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Improving University Students' Media Literacy Through an ERASMUS+ Blended Intensive Program: A Case Study

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Abstract

Despite media literacy long having been identified as a critical set of 21st-century skills by various governments and non-governmental organizations [1], many university students are not fully aware of its importance and are overly confident in their own abilities [2]. A month-long ERASMUS+ "Blended Intensive Program" (BIP) that combined a week of in-person activities and distance tasks was developed at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU) to help improve the media literacy of university students who participated from five European countries. The programme brought together 26 international students from diverse academic backgrounds and combined online preparatory sessions with an intensive on-site week of lectures, workshops, and collaborative projects. Learning activities were designed to foster critical thinking, digital literacy, intercultural communication, and leadership skills. The aim of the present research was to explore the effectiveness of the ERASMUS BIP short-term course in the international group of students and to work out recommendations for the teaching of media literacy themes. The method of the research was the case study. Data were collected through participant surveys, group reflections, and instructor observations.

Findings show that the BIP significantly enhanced students' ability to analyse media content critically, use digital tools effectively, and collaborate across cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Students reported increased confidence in questioning information sources, improved teamwork skills, and greater awareness of the media's influence on society. These findings are consistent with earlier research on blended learning at LBTU, where postgraduate engineering students in Academic English courses emphasized enhanced motivation, self-directed learning, and development of communication competences [3].

The case study demonstrates how Blended Intensive Programmes can effectively develop essential competences in small, international groups of students. Hosted at LBTU, the BIP highlighted the value of integrating media literacy into higher education curricula and provided recommendations for designing future programmes that promote active learning, intercultural collaboration, and critical engagement with media.

Keywords: *Media literacy, higher education, ERASMUS+, international exchange, critical thinking*

1. INTRODUCTION

Media literacy is a term that has been defined in numerous ways. A review by Potter [4] of 258 different definitions of media literacy found in 134 articles from the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* found that definitions most often included "the ability to read, evaluate, analyse, imagine possibilities, deconstruct messages, recognize patterns, challenge meanings, judge credibility, decipher sender intent, counter-argue, dig for truth, avoid influence, and produce messages" [4, p. 41].

Media literacy has been identified as an increasingly critical skill over the past century. Though it is believed to have been coined by Louis Forsdale in 1955 [1], the western tradition of media literacy education goes back to at least the American Society for Visual Education founded in 1919 which trained educators to teach film analysis to students [5]. Media literacy education has become far more complicated since the days of black and white silent films, especially with the increasing prevalence of

social media, artificial intelligence, and coordinated disinformation campaigns—some organized by state actors [6]. With rapid change in the media landscape seen in the shift from traditional media such as television and radio to social media platforms, blogs, and podcasts [7] and the increasingly widespread publication of AI-generated content [8], it can be difficult for students and educators to keep up to date with the skills needed to navigate the modern media landscape.

Critical thinking plays a central role in helping individuals stop being manipulated by the media. The ability to analyse and evaluate information enables people to recognize media manipulations, such as disinformation and fake news [9]. These manipulations are often designed to mislead audiences, distort reality, or influence opinions for political and commercial purposes [10]. By practicing critical thinking, individuals can avoid being influenced by distorted messages that are spread through various platforms. Developing such skills requires continuous awareness and training, especially in an age where digital content is consumed daily. Critical thinking should be enhanced whenever one interacts with media, whether it is news, advertisements, or social networks. Media literacy education encourages learners to question the credibility of sources and the intentions behind published messages. For students in particular, being equipped with practical tools for fact-checking is essential. Reliable fact-checking websites, reverse image search, and source triangulation help to identify false or misleading information. By applying these strategies, students can strengthen their autonomy in forming opinions based on verified facts. Thus, a combination of media literacy and critical thinking prepares people to become more responsible and informed members of society.[1]

Many international organizations in which Latvia participates have defined media literacy as a priority. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has developed an online platform with the specific goal of assisting member states to, “develop and implement national Media and Information Literacy policies and strategies” [11]. Among other media literacy-related initiatives, the European Union Audiovisual Media Services Directive requires all member nations to promote and facilitate the active development of media literacy skills, requiring a written report every three years [12]. As media literacy has been increasingly seen as a security issue [13], the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) states on their website that they work together with member countries and partners to, “understand, counter and build resilience against these information threats” [14].

At the national level, Latvia has taken significant steps to promote and develop media literacy. The National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), Latvia’s state media regulator established a “Media Literacy Database” in 2023 which contains more than 200 works of various genre and format related to media literacy either in the Latvian language or specific to Latvia’s context [15]. This database contains a wide range of material that supports one of the ambitious goals of the revised education curriculum standards designed by the Skola2030 education reform program approved in 2018 – to integrate media literacy into the obligatory primary and secondary education curriculum in the study fields of language, social and civics, technology, and culture [16]. Despite these efforts, a study of 163 first year undergraduate students at a university in Latvia who had graduated from secondary school in 2023 or 2024 (after the full implementation of the new curriculum standards) concluded that more training at the university level was required, finding that many students were confident in their own media literacy abilities despite being unable to accurately answer basic questions about media literacy fundamentals [2].

Blended learning has become increasingly popular as an educational tool for throughout the last two decades [17]. Blended learning integrates online educational materials with traditional in-person classroom methods. Numerous studies highlight its benefits, which encompass improving student motivation, encouraging active engagement, enhancing autonomy and teamwork, establishing new forms of interaction between instructors and learners, increasing flexibility and accessibility, contributing to improved academic performance [18]; [3]. In addition, blended learning also encourages the development of essential 21st-century skills, such as information literacy, problem-solving, and collaborative communication [19]. For universities, blended learning offers the opportunity to optimize resources by reducing the need for fully physical classroom space while maintaining the quality of teaching and learning interactions. [20]

Since 2021, the Erasmus+ initiative of the European Union has offered the possibility to create “Blended Intensive Programmes” (BIP) in which at least 15 students from at least three partnered

educational institutions spend a minimum of at least five days in person at a host institution in addition to online instruction, receiving a certain amount of ECTS credits. [21] BIP courses represent an innovative form of short-term blended mobility that enables international students and staff to gain intercultural experience, develop digital and professional competences, and strengthen academic cooperation across institutions [22].

Given the importance of and need for media literacy and critical thinking skills, as well as the effectiveness of blended learning as a means for instruction at the university level, including at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU) where postgraduate engineering students in Academic English courses emphasized enhanced motivation, self-directed learning, and development of communication competences during blended learning [3], a BIP focused on media literacy was developed.

2. METHODS AND DESIGN

The aim of this research was to determine the effectiveness of an ERASMUS+ Blended Intensive Program (BIP) to improve the media literacy of university student participants which took part in spring of 2025. A case study was conducted with 25 bachelor's students from five European countries who took part in the month-long program, with two summatively graded tasks which students completed before and after a week-long series of in-person lectures and workshops at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU).

2.1. DESIGN OF THE BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAM

The aim of the BIP was to develop students' essential media literacy skills, enabling them to critically analyse, create, and communicate media content effectively in an international and digitalized world. By fostering critical thinking and intercultural communication, the program prepared future leaders to navigate the complexities of modern information landscapes and combat misinformation. The stated objectives were to:

- Enhance media content creation skills
- Develop critical media analysis abilities
- Strengthen cross-cultural communication
- Encourage critical thinking in professional contexts
- Understand AI-generated information
- Combat misinformation and manipulation
- Foster international collaboration and networking

The blended learning course included an online workshop and in-person lectures; workshops; group projects; collaborative tasks; media analysis, cultural and team-building activities; and excursions. Before arriving at LBTU, students participated in an online introductory session which provided an opportunity to meet fellow participants and lecturers, explore key course details, and review the program structure and evaluation requirements. Students were also informed about the criteria of the first summatively graded task which they were required to complete before arriving at the in-person sessions: an informational video about a media source from the participants' countries which included the following information:

- Ownership (privately owned, publicly owned, state-controlled, or a mix);
- Location of the news bureaus;
- Languages offered by the media source;
- How long the source has been offering news reports;
- Target audience for the media source;
- Controversies that the media source has been involved in;
- An analysis of whether the new provided by the source should be considered trustworthy.

In April 2025, LBTU hosted students for a one-week visit. They participated in a mix of traditional classroom learning and hands-on experiences focused on media content analysis and creation. The program also included team-building activities and excursions to notable local landmarks. At the end

of the week, students picked topics that they would research for their final assignment, as well as faculty advisors who they could consult.

Two weeks after the in-person sessions, students took part in the international scientific conference *Students on Their Way to Science*, presenting their final work in an online section devoted to the participants of the BIP. 35 topic choices were offered by to the students who then had to present a theoretical overview of the topic in consultation with one of five advisors who taught in-person sessions of the course. Students were required to submit an abstract and give a 5-10 minute presentation. This research presentation counted as the second summatively graded task of the program.

The BIP course outcomes included:

- Media Creation and Analysis Skills: producing and evaluating media critically.
- Stronger Critical Thinking: identifying bias, misinformation, and manipulation.
- Cross-Cultural Communication: working effectively in diverse teams.
- Understanding AI in Media: assessing AI-generated content.

The criteria for course assessment included attendance, active participation, the case study videos prepared ahead of the in-person sessions, and the final presentation in the online conference. Students received 3 ECTS credits for successful completion of the course.

2.2. RESEARCH DESIGN

To conduct the case study, pre- and post-testing was used to evaluate student learning in addition to a structured feedback questionnaire.

At the very first in-person session, students were asked to complete a questionnaire administered via Google Forms which included seven basic questions that tested their pre-existing level of media literacy. The questions were:

1. Please describe two ways to check if news is "fake" or "real".
2. What two signs could you use to recognize that a content creator is trying to manipulate you?
3. What are two examples of logical fallacies that you can commonly find in media content? (you do not have to name the fallacy, but you can describe an example).
4. Please describe two different genres of journalism.
5. Please give an example of pathos (appeal to emotion) in advertising.
6. Please give an example of ethos (appeal to credibility) in advertising.
7. Please give an example of logos (appeal to logic) in advertising.

The students' answers to each of the questions were marked as "correct," "partially correct" or "incorrect" by the course instructors. Answers that were left blank were considered "incorrect." At the end of the final in-person session, the participants completed another Google Form questionnaire with identical questions to the first one so that results could be compared. The questionnaire also included feedback questions about the course which were also analysed in order to determine students' attitude toward the BIP.

Participants were informed that the results of questionnaire would be used anonymously for the purpose of this research, and that no personally identifying information would be published. Students were not required to answer all questions or even take part in the questionnaire at all in order to complete the BIP course, and their participation in the questionnaire did not impact their final course results in any way.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 summarises the pre- and post-test results of 24 students (those who completed both tests) for seven media-literacy questions. It shows the number of answers that were incorrect (or not given), partially correct, and fully correct for each question. The table also includes an overall totals row, as well as the mean ± SD of correct answers per student.

Table 1. Pre- and post-test results: student counts of incorrect, partially correct, and correct answers (n = 25)

Question #	Incorrect/no answer		Partially correct		Correct	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
1	0	1	7	2	17	21
2	0	1	8	3	16	20
3	16	6	6	4	2	14
4	6	5	5	6	13	13
5	11	2	2	4	11	18
6	14	4	2	0	8	20
7	16	6	1	1	7	17
Total (all 7Qs)	**63**	**25**	**31**	**20**	**74**	**123**
Mean ± SD per student	n/a				**2.96 ± 1.25**	**4.92 ± 1.15**

Overall, correct responses increased from 74 to 123, raising the mean number of correct answers per student from 2.96 ± 1.25 to 4.92 ± 1.15, while incorrect answers fell from 63 to 25. Six of the seven questions showed clear gains, with the largest increases in Question 3 about logical fallacies (from 2 to 14 correct), in Question 6 about ethos in advertising (from 8 to 20 correct) and Question 7 about logos in advertising (from 7 to 17 correct). However, Question 4 about genres of journalism remained unchanged at 13 correct answers, which can be explained by either pre-existing knowledge or that the course did not impact understanding of this topic. These results demonstrate a notable overall improvement in media-literacy knowledge, particularly in critical-thinking areas such as identifying logical fallacies and recognising rhetorical appeals, while also highlighting Question 4 as a potential focus for further improvement of instruction.

Although it can be seen as promising that the overall amount of students who answered correctly on the post-test was higher than on the pre-test for all questions, it is important to analyse the extent to which there was student improvement on each of the questions. For each question, student progress was labelled as “better” if they answered more correctly on the post-test than the pre-test: for example, they answered incorrectly on the first test and partially correctly or correctly on the post-test, or partially correctly on the pre-test and correctly on the post-test. A label of “worse” was given if the student answered correctly on the pre-test and partially correctly or incorrectly on the post-test, or partially correctly on the pre-test and incorrectly on the post-test. A label of “same-“ was given for those who answered incorrectly on both tests or partially correctly on both tests, and a label of “same+” was given for those who answered correctly on both tests. Percentages were then calculated for each individual question and then for all answers to all question in total. The results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Amount of students who performed better, the same, and worse on the post-test questionnaire compared with the pre-test

Question #	Worse	Same-	Same+	Better
1	8.3%	4.2%	66.7%	20.8%
2	12.5%	4.2%	58.3%	25%
3	4.2%	33.3%	4.2%	58.3%
4	29.4%	8.3%	33.3%	25%
5	0%	8.3%	29.4%	58.3%
6	0%	16.7%	33.3%	50%
7	4.2%	20.8%	25%	50%
Total	8.3%	14.9%	35.7%	41.1%

Overall, when looking at all students’ responses to all questions, progress was shown 41.1% of the time. As can be seen, the areas where students showed the most overall improvement was in being able to identify logical fallacies and the rhetorical devices of pathos, ethos, and logos in advertising content, with at least half showing improvement on each of those aspects. Concerningly, nearly one third of students answered more incorrectly on the post-test about genres of journalism, indicating that the methods of instruction for that part of the course need to be re-evaluated and improved. The fact

that students were able to name ways to detect fake news two thirds of the time both times indicates that less time might be devoted to this aspect and more devoted to areas where students had greater difficulty.

At the end of the programme, 25 students completed a feedback survey. They rated the relevance of the topics covered in the BIP and their overall satisfaction with the BIP on a Likert scale from 1-5 (1 = very low, 5 = very high). Table 3 summarises the results of the survey.

Table 3. Student ratings of the BIP: relevance of topics and overall satisfaction (n = 25)

Survey item	Mean	Median	Min	Max
Relevance of topics covered in the BIP	4.28	4.0	3	5
Overall satisfaction with the BIP	4.28	5.0	2	5

The perceived relevance of the topics covered in the BIP had a mean score of 4.28 (median 4.0; range 3–5), indicating that participants generally considered the topics highly relevant. Overall satisfaction with the BIP (course, excursions, free time) had the same mean score of 4.28, but with a higher median of 5.0 (range 2–5), suggesting that most participants rated their experience at the highest level.

Thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses identified the BIP benefits that participants viewed as most valuable. Table 4 presents these key themes together with anonymous comments from students.

Table 4. Students' perspectives on the most valuable BIP benefits

BIP benefits	Students' comments
Media literacy & misinformation	"I can now recognise fake information in the media." "Media fallacies – I did not think that way before and now I can recognise fake in the media." "Sessions about digital media, the credibility of news, podcasts, misinformation, disinformation and malinformation… all are very useful."
Critical thinking	"The critical thinking session was fun and interactive." "I liked the philosophical approach to critical thinking." "Critical thinking – even though it was tiring because of the lack of English." "The philosophical approach explained quite well what work you can and should do by yourself."
Rhetorical techniques in advertising & marketing	"I liked learning what pathos, ethos and logos mean." "Sessions on Tuesday to recognise commercials (pathos, ethos, logos) – rhetorical techniques in advertising and marketing." "It was interesting because I had never learned about these before."
Podcasting & digital-media skills	"I got some good sources that I can use if I would like to make a podcast." "Digital Media in Modern Society: very important, especially in a cross-cultural context like this BIP." "I liked learning about radio stations."
Collaborative learning & interaction	"All sessions were useful as we had to work with our colleagues, other students." "The sessions were actually useful and we had an opportunity to communicate a lot." "I really liked the classes we had on Tuesday—very interesting and understandable."
Teaching quality & engagement	"Teachers explained everything very well." "The sessions were very interactive and explained everything effectively." "The classes were very engaging and interesting (for example the fake-profile activity)." "All of the sessions fit perfectly with the theme of the program."
Community media & citizen journalism	"For my personal perspective, the whole program is very useful. But the section *Community Media and Citizen Journalism as Key Components of the Democratic System* gives me more insight."

As shown in Table 4, students valued a broad range of BIP aspects. BIP participants repeatedly appreciated the media literacy and misinformation activities, sessions on critical thinking and rhetorical techniques in advertising and marketing. Respondents also highlighted opportunities for collaborative learning and engaging delivery of the teaching. These qualitative findings reinforce the

quantitative survey results: students not only rated the BIP highly on the 5-point Likert scale but also explained why.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, BIP can be seen an effective way to improve university students' media literacy which can be seen through improved results on pre- and post-tests as well as the generally satisfied attitude of the participants towards the course. This is in line with previous researchers who have found blended learning to be an effective method of instruction [3]; [19]; [20]; with Erasmus+ blended intensive programmes being a particularly useful format [22]. Those interested in organizing a BIP on media literacy and critical thinking skills might consider including rhetorical devices and logical fallacies, as these were areas where students showed significant growth. Great care should be taken when discussing journalistic genres, as in this case a concerning number of students ended with an overall worse understanding than before the course.

Several important limitations in both the course and the research need to be mentioned. First, only a limited number of students can take part in any given BIP project, and although much of the participant costs are covered, participation can be prohibitively expensive for some. Organization of a BIP on any given subject is dependent on the staff available at the partner institutions and whether there are experts willing to participate. In terms of the research, only a limited number of students in just one BIP were researched, and the pre- and post-test included only seven questions out of the many different media literacy skills that could be tested. Also, the rating of pre- and post-test answers as "correct" "partially correct" or "incorrect" might be considered subjective depending on a lecturer' s individual understanding of the subject matter. Different levels of English language of different students might also have affected their understanding of certain questions.

Despite these limitations, a BIP course can be recommended to improve university student media literacy. Future work should be done by testing a wider variety of media literacy indicators and also develop other types of blended learning opportunities that a greater number of students can access and benefit from.

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