

Exploring International Students' Engagement and Satisfaction in EAP Blended Learning: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The increasing integration of blended learning within higher education has reshaped the pedagogical approaches in transitional, *foundational and pre-sessional*, academic English teaching and learning programmes. These programmes are designed to support international students, driven from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds to progress and thrive in their undergraduate and postgraduate studies in UK universities. This study examines international students' perceptions and learning behaviours within blended learning and how the technology incorporated into this model can impact learning engagement and satisfaction. Data was collected through interviews and focus groups with 40 students. In addition, reflective diaries from 12 students were obtained and analysed to gain insights into students' learning behaviour and practices in synchronous and asynchronous learning environments. The findings reveal variations in students' preferences for the online components of blended learning. Teachers' and students' social presence, or interpersonal relationships, are crucial to students' learning engagement, and maximising face-to-face time can promote students' learning satisfaction. Students perceived signs of autonomous learning, and the structure of blended learning can support students' preparedness for UK higher education. The study provides guidance and offers implications for tutors, course developers, and all stakeholders engaged with international students.

Keywords: blended learning, international students, EAP, learning satisfaction, student engagement

1. Introduction

Blended learning has significantly impacted the teaching and learning environment in higher education, and this phenomenon appears to be expanding. This growth encompasses the traditional responsibilities in educational institutions, prompting academicians to reassess their roles as tutors and researchers (Kelderman, 2020). A substantial body of research prior to the COVID-19 pandemic focused on blended learning as a treatment, comparing it with other formats, such as face-to-face and online, to determine whether this learning model yields statistically significant differences in students' learning outcomes. Therefore, it can be assumed that questions like 'blend or not to blend' and 'flip or not to flip' have become relatively irrelevant in the present time. This is because many undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the British education sector are being taught online or have an online part, such as blended and flipped learning components (JISC, 2023). Hence, understanding the effect of integrating technology on students' learning outcomes is crucial to effective blended teaching and learning (Lomer & Palmer, 2021) to increase student engagement and satisfaction. In language learning contexts, technology has also been shown to improve students' writing performance, lexical development, motivation, and creative engagement (Alkhaldi, 2023).

This qualitative study contributes a contextually grounded understanding of students' engagement and satisfaction by foregrounding participants' meanings, experiences, and interpretations. Rather than treating engagement as a static outcome, the study examines how it is produced through relationships, participation, and perceived support. Guided by Social Constructivism Theory (SCT), which views knowledge as co-constructed through learners' experiences and interactions with the learning environment, the analysis offers a conceptual account that connects students' lived experiences to broader discussions of engagement, belonging, and satisfaction. Studies investigating students' perceptions of blended learning from UK higher education institutions collected data from undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across different study disciplines (Armellini et al., 2021; Lomer & Palmer, 2021; Mensah et al., 2025; Wakenshaw et al., 2024). Whereas Foundation Year (FY) and Pre-sessional Programmes (PSP) to study English for Academic Purposes (EAP) are fundamental for students to progress to the university and pursue their degrees, there are very limited (published) articles on students in these programmes. FY and PSP function as an academic bridge to narrow the gap between the previous styles of education and equip students from various cultural and educational backgrounds with the skills required to succeed in their studies (Bond, 2020). Hence, by centring the international students' own accounts, the study captures the meanings they attach to engagement rather than treating it as a fixed measurable variable.

There is a dominant deficit narrative in the literature that usually portrays international students as a homogeneous cohort lacking critical thinking, independent learning, and engagement (Jabbar et al., 2020). The United Kingdom (UK) is the second most popular destination, after the United States of America (USA), hosting approximately 680,000 overseas (European and non-European) students, almost a third of

the overall students (HESA, 2025). International students in the UK bring significant value in terms of soft power, influence, and financial value (Lomer et al., 2021; Shutt, 2022). This is evident in a report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (Index, 2021). The UK was ranked second after the USA for educating 55 world leaders. Higher education and international students are one of the UK’s greatest export earners and contribute annually to the UK economy by around £28.8 billion (Index, 2021). International students, however, do not just bring financial benefits. They also bring educational benefits and different perspectives by making the learning environment more interesting, diverse, and exciting with their presence (Shutt, 2022). Therefore, the study is significant in that it illuminates how this cohort of students experiences engagement in blended learning programmes.

The study poses a main research question:

How do international students perceive blended learning in relation to their academic English experiences?

This is supported by two sub-questions related to learning engagement and satisfaction:

1. How do international students describe their satisfaction with blended learning?
2. What factors support student engagement in blended learning environments?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conception of Blended Learning

The term ‘blended learning’ was not firmly established until the beginning of the 21st century. However, integrating technology into education, especially in language teaching and learning in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), dates back to the 1960s. The term itself has not been completely embraced in the teaching and learning context since it refers to this relatively new pedagogy as ‘e-learning’ or ‘hybrid or mixed learning’ (Dong & Liu, 2024). Blended learning is a combination of face-to-face and online teaching (Sharma, 2017). Graham (2018) substitutes online teaching with computer-mediated instruction: ‘a combination of face-to-face and computer-mediated instruction’. Similarly, Helms (2014) uses “blended” to indicate courses that combine face-to-face and some types of synchronous or asynchronous online teaching that go beyond providing passive links. A more recent definition reimagined blended learning in higher education as ‘a combination of face-to-face learning and dynamic digital activities and content’ (JISC, 2023).

These definitions do not reflect the substantial variety within the blended learning environments, the proportion of the online mode, nor the amount of the conventional classroom time reduction. For example, some blended learning courses can have a significant majority of instruction online, and the physical co-presence of the tutor and the students can only be on site a few times during the semester for classroom presentations and group discussions. In other blended programmes, online delivery systems can be restricted to some additional materials and tasks through the online platform for practice outside the classroom. Smith and Kurthen (2007) present definitions for related terms based on percentages of use (Table 1).

Table 1. An early taxonomy of terms related to blended learning (Smith & Kurthen, 2007, p. 463)

Term	Definition
Web-enhanced	Subjects that make use of a minimal amount of online materials, such as posting a syllabus and course announcements
Blended	Subjects that utilise some significant online activities in otherwise face-to-face learning, but less than 45%
Hybrid	Subjects in which online activities replace 45–80% of face-to-face class meetings
Fully online	Subjects in which 80% or more of learning materials are conducted online

These definitions did not account for pedagogic diversities and focused solely on time spent online; many of these terms are synonymous in English language teaching and learning. The present study is guided by the conceptualisation articulated by Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 96), highlighting blended learning as the “thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences”. The significance of ‘thoughtful integration’ is undetermined and does not specify the amount of the two main types of learning, online and face-to-face. The definition emphasises the design effort and permits a range of tools for implementing the blend of learning modes. Also, it gives room for the tutors to regularly review the courses and thoughtfully combine the two main modes of teaching and learning in a planned and pedagogically valuable manner to promote students' engagement and learning skills (Nikolopoulou & Zacharis, 2023; Podoliak, 2022). Overall, there seems to be no consensus in the literature on a definitive definition of blended learning, and the term could be misleading. Therefore, it can be suggested that ‘blended teaching’ could solve this issue and would be accurate since the action is based on pedagogical decisions (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005).

2.2 Student Academic Engagement and Satisfaction in Blended EAP Learning

The rapid adoption of blended learning (BL) across higher education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has prompted sustained scholarly attention to how the integration of online and face-to-face modalities affects student engagement and satisfaction (Amenduni & Ligorio, 2022). Within this broader landscape, a growing body of work examines how these dynamics unfold for international students—and specifically within EAP programmes. In the context of these cohorts, different variables are considered, and how these variables, including language proficiency level, cultural adaptation, computer skills or digital literacy, affect the curricula and pedagogical design. Student engagement is a cornerstone construct for high-quality education and correlates with academic achievement, deep learning (Phillips & O’Flaherty, 2019), a sense of community (Hill et al., 2023), self-regulation of time and effort invested in studying, interaction and participation (Pye et al., 2022), feelings of autonomy, choice and control (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Halverson and Graham (2019) highlight that such correlations have led researchers to consider student engagement as “an educational bottom line” (Coates, 2006, p. 36) and “the holy

grail of learning” (Sinatra et al., 2015, p. 1). However, many students lack active involvement in their education, which can lead to high attrition, lack of enthusiasm, and low academic achievement (Halverson & Graham, 2019). As a result, engagement is a multidimensional construct and is crucial to effective teaching and learning processes.

Student engagement has three commonly accepted dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and affective. While behavioural engagement encompasses active and responsive behaviours towards learning activities, cognitive engagement refers to the level of mental effort exerted during learning activities and is characterised by deep learning (Phillips & O’Flaherty, 2019), self-regulation (Ibrahim et al., 2025), and comprehension (Hollister et al., 2022). Affective engagement encompasses the level of emotional involvement in learning activities, which is demonstrated by positive responses to the learning environment, classmates, and tutors, as well as a sense of belonging (Hollister et al., 2022). In the context of this study, engagement can be described as the exercise of agency in a learning environment, concentrating on the significance of emotions and self-regulation. Teaching and learning in academic English programmes is usually centred, and students take charge of most learning activities. Therefore, student engagement encompasses understanding the content, the relevance of materials and activities and the effectiveness of integrating blended learning modalities. This aligns with the view that language materials should be relevant, flexible, and responsive to learners’ needs and learning contexts (Erkir & Alkhaldi, 2025).

The finding that students’ engagement and involvement accounts for the connection between the blended learning context and these students’ satisfaction has been consolidated by a large pool of data and a continually growing body of evidence. To further support this, in their study with 210 students, Haji (2024) indicated that interactions via learning management systems positively influenced engagement, which in turn increased perceived learning outcomes and satisfaction. Similarly, Jayanthi and Rajalakshmi (2022) confirmed that behavioural and cognitive engagement significantly predicted student satisfaction among 377 college students in an online learning context, with faculty support and course structure serving as antecedents of engagement. Moreover, Zhou et al. (2025) revealed in their mixed-methods study of 131 students in a blended EAP course that online cognitive engagement was a significant predictor of reading, listening, and writing scores, while behavioural engagement predicted writing and speaking performance. This is supported by Rahman and Azmi (2025), who examined students’ perceptions of LMS-mediated blended learning in an EAP course and reported broadly positive attitudes, particularly regarding skill development and enjoyment of the format. Despite that, learners identified that social interaction and critical thinking are not satisfactory and needed to be improved – a finding that echoes wider concerns about the limitations of online components in fostering deeper cognitive and collaborative engagement. In general, there is substantial evidence that students’ engagement cognitively and behaviourally in various blended learning environments and platforms aids their academic performance and increases their overall satisfaction.

Emotional engagement can be a key factor in student satisfaction and academic achievement in blended learning courses. Therefore, social presence, or the interpersonal relationship and efforts to build a learning community (Shehzad and Charles, 2023) can be a predominant factor for students’ perceived learning and satisfaction. Blended learning involves participation in different platforms, which may lead to students’ distraction. The teacher’s social presence can demand complex roles to facilitate discourse, connectedness and emotionally intelligent behaviours to maximise learners’ motivation and engagement. Notwithstanding, students’ perspectives may differ significantly, and thoughtful and balanced integration of technology in academic English programmes can ensure that the international student cohort feels connected in these academic bridge programmes before pursuing their undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Blended learning fits broadly within the school of Social Constructivism - SCT in technology since this theory helps to comprehend how ‘mediated’ instruments such as technology, utilised by learners, change how interlocutors engage with each other to develop their language learning process. SCT core principle is that learning does not take place in isolation from social interactions, and language mediates social and psychological processes (Gutiérrez, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). It demonstrates that learning happens through integration within a community of practice, where language, interaction, and social impact play crucial roles in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding (Vygotsky 1978). In other words, human relationships with the external world are not direct and controlled by conceptual or symbolic tools, such as language, and physical tools or material artefacts, such as technologies (Swain et al., 2015). Given that tools and signs are not neutral, it is reasonable to anticipate that the utilisation of various tools, such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), can present distinct opportunities for promoting academic English skills (Mohammadi Zenouzagh et al., 2023). As a result, ‘mediated’ tools are not limited to human assistance but could extend to technology. These tools are crucial to the learning process since they reshape the learning task and change the structure of cognitive function (Lantolf et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

Exploring international students’ experiences sits within interpretivism, which underpins qualitative research and is linked to the constructivist ontological position, which perceives knowledge as co-constructed through participants’ interactions with the learning environment (Cohen et al., 2018; McKinley & Rose, 2020). The research questions seek a thorough understanding of how participants experience engagement and satisfaction in blended learning, rather than statistical generalisation. Hence, the study employed a qualitative, exploratory approach and collected data through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and student diaries to give voice to the participants and probe issues of presenting behaviours and actions.

3.1 Participants and Sampling

The study recruited international students from the transitional Foundation Year – FY and Pre-sessional Programmes – PSP, in three UK

universities, including Post-92 universities and Russell Group universities, both of which require different entry English proficiency levels before pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate studies. While PSP students completed their first degree outside the UK and joined either a 6 or 10-week programme of academic English study to pursue a master's degree, FY students completed their basic education, or school study, in their home countries and arrived in the UK to join an undergraduate course. These two programmes were deliberately selected to fine-tune the findings to the experiences of EAP students in blended learning settings while remaining open to transferability to similar contexts.

The study followed a random sampling strategy to collect data through semi-structured interviews, Focus groups and students' diaries. Hence, every student in the general population has an equal probability of participating in the research, and whether one or more participants are included or excluded from the sample is a matter of chance and nothing else. Students were invited to participate via email and course announcements; those who responded and provided informed consent were included. The final sample size was determined through an iterative process, with recruiting participants continuing until no substantial themes or data emerged, thereby indicating the data saturation had been identified for this study.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection occurred after completing the PSP study and in the second semester of the FY academic English study to ensure that the participants had considerable experience of the blended learning EAP setting. The study employed semi-structured interviews to collect data from 17 students in both programmes. In addition, five focus groups with 23 students were conducted to generate co-constructed data, seldom obtained through individual interviews. Indeed, ethical considerations guided the conduct of focus group discussions (BERA, 2018). For example, students from certain cultural backgrounds hesitated to meet the researcher in a one-to-one meeting, even if it was online via the Zoom application. In addition, a few participants lacked fluency but could show their perspectives by nodding or shaking head from side to side and expressing agreement or disagreement with what they had heard from groupmates. Additionally, speaking in groups helped multiple participants who are less proficient in English to jog each other's memories and thoughts (Wellington, 2015, p. 147) and to talk in a relaxed environment, which was not feasible in individual interviews. A total of 40 students' narratives were collected from interviews and focus groups to investigate participants' experiences of engagement and satisfaction with blended learning.

In addition to the elicited subjective data from interviews and focus groups, the diaries of 12 students from the research sample helped to reflect students' actual learning behaviour and engagement in blended learning environments. Students recorded their achievements, problems, preferences, and strategies for learning on a daily basis for eight weeks. Diaries provided an insider account of students' personal understanding of their learning experiences. They captured the development and changes in student learning engagement over the programme duration. Students got training on how to complete the diaries according to SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, reliable and timely) standards, which helped the learners to understand the task requirements. Moreover, a set of questions was listed at the top of the document to guide the participants to record learning activities during the course. The research participants reflected on synchronous activities and provided a brief description of the activities they completed outside class in their individual and group study.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study followed certain measures to ensure qualitative rigour: credibility, dependability and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and settings, member checking of key themes, where participants were invited to review and confirm summaries of their accounts, and triangulation across multiple research methods. While semi-structured interviews provide detailed and individual perspectives, focus groups offer dynamic discussions that reveal shared experiences and diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, student diaries added a reflective dimension to students' learning practices in and outside the classroom. Together, these methods create a more thorough and nuanced understanding by cross-verifying information and uncovering insights that might be missed when relying on a single data source that cannot be cross-checked.

Indeed, interpretation and replication of the analytical process followed multiple stages, taking into consideration the depth of analysis and what all participants meant through inductive data analysis, then linking that to theory in discussions and writing the report. This included a detailed audit trail of coding and finalising emerged themes, which enhances the dependability of the study. Self-reflexivity was constantly present, and analytical decisions were checked against the raw data rather than pre-conceived ideas. Finally, transferability was promoted through thick description: detailed portrayals of participants' contexts, course structures, and participants' experiences of blended learning so that readers can judge the extent to which findings may apply to other educational settings. Overall, all methodological criteria for rigorous qualitative research were implemented, ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The study includes human subjects, so it was crucial to obtain institutional and individual approval before starting data collection. Since the research data was collected from 3 higher education institutions, the research proposal and required documents were sent to the research ethics committees ahead of time. This is followed by individual consent forms to invite participants and inform them about the research purpose, procedures, and benefits (BERA, 2018). The focus of the discussion schedule was on the cognitive, not the emotional, aspects of learning to maintain the physical and mental well-being of the study participants. The responses were made untraceable and anonymous, so the participants were given numbers, and no information was shared with anyone else. Hence, ethical issues started with the research proposal and initial ethical approval, and they were present throughout the entire research process, including planning and design, data-gathering, data analysis, and data reporting.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to categorise, analyse and report the patterns or themes within the qualitative data collected. Hence, the research questions guided the analysis of data by their content and identified and interpreted the features. The data collected led the research analysis process. They followed an inductive approach through a five-step strategy based on a thematic analysis: familiarising with data, generating initial codes, developing themes, mapping, and producing the report (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The written texts and files were imported into NVivo software to identify similar information across the data systemically. Data analysis followed an iterative process, with constant comparison and final themes were assessed for their relevance to the research questions. This is also linked back to SCT, the conceptual framework guiding the study, thereby making the analytical process transparent and tightly connected to the research objectives.

4. Findings

The analysis of the students’ responses to semi-structured interviews, focus groups and diaries elucidated three principal themes regarding students’ experiences and perceptions of engagement and satisfaction in blended learning settings. Table 2 summarises the emerging themes before presenting them in detail with participants’ narratives.

Figure 2. Emerging themes from the participants’ interviews, focus groups and diaries

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Perceived Learning Effectiveness	- Quality of Learning Experiences - Self-based Learning
2. Social Experiences	- Effective Communication on Blended Learning Platforms
3. Sense of Responsibility and Embracing Change	- Regulation of Study Time - Personal Accountability

4.1 Theme 1: Perceived Learning Effectiveness

4.1.1 Quality of Learning Experiences

“I thought the course would be a bit chaotic because we have to keep up with online and face-to-face work. But it slightly exceeded my expectations and has been smooth” [Participant 6].

The data reveal varying levels of students’ satisfaction with the blended learning course structure and learning opportunities, indicating that it is not universal. A variety of learning platforms characterise blended learning, while the findings showed that many students prefer following their studies on a single tool and not switching between multiple software applications and platforms. This could be challenging for some students and subject to technical issues and frequent pressure, which can affect students’ learning potential and mastery of knowledge.

“The course prepares us for our future study at the university” [Participant 33].

Participants found the course to be an academic bridge to the gap between their previous education and the teaching and learning styles. This correlates with the findings from the students’ reflective diaries.

“Work on PPT slides in groups and discuss and collect the content of the presentation together. Then I do my reading assignment on VLE independently” [Participant 42].

“The course increased my interest in learning. I do not feel I am passive, and the course pushed me to be more active” [Participant 29].

Students’ narratives and learning behaviour indicate that satisfaction with blended learning is related to the ability to engage with the content, interact, and communicate with the tutor and peers in different learning spaces (Wei & Chou, 2020). If the course meets the learners’ expectations and they are satisfied with the content and structure, their preparation will increase, resulting in greater development of their knowledge and experience. “The more positive learners’ online learning perceptions are, the more they will perceive support and benefits from their online learning process” (Wei & Chou, 2020, p. 3). This can consequently encourage students to implement effective learning strategies, which can have a positive impact on students’ academic achievement and module satisfaction (Zizka & Probst, 2023). This, in turn, appears to lead to greater satisfaction with the course of study, especially in the transitional stage before pursuing their undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

4.1.2 Self-based Learning

“A significant advantage is flexibility. I can allocate any time to study on my own” [Participant 12].

Multiple data entries revealed that the programme fostered positive perceptions of the flexibility and accessibility of learning resources, which further contributed to their satisfaction with blended learning. The flexibility of blended learning includes thoughtful integration of technology, which constitutes the dominant focus, and other dimensions such as face-to-face and online tutor-led classes to meet the needs of learners and ensure maximum inclusion. Having the academic English learning resources posted on the online platform and organised in weeks according to the scheme of work gave students the flexibility to follow and catch up on any missing learning. The availability of materials could encourage students to revisit the course content anytime and anywhere.

“We can review the course content anytime and anywhere. We can access more information that we need and review what we do not understand” [Participant 38].

Nonetheless, some students viewed materials posted on the online platform as adding more tasks and time to independent learning,

therefore, creating an additional workload in their already overwhelmed lives (Lomer & Palmer, 2021).

4.2 Theme 2: Social Experiences

4.2.1 Effective Communication on Blended Learning Platforms

“In face-to-face classes, it is easier and faster to communicate with the tutor than via online messages” [Participant 27].

In blended learning spaces, communication can be dissimilar from solely face-to-face learning. While some students utilised smart learning devices and blended learning resources to drill their abilities to practise academic English skills individually and in cooperation with other classmates, they favoured the face-to-face presence of the tutor and direct interaction with classmates. This indicates that students were missing the social presence of the tutor, classmates and social life. The students exercised virtual interaction in synchronous and asynchronous learning, but some were emotionally connected to face-to-face communication with the tutor and classmates.

“Group study is more convenient, but face-to-face discussions are better for explaining our ideas and sharing our information” [Participant 28].

Outside-classroom learning is one of the significant characteristics of blended learning programmes, and student participation is crucial to achieve the course learning objectives. Some participants favoured outside-classroom learning and taking part in study groups and projects in a face-to-face environment, rather than engaging in these activities online. This study extends the results from Onah and colleagues and demonstrates that interaction beyond classroom activities was evident in students’ behaviour as they sought help from one another and showed more engagement in learning (Onah et al., 2020).

“An advantage of interaction online was my ability to work in a comfortable and stress-free environment. I get confident, and this improved my performance” [Participant 5].

However, other participants demonstrated that taking part in online classes could be easier and more relaxed compared to face-to-face learning. This could relate to individual personal traits, learning preferences and students’ familiarity with interaction among students in online classes. Also, students can be more familiar with online learning, given the fact that the time of data collection took place post Covid-19, after years of learning on online platforms.

In addition to interpersonal communication between the students and with the tutor, some participants reflected on difficulties related to technical and organisational issues. This relates more to students’ individual needs and their mastery of technology. Some participants experienced challenges dealing with the online platform, especially at the beginning of the course. This includes stress and challenges joining classes run online due to internet problems. Some participants also encountered stress and learning dissatisfaction caused by the different learning modes: face-to-face, online and interaction on VLE.

“Face-to-face communication in group work is easier, and body language can help us understand more and have more discussions” [Participant 27].

Participants reported that communication with classmates in group work activities and breakout rooms was challenging in virtual classes compared to in-person learning. Participants found that face-to-face engagement in activities was more efficient not only because they were familiar with it, but also because it promotes discussions and is more convenient in explaining ideas and sharing information. In a face-to-face learning environment, students can use nonverbal clues like smiling, nodding, and leaning in to effectively transmit immediate behaviours.

“I feel comfortable answering questions online with no one judging me - it's literally me and the laptop” [Participant 7].

Conversely, some participants confirmed they can interact effectively and exchange ideas in online breakout rooms. Quieter and less confident students are likely to be more motivated to participate in breakout room discussions, since they may be seen as less threatening compared to speaking in front of the entire class.

The data suggested that participants referred to their agency to engage in smaller communities using alternative social media platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and QQ (Figure 1).

“Our study group always meets on QQ. We have a group to discuss the activities and prepare for our seminars and presentations” [participant 37].

Students can form bonds in small groups with classmates who share traits and characteristics and experience a sense of community. The private groups could offer emotional support that proved to have a favourable effect on their overall learning experience. Therefore, using private platforms not only deepened the relationship between students but also motivated them to work collaboratively.



Figure 1. Digital technologies and engagement platforms

The digital learning platforms, such as Brightspace, Blackboard and Insendi assigned by the universities, where the data of this study were gathered, may be perceived as less engaging, as some students noted a lack of dynamic content and difficulties in accessing these platforms. Therefore, incorporating more popular and engaging options could facilitate students' learning engagement and satisfaction (Ayesha, 2024).

4.3 Theme 3: Sense of Responsibility and Embracing Change

Participants' narratives demonstrated that participants developed a level of accountability and acceptance of blended learning. Unlike face-to-face learning, blended learning requires students to attend and interact in more than one learning mode, and participants seemed to adapt gradually to the new learning format to achieve the course requirements. As young adults choose to study in a UK higher education institution, students appear to form a positive view of blended learning swiftly (Nikolopoulou & Zacharis, 2023). This affects their decision to accept the relatively new teaching modes and encourages students to develop behavioural skills such as time management and self-discipline to cope with the different requirements of the course, which some of them had not experienced before.

4.3.1 Regulation of Study Time

"A new way of learning, but interesting. The mix between learning face-to-face and online helped us to manage our time" [Participant 18].

"I use outside the classroom to structure my assignment and work on my PPT slides" [Participant 14].

Many students revealed that they allocated time for the activities on the online platform and engaged in outside-the-classroom learning besides their synchronous learning with the tutor. This demonstrated that students practised their capacity to control learning and plan for learning tasks on their own. Moreover, the data from interviews and focus groups are consistent with the findings of reflective diaries, which demonstrated that participants utilised time both within and beyond the classroom to actively engage with learning resources to meet the course objectives. The diaries documented patterns of self-directed study, peer collaboration, and reflective engagement with course content. That was evident in the group and individual study meetings, and the effort participants exerted to consolidate understanding and sustain learning progress throughout the course.

In addition to metacognitive skills such as setting goals and planning learning, students developed cognitive skills of EAP abilities, like learning writing and presentation skills, especially outside the classroom and independently from the teacher. This was a widely held view but not universal, and students' attitudes toward blended learning and managing time properly to meet the various requirements of the course are considered self-directed learning and could be a sign of autonomous learning (Wong et al., 2020).

4.3.2 Personal Accountability

"I learned how to be disciplined and to prepare independently for the classes and do tasks posted on an online platform to participate in face-to-face and online classes" [Participant 1].

Participants believed that the combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning motivated them to develop self-discipline skills. The course structure trained them to balance life commitments and learning to achieve tasks on time. Students' narratives demonstrated that students utilised learning resources on VLE and that they perceived that preparing for classes is key to understanding the content and increasing learning potential.

"I have become more active in my study. The course increased my interest in learning and pushed me to be more active" [Participant 29].

Data entries demonstrated common actions and behaviours like starting the lesson before tutor-led sessions, completing asynchronous units, and reflecting on their performance after class. Many of these practices are without the tutor's instructions, which can help students self-regulate learning over time (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2020).

5. Discussion

The study findings demonstrated that face-to-face meetings supported students in online learning parts, whether in tutor-led sessions or on the online platform. While the online component of blended learning is essential and may constitute the majority of the teaching and

learning process, the utilisation of face-to-face meetings can foster an online social culture that facilitates learning through interpersonal and group discussions (Puspitasari & Hanayanti, 2023; Sasan & Rabillas, 2022). The face-to-face part of blended learning supported the online communities by building social and cultural bonds among students, which had a positive effect on learning in online platforms. Face-to-face meetings supported students' confidence to engage in direct communication, which in turn increased the sense of community in all parts of blended learning. This study extends the findings of other studies (Booth & Kellogg, 2015; Hill et al., 2023; Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2016; Paskevicius & Bortolin, 2016; Puspitasari & Hanayanti, 2023) indicating that combining face-to-face sessions with online learning can foster relationships and trust among students. The combination of two learning modes can enhance the sense of community among students and facilitate the creation of successful online communities. This study demonstrates that enabling group members to collaborate in-person fostered trust, leading to increased participation of teachers in online forums and reinforcing the e-learning community.

This study adds to the existing literature about blended learning, and it particularly explains that the value of blended learning design is not merely about its synchronous and asynchronous availability or flexibility, but this value lies in how this modality of learning enhances learners' interpersonal connections and boosts their sense of community. It is not surprising that the participants clearly expressed their preference for the face-to-face component of blended learning, yet they simultaneously expressed their satisfaction with doing activities in breakout rooms. This might sound as a paradox, but it is actually the opposite. It simply proves that students link face-to-face modality with their accustomed classroom environment, teacher presence and getting immediate reassurance, and they also consider the breakout rooms feature as an opportunity for active participation, peer-to-peer support, collaboration, discussion and interaction. The findings therefore point to a nuanced tension in which students estimate and value various facets of engagement depending on the unique learning environment that provides this particular engagement: online, face-to-face and blended. This supports the notion that blended learning design should not be merely about mixing or integrating different modes of delivering education, but it should consider each mode's distinct pedagogical function and how it impacts both engagement and satisfaction. In particular, the sense of community was crucial to increasing students' engagement and interaction in group work and breakout rooms. These findings support the view that once this community is established, students' learning outcomes can be achieved and developed dramatically. Physical presence can accelerate the sense of community and comfort, which can help students interact and engage in online learning and platforms (Hill et al., 2023; Shehzad & Charles, 2023).

The novelty of the study lies in its emphasis on the relationship between course structure and student experience, revealing that learners are most satisfied when online and face-to-face elements feel connected, purposeful, and socially meaningful. Participants in this study particularly valued communication in tutor-led sessions, online and face-to-face. The results are established through the lens of SCT that interaction with the teacher or more knowledgeable peers is crucial to a successful learning experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Multiple participants confirmed the benefits of teachers' willingness and guidance in elucidating EAP concepts to ensure understanding of learning resources. Students' engagement in activities can foster an environment in which students perceive themselves as active participants and agentic partners in the process of learning and teaching (Armellini et al., 2021). Indeed, effective communication occurs when it is not perceived as hierarchical, but rather as truly reciprocal (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016). Participants also appreciated the communication with the tutor outside of classroom settings and commented on how the accessibility of teachers can positively affect their satisfaction. Students anticipate proficient communication that extends beyond the confines of the classroom and encompasses a wide range of subject-specific subjects. Effective tutor-student contact, both within and outside the classroom, can cultivate a stronger student connection with tutors, and the whole institution and plays a pivotal role in developing partnerships and overall consent with the course. Therefore, well-structured planning and careful course design can maximise opportunities for effective communication and dialogue among partners in blended learning environments.

In addition, the findings indicate that social presence is not a peripheral feature of blended learning in EAP programmes but a central condition for sustaining participation and reducing the sense of isolation that can arise in blended environments. The interpersonal relationship between partners and tutor social presence had a significant effect on student engagement in learning communities. Face-to-face interactions in blended learning can develop emotional engagement, and on-campus seminars can strengthen the bond between students, which, in turn, can positively reflect on their interaction in online communities. These study findings extend the results from a recent research conducted by Shehzad and Charles, who found that “instructor social presence positively influences student engagement and attrition” (Shehzad & Charles, 2023, p. 1). They investigated the role of facilitation on students' behavioural, psychological, and cognitive engagement and statistically proved that a tutor's social presence has a significant positive connection with facilitation. This indicates that learners who see their tutor as more present and engaged in the learning process are likely to report a higher level of facilitation.

Blended learning is constructivist in nature, and the socio-constructivist epistemology of this approach emphasises the importance of collaborative, inclusive, and independent learning (Lomer & Palmer, 2021). The findings revealed that blended learning can enable participants to scaffold learning in self-directed asynchronous learning. The findings extend prior research run by (Meri-Yilan, 2021) and show that students engage in learning activities and utilise digital technologies to exercise and develop autonomous learning. The findings also demonstrate that blended learning had an impact on students' motivation, and the availability of materials encouraged them to extend learning outside the classroom. Participants of this study demonstrated a positive attitude towards learning and the course related to the availability and accessibility of learning resources and the utilisation of digital devices in and outside the classroom. Participants confirmed that blended learning encouraged them to develop study and learning behaviours like preparing for classes and participating in group activities online with classmates. A possible explanation for this can be attributed to students' inclination towards interactive learning tasks such as presentations and group work activities, which stimulated their motivation to interact in blended learning communities (Ayesha,

2024; Wong et al., 2020; Zhao & Song, 2022). Although Wong et al. (2020) proved statistically that there was no substantial alteration in the level of student autonomy after completing a blended learning course, the researchers observed a subtle alteration in students' behaviour. This suggests that when students demonstrate a favourable attitude towards learning and the study programme and are willing to interact with synchronous and asynchronous activities, it can be considered a form of autonomy.

This study argues that engagement can be enhanced by building a sense of belonging to promote positive communication and interactions among classmates and tutors. The data reinforce the idea that the sense of belonging reported by students aligns with SCT's view that learning occurs within socially mediated, relational contexts where individuals co-construct knowledge and identity through interaction. Proficient communication and the establishment of strong relationships facilitate a more profound connection with learning and cultivate this sense of belonging (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016; Armellini et al., 2021). This study confirms earlier reports that establishing strong student-tutor partnerships, especially when students perceive their tutors as equals, serves as a catalyst for fostering student engagement (Armellini et al., 2021). In their role as partners, students not only benefit from learning and teaching experiences but also contribute to the learning process (Fortune et al., 2019; Matthews et al., 2018). Therefore, the students' experiences of interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging highlight how meaningful engagement with others is on the blended learning platforms.

6. Conclusion

The study examined international students' perceptions of blended learning in EAP transitional programmes, and students' narratives from three multiple methods revealed positive experiences. While there were some overlapping perspectives on the online elements of blended learning, multiple participants acknowledged the benefits of blended learning and emphasised the importance of social presence in facilitating meaningful engagement within blended learning environments. The reported value of face-to-face sessions suggests that opportunities for immediate interpersonal interaction remain critical in supporting students' engagement and sense of connection. Consequently, course designers and educators should consider integrating pedagogical strategies that cultivate a strong social dimension across blended modalities. Approaches such as collaborative tasks, sustained tutor presence, and deliberate community-building activities can bridge the relational gap between online and in-person components. Designing for social presence, therefore, has important implications for enhancing learner engagement, promoting continuity of interaction, and strengthening the overall cohesion of the blended learning experience. Ultimately, designing blended courses that thoughtfully combine face-to-face, online, outside, and inside classroom learning can nurture social presence and bridge the emotional and cognitive gaps between modalities, creating a more cohesive and stimulating learning experience.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to some limitations that should be acknowledged. The qualitative design and relatively small, context-specific sample limit the generalizability of the findings. While the use of interviews, focus groups, and student diaries provides rich, in-depth insights into international students' experiences of blended learning in EAP transitional programmes, these findings may not be transferable to other institutional contexts, disciplines, or student populations. In addition, the study relies heavily on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' perceptions, memory recall, or social desirability bias. Participants may have selectively reported experiences or framed their engagement and satisfaction in ways they perceived as favourable or expected, potentially affecting the accuracy of the data. Considerable efforts, however, were made to minimise potential bias in the data analysis, including systematic coding procedures and triangulation across multiple data sources. While qualitative analysis inherently involves researcher interpretation, these measures helped to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

6.2 Future Research

Future research can be reframed as a quest for prototypes to identify the most exemplary instance of the blended learning model. It can also focus on determining how blended learning maintains a community of practice and the roles of social presence, tutor presence, and course design features in shaping students' motivation, participation, and sense of belonging, particularly in transitional programmes. These studies can take a comparative approach by examining how international students experience blended learning across disciplines, proficiency levels, and institutional settings. Particularly, the comparisons between international students' experiences of EAP modules and other subjects would help to show whether engagement and social presence operate differently depending on the nature of the course.

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Author contributions

Dr. MEHI collected the data and analysed it. He also wrote the literature, methodology, findings, and the discussion section. Dr. RG wrote the abstract, introduction, and proofread the manuscript. Dr. AAA reviewed the paper, wrote the conclusion, and finalised the references. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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