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#### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Blended Learning in Russian Higher Education: The Evolution of the Term in Science and Practice

Elena N. Strelchuk  Mariya N. Kozhevnikova  Victoria S. Borchenko 

**Background/purpose** – The concept of "blended learning" was taken by Russian education from abroad. However, under the new conditions, the authors' original idea of combining different forms of learning has been transformed into a mixture of online and offline learning. This study aims to analyze the factors that led to the transformation of this concept in Russian research papers and the practice of teaching in universities. The observation method was necessary to describe how the term is applied and to draw conclusions about how it is understood by teachers.

**Materials/methods** – The study is based on the comparative method, which includes a selection, description, and analysis of different interpretations of the studied concept in more than 90 Russian and foreign scientific publications. The results of the analysis are presented in diagrams, allowing consolidating a new point of view on the subject of research.

**Results** – The study showed that Russian researchers understand "blended learning" as a combination of online and offline lessons, while the true meaning of the term is the combination of electronic learning tools with traditional face-to-face tools that can be used both synchronously and asynchronously.

**Conclusion** – Prospects for the use of blended learning in Russian universities lie in the understanding that it is a special form of learning process, in which students interact either with a teacher or with an electronic learning resource, depending on what helps to achieve the learning objectives most effectively. This requires the development of new educational technology based on innovative software.

**Keywords** – Blended learning, hybrid learning, distant learning, face-to-face learning, Russian universities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Blended learning has become increasingly popular during the pandemic due to the mass adoption of distance learning by educational institutions. A survey of ministries of education from 149 countries conducted between July and October 2020 by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics found that during the pandemic, almost all countries switched to "remote learning tools including via TV, radio, and online platforms... wealthier countries more likely to use a combination of remote and in-person (hybrid) learning" (UNESCO, 2020). "The world has become hybrid – and will stay that way because many people and organizations value the new opportunities it presents" (Dede, 2022).

New educational technology advances rapidly. Teachers barely have time to master it technically and methodologically. As a rule, Russian educators tend to redefine popular Western concepts and adapt them to local realities. This is what happened with blended learning. Numerous scientific works on blended learning have shown that the more popular the term becomes, the more differences in its interpretation appear. Of course, authors can make their own interpretations of the term, but let us not forget that an integral part of research is precision of wording and clarity of the concepts used. When our knowledge about a subject increases, we can make clarifications and additions to the definition we agreed on earlier, but still they cannot affect the essence of the subject being defined. Otherwise, we have to find a new term for it. Something similar happened to blended learning and hybrid learning because of snowballing growth in interest toward online education, into which all Russian teachers had to immerse in 2020. Many could not quite figure out whether conducting a lesson in a video conference on Microsoft Teams or Zoom is distance or blended learning. Should viewing videos in the classroom on e-learning platforms be considered online or blended learning? Should it be called distance or blended learning if the instructor emails the assignment and collects the students' responses for review? How do forms of education such as face-to-face, online, and distance learning relate to synchronous or asynchronous classes? Thanks to the rise of many new electronic learning tools, many have begun to confuse the concepts of "form of learning" / "learning tools" / "educational technology" in relation to the new phenomena of pedagogy.

This study examines the transformation of the term "blended learning," its evolution in research and practice in Russian universities. The authors suggested that the reason for the popularity of blended learning lies in the combination of online and offline interaction between a teacher and students, which coincided with the methods of individual learning traditionally used in Russia. However, the proposed hypothesis does not reflect the essence of blended learning. The proposed hypothesis explains why the confusion in understanding of the term paradoxically did not prevent the effective use of the format in practice. The results of the study are aimed at drawing the attention of teachers and methodologists to the problem of blended learning: the complexity of interpretations of the term and the need to establish its clarity, distinguishing it from the concepts of "hybrid learning", "corporate learning," as well as the need for further didactic developments and educational technologies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Blended learning before the COVID-19 pandemic*

For more than 20 years, researchers from different countries have been closely studying blended learning, analyzing its concept, and implementing it in pedagogical activities. For example, Driscoll M. (2002), De George-Walker L. & Keeffe M. (2010), Staker H., & Horn M.B.

(2012), Yang Y.F. (2012), Tomlinson B. & Whittaker C. (2013), Hrastinski S. (2019), Blinov V.I. et al. (2021) have published their research papers on the subject.

In Russia, before the pandemic, education was organized in a traditional face-to-face format. Multimedia devices were used only when necessary (e.g., projector, interactive whiteboard, or PC). The first publications on the subject appeared in the mid-2000s. The published papers explore the possibilities of using this experience in Russian schools (Bogomolova, 2009) and universities (Bogomolov, 2008; Shusharina, 2018), initially in the teaching of natural sciences, and later in the humanities. In addition to the concept of "blended learning," the articles use such terms as "hybrid" or "corporate" learning (Kucher, 2009). In 2006 Curtis Bonk and Charles Graham released the Handbook of Blended Learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006), to which most Russian authors refer. The handbook seemed to provide a clear answer to what creates blended learning, as the authors offer a definition of the term, a typology of different versions, and examples of their use. In 2016, a handbook, *Step of the School to Blended Learning*, was issued by Andreyeva N. (2016). The handbook represents the first guidelines on blended learning in Russia. It is "designed for teachers and school administrators responsible for improving the quality of education" (Andreyeva, 2016). It compiles hands-on instructions on how to implement blended learning in schools. In 2017, a handbook titled "Blended Learning: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (4 volumes)" edited by Khosrow-Pour et al. (2017) was published in the US. It gives researchers insight into the issues of blended learning, providing detailed perspectives on advanced theory and the latest technological innovations. In 2019, Stefan Hrastinski (2019) detailed five fundamental conceptual characteristics of blended learning, revealing the essence of its quality by identifying and applying the benefits of different modes of learning, integrating formats of interaction in the pedagogical process, the quantitative (in percentage) ratio of technologies used in the classroom, time and other components, as well as the opportunities and ways of including digital technology in classroom learning, and analyzing synchronous learning technologies (video conferencing, virtual classrooms, etc.) which cannot be ruled out when implementing blended learning.

### *2.2 Blended learning during the pandemic*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all educational institutions in the world have switched to online and/or remote learning. Many teachers have faced problems caused by the lack of a) pre-prepared learning materials for remote learning and online courses; b) professional skills for working with digital resources (Middleton, 2020). Trust T. & Whalen J. stated that teachers recognized the need for professional development (Trust & Whalen, 2020). The learning process began to function on educational platforms, instructional communication began to be facilitated through mobile messengers such as WhatsApp, according to Alonzo L. & Corral Y. (2022), e-learning environments proved to be a necessary resource in learning, even social networks became a popular platform for communication, including Instagram, as pointed out by Kuz A. (2022). Thus, complementary technology in education and entertaining online resources acquired the status of the main means of communicating at different levels of learning (Kaden, 2020). However, DeWitt P. (2020), as well as other authors, published research articles based on in-depth analysis and a survey of educators from various countries. They noted that teachers were frustrated with the need to produce large volumes of educational content to be used in an online environment. F.J. Garcia-Penalvo et al. (2020) concluded that many mistakes were made in the design of remote learning. Thus, participants of the educational process perceived this educational format negatively. Thomas Arnett (2021), a senior research fellow in education for the

Christensen Institute (US), published an article on the institute's website in which he addressed the disadvantages of distance learning during the pandemic and suggested the introduction of blended learning in 2021. Besides, one can note an increase in the number of publications on the subject in the Journal of Technology and Teacher Education and the TechTrends journal over the last 5 years. The articles deal with the specifics of online, distance, and blended learning, as well as with the possibilities of applying different kinds of techniques in pedagogical activity. In 2021, Kazan Federal University published a study "What is the blended learning Method and how it works?" (Glinskikh, 2021) whose authors attempted to return to the original meaning of the term and consolidate the experience of working under this format in Russia. In the same year, the Institute for the Development of Education in Yekaterinburg prepared a collection of articles devoted to methodological approaches to the organization of blended learning (IRO-EXPRESS, 2021).

### *2.3 Blended learning after the pandemic*

The pandemic is not over in many countries, and many universities around the world continue to work in a blended learning format. The number of publications on the subject is increasing. The authors, with their experience in blended learning, have a more detailed approach to the analysis of the problems. Dede C. (2022), Mouza C. et al. (2022), Short C.R. et al. (2021) write about didactic features of teaching in blended learning, development of virtual technologies, preparation of teachers to work in a digital environment. Alonzo L. & Corral Y. (2022), Kuz A. (2022) point out the increasing role of mobile applications in modern education, originally designed for entertainment purposes. Holt L. (2021), analyzing the specifics of the pedagogical process, the effectiveness of learning in different formats, note that in the near future there may be large gaps in student knowledge when learning primarily online, so classroom training is necessary and essential.

In addition, there is an increasing number of works in which blended learning is considered ambiguously. So, Bordovskaya N. et al. (2022) compare the concepts of "blended learning" and "blended educational technology". In their opinion, the term blended learning should be considered in terms of the organization of the learning process based on the interconnection of learning formats and the use of digital resources, and blended learning technology "has a broader meaning and is understood as a sequence of coordinated actions and operations performed by a teacher and students to achieve a given educational goal using digital and traditional educational resources, tools and communications" (Bordovskaya, 2022).

In Russia, methodological developments are being created for the implementation of blended learning in universities (Blinov V.I. et al., 2021; Rudinsky I.D. & Davydov A.V., 2021; Bordovskaya N.V. et al., 2022). For example, Blinov V.I. et al. (2021) described the implementation of blended learning at different levels of pedagogical process arrangement in universities. Rudinsky I.D. and Davydov A.V. (2021) write that a certain development of blended learning is "hybrid learning technology" (Rudinsky & Davydov, 2021) and describe such technologies (Face to Face, Face to Book, Face to Equipment, etc.) applicable in higher education institutions.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### *3.1 This study is based on the following research methods:*

- comparative analysis of the available academic articles on the subject, which was based on the comparison, analysis and synthesis. Using this method we studied the concept of "blended learning" in academic works of Russian and foreign authors (based on the

publications of the Scopus, Web of Science, and RSCI databases, as well as educational and methodological manuals, information and educational resources on the Internet, including online dictionaries);

- comparative analysis of the concepts on the subject, the basis of which was a comparison, analysis and synthesis. Using this method, the similarities and differences in the understanding of the concept of "blended learning" by Russian and foreign researchers, as well as in the definition of the terms "blended / hybrid / integrated / corporate" learning were revealed;

- synthesizing our own standpoint (the method of determining the foundations of research). Based on comparative and comparative analysis, this method allowed us to propose our own point of view regarding the functioning of the concept of "blended learning" in the research and practice of teachers working in Russia;

- observation of blended learning implementation in Russian universities. This method helped to organize the observation of Russian universities (RUDN University, MGPU and DSTU) during and after the pandemic in the online, face-to-face, and blended learning formats. In addition, the authors' own experience of implementing blended learning is presented. Attention is focused on the forms of implementation of blended learning, technologies used in the pedagogical process, types of students' activities when changing learning formats.

The data collected were aimed at addressing the following questions:

- determine whether blended learning applies only in elite education, or is widely practiced;

- establish what researchers understand by blended learning. Is it a method, technology, or a form of learning? Does it belong to synchronous or asynchronous learning? Is it a new approach in education?

- explain how the concepts of blended learning and hybrid learning relate. Do they substitute or complement each other?

- determine whether the training, which in Russian universities is called blended learning, corresponds to the originally stated characteristics. If not, should we call it something else?

### *3.2 Participants*

Observation of the blended learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic was carried out between March 2020 and October 2022 - post-pandemic. The participants of the observation are 300 students of Russian universities such as RUDN University, MGPU (Moscow), and DSTU (Rostov-on-Don). About 100 of them study Russian as a foreign language during the pre-university training, as well as about 150 students of Bachelor's degree programs and about 50 students of Master's degree programs were participating in the observation. The students are residents of China, Latin America, Africa, Iran, India, Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Nepal.

### *3.3 Instruments*

We used general scientific approaches of data collecting and processing to implement the indicated general scientific theoretical and empirical methods. In particular, sampling, description, and formalization of the material were used.

### *3.4 Procedures and Data analysis*

The study was conducted from January 2021 to October 2022.

*Stage 1. Analysis of materials.* Using the method of continuous selection, we selected research publications on the subject by 1) foreign authors (about 40) in the Scopus and Web

of Science databases; 2) Russian authors (about 70) in the RSCI database (Russian Science Citation Index database). After that, foreign online dictionaries were reviewed: Cambridge Dictionary, Macmillan Dictionary, and Lexico. In addition, English and Spanish dictionaries by Oxford University Press, Collins Online Dictionary, and Dictionary.com allowed selecting the definitions of the term "blended learning." In addition, methodological literature on the practical application of blended learning in universities in different countries was collected.

*Stage 2. Comparison and contrast.* A comparative analysis of the definitions of the "blended learning" concept was carried out. The result of the analysis allowed us to review the concept from different aspects. Firstly, we considered it from the terminological point of view, speculating whether it should be defined as technology, a teaching method, etc. Secondly, we analyzed the subject as learning with the instructor and as independent learning performed by students, using proper techniques. Thirdly, we scrutinized blended learning as a form of learning, whether it is online, face-to-face, or another form.

The results are presented in diagrams, which reflect calculations of the quantitative ratio of the use of the definition "blended learning" (method, technology, model, etc.) and forms of its implementation in Russian and foreign universities.

*Stage 3. Analysis and synthesis of the results.* The similarities and differences of the studied concept with the related terms used in the research literature ("hybrid learning", "corporate learning" and "web-enhanced learning") were reviewed. The paper presents the results of the review of the definitions of "blended learning" presented in Cambridge Dictionary, Macmillan Dictionary and Lexico Dictionary to illustrate the multidimensionality of interpretations of the term in the reference literature. Traditional and innovative components in blended learning are described based on an analysis of variations in forms of learning. Conclusions about the elitism of blended learning on the basis of the studied scientific literature are made. The author's definition of "blended learning" is offered.

*Stage 4. Observation.* Observation of implementation of blended learning in Russian universities, carried out between March 2020 and October 2022, allowed us to describe the most vivid example of its effectiveness - the use of modular object-oriented dynamic learning environments in the pedagogical process.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Is blended learning applicable to elite or public education?

The first mention of blended learning refers to 1999, and initially it was used "in the business world in connection with corporate training." Later, it appeared in higher education in the United States and then was employed in language teaching (Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013, p. 11). Following the United States, blended learning was quickly adopted by other countries. Brazil, Great Britain, and other countries, interested in the new form of learning, began to implement it in the educational systems of higher education institutions. Over the past decade, blended learning has been in demand in Australia, Spain, China, Singapore, and Japan. Its popularity is due to a lot of advantages that have become available thanks to the inclusion of Internet technologies in the educational process, including the following:

- globalization of education. Students want to have access to the best international educational resources;
- increased requirements for the quality of teaching, the possibility of choosing a teacher;
- flexibility, that is, the ability to use teaching tools at any convenient location and at any convenient time.

Blended learning allowed students to choose the time, place, pace and form of work convenient for them, based on "personal learning needs, preferences and situations," which made learning more comfortable and learning outcomes more favorable. This is confirmed by the data of studies conducted in different countries - the University of Southern Queensland (Australia) (De George-Walker, 2010), the National Yunlin University of Science and Technology (Taiwan) (Yang, 2012).

At the same time, Antonio Prieto, professor at the Spanish National University of Distance Education (UNED) said "What we now call blended learning, the combination of online education and face-to-face classroom interaction, is not something new: it has been practiced at universities like UNED since its creation, almost 50 years ago... The goal is to achieve a more effective, efficient and elitist education" (Galafate, 2020). Prieto describes blended learning as "effective," "efficient," and "elitist." These words can be perceived as synonyms. Notably, in Western countries, primarily in the English speaking ones, elitism is a sign of high-quality education and has no negative connotations. On the other hand, the Russian pedagogical school has always been accessible to everyone. It was not elite. That is, blended learning originally focused on the elite, for whom education should be built on different principles than for the public and become more effective and of higher quality than for an average consumer of educational services.

This is confirmed by the fact that blended learning was mostly used in developed countries. Director of the ADEF (Learning, Education, Assessment, Training) laboratory at the University of Aix-Marseille (France) Jacques Ginestié notes that "the potential of blended learning in developing countries is not yet explored" (Ginestié, 2020, p. 117). Although there have been some attempts to involve developing countries in blended learning. Academic mobility programs such as Erasmus are another example of cooperation. In 2020, the University of Aix-Marseille and the Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action created the Blended Learning Training for Teachers Educators program (Ginestié, p. 118) to support international interaction among higher education institutions of European (France, Denmark, Belgium) and Asian countries (Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan, etc.), as well as to foster development in teaching staff training.

In Russia, the first experience of using blended learning was an innovative project by Teleschool and the publishing house Prosveshchenie. At the end of the project in 2013, there was an international conference dedicated to "the issues of blended learning as a new technology in the pedagogical process" (Andreyeva, 2018, p. 21). Teachers prioritized the rotation model of blended learning. Since 2013, the Center for Blended Learning headed by Natalia Andreeva has been working in Moscow, where teachers of Russian educational organizations, in collaboration with foreign colleagues' research, develop, create, and test models of blended learning in foreign language classes. But blended learning has never become widespread in Russian schools because the content of the MESH (Moscow Electronic School) platform was released later and was seen more as a backup tool for presenting learning materials. For example, when there was the need for a substitute teacher. As a result, these tools were playing the secondary role.

In September 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, a branch of Le Sallay Academy, Le Sallay Dialog, opened in Moscow, in which "blended learning is not a fashionable experiment by one teacher but a complete concept, built according to European standards" (Le Sallay School Dialogue, 2020). It is since the beginning of the pandemic that interest in blended learning in Russia has increased noticeably. However, it was applied primarily to institutions of higher education. Some scholars believe that blended learning still "retains the status of an

experiment, and is currently at the stage of research and the first attempts of implementation" (Rudenko-Morgun et al., 2019, p. 18).

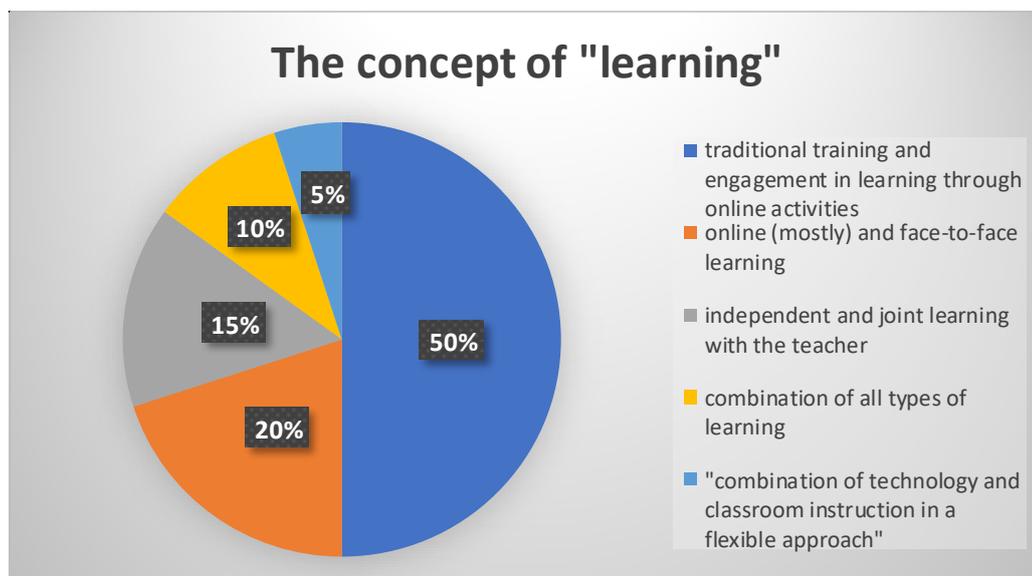
Although some Russian universities tried to introduce blended learning before the pandemic, they only partially corresponded to the initial understanding of the essence of it. They focused on modernization of the educational process and the introduction of modern computer technology than on the desire of universities to include blended learning. Thus, for several years, Russian universities have been using educational platforms based on Moodle, a learning platform and a course management system, which allow students and teachers to work both remotely and face-to-face.

#### 4.2 The essence of the blended learning concept

Analysis of the terminological field blended learning concept in the articles of foreign scholars has allowed us to identify its different interpretations. Because of the fact that "the term has constantly taken on new meanings" (Driscoll, 2002), foreign researchers consider blended learning regarding form as a *tool*, or *method* of learning (Khosrow-Pour et al., 2017), a *course* (Allen & Seaman, 2010), *educational programme* (Staker & Horn, 2012, p. 3), a *form* of learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006), an *approach* (Watson, 2008, p. 3), or in sum, combining all the above (Driscoll, 2002; Hrastinski, 2019).

The concept of blended learning in foreign pedagogy is also presented in many aspects. In publications released from 2001 to 2021, it is interpreted as: independent and joint learning with the teacher (Driscoll, 2002; Bonk & Graham, 2006); online and face-to-face learning (Allen & Seaman, 2010); traditional training and engagement in learning through online activities (Staker & Horn, 2012; Khosrow-Pour et al., 2017); combination of technology and classroom instruction in a flexible approach (Banados, 2006); combination of all types of learning (Driscoll, 2002; Hrastinski, 2019). J. Watson defines blended learning as "the middle category between fully online and traditional learning" (Watson, 2008, p. 4).

Figure 1 shows the statistics on using the concept of "learning" in the publications of foreign researchers is presented below (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Statistics on using the concept of "learning" in the publications of foreign researchers

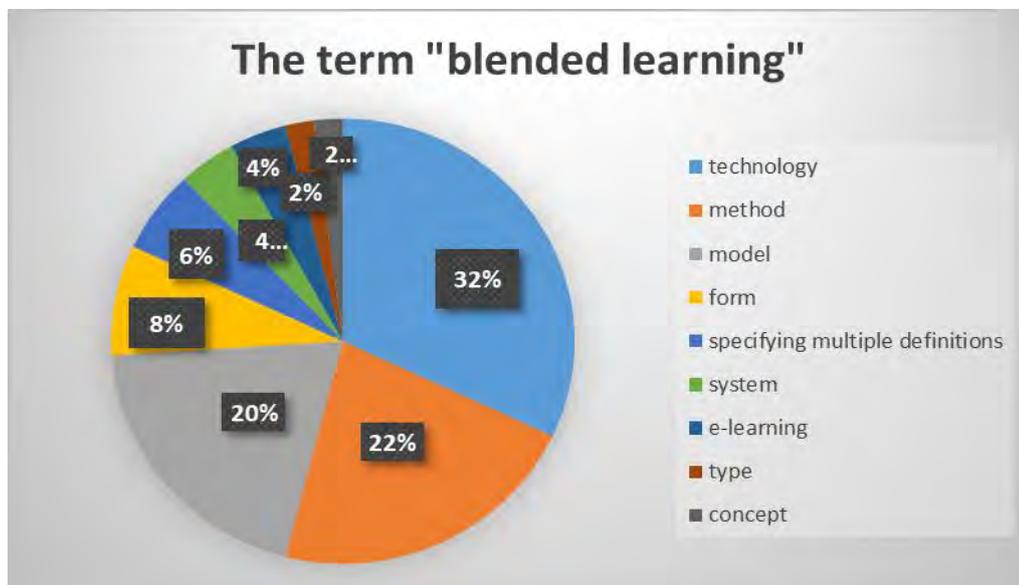
Online dictionaries define blended learning as a *way* of learning (Cambridge Dictionary), a *method* of learning (Macmillan Dictionary), a *learning style* (Lexico Dictionary); the term

"blended learning" predominates in English-language sources, while in other languages the term "hybrid" is more common.

Since "educational institutions use different definitions of the term 'blended,' and teachers can choose their own elements of blending" (Mouza et al., 2022), blended learning represents "instructional methods, pedagogical approaches and technologies, although these blends are not aligned with influential blended learning definitions, it is important that researchers and practitioners carefully explain what blended learning means to them," Stefan Hrastinski notes (Hrastinski, 2019). This partly explains the fact that domestic researchers, borrowing the term from foreign papers, fill it with additional meanings.

The analysis of papers published in Russia in the field of foreign language teaching showed that Russian researchers, following the foreign ones, understand the concept of blended learning in a broad sense, interpreting it from different points of view. 70 studies indexed in the E-library database from 2010 to 2021 were analyzed.

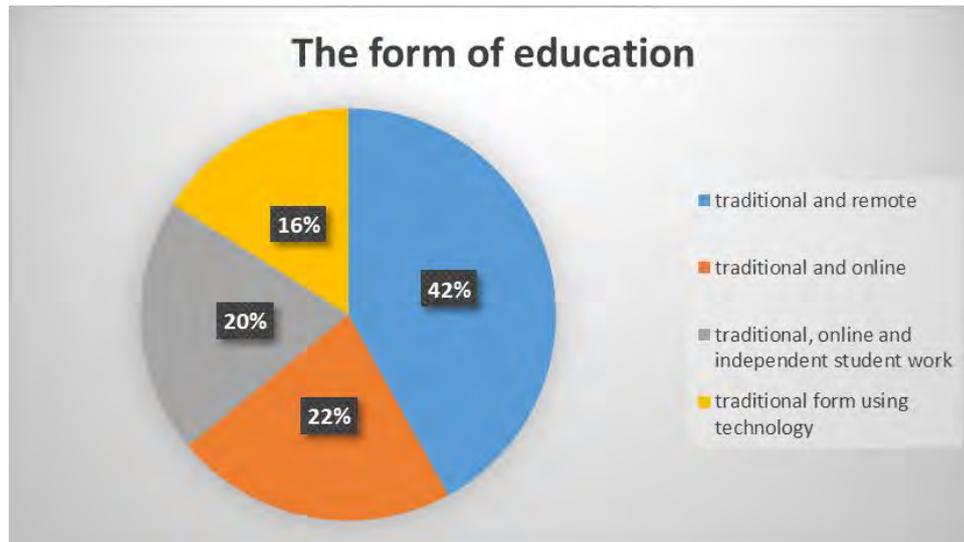
Figure 2 shows the statistics on using the term "blended learning" is represented below (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Statistics on using the term "blended learning" in the publications of Russian researchers

Most Russian researchers consider blended learning as a technology, method, or model of learning. They associate blended learning with remote learning (Bogomolov, 2008; Azimov & Schukin, 2009) and indicate the use of technology within asynchronous and synchronous interactions (Mouza et al., 2022; Kapustin, 2007). Synchronous learning is commonly understood as learning taking place at a given moment, and it can be either face-to-face or remote, but necessarily in real time. Asynchronous learning implies "the use of telecommunication technology, when each student gets acquainted with the training materials or performs tasks not simultaneously with all members of the training group but at a convenient time for them" (Azimov & Schukin, 2009, p. 20).

Blended learning, according to the authors of the study, includes the following forms of work reflects the following design of its application, taking into account the integration of existing forms of interaction (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The forms of work reflected in the definition of the concept of "blended learning" in the publications of Russian authors

Blended learning involves a variety of content, in which the mandatory component is the traditional work in a classroom, while other components may vary. Blended learning includes a combination of forms of activity: face-to-face, remote, online, and independent activity of students, that is, synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Besides, in the study of the blended learning concept, it is necessary to consider the traditional and innovative components (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Traditional and innovative components of blended learning

Blended learning	
1-st component	2-nd component
Traditional:	Innovative:
1) Presence of a teacher. Interaction with the instructor takes place in the classroom, or in a video conference.	1) Absence of a teacher. Interaction with the instructor is replaced by activities with specially developed computer programs or learning materials. For example, each student watches a recording of a lecture on their electronic device, or students watch a recording together on a screen in class.
2) Synchronous format. Learning in real time.	2) Asynchronous format. Learning is implemented at a time and place convenient for students (i.e., delayed use of materials).
3) Collaborative work. Students interact with a teacher.	3) Independent work. Much attention is paid to the student's independent remote learning.

Russian researchers do not interpret blended learning right as the essence of it, according to its founders Bonk and Graham, is not that it combines remote and face-to-face learning but introduces electronic (computer) learning tools that can help the teacher and may replace them in some learning activities. Thus, these tools can:

- a) save teacher's time by freeing it up for other activities;

- b) choose a convenient time for students to listen to the course;
- c) make learning more flexible and individual by dividing the class into groups and alternating different learning activities in these groups. For example, some students can watch an educational video, while others work on grammar exercises with the teacher.

#### 4.3 Comparison of the blended/hybrid/corporate/integrative learning concepts

In the scientific papers, along with blended learning, other terms close in meaning are used: mixed-mode learning, hybrid learning, and integrative learning. The analysis of the works of foreign and Russian researchers allowed us to determine that most authors use such semantic component as a combination of synchronous interaction with a teacher and asynchronous interaction with electronic platforms, which can take place during face-to-face or remote learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Allen & Seaman, 2010; Gretter & Gondra, 2020); (Meshkova et al., 2018; Chirkova, 2019). However, some researchers (Tomlinson B., Whittaker C.), (Rudinsky I.D., Davydov A.V.) believe that blended learning emphasizes the greater use of online mode, electronic and Internet resources, "the primary interaction of the learner with the educational online resource," and the interaction with a teacher is secondary (Rudinsky & Davydov, 2021). The authors stress that it is important "to find the right combination of educational technologies, regardless of whether they are implemented online or offline" (Rudinsky & Davydov, 2021).

Today, in the context of blended learning, the term "learning model" can be found instead of "technology". "Face to Face", "Face to Book", "Face to Electronic Book", "Face to Equipment Model" are, in fact, the names of learning technologies that include learning tools (Rudinsky & Davydov, 2021). But in the English-language articles the word "model" is used both in relation to educational technologies and to the form of learning, which introduced additional confusion when transferring blended learning into the Russian language (here we should make a note that in the Western scientific publications the terms "method", "approach", "principles", "technologies" of learning, etc. are less strictly formalized and differentiated than in articles published in Russia).

By examining the concepts of "blended" and "corporate" learning, it should be stated that initially blended learning was the main form of improving the professional skills of employees working in various organizations, as it gave them the opportunity to combine work and study through using remote, asynchronous learning models. Later the term moved into education, as it happened with other learning technologies, for example, that came from the field of management, and is quite successfully used today as methodological tools in teaching, including foreign languages. Today, corporate education refers primarily to the form of organizing additional training for employees, and in education, the term "blended learning" entrenched, although the methods and techniques used by them are very similar.

As for when authors substitute the term "integrative learning" for "blended learning," this is completely incorrect. "Integrative learning" is a method or approach (used mostly in schools) that involves the inclusion of several disciplines in one lesson. This method is often used in foreign language lessons and in non-humanities disciplines, such as physics or geography. "Many articles used 'blended' to describe teaching in two languages, teaching multiple subjects at once (e.g., math and science), or combining classes for in-service and pre-service teachers but did not include the strategic combination of online and in-person modalities" (Short et al., 2021). In this connection, replacing the term "blended learning" with "integrative learning" is not appropriate.

#### 4.4 *Blended learning in Russian universities*

It is believed that blended learning in Russian universities became widespread during the pandemic. However, as mentioned above, it also existed before the pandemic, as demonstrated by modular object-oriented dynamic learning environments in the educational activities of universities and institutes. These multifunctional systems were designed both for offline and online collaboration between students and instructors, and for independent students' activity in or out of the classroom (asynchronously). They made learning more varied, informative, flexible, and equipped with a modern interface. It was convenient in the ways of providing and storing course-specific learning materials.

For example, the Moodle system was widely used at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia a few years ago. Meanwhile, the Telecommunication Training and Information System (TTIS) was developed. It hosted methodological materials that could be used by students depending on the goals, objectives, and stages of the course. It was possible to discuss current topics on platform's Forum, to do tasks on a certain topic, to get acquainted with the course program and its separate parts, as well as to listen to recorded lectures. Various announcements and the results of current and final grades were also posted there. At the same time, there was a feedback with the teacher and the opportunity to receive grades on the platform. However, at that time no one assumed that TTIS was a part of blended learning. After the pandemic began, TTIS continued to exist as an auxiliary platform, and most classes switched to online.

This electronic platform was included into the educational process of Moscow State Pedagogical University back in 2014. At first, it was used in teaching those disciplines that were connected with information technology, and then it was introduced into the university's humanities departments. As a result, today the university has a full-fledged electronic educational environment, which allows teachers to combine traditional and innovative educational technologies. The unique bank of electronic courses created over the years gives students broad access to information, allows for remote interaction of all participants in the educational process, and gives students the wider opportunities for individual work and the teacher opportunities for continuous monitoring. It also allows participants to leave feedback. The teacher can send messages to the entire group or individual students, receive completed assignments, post important organizational or educational information, etc.

The Skif platform at Don State Technical University has similar functioning. This educational platform is not mandatory for the educational process; its content depends on the specific teacher, on the goals and outcomes of the course. However, it gained its most popularity during the pandemic, when the transition was made from face-to-face learning to online. Accessing the platform, students can use resources at any time convenient for them.

Notably, the blended learning format based on these platforms has many advantages, as it implies, as a rule, independent work of students at a convenient time for them. At the same time, there are some disadvantages: students' written works uploaded to the Forum are copied off by other participants; completed homework is not submitted on time, and the teacher has to create new assignments, not to mention that the platforms can suffer from technical problems. Blended learning should include the widest range of electronic resources, most of which should be developed specifically for a given university and for the educational programs it implements. Since such resources require the involvement of professional developers and considerable financial resources, most universities are limited to use existing platforms.

Sometimes teachers face a situation when universities call it blended learning, when some students are in the classroom and some take part in the class via a video conference. Such teaching has become especially popular at those universities where foreign students who planned to study but could not travel to Russia due to the pandemic or other restrictions (for example, students of pre-university training program at DSTU). While trying to make their training as close as possible to the traditional full-time mode, the administration of the university makes efforts to accommodate foreign students, including them in the groups that work in the classroom. It is clear that this type of learning is unavoidable; not only does it not help the teacher, but on the contrary, it creates additional difficulties for them. In this case, it is not correct to refer to it as blended learning.

Notably, only some of the existing problems were mentioned, "serious work must be done to explore further applications of both relatively simple and more complex systems that are still in their infancy" (Bowen, 2018). The success of any educational system depends on such an important factor as the teacher's willingness to participate in developing the electronic part of the course to make it effective and interesting for students. Often, what is conceived as a way to free up time for the participants of the educational process becomes an additional burden for the teacher, for which they are not prepared to perform.

Nevertheless, Russian professors (Rudenko-Morgun O.I. et al. (2019), Prosvirkina I.I. (2017), Yaroslavova E.N. (2020) et al.) following their foreign colleagues, realize blended learning using different models, mainly "Flipped Classroom" and "Station Rotation," of the Rotation model group proposed by American linguists Staker H. and Horn M. (2012). Additionally, Russian researchers are also developing their own classification of "organizational and didactic typology of blended learning models designed for use by those employees of an educational organization who really determine the choice of one or another model of the learning process" (Blinov et al., 2021). Thus, specialists in teaching methods have taken the levels of organization of the educational process (curriculum, discipline, a specific topic of the discipline, a lesson, technology, even a group of students) at which blended learning can be applied in universities.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The study revealed that blended learning initially focused on a combination of traditional and modern means of education, which required additional costs and made it more elitist and, therefore, effective. Initially, large corporations used blended learning because they could afford to spend a lot of money on training employees. Gradually, more and more universities and schools, including Russian, began to take a closer look at blended learning, as using modern technology became available, and the pandemic has pushed us to admit that distance learning (with all its negative feedback from the teaching community) has become a familiar and understandable form of education. Today, blended learning is not for elites only.

Curtis Bonk and Charles Graham (2006), the pioneers of blended learning, define it as a form of learning that combines traditional face-to-face learning with computer-assisted learning, which suggests a teacher who is "present or absent" in the classroom rather than offline or online learning. The authors pinpoint that computer technology does not necessarily have to be used remotely. It can be training simulators installed in a computer lab, electronic textbooks, or video lectures shown on the screen in the classroom. For some reason, blended learning began to be perceived exclusively as a combination of traditional and distance learning. For example, blended learning "focuses on the obligatory combination of 'human-centered' and online learning" (Rudinsky & Davydov, 2021) or "is the same as

partial distance-learning, which is characterized by the preservation of traditional principles of building the learning process with the inclusion of elements of online learning" (Azimov & Schukin, 2009, p. 281).

This terminological diversity is typical for the period of approval of any new concept in the pedagogical theory and practice, especially if it is simultaneously engaged by specialists from different areas of pedagogy: school education, additional education, higher education, etc. Obviously, the ambiguity of interpretation complicates using the term in research as it confuses specialists who want to introduce blended learning in practice; that is, does not allow using it efficiently in the theory and practice of education.

Having analyzed the existing interpretations conceptual and terminological field of the "blended learning" concept, we propose to consider it as a special form (or format) of learning, in which synchronous interaction between students and the teacher is combined with asynchronous interaction between students and the electronic educational resources, and both types of interaction can be carried out in person or remotely, using electronic devices. This form of education provides both the presence and absence of the teacher, but necessarily involves the involvement of the student in independent work, increasing its degree of engagement in the learning process and making the moderator of their own educational track. In addition to the concept of "blended learning," the articles use such terms as "hybrid" or "corporate" learning. Notably, the latter one is not appropriate because the field of application of the method, implying training employees of corporations and large companies, transferred to the name of the method. Besides, blended learning is applied to the professional development of employees as it allows establishing a work-study balance. Thus, employees may undergo courses at a convenient time. Therefore, in some works, corporate training is substituted for blended learning (Kucher, 2009). However, most authors still tend to use "blended" and "hybrid" learning in their publications.

Our research shows that hybrid learning is not something new in relation to blended learning, differing from it only in the "proportions" in which the learning process combines different kinds of interaction between students and the teacher. These concepts can be used as synonyms, since hybrid implies a crossing, a joining, and a blending which becomes something new. For example, the hybrid engine of a car involves the alternate use of gasoline and electronic mechanisms. At the same time, it is not just the result of their connection, but a new design. Based on the traditions of pedagogical practice developed in recent years, we propose to apply the term "blended" in relation to the form of learning, and the term "hybrid" - to the technology used in this case and the means of learning.

The study allowed us to make the conclusion that blended learning is implemented in Russian universities only partially, so it is necessary to develop hybrid educational technologies that require significant financial and technical resources, as well as methodological recommendations and a set of tasks in individual disciplines to use blended learning models because its application should be systematic and effective, which, in turn, indicates the readiness of Russian teachers to implement it. This also requires additional training for teachers.

We suppose that the point of view proposed by V.I. Blinov et al. on applying blended learning at different levels of the pedagogical process in Russian universities is quite reasonable and its implementation is appropriate (Blinov et al., 2021). We can also agree with the authors of the book "Higher Education in the Digital Age" who state that "we must not be afraid to experiment, we must monitor the evaluation of the results" (Bowen, 2018). Attention should also be paid to "interaction between the universities and various economic

entities, introducing a feedback system with the professional community, and the development of modern educational technologies" (Kozhevnikova et al., 2022]. Blended learning sometimes becomes the only possible "in difficult social conditions, which undoubtedly reflects its future prospects" (Strelchuk, 2021).

## 6. CONCLUSION

1. Blended learning, which originated abroad in the early 21st century and was originally intended for corporate and elite education, became widespread during the pandemic, and thanks to the availability of electronic communications and computer technology has moved into the category of mass form of education.
2. Interpretation of the term has changed significantly due to the transition to the online format and is used by many authors as a combination of traditional and distance learning forms, which greatly impoverishes understanding of the essence of blended learning. It would be logical to return to the originally proposed definition and understand blended learning as a form of learning process in which students interact alternately with the teacher and with electronic resources, depending on what is more effective for solving a particular learning task.
3. It is reasonable to clearly distinguish the "blended / hybrid / integrated / corporate" learning terms. We propose to use the term "blended" in relation to the form of training organization, and the term "hybrid" in relation to specific technology that is used in setting up this form of training. Corporate training should be seen as a form of organizing additional training for employees. Replacing these terms with "integrative learning" is incorrect.
4. At the moment, blended learning is used in Russian universities partially but the success of developing this form of education in Russian universities depends on the ability to develop hybrid educational technologies.

## DECLARATIONS

**Author Contributions** The authors contributed equally to the current research with both data collection and data analysis. All authors have read and approved the published final version of the article.

**Conflicts of Interest** Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** No ethical approval was sought as the research process was conducted since widely known literature was analyzed and the authors' own experience was taken into account.

**Data Availability Statement** The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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