedback about the Blended Intensive Program's content and activities

In relation with the general support, based on the responses (Figure 2), participants had a mostly positive experience with the support and collaboration provided during the Blended Intensive Programme (BIP). Teacher involvement in both lectures and activities was rated highly, with most respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the teachers effectively supported their learning process. Additionally, most participants reported being able to access relevant documents through the program's online drive. However, there is some variation in responses regarding how well participants felt informed about the program structure, contents, and activities, with a small portion expressing neutrality or disagreement, suggesting there may be room for improvement in this area.

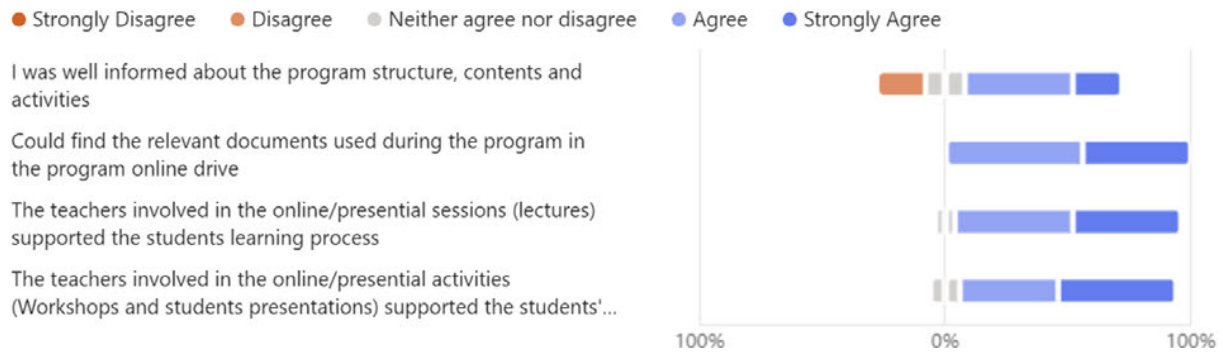


Figure 2. Student feedback about the Blended Intensive Program's support and collaboration

When asked about program general quality (Figure 3), most participants rated the Blended Intensive Program positively, with 64% indicating the quality as good and an additional 32% rating it as very good. Only a small percentage (4%) rated the program as fair, and no respondents rated the program poorly. This suggests that, overall, participants were satisfied with the quality of the program, with the vast majority providing favorable evaluations.

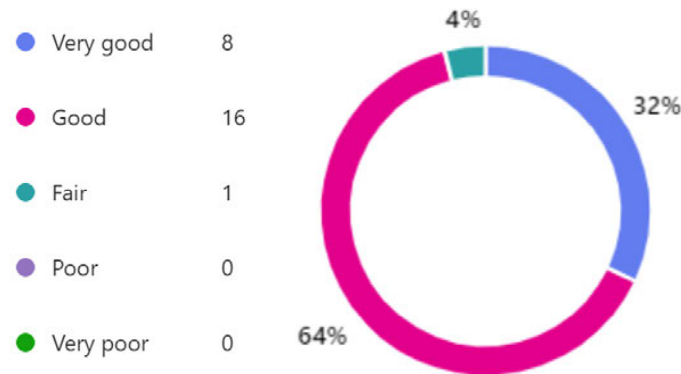


Figure 3. Student feedback about the quality of this Blended Intensive Program in general

Finally, most participants expressed strong willingness to recommend the Blended Intensive Program, with 96% either strongly agreeing or agreeing. Only 4% of respondents responded neutrally, and no one indicated disagreement. This suggests that participants generally had a positive experience with the program and would be likely to endorse it to other students (Figure 4).

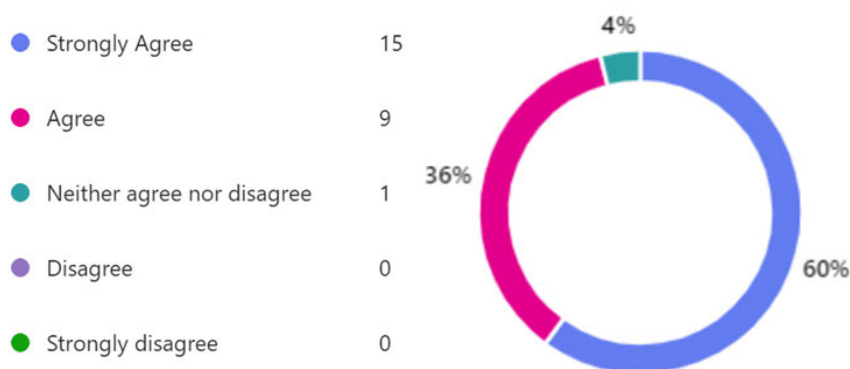


Figure 4. Student recommendation of the Blended Intensive Program

4 CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the participant responses provide a largely positive view of the Blended Intensive Program (BIP), particularly in terms of enhancing knowledge and awareness of global health issues, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and interdisciplinary approaches. Most participants agreed that the program was relevant to their future professional practice, though some variation in opinions regarding the effectiveness of specific lectures and activities suggests that content delivery could benefit from refinement. Support and collaboration within the BIP were also well received, with participants highly rating the involvement of teachers in both lectures and activities. The accessibility of relevant documents through the program's online platform was another strength. However, a small portion of respondents indicated some room for improvement in how well they were informed about the program's structure, content, and activities. The overall quality of the program was rated favorably, with most participants describing it as either "good" or "very good," and no negative evaluations. Moreover, a significant proportion of participants expressed strong willingness to recommend the program to others, indicating general satisfaction with their experience.

These results suggest that the BIP could contribute to develop students' global health competencies and interdisciplinary problem-solving skills, which are crucial in addressing complex global challenges. While the program was broadly successful, there is potential for enhancing certain areas of content delivery and communication to further improve the participant experience. Despite the positive outcomes, the study's reliance on a relatively small, self-reported sample limits the generalizability of these findings. Future research could benefit from larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal studies, and objective measures of learning outcomes. Additionally, examining the long-term impacts of the BIP on students' career choices and contributions to global health initiatives would provide valuable insights into the lasting effects of such educational programs.

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