BETWEEN PRESENCE AND DISTANCE: NEW PRESPECTIVES ON STUDENT'S LEARNING IN HYBRID UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT
This study explores whether a hybrid educational model can effectively meet the learning, social, and professional needs of university students. Framed within the national EduNext project, a qualitative investigation was conducted with 14 students enrolled in the inter-university master's degree program LM-50/93 (University of Naples Parthenope and University of Salerno). Data collected through semi-structured focus groups were examined using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Three core themes emerged: the need to restructure the educational offer, entry-level competencies supporting study-work-life balance, and organizational and managerial challenges. The findings highlight a clear preference for blended learning over an exclusively online format, as it successfully combines flexibility and continuous assessment with the indispensable value of in-person social interaction and experiential learning.

KEYWORDS
Blended learning; hybrid education; student engagement; educational artificial intelligence.

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1. Introduction

In Italy, escalating gentrification phenomena have substantially reduced the number of non-resident university students living away from home, as the cost of long-term housing has become increasingly prohibitive (Rossi & d'Addona, 2025). Compounding this crisis is the necessity for many graduating students to combine work with study in order to make their financial situation sustainable (Giannola et al., 2025). This latter variable significantly impacts educational outcomes, as it fosters absenteeism and, in many instances, early dropout phenomena (Federighi, 2023). Nonetheless, over the years these trends have represented a major opportunity for several entrepreneurs who focused on applying technology to teaching, giving rise to distance-learning (telematics) universities (D'Angelo et al., 2024). These academic institutions have rapidly established themselves in the market because, through digital audiovisual content, they successfully bridge geographical distances and expand lecture schedules (J. U. da Silva et al., 2024; Kehl et al., 2025). Such an approach has fostered a personalized learning experience free from the constraints typical of traditional campuses, securing a clear competitive advantage (Fernandes et al., 2023).

However, despite these gains in educational accessibility, a pedagogical paradox emerges that warrants close scrutiny, as this digital transformation also brings significant challenges (Kundu Pramanick & Sarif, 2025). These issues stem directly from the mere transposition of instructional content into digital formats—a dynamic that risks compromising fundamental learning dimensions, specifically active student engagement and constructive peer interaction (Costa et al., 2025). The consequences of this misalignment can adversely affect the perceived effectiveness of the educational journey and the quality of learning outcomes, potentially compromising academic success (Locali, 2025).

This assertion finds support in a comparative study conducted by Sun (2023) at Durham University (United Kingdom). Over two academic semesters, the author administered a questionnaire to 152 psychology undergraduate students (80 males and 72 females, aged between 17 and 24 years) to examine the effects of a mixed learning experience that combined in-person and remote classes to cope with pandemic-related restrictions. The results revealed that students gave significantly higher ratings to face-to-face instruction compared to digital methods. Yet, contrary to expectations, they expressed a strong preference for taking exams remotely, suggesting that their reservations did not target digital methods per se, but rather the absence of social interaction inherent in purely distance education. Beyond demonstrating that a disconnect between technology and campus social life—the relational fabric that develops within university walls—is perceived as a critical barrier (Dulfer et al., 2025), these findings also highlight students' desire to leverage technology as a support mechanism for teaching (Matere & Oranga, 2025). Consequently, there is an imperative need to explore educational frameworks capable of integrating the benefits of digitalization with students' social interaction needs (Dai et al., 2016; Dai et al., 2025; Doroshenko et al., 2021).

Within this landscape lies the research question of this study: Can a holistic approach based on blended learning—structured partly in person and partly online—reconcile students' learning and social needs with their personal and professional commitments? To address this question, the research team conducted a qualitative investigation involving a group of students enrolled in the inter-university master's degree program in "Coordination of Educational Services and Technologies for Inclusion" (LM-50/93), offered jointly by the University of Naples Parthenope and the University of Salerno. This specific degree program was selected due to its participation in the EduNext project—an Italian national Digital Education Hub involving 35 universities and 5 Higher Education Institutions in Art

and Music (AFAM), with the stated objective of modernizing higher education through digitalization and the adoption of innovative teaching methodologies. The working hypothesis posits that findings from this inquiry can provide valuable insight into students' perceived utility regarding the establishment of a newly restructured hybrid curriculum (online/in person).

2. The Degree Program in Coordination of Educational Services and Technologies for Inclusion: Description, Evolution, and Mission within the EduNext Project

The LM-50/93 master's degree program, established through the collaboration between the University of Naples Parthenope and the University of Salerno, is aimed at undergraduate degree holders seeking to specialize as pedagogists in the coordination of educational services. This degree path aims to train qualified professionals equipped to operate in formal and non-formal educational contexts, with particular emphasis on situations of vulnerability and risk. To enhance its reach and effectiveness, starting from the 2025/2026 academic year, the LM-50/93 program will undergo restructuring in accordance with the guidelines established by the EduNext Network-Consortium—a national digital hub funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP/PNRR) aimed at innovating and expanding blended and distance higher education offerings across 35 universities and five Higher Education Institutions in Art and Music (AFAM). Within this framework, the LM-50/93 program will adopt a blended delivery mode through an instructional approach that delivers 50% of the video lectures asynchronously and 50% in person. Regarding the asynchronous component, in addition to video lectures, *e-tivities* are also provided—namely online exercises, simulations, and virtual classrooms conceptualized as experiential laboratory activities (Allison & Seaman, 2017; Arcodia & Novais, 2022), available both in person and remotely (live and recorded). The purpose of this structure is to ensure a flexible learning process

reinforced by a strong practical-operational orientation (Dewey, 1916; Montiel, 2023).

Regarding the educational curriculum, the two-year study plan comprises 120 total ECTS/CFU credits and includes a shared first year for all students, focusing on pedagogical, relational, intercultural, social, and regulatory competencies to promote inclusion, alongside the design and evaluation of innovative training systems. The second year branches into two elective specialized tracks:

1. **The LM-50 class**, designed to train professionals in educational prevention and inclusion, with a specific focus on educational governance, organizational change, and the economic sustainability of educational processes;
2. **The LM-93 class**, which prepares experts in educational relationships across physical and digital environments, featuring in-depth studies on educational policies, organizational practices, and assistive technologies for inclusion.

Upon completion of the degree program, graduates will be able to assume leadership, coordination, and instructional design roles across diverse contexts, such as: educational and academic institutions, services for early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, local territorial entities, social cooperatives, and public and private educational centers. In addition to focusing on preparing future pedagogists to address the increasing demands for innovation and inclusion in Italy's educational landscape, this proposal pursues a significantly broader scope: it aims to train expert educators characterized by resilience and autonomy within a territory distinguished not only by marginalization and vulnerability, but also by profound cultural and ethnic diversity.

3. Methods

The study was conducted at the University of Naples Parthenope, and all data were collected on May 6, 2025. The research intervention focused on assessing the needs of students enrolled in the previously described LM-50/93 master's degree program.

Following an on-site randomized recruitment activity, 14 out of 20 contacted students (an average of 45 students enroll in the program each year) agreed to participate in the focus groups. Participants were aged between 23 and 36 years and were enrolled in either their first or second year of study. Prior to the interviews, students signed an informed consent form, and all collected data were processed in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016).

Consistent with the research question formulated at the outset, the study sought to investigate whether a holistic approach based on the adoption of blended learning methodologies (partly in person and partly remote) can reconcile students' learning and social needs with their personal and professional commitments.

Participants

The 14 students who participated in the study (five males and nine females) were divided into three heterogeneous focus groups: two groups of five participants and one group of four. This arrangement was devised to foster wider and more spontaneous participation in the discussion.

The inclusion criteria required participants to: 1) be enrolled in the LM-50/93 degree program; 2) be native Italian speakers or possess certified advanced proficiency in the language; and 3) have no certified intellectual disabilities.

4. Data Collection

The audio interviews were conducted by two members of the research team (FPS and AP) who were not involved in teaching the course under study. The participants attended classes on-site and reported an attendance rate ranging between 50% and 80%. The sessions took place in person inside a classroom at the University of Naples Parthenope; students sat around a table and responded to questions posed by the researchers.

A semi-structured guide comprising 22 open-ended questions was prepared for the facilitation of the focus groups, organized across seven thematic areas:

1. *Entry barriers*: enrollment difficulties, familiarity with the e-learning platform, access to tutorial support;
2. *Prior knowledge and competencies*: past educational experiences, internships, professional background in the sector;
3. *Goals and expectations*: learning objectives, professional outlook, fulfillment of initial expectations;
4. *Learning styles and preferences*: preferred instructional formats (lecture-based instruction, group discussions, or practical design); preference between continuous assessment versus a final examination;
5. *Difficulties and challenges*: obstacles encountered in similar academic paths, topics perceived as complex, desired instructional supports;
6. *Technology and resources*: digital tools utilized, comfort level with e-learning platforms;
7. *Feedback on previous experiences*: instructional practices deemed effective or ineffective, along with recommendations for improvement.

The interview guide was developed with an exploratory and non-directive function, aligned with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The questions guided the dialogue without predetermining its content, allowing spontaneous and subjective narratives to emerge. The moderators adopted an active listening approach, introducing follow-up probes ("Could you tell me more?", "What exactly do you mean?") whenever answers warranted further clarification.

Transcription was carried out using HappyScribe®. The interviews were subsequently re-audited, and any typographical errors were manually corrected.

5. Data Analysis and Methodological Rigor

Braun and Clarke's (2019) qualitative reflexive thematic analysis was selected for data processing, as it was considered well-suited to the diverse and subjective educational experiences under investigation. To ensure methodological rigor in line with the theoretical framework, a reflexive rather than a purely explicit/descriptive approach was employed during textual analysis, prioritizing the critical and creative capacities of the researchers involved (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

In keeping with this orientation, the coding process did not incorporate an inter-rater reliability procedure among independent coders: in reflexive thematic analysis, such a measure is considered conceptually incompatible with an approach that values researcher subjectivity as an epistemic resource rather than a source of bias to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). Rigor was maintained through collaborative coding conducted jointly by the two researchers (FPS and AP), supported by systematic discussion and shared negotiation regarding the assignment of each label until interpretive consensus was reached.

Consequently, the workflow was structured into multiple stages, beginning with an initial phase that entailed transcribing the audio files via HappyScribe® (followed by

re-listening and manual corrections) and subsequent familiarization with the collected data. Preliminary labels (subcodes) were then generated and grouped into broader categories (codes). Finally, the overarching themes were developed and named on the basis of the evidence collected (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) and their application to the study on the LM-50/93 degree program.

6. Results

The research team identified three main themes regarding the students' experience in the LM-50/93 master's degree program (Table 1).

Sub-codes	Codes	Themes
• Appreciation for an active teaching approach • Students expect to develop interpersonal skills • Interest in current topics rather than historical overviews • Workshops/practical experiences in real-life contexts • Workshops/practical experiences in real-life contexts • Greater attention to disability and vulnerable people • Mix of digital and paper materials • Preference for continuous assessment Preoccupation for the limitation of the experiential approach if the course is delivered online	- Students' educational needs	Need to restructure the educational offer
• Tutor availability • Availability of incoming tutors • Implement tutoring Need for academic guidance throughout the degree program	- Implement tutoring activities	
• Inadequate training • Training inadequate compared to expectations • Greater coherence in first-semester content Fundamental difficulties in studying legal subjects (students are not sufficiently prepared)	- Inadequate training	
• Internship related to the LM-50/93 program prior to enrollment • The L-22 degree (Sports and Exercise Sciences) provided foundational knowledge for LM-50/93	- Sufficient level of incoming students	Entry-level competencies and compatibility between study, work, and personal life
• Online-only courses are not popular • 10–15 minute units are popular • Lectures are too "condensed" • Digital interaction methods • Preference for hybrid courses (online/in-person) • Preference for continuous assessment • Use of diverse digital tools for studying	Preference for a hybrid course online/in person	
• Desire to continue with host companies after the internship • Uncertainty about future employment • Interest in diverse work environments Strengthening placement with particular emphasis on employment	Strengthening work-oriented placement	Organizational and managerial aspects
• Greater attention to students from faculty in the first semester semester • Greater coherence in first-semester content • Disconnection between the first and second semester	Discrepancies between the first and second half of the year	
• Lack of clarity from some instructors • Communication issues with instructors	Communication issues	
• Poor scheduling of exam dates • Difficulty catching up for late enrollees • Initial enrollment difficulties resolved through institutional support • Classes overly "compressed" • Organization of classes and internships • E-learning platform underutilized by instructors	Organizational issues	

Table 1. Thematic structure emerged from the analysis: sub-codes, codes, and main themes.

Theme – 1: Need to Restructure the Educational Offer to Improve the Course. Students Call for a Paradigm Shift

With reference to their previous educational background:

"*I really enjoyed my time at the online university, even though it was a distance-learning institution. We had a lot of practical experiences; I got to work on practical projects and then had the opportunity to contact the instructor and speak with them face-to-face, always.*"

"*Professor A. was the only one who helped us with videos and WhatsApp messages, and consistently supported us throughout the entire registration process with video tutorials.*"

"*Yes, definitely in-person. Online, loop discussions? No, in-person. Online is convenient, of course, in certain situations if you can't make it... But in-person classes are just different. You learn differently, and then there's the actual connection with the professors. The social aspect, the way you interact is so much better than being alone in front of a screen.*"

"*I think that regarding the law lectures, since almost the entire class had never taken a law exam before, it was necessary to focus on foundational concepts. You cannot teach this subject starting from specific topics when the audience does not even know the basics of law.*"

The comments reveal that students' expectations remain largely unmet, primarily due to the lack of a direct link between theory and practical application. Furthermore, students highlight significant difficulties at the beginning of the program stemming from the absence of formal tutoring systems, as well as challenges related to legal subjects studied during the second year.

Theme – 2: Entry-Level Competencies and Compatibility Between Study, Work, and Personal Life

Upon enrollment, students believe they possess baseline skills compatible with the LM-50/93 degree program.

"*I completed civil service and worked on projects for the Campania region related to crime prevention and psychomotor education. These projects also took place in schools, so I already had relevant background knowledge.*"

"*I come from the Faculty of Motor Sciences, where several exams and subjects had already been covered previously.*"

"*I would prefer a blended model. Perhaps in-person for those who can attend, while those facing difficulties could join via a hybrid platform. In my view, that would be ideal, as some people might be able to attend in person, while others might need to participate remotely on a given day or due to personal reasons. So I believe it should be blended.*"

Regarding 10–15 minute units with continuous assessments: "Yes, because we arrive at the exam less stressed. We can also coordinate dates—even if they aren't perfect—but being less stressed allows us to coordinate everything much more easily."

The comments show that working students and those with personal commitments view the hybrid teaching method (online/in-person) as an essential tool for balancing the different dimensions of their lives. This need is particularly pronounced among those who already possess prior expertise in the field—acquired through work experience, internships, or prior training programs—and require flexibility to leverage their professional background without disrupting their ongoing responsibilities.

Theme – 3: Organizational and Managerial Issues

Students highlight organizational issues that significantly affect their educational experience.

"*Many professors say we are educators, others say we are pedagogists. These are two distinct professional profiles with different skills and knowledge. This causes confusion, and we would like to understand precisely what type of professionals we are and how to position ourselves in the labor market.*"

"*Since the internship coincided with the university schedule, I chose to postpone it, regardless of classes. I still can't tell whether attending it will be useful or not.*"

"*I think it would also be great to establish contacts with companies or centers to help us transition into the workforce. Because my internship lasts only one week—goodbye and thank you. Yes, it's great, experience is everything, but after earning a degree, you also want to see results.*"

"*No, for me everything was coherent, especially in the first semester. However, the second one was somewhat harder for us, particularly regarding the bibliometrics exam. It would be preferable to study it from the start, as we are still learning how to write. It was still useful—it helped us understand how to write a thesis and a research paper. Having it right at the beginning would allow us to acquire these skills for subsequent courses.*"

The collected testimonials highlight structural and organizational shortcomings across multiple dimensions of the degree program. These issues stem from ambiguities in defining the professional profile targeted by the course, internship scheduling, an imbalanced academic workload, and a disconnect between academia and the labor market.

7. Discussion

Our analysis confirms that students' needs align closely with a blended instructional model. Participants enter with experiential capital from prior work or related undergraduate degrees (e.g., Exercise Sciences). Managing academic demands alongside employment requires structural flexibility (Antoniadou et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2025). Continuous formative assessments and modular units—often associated with telematics universities—are desired not to replace classroom presence, but to complement it (Marín-Flores, 2024).

Crucially, concurring with Sun (2023), students fear the loss of social and experiential engagement in fully virtual environments. Face-to-face interaction is essential for peer bonding, relational competencies, and professional networking (Cedillo et al., 2025; Jensen & Jetten, 2015; Priestley et al., 2022). A balanced hybrid model successfully safeguards collaborative learning while providing scheduling flexibility (Klimova, 2021; Kumar et al., 2021; Nikolopoulou & Zacharis, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Transitioning conventional degrees into hybrid formats involves institutional challenges and gaps in instructional design know-how (Anguisaca et al., 2025; Beaumatin & Roiné, 2023). Contreras et al. (2023), reviewing 50 global studies, noted that despite clear benefits, hybrid models require standardized operational frameworks. Italian public universities historically have limited experience with blended pedagogy (Marzano, 2025), though pandemic adaptations accelerated technical readiness (Carbone et al., 2024; Guzzo et al., 2023).

Generative AI offers promising opportunities to support self-regulated learning (Huang, 2025). Following data collection, EduNext integrated the AIDA® digital

assistant into the LMS to assist retrieval practice and provide real-time learning analytics for faculty (Borrella & Ponce-Cueto, 2025; Sajja et al., 2025; Susnjak et al., 2022). While AI tools cannot solve structural curriculum deficits alone (Gibson et al., 2023), they provide valuable scaffolding when paired with instructional designers and tutors. Bruijn-Smolders and Prinsen (2024) established that bimodal learning yields moderate-to-high gains in student engagement and academic attainment; our study confirms these benefits within a humanities and educational sciences framework.

8. Limitations

While providing valuable insights into the transition of a master's degree program toward a distance and in-person hybrid delivery model, this study presents several methodological limitations. First, the sample size is limited: the inquiry involved only 14 students, representing a small fraction of the broader cohort that enrolls in the program each academic year (averaging approximately 45 students). This restricted sample size constrains the generalizability of the findings, precluding the direct extrapolation of conclusions to the entire LM-50/93 student population, as well as to comparable academic programs in other university settings.

A second methodological limitation lies in the lack of complementary quantitative data that could provide deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation and reinforce the qualitative findings through a mixed-methods design. Nonetheless, despite these constraints, this study preserves significant exploratory value by providing preliminary qualitative evidence regarding students' educational needs amid an ongoing transition toward hybrid learning. As such, the findings establish an initial baseline for future studies that, by employing more robust

methodological frameworks, will be able to validate and further examine the trends identified here.

9. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore whether a blended learning model could meet the educational, social, and professional needs of Italian university students, taking the inter-university LM-50/93 master's degree program as a case study. The findings from the reflexive thematic analysis allow for an affirmative answer to this question, albeit with several important qualifications. Students in the program expressed an explicit preference for hybrid learning over an exclusively virtual mode, motivated not only by practical demands for flexibility (stemming from the need to reconcile study, employment, and personal life) but also by recognizing the irreplaceable value of social interaction and hands-on, experiential learning in person (Iavarone et al., 2017). This finding aligns with trends highlighted in the international literature (Bruijn-Smolders & Prinsen, 2024; Sun, 2023) and indicates that shifting toward hybrid models cannot be reduced to a merely technical or organizational matter; rather, it demands a comprehensive pedagogical redesign centered on the quality of educational relationships.

In terms of practical implications, the results offer actionable insights for instructional designers and academic leaders of the LM-50/93 program. Crucially, they highlight the need to establish formal tutoring systems starting from the very first semester, thereby filling a gap that students identify as one of the primary hurdles in their academic journey. Furthermore, introducing continuous assessment methods alongside concise instructional units (10–15 minutes) aligns well with the demands of working students and the pedagogical standards of distance education.

Lastly, strengthening the bridge between academia and the labor market (via more structured internships and career placement networks) represents an explicit priority for students that must not be overlooked in the curriculum redesign.

It should be emphasized that these results were obtained within a predominantly humanities-oriented disciplinary setting, an area historically less investigated than STEM fields in blended learning research (Bruijn-Smolders & Prinsen, 2024). In this light, the present study helps bridge an existing gap in the literature by offering preliminary qualitative evidence on adopting hybrid education within a program focused on pedagogy and educational sciences.

The findings point to three future research directions that the research team intends to pursue:

1. Conducting a comparative study between students enrolled in the LM-50/93 program in face-to-face versus hybrid modes starting in the 2025/2026 academic year, aiming to assess whether and to what degree the blended model generates measurable differences in learning outcomes and student engagement.
2. Undertaking a longitudinal study designed to track the trajectory of psychological and motivational variables (including anxiety, stress, self-efficacy, and critical thinking) among students exposed to the newly implemented instructional model, thereby building a more robust empirical foundation to evaluate its long-term efficacy.
3. Focusing specifically on AIDA®, the learning assistant integrated into the LM-50/93 course following the completion of this study. The perceived effectiveness among students remains an open empirical question that future investigations will examine, determining how well its features address the educational needs identified in this inquiry.

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