

Evaluation of first-ever [LERU Blended Conference](#) at UU

The League of European Research Universities ([LERU](#)) is a prominent advocate for the promotion of basic research at European research universities. Last November, a large group of colleagues from [LERU-universities](#) and colleagues in Higher Education from all over the world, all interested in digital education, participated in a first-ever Blended Conference. This Blended Conference was organized by the LERU thematic group **Digital Education** to broadly disseminate evidence informed knowledge of and experiences with digital teaching solutions. The Blended Conference comprised an online pre-conference of 40 webinars during a period of three weeks and a closing face-to-face event of two days in Utrecht (The Netherlands).

In the LERU-universities there is so much knowledge on Digital Education. By joining forces and sharing this knowledge in a Blended Conference all LERU institutes can not only bring their own Education to a higher level but also globally offer this knowledge to other institutes. The blended approach of this conference has opened up the opportunity to build global networks and hear about the latest developments for a large group of teachers, policymakers and other staff members. These new formed networks are a basis for sustainable collaboration, also on other interesting topics.

For an impression of the LERU blended conference, watch the video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybBptMoZ_CY

All the sessions of the Blended Conference are still available on leru.educate-it.nl/

[Participants from all over the world](#)

Over 500 people from more than 45 different countries registered for the online part of the conference from November 1 till November 29. They participated in one or more online activity such as webinars and/or discussions in our online workspaces in Slack. Posterior to the online part of the conference was a two day On-Campus part in Utrecht with limited places and several sessions on different topics. All sessions were streamed, recorded and open for the world and had possibilities for online interaction. At this On-Campus part we had two interesting key notes by Bert van der Zwaan (former rector from Utrecht University) and the EU-delegate Themis Christophidou (Director-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture). During the On-Campus part of the Conference there was a special parallel programme for the Vice Rectors of Teaching and Learning of the LERU and the participating Central European universities. The aim of this programme was to facilitate a timely discussion on the challenges, opportunities and directions for change for Research Intensive Universities in the digital age. The key challenge for the Vice Rectors: Adaptation to technological and societal change is needed within a short time span. 15 Vice-Rectors of Teaching and Learning were present at the on-campus part of the Conference and discussed with a broad delegation of representatives from LERU universities about the EU 'Digital education plan' and worked together on a draft of a shared vision on this paper.

On-line sessions: 521 Participants November 2018

Aruba	8	Chili	4
Portugal	2	Switserland	43
Ireland	12	Netherlands	146
Germany	30	Austria	2
Australia	5	Belgium	44
Russia	10	Greece	7
France	28	Denmark	37
China	1	Italy	23
Iran	2	Ghana	5
Hungaria	3	Tajikistan	1
Tanzania	3	Chez Rep.	1
Sweden	8	Poland	2
Finland	17	Mexico	11
United Kingdom	32	Turkey	3
Haiti	1	Slovia	1
Slovenska	1	Romania	3
Spain	19	Norway	1
South Africa	1	Indonisia	1
Lithunia	1	USA	1
Servia	1		

On-campus part: 92 participants from 23 universities from 14 countries

Charles University Prague	3
University of Geneva	4
Leiden University	8
University of Helsinki	7
University of Freiburg	1
University of Zurich	6
Utrecht University	9
University of Milan	3
University of Barcelona	3
Sorbonne University	6
Eötvös Loránd University	1
University Leuven	8
University of Amsterdam	6
University College London	4
University Paris Sud	1
University of Copenhagen	8
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich	3

Imperial London	2
Lund University	2
Trinity College Dublin	2
University of Warsaw	2
University of Strasbourg	2
Heidelberg University	1

Research on digital education

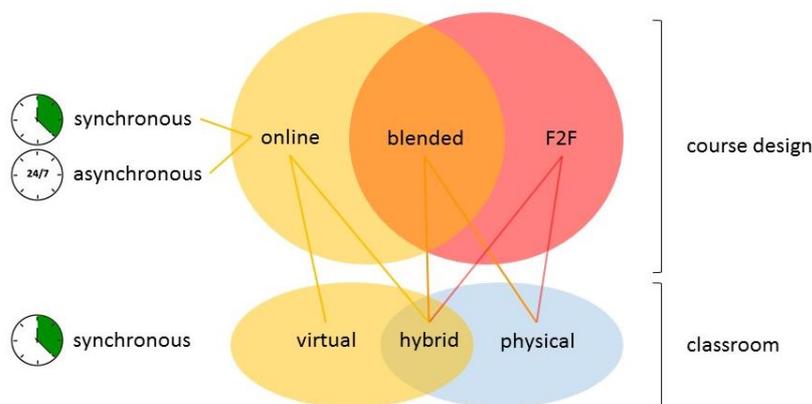
Another goal of the LERU Thematic group Digital Education is to work together on Research of Education. The more the LERU universities work together in this area, the bigger and better the data and the sooner and better we know the effect of Digital Education. To bring together changemakers in Higher Education was one of the ways to achieve this.

Collaboration in disciplinary and between interdisciplinary groups is essential for digitalization and to overcome challenges in implementing Digital Education. The Blended Conference combined hands-on practice, Research Based educational change and also discussions on a more strategic level.

The aim for bringing together changemakers in Higher Education during the Blended Conference was to build a community of practice and expertise, to foster co-operation between the LERU institutes and to share and develop new ideas and practical solutions. One of the results of this Blended Conference are recommendations and guidelines for the benefit of Digital Higher Education. Together with the policy group Vice-Rectors Teaching and Learning we will write a vision paper on Digital Education which will also be a response on the EU Digital Education Action Plan.

Collaboration Ricoh Europe and Utrecht University

The complete Blended Conference was sponsored and facilitated by the joined partnership of Ricoh Europe/Netherlands and Utrecht University. The main aim of this sponsorship was to build up experiences with a Blended Conference and to discover the needs for optimal support of the different activities: online, (a-)synchronously and hybrid (a combination of face-to- face activities with participation online).



Virtual synchronous and a synchronous

During all online activities we used the Cloud2Meet solution from Ricoh for synchronous virtual communication. During the online part of the Blended Conference we offered a variety of online activities; webinars, seminars, panel discussions, keynotes, etc. Most of these activities have been successfully streamed and recorded. We received a number of positive direct responses from participants and we received a number of written responses with a large range of ratings from participants.

How would you rate your experiences with Cloud2Meet, the virtual meeting room we used for the online activities?

1:10

2:9

2:8

7:7

3:6

4:5

1:3

2:1

Narratives with a rate of <7

- *neutral*
- *only a few of the streams were working*
- *Ok, although sometimes it froze.*
- *I found it hard to hear the presenters.*
- *On site support was good and there were no technical problems. Irritating was unknown start of recording and publication of recordings on YouTube without editing. Presenters should be advised to always keep their camera on.*

Although we paid a lot of attention to the instruction of the presenters and arranged support and possibilities to check, train and rehearse before the start of the online part of the conference, it seems that most of the presenters did not use these opportunities to train themselves and check the equipment beforehand. This might be one of the explanations for some of the low rates from participants.

Conclusion:

Voluntary instruction for the presenters of online activities is not sufficient. It is a necessity for the presenter (and all participants) to make sure they are well prepared and have a rehearsal and training exercise beforehand.

Recommendation:

Develop an online training facility that presenters and participants can visit by themselves. If possible have a (virtual) tutor present who can offer support, guidance and feedback. Practice and preparation is essential for the quality of online activities.

On campus: synchronous and a-synchronous

During the activities in the on-campus part of the Blended Conference at Utrecht University we had both plenary sessions and small group workshops. For these activities we used the Ricoh Smart Boards. These Smart Boards (10) were brought in by Ricoh a few hours before the start of the on-campus part of the conference and within the hour they were up and running. Not all the presenters of the sessions and workshops were familiar with the Ricoh Smart Boards. With the hands-on support of Ricoh they quickly were made familiar with using them and discovered the possibilities. In the break out rooms we used these Smart Boards to show [posters](#) and [video clips](#) from the participating universities.

Conclusion:

The Smart Boards are easy to use and with a support team member it was feasible to support all small group activities. Using the same Smart Boards in all the different sessions and workshops and in the break out areas worked out very well because all the presenters knew how to use the smart boards.

Recommendation:

Maybe with two support members it would have been a bit easier to do the support of ten Smart Boards. Especially in starting up all the Smart Boards in the different rooms and give instruction to each presenter/user. A central introduction of all the presenters to the Smart Boards would also be a possibility and a time saver before the start of the Conference.

Hybrid: synchronous and a-synchronous

Plenary

We used the 360 degree video camera for recording the plenary sessions. Therefore we needed a wired configuration which seemed difficult to realise in this very old Academic Hall of Utrecht University. Although we worked out a plan before the on-campus event started and tested a live stream 360 degree camera and the use of microphones, it did not work out the way we anticipated at the actual event.

Conclusion:

Remote live stream video is not impossible to realise but it is still difficult to get the right position for a recording. More experience is needed.

Recommendation:

Plan the right configuration and organise a real test (sound and view) in the actual venue of the remote live stream 360 degree video.

Small group sessions (*workshops, demonstrations and training, seminars, panel discussions*)

We planned to organise our sessions with participants physically attending the sessions and others who participated online. Due to the interactive set-up of the sessions (subgroup discussions and with a lot of interaction) it was very difficult for online participants to actively participate.

Conclusion:

For presenter(teacher) centered activities it is not very difficult to organise a set up where online participants can join in and actually interact with the presenter. In our case we wanted all group members to become actively involved and work on tasks/assignments in subgroups. For this purpose we need other solutions to enable online participants to actively participate. Therefor we need to further test different configurations and different types of small group sessions.

Recommendation:

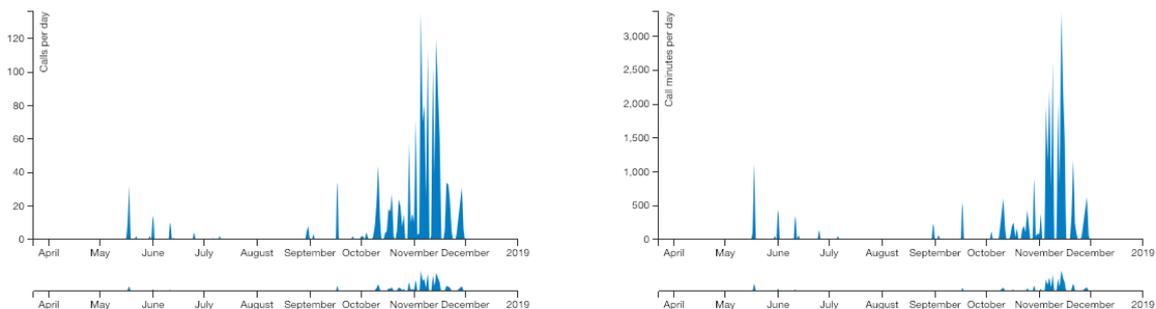
Work out different set-ups for the (mixed) sessions on paper and plan the right hardware configurations for supporting online collaboration and facilitate interaction.

Test these different settings and configurations. Try to make it as flexible and dynamic as possible to give the presenter/teacher the opportunity to create settings that best fit with his/her planned educational format.

Overview of VMR/C2M activity

Name	Video address	Call count	Call count delta	Call minutes
VMR Video-Media's VMR	video-media.vmr@ucsa.ricoh.com	97,00		71:09:36
VMR E-assessment's VMR	e-assessment.vmr@ucsa.ricoh.com	176,00	4300.0	84:59:38
VMR E-certification's VMR	e-certification.vmr@ucsa.ricoh.com	56,00	300.0	18:10:05
VMR Academic-development's VMR	academic-development.vmr@ucsa.ricoh.com	89,00	1680.0	50:49:43
VMR Open-educational-resources's VMR	open-educational-resources.vmr@ucsa.ricoh.com	88,00	486.666666667	43:16:46
VMR Collaborative-research's VMR	collaborative-research.vmr@ucsa.ricoh.com	39,00		19:50:42
LERU Blended Conference's VMR	leru.blended.conference.vmr@ucsa.ricoh.com	83,00	-34.6456692913	14:50:00

Network Call Trends All time



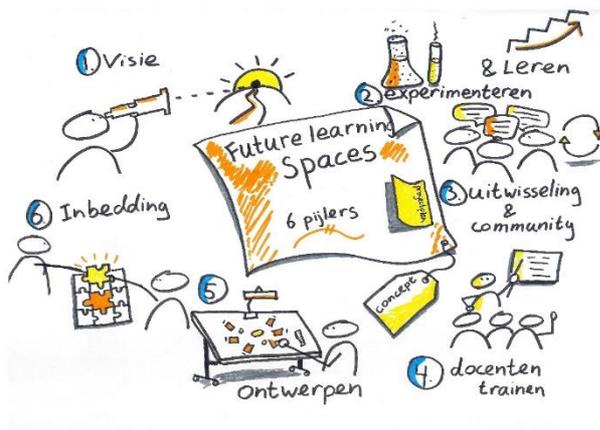
Future activities

Our experiences with the first ever Blended Conference shows that there is a big future for Conferences in an online and/or blended format. Not all of us have the financial means to physically visit a conference and also in looking at global topics such as sustainability and environmental awareness Online and Blended Conferences are the future.

Of course we still need to further improve access, connections and ways to collaborate but online collaboration in education will become more standard and regular but it brings more challenges to it than corporate online meetings.

Future Learning Spaces

The project Future Learning Spaces in the Educate-it programme of Utrecht University explores and pilots what is needed for Future Education. In order to connect with students and teachers online and collaborate, a classroom needs to be flexible, dynamic, mobile and equipped with the right facilities. In our Future Learning Spaces project education and pedagogical approaches are leading but there is also a close relationship with all stakeholders (students and teachers). To realise a well equipped Learning Space there is a need for more than pedagogical expertise, therefore the project team of this project consists of a broad group of representatives of Utrecht University; The department of Academic Affairs; Real estate; Facility service and the ICT department.



This project is closely linked with other future activities like LERU collaboration, the project Virtual Exchange, bilateral collaboration, networks, alliances, etc. These facilities are not only useful for education but can also support collaboration of researchers and their meetings and (inter-)national staf meetings.

Blended and online education with a student-centered approach means that students are obliged to actively participate and collaborate. Online, virtual, hybrid activities need specific support.

However, students from participating institutes are not in the same place and we therefore need facilities for collaboration and communication purposes. This student-centered and active learning approach and the collaboration in subgroups is different from the basic solutions for online meetings and classroom activities can differ depending on the goals you want to achieve. To find the right solutions for this way of teaching and studying is quite challenging.