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Author

Name: Mark Frederiks

Position: Coordinator international policy

Organisation: Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands, Flanders and Luxembourg (NVAO)

Country: Netherlands

Short bio: Mark is steering group member and expert in the HIBLend project. He has managed the EUniQ project on quality assurance of European Universities and participated in 4 EU funded pilot projects to introduce a European Degree Label. Mark is co-author of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes. He acts as NVAO process coordinator of reviews in Flanders, Luxembourg and is expert in international projects. From 2004 to 2019 he was Coordinator of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA). He is also affiliated researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG) at Ghent University where he is primarily carrying out research regarding the QA of European Universities alliances.

Name: Dagmar Provijn

Position: Senior Policy Adviser

Organisation: Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands, Flanders and Luxembourg (NVAO)

Country: Belgium

Short bio: **Dagmar** is expert in the HIBLend project. At NVAO he is coordinator of the Quality Assurance System Flanders and is (co-)author of several of its frameworks. He acts as process coordinator of institutional and programme assessments in Flanders and Luxembourg and in European Approach procedures. He was process coordinator for one of the pilot procedures in the EUniQ project on QA of European Universities and was a member of ENQA's Working Group on Micro-credentials and their quality assurance. He is facilitator of ECA's Training Academy 'Assessing the Quality of Internationalisation' and is member of the Certification Group for CeQuInt.

Name: Angeliki Psychogyiou

Position: Policy and Project Coordinator

Organisation: Academic Cooperation Association

Country: Belgium

Short bio: Angeliki is the project manager of the HIBLend project. Her main focus at ACA is on digitalisation and sustainability in international higher education, conducting both project and policy related work. She is co-chair of ACA's Thematic Peer Group "New Mobility Formats", exploring the intersection between digitalisation and sustainability, discussing emerging trends and issues in digitally enhanced mobility formats, and their implications for programme design and the work of funding agencies. Before joining ACA, Angeliki spent five years within the international relations office

of the University of Paris 8 - Vincennes Saint Denis, where she worked as project manager and engineer.

Name: Henri Annala

Position: Senior Lecturer, International Coordinator, Digimentor

Organisation: Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK)

Country: Finland

Short bio: Henri is steering group member and expert in the HIBLend project. He is a senior lecturer of English and Swedish at TAMK and a digital pedagogy expert. In addition to teaching, his responsibilities cover coordinating international affairs and working as a digimentor in the School of Pedagogical Innovations and Culture. His areas of interest in teaching are collaborative online pedagogy, cross-cultural communication and fostering student motivation and engagement. He is also Assessor of the Finnish National Agency of Education, which assesses the spoken English exams for the National Certificates of Language Proficiency.

Paper

Title: Quality Assurance of Student Blended Mobility

Abstract

Higher education institutions are increasingly integrating Student Blended Mobility (SBM) as part of their internationalisation efforts, combining physical and virtual learning to enhance accessibility and inclusivity and provide alternative mobility formats for their students. Blended mobility started mainly as a quick solution during the COVID-19 crisis but is now becoming a more permanent part of international student mobility, also assisted by the implementation of such innovative models in European Universities. However, institutions are facing challenges in quality assurance, institutional support, and student engagement. The EU-funded HIBLend project aims to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive framework to support institutions in effectively designing, implementing, and evaluating SBM activities. Surveys, interviews, discussion rounds and validation sessions have been set up by the HIBLend project partners to explore and address the relevant quality issues with students, teachers, institutional administrations, support staff, SBM experts, QA and funding agencies. The main project results related to QA are presented in this paper which starts with summarising the current landscape of SBM, the key trends and institutional perspectives in terms of implementation and uptake. Next, the main quality considerations for SBM in view of the ESG are highlighted. Special attention is given to the project recommendations on how QA agencies can assist with supporting high quality SBM. The paper concludes with a reflection on how QA supports this shift—from emergency response to lasting practice—by helping institutions ensure quality in new mobility formats.

1. Introduction

One of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic was the acceleration of new digital and hybrid learning and mobility formats. This digital transformation was furthered fostered through EU initiatives such as the EU Digital Education Action Plan and the European Universities Initiative.

A manifestation of the digital transformation has been the emergence of Student Blended Mobility (SBM). The Erasmus Programme Guide (2022) defines SBM as a “Combination of physical mobility and virtual elements, where students engage in both face-to face and online learning experiences in an international context as part of their study programmes”.

SBM is a relatively new phenomenon and HEIs have still limited experience with developing high-quality SBM. Therefore, the EU Erasmus funded project "Fostering high-quality blended student mobility in higher education" (HIBLend) project was initiated to enhance HEIs' capacity to develop high-quality SBM and to increase interest in SBM overall. The project partners are the project coordinator Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), European University Foundation (EUF), Masaryk University, Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands, Flanders and Luxembourg (NVAO), and Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK). The HIBLend project started with a kick-off meeting in February 2023 and ended with a final conference in December 2025.

The project has three major focus areas: 1) The design of a comprehensive framework for quality-driven blended mobility; 2) Internal and external validation of the framework through different test case scenarios; 3) Framework dissemination and uptake through an interactive digital toolbox and the community of practitioners developed throughout the project.

The project partners have mapped the existing and emerging theoretical and practical models of SBM, investigated quality expectations of stakeholders and considered the institutional approaches to guaranteeing SBM quality. Mixed methods involving a large-scale survey of higher education practitioners, focus groups and a mini-Delphi study based on a series of expert/stakeholder workshops have been applied. An in-depth analysis of the related quality expectations and institutional approaches to address them has been carried out. This analysis has led to the design of a comprehensive framework, tested and validated, offering guidance for institutions on the key principles and processes underpinning the quality of blended mobility programmes. The application of the framework is aided through an interactive visualisation and dissemination of the framework through a project digital toolbox, consisting of a 'heatmap' of good practice examples and institutional testimonials raising awareness of quality blended mobilities among institutions and students.

The focus of this EQAF paper is primarily on the quality considerations of SBM, in light of the ESG, and the associated recommendations for QA agencies. The HIBLend framework and the digital toolbox will be presented during the final conference in hybrid format on 9 December 2025.

In the next sections a short overview of the current situation regarding SBM is given, followed by a presentation of the main quality considerations for SBM and its relationship with the ESG. A special paragraph is devoted to the recommendations that are addressed to QA agencies. The paper ends with a concluding reflection of how QA can support institutions to ensure the quality of blended mobility formats.

2. The current landscape of student blended mobility

The HIBLend report "Approaches to Blended Student Mobility" provides an exploration and categorisation of theoretical and practical approaches to SBM formats. A literature review highlighted the key features of SBM with their respective benefits and shortcomings, the problem-based or self-guided learning models, and the Erasmus+ approaches of individual bilateral blended mobility or Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) which are based on structured institutional cooperation. SBM can also be distinguished based on their length (short-term vs long-term) and type of mobility (credit vs degree mobility). BIPs have become the most dominant form of SBM. Uptake rates have been increasing both within the sector and among students. Overall, 9% of mobile students participated in a blended mobility activity in 2023.

SBM practices and approaches were further explored using a survey among HEIs, through focus groups and hackathons. Offering students an increased potential for intercultural learning, attracting more students and making mobility more feasible were mentioned as main reasons for implementing student mobility in a blended format.

The most common sequence of SBM components was where the online component *preceded*, facilitated and prepared the subsequent physical mobility. Online components *during* physical mobility could enhance the on-site learning experience, enriching interactions and academic engagement. Online components *after* the physical mobility could support reflective learning and allow for consolidation and continued engagement with the host culture. In some cases, the online component is used both prior to and following the physical component, offering a gradual entry and exit from the intensive in-person experience. However, the online component typically tends to be considered as supporting the physical component, with academic value and resources mostly attached to the physical mobility. This situation is encouraged by the requirements of the Erasmus+ programme, currently awarding ECTS credits only for the physical mobility component. The complexities of designing a high-quality, engaging online experience for learners also hampers sufficient attention for the digital component.

Key institutional actors involved in SBM were coordinators and officers of International Relations Offices and teachers/professors. Less involved were Study Programme Coordinators, IT Officers, Instructional Designers/E-learning Consultants, and QA Officers. Administrative staff were twice as involved in BIPs as academic staff, whilst both types of staff were equally involved in short-term SBM.

A collaborative approach, integrating academic, technological, administrative and quality assurance aspects of SBM, was found to be important for quality SBM.

3. The quality of student blended mobility in view of the ESG

The HIBLend report "Quality perceptions and Quality Assurance approaches to Student Blended Mobility" explores quality considerations for SBM from multiple perspectives, primarily based on expert and stakeholder interview sessions with administrative staff/management, academic staff and students involved in SBM, representatives of QA agencies, Erasmus+ officers and officers of regional/national funding schemes.

One of the HIBLend findings is that SBM activities are rarely a fully integrated part of accredited study programmes. The uncertainty of sustainable funding makes it difficult for study programmes to commit to long-term integration of SBM as a core or even obligatory internationalisation part of study programmes (e.g., as part of joint programmes or mobility windows). The short duration of SBM also limits the possibilities for measuring academic impact. The evaluation of SBM reflects this positioning, as SBM activities are primarily evaluated internally, if at all, and in very different ways. These include formal assessments at the central or faculty level, based on emerging internal QA approaches, as well as informal methods such as open-ended feedback from students and staff, discussions, and anecdotal evidence gathered during project debriefing.

According to institutional staff, the main challenges linked to student participation in SBM are related to the specific nature and status of the online component. On the one hand, students have different levels of digital skills and learning styles underpinning their capacity to self-regulate and maintain the attention span. On the other hand, the specific design of the online component may not boost learner engagement (which requires sufficient digital capacity of staff) and there is a lack of formal recognition for the learning outcomes achieved in the online setting.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) highlight the standards that "apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery (ESG, p.7). The ESG "equally apply to online and blended learning" (EQAR, "Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies", 2024, p.3). The first principle of the ESG is that "higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance" (ESG, p.8). Part 1 of the ESG on internal quality

assurance is therefore crucial for all higher education provision, including SBM. The wording of these standards and guidelines often reflects the context of degree programmes, which are still the main part of higher education provision in Europe. However, "the term programme refers to higher education provision in its broadest sense, including provision that is not part of a programme leading to a formal degree" (EQAR, 2024, p. 30). The standards are also relevant for SBM (whether these are organised as part of a degree programme or not) and should "be taken account of and adhered to by those concerned, in all types of higher education provision" (ESG, p. 9).

It is, therefore, imminent to contextualise the ESG Part 1 to SBM. The HIBLend project results provided the basis for this contextualisation, highlighting the quality considerations that were perceived by stakeholders as particularly relevant for an effective implementation of SBM. This leads to the following summary of the ESG Part 1 as applied to SBM (the full text has been incorporated in the HIBLend framework):

ESG 1.1 Policy for quality assurance

A structured quality assurance policy is fundamental to ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of SBM within higher education institutions. Such a policy should encompass both the online and physical components of SBM, ensuring coherence and alignment with institutional standards for education quality. The policy may either be integrated into an institution's broader QA framework or developed as a distinct policy addressing the specific dynamics of blended learning. The QA policy for SBM is most effective when it supports that institutional leadership, organisational units, individual staff members, students and relevant external stakeholders (involved in e.g. internships, service learning) take on their responsibilities in QA. If the institution is participating in a university alliance, then the policy may also address the value of the alliance for SBM, e.g. regarding resource sharing, frameworks for student selection, and credit recognition.

ESG 1.2 Design and approval of SBM

The design and approval of SBM require careful integration of online and physical learning elements to ensure a cohesive academic experience. Effective design ensures that students can transition smoothly between digital and physical components, enhancing both their academic and intercultural learning experiences. SBM design should align with institutional guidelines, facilitating curriculum integration, academic calendar coordination, and mutual recognition of credits across partner universities. The objectives of SBM should be aligned with the internationalisation policy of the programme/institution and with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Dedicated administrative teams can be instrumental in managing the complexities of SBM, reducing administrative burdens, and enhancing coordination between departments.

ESG 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

SBM should be structured in a way that actively involves students in shaping their learning process. To maximize the impact of SBM, the design of learning activities should reflect a balance between structured academic content and opportunities for intercultural exchange. Creating a sense of continuity between the virtual and physical components contributes to a more immersive and interactive learning journey. The assessment methods used should also reflect this participatory approach. The role of feedback mechanisms is crucial in capturing student experiences and fostering continuous improvements in the learning design, based on empirical evidence of student learning experiences. Assessment practices should align with the broader educational objectives of SBM, incorporating perspectives on digital, international, and intercultural competencies.

ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Institutions should have fit-for-purpose SBM admission, recognition and completion procedures, aligned with the broader framework of student mobility across higher education systems. These processes should be transparent for students and implemented in a consistent manner, as they are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while also promoting SBM.

ESG 1.5 Teaching staff

The role of teaching staff in SBM is fundamental to ensuring a high-quality learning experience. The effectiveness of SBM depends on the pedagogical and technical competencies of educators, particularly in managing diverse student groups within digital and intercultural learning environments. The digital nature of blended mobility requires continuous professional development, as well as institutional strategies that support faculty in adapting to new teaching modalities. Institutional support mechanisms can contribute to the sustainability of SBM by fostering collaboration among educators, recognising their contributions, and ensuring that necessary resources are available.

ESG 1.6 Learning resources and student support

The effectiveness of SBM is closely tied to the availability of adequate learning approaches and student support mechanisms. The integration of digital and physical learning environments should be designed to facilitate seamless engagement, fostering intercultural exchange and academic collaboration. Comprehensive guidance before and during mobility enhances students' ability to navigate the blended experience effectively. Ensuring that all participants have access to the necessary academic and technological resources contributes to the inclusivity and sustainability of SBM. Addressing disparities in resource allocation between online and physical components further strengthens the overall learning experience, supporting a more integrated and holistic approach to SBM.

ESG 1.7 Information management

Effective information management plays a key role in ensuring the continuous improvement of SBM. A structured approach to collecting and analysing data allows institutions to monitor participation trends, assess student and staff experiences, and refine the overall quality of SBM activities. Feedback mechanisms are essential in capturing perspectives from multiple stakeholders, contributing to more informed decision-making.

ESG 1.8 Public information

Transparent and accessible information should be a fundamental component of SBM. Clear communication about programme structures, learning objectives and environment, participation requirements, required (technical) skills/equipment and assessment procedures ensures that both current and prospective students can make informed decisions.

ESG 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of SBM

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their SBM activities to ensure that they meet their objectives and respond to the needs of students and society. Evaluative processes contribute to identifying areas for refinement, strengthening the integration of online and physical learning components. The reviews should lead to continuous improvement and any actions taken as a result of these reviews should be communicated to all those concerned.

ESG 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

Institutions undergoing regular external quality assurance should include SBM activities where relevant. Although it is currently not common to include SBM in external QA, it is in the spirit of the ESG to build external QA on the internal QA for SBM. For instance, in systems of programme accreditation, the institution can describe SBM activities in the self-evaluation reports of programmes that provide SBM. In systems of institutional reviews/accreditation the institution may describe in its self-evaluation report the QA policy for SBM (ESG 1.1). In this manner, external QA can verify the effectiveness of internal QA for SBM, act as a catalyst for improvement and assure the public of the quality of SBM.

4. Recommendations for QA agencies

External QA (ESG Part 2) should build on internal QA (ESG Part 1). However, the QA agencies that were interviewed reported limited or no direct experience with SBM. They often focus on blended learning as a broader concept, recognising its relevance but not treating SBM as a distinct area in QA frameworks and assessments. Similarly, the national funding agencies reported that they monitor compliance with funding rules but that there is no dedicated QA framework for blended mobility, and metrics for the online components are inconsistent or absent.

The HIBLend project results have resulted in recommendations for the different stakeholders to strengthen the quality of SBM. The following recommendations have been specifically addressed for consideration by QA agencies:

- QA agencies can serve the development and innovation of SBM best by applying an enhancement-led QA approach, encouraging HEIs to develop autonomous and robust internal quality assurance mechanisms for SBM, aligning it with institutional internationalisation policies, and focusing on long-term sustainability and continuous improvement.
- QA agencies may consider to introduce a voluntary quality label for SBM, complemented by enhancement workshops and peer learning opportunities. The Estonian quality label for e-courses could serve as a model for recognising and incentivising quality SBM practices.
- If QA agencies assess student mobility then they should update their external QA framework to include blended formats, ensuring that also the digital components are evaluated. SBM-specific quality indicators may be developed to assess the effectiveness of both online and physical mobility components, ensuring balanced student engagement and learning outcomes.

5. Concluding reflections

Although SBM has grown due to the crisis of the pandemic and the limitations of physical mobility, its attractiveness has also been promoted due to the digital and green transitions, and the emergence of European Universities alliances developing virtual campuses with innovative learning and mobility formats. In view of these developments an increasing growth of SBM should be expected. However, one can also argue that student numbers involved in SBM are still limited, as well as its institutional embeddedness. SBM has not yet fully escaped the crisis mode and bolder steps must be taken to reach its full potential. Prejudices pertaining to blended mobility, especially with regard to the online component which is often perceived by students as secondary option compared to physical mobility, should be tackled and this requires more attention for the quality of the SBM experience.

The key insights emerging from the HIBlend research, highlight the need for a more robust institutional QA understanding of SBM, particularly regarding the online component and a more strategic approach to the design and the implementation of SBM, including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The findings also showcase the importance of support and funding for building the capacity of administrative and academic staff to design and deliver different kinds of SBM activities. Moreover, they emphasise the need for improved recognition of students' efforts in acquiring knowledge and skills across different learning environments.

The ESG provide a robust foundation for addressing the QA challenges of SBM. Key areas of focus include QA policy, curriculum design, assessment methods, faculty training, IT support, learning resource availability, and systematic monitoring and reporting. SBM can be aligned with internal QA by integrating requirements for an effective implementation of SBM into existing institutional and programme-level QA mechanisms. At the institutional level, it is important that cyclical audits provide the flexibility to include SBM. At the programme level, the focus could be on ensuring the cohesion between online and physical learning components in curriculum design. Regarding external QA, enhancement-led approaches encourage continuous improvement without sanctioning institutions that are not yet fully aligned with standards for SBM. Such approaches could include a voluntary quality label for SBM and a workshop model to discuss the alignment of internal and external QA.

As a result of these quality considerations and the findings of the HIBLend reports, the HIBLend framework has been developed, as presented at the HIBLend final conference on 9 December 2025. The framework has been piloted with institutions and is supported by a checklist of actionable items that institutions can follow regarding the strategy, design, implementation and internal evaluation of SBM. By integrating institutional, pedagogical, and quality assurance considerations, it serves as a strategic and practical tool to help HEIs implement and enhance SBM initiatives, ensuring alignment with European quality standards.

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For HIBLend framework and other project deliverables: https://hiblend.eu/deliverables/