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Flexible Learning Toolkit

QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project: Flexible Learning Toolkit Final Report

This evaluative report is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The [project](#) was led by University of Derby in partnership with Derby College, London College and Pearson Learning. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).

Institutional team		
During the second year, there were three changes to the initial academic team, due to resignations and retirements. Unfortunately, Derby College was not able to continue in to the second year, due to a change of staffing, and there was a change of leadership at The London College too. Additionally, the student research roles are temporary contracts and subject to change during the project. Some students graduated and moved on into employment. Despite these changes, the project partnership between the University of Derby, The London College and Pearson remained strong.		
Role	Core team	Changes
University of Derby Project Leader	Paula Shaw Associate Prof. online teaching and learning	
University of Derby co-lead	Prof. Allan Howells Associate PVC Quality	Resigned
Partner institution lead The London College UCK	Mike Scott College Principal	Fahmida Khan HE lead
Partner institution lead Derby College	Jenny Brandham Director of HE (Higher Education) in FE (Further Education)	Roberta Hall HE lead (withdrawn)
Partner institution lead Pearson	John Roberts Online learning consultant	
Project director (1 & 2)	Paula Shaw	
Project director (3 & 4)	Dr. Justin Steele-Davies	
Research team	Prof. David Sheffield	
Research team	Dr. Alice Doherty	
Research team	Associate Prof. Ann Minton	
Research team	Dr. Pauline Green	Retired
Research team (additional)	Marlies Gratton	Resigned
Student admin assistant	Joseph Godfrey	Temporary contract finished 01/10/2020
Student researchers	Joseph Godfrey Bethany Delauney	Temporary contract finished 01/10/2020
Student interns	Sarah Fitzsimmons Zhi yi Wang	Temporary contract finished 01/08/2021
Student researchers	Merin Mathew Amy Cudworth Anika Sharif Viktoria Nagi	Temporary contracts finish 01/08/2022



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Outcomes/activity

Context

Pre pandemic the sector had noticed an increase in the use of digital technologies for learning, teaching and assessment. However, little evaluation had been conducted into their effectiveness in supporting an optimum amount of flexible learning. In particular, the choice and application of digital technologies were not evaluated during the curriculum design and review processes and sector-wide support for the application of digital technologies in curriculum design was limited. Such lack of visibility leads to on the one hand rigid, constrained curriculum and on the other hand unstable, unrestrained curriculum.

Significant work has been done by Advance HE in providing a Flexible Learning Framework. The Department for Education (DfE) is providing a steer towards evidence-based teaching and learning approaches. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is raising the profile of digital learning, which includes the 4 Hallmarks of Success playbooks, designed to increase appropriate amounts of flexibility according to mode of delivery (campus, online or apprenticeship).

Conducting this project during and post-pandemic has proved challenging. Arranging meetings via Microsoft Teams has enabled the project team to stay in contact and work together, however, there have been limited opportunities to work together in-person and workshops have been conducted online. The latter would have benefited from some in-person discussions. The first phase of context analysis took place during the pandemic and provided ample opportunities to observe well designed flexible learning in action across the modes of study (campus-based, online and apprenticeship). During this time campus-based students became accustomed to more flexibility through digital means. There is evidence to suggest that they wish to retain some flexibility (Rowan and Neaves, 2021). However, the post-pandemic context has shifted, creating a sharp divide between strategy and practice. Post-pandemic campus-based students are expected to return to in-person teaching, this has left practitioners wondering how much flexible learning is appropriate in and between sessions. Campus-based students are expected to make use of the material infrastructure during independent learning, yet students have become accustomed to using digital libraries, webinars and engaged with the student union remotely. Work experience may also offer remote opportunities that were previously unavailable, as organisations incorporate remote working patterns.

Post-pandemic the rationale for the project became stronger. It was observed that continual monitoring reports did not capture compliance with *all* strategies. For example, it was not clear how digital practice baselines were evaluated. Without this impact analysis it is difficult to make causal or at least associative assessments of 'what works'.

The project aimed to provide clarity about the amount and quality of flexible learning built into programme/ module design, with a focus on known sector weaknesses, namely:

- lack of flexible (physical, virtual, synchronous and asynchronous) staff contact,
- poorly scaffolded, peer engagement and independent activities,
- content and assessment overload
- lack of self-assessment and guided assessment preparation.

To address these weaknesses the project's objectives aimed to;

1. Improve programme management, optimise flexibility (within the institutional constraints), and enhance the consistency between modules.
2. Create blueprints for flexible campus (blended), work-based and fully online modules that



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estimate module workloads for the total credit hours.

3. Enable practitioners to adapt the toolkit to meet the needs of their contexts. For example, to use the assets; with 'at risk' modules where a poor student experience is indicated, for targeted programme validation or modification where it is useful to visualise module structures, and for all programmes that wish to explore flexible curriculum enhancements.

Delivery Model

The Flexible Learning Toolkit (FLT) Project was divided into six smaller projects. Table 1 below shows the size of each project, the activities undertaken and the outputs of each. Project 1 and 2 concluded in August 2021 with the launch of a 5-hour Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). Project 5 completed in June 2022 with the launch of the FLT website. The project achieved its initial aim of providing training, tools and a process evaluation. Projects 3, 4 and 6 are partially completed with wide conference dissemination and chapter publication. Journal publications are delayed due to the complexity of remote communications that still exist and changes in student engagement with the project (all are on temporary contracts, some have graduated, moved into employment and left the project). Furthermore, the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) and project team believe that there is the potential for wider impact, therefore the team aims to conduct further mapping case studies using the Module Activity Plan with Indicative Timelines (MAPIT) tool and evaluate the impact of curriculum changes during 2022/23. The additional mapping activity would benefit from in-person workshops with development teams and the results of this aims to be disseminated through the QAA annual conference 2023.

Table 1: Flexible Learning Toolkit Project size, activities and outputs

Objective	Size	Activities/ Outputs	Outcomes
1. Improving programme management, increase flexibility and enhance the consistency between modules.	Small scale	P1: Context analysis: Digital exhibition of flexible learning	Awareness of academic and student experiences of digital learning during the pandemic
	In-depth	P 2: Training and support: Flexible Learning Toolkit MOOC.	Student experiences shared, recommendations for flexible learning.
	In-depth (Publication in progress)	P3: Dissemination (research, chapter, conference).	International book chapter highlighting recommendations. Journal publication highlighting 'other' space learning within HE.
2. Creating blueprints for flexible campus (blended), work-based and fully online modules that estimate module workloads for the total credit hours.	In-depth (Publication in progress)	P4: Evidence-base to fill evidence gaps. Dissemination (rapid systematic review).	Evidence-informed decision making about flexible learning. Highlight the most robust evidence on flexible engagement and study materials.
	In-depth	P5: Module Activity Plan with Indicative	MAPIT templates, blueprint examples and case studies



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		timelines (MAPIT) template. Student and academic focus group feedback Case study blueprints.	act as useful templates to share practice.
3. Enabling practitioners to adapt the toolkit to meet the needs of their contexts.	Small scale (Impact evaluation ongoing)	P6: Student project engagement video Conference dissemination Flexible learning toolkit website.	Pearson HE Innovate FLT site provides a single website to access resources.

Rowan, A. and Neaves, J (2021) United Kingdom Engagement Survey. Advance HE
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/uk-engagement-survey-ukes-2021>

Dissemination of work

The Digital exhibition of flexible learning was disseminated in the following ways:

- University of Derby Online learning summit 'Representing online learner voices a digital exhibition of flexible learning'.
- University of Derby Festival of Learning 'Building a toolkit to support flexible learning for all students'.

Beyond the partnership:

- Association of learning technologists (ALT) conference 'From digital ethnography to exhibition: Exploring the entanglement of learning online, work and life' (QAA funded)

The project team want to thank [Thinglink](#) for sponsoring the project and providing licences and a public link for two years [Digital Exhibition of Flexible Learning](#).

The 5-hour FLT MOOC was disseminated in the following ways:

- [University of Derby corporate communications](#) September 21. This informed the wider University and partner institutions about the project and provided the link to access the learning resources.
- The QAA disseminated the MOOC's link to their members through the September 21 bulletin and a summary of the first two outputs are available on the [Collaborative Enhancement Projects page](#)
- FLT MOOC is hosted publicly in the University's [non-credit bearing courses](#), this will remain as a public link for 5 years.
- The London College, Derby College, Pearson - internal dissemination

Beyond the partnership:

- UK (United Kingdom) staff and student experiences of digital teaching and learning during the pandemic lockdown are explored in a book chapter, Shaw and Rawlinson (2021) 'The impact of the pandemic on pedagogical models of digital learning'
- Council for Hospitality Management Education CHME Autumn newsletter
- University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) 4th October newsletter and link to the MOOC on the UVAC webpages
- Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) newsletter.

The MAPIT templates and case studies were disseminated in the following ways:

- University of Derby Annual Teaching and Learning Conference 2022



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Beyond the partnership:

- Advance HE annual conference 2022
- BETT conference, London Excel 2022
- [QAA student experience video](#) disseminated at the QAA student voice conference.

Inter-institutional collaboration

Our main collaborative working has involved 'Teams' meetings and asynchronous feedback from the partner organisations. The student administrator took on the role of partner liaison, informing them of progress and capturing feedback from them about the presentation and comparability of experiences within their own contexts. Their feedback was particularly valuable in understanding the comparability of digital learning issues facing HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) during a Covid-19 lockdown.

In producing the Flexible Learning Toolkit MOOC partners and University of Derby stakeholders were send draft copies of the units to review and consider the suitability for their contexts and needs. One of the partners Pearson co-wrote the unit on orientation and online induction, drawing on their wealth of experience in online learning.

A prototype curriculum mapping template, MAPIT was created by the University of Derby team and shared with the partners for comment and refinement. Once agreement was established, each institution identified programmes to undertake a mapping exercise, facilitated by one of the student researchers. Once the mapping was complete, the student researcher liaised with each team to capture case studies for publication on the FLT website.

The project team and partners were successful in submitting a proposal to the University of Derby annual teaching and learning conference 2022. The project team facilitated a hybrid panel discussion about the future of flexible learning, some members were present in-person and others attended via a Microsoft Teams link.

Sector-wide work

The project has contributed to sector-wide themes in the following ways:

Two international online students that took part in the context analysis, responded to a call for sharing practical examples of sustainable development goal 4: quality education for all. They shared their experiences of online study in the 'Global challenges research fund conference' (GCRF) 'Building a digital ethnographic methodology in an international context'.

Exploring the issues of educational evaluation, the project team were invited to present at the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI network) 'Scaling-up digital learning whilst maintaining satisfaction: lessons from the frontline'.

The research team have made links with a UVAC /Erasmus+ project that is currently investigating the developments in online pedagogy and looking at the staff competency needed to support digital/remote learning as prompted by the pandemic. The MOOC and other outputs from the research have been shared with the UVAC/Erasmus + team.

Pearson HE Innovate community of practice hosted a sector-wide webinar called [Let's talk about flexible learning](#) 400+ sector practitioners registered for the event and Pearson have provided a website to host [the flexible learning toolkit](#) (maintained for 5 years)



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Supporting staff and student engagement

To undertake the context analysis, six students and six academic participants created weekly personal reflections throughout the semester. These participants, representing different disciplines and levels of learning, were given an opportunity to have their voice heard about their digital learning experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. The participants retained autonomy over their exhibits and decided what they wished to share in the digital exhibition. This introduced academics to the diverse ways in which students experienced higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic, online, on campus-and work-based and across different disciplines.

Students employed in this project developed their qualitative research and digital skills and engaged with external partners. One student was employed as a project administrator to liaise with partners (QAA funded), another acted as a co-researcher to transcribe, debrief, and apply GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) requirements. A level 5 student experienced the collaborative nature of research work for the first time, whilst developing digital skills and creating the digital exhibits.

In creating the Digital Exhibition of Flexible Learning Journeys and the Flexible Learning toolkit MOOC inter-disciplinary, inter-institutional and inter-departmental work has taken place. The research team would particularly like to thank Pearson for the content supplied to support student transitions, the work performed by the University of Derby's digital content team, in supporting the students with creating the exhibition's assets, and the learning designers involved in creating the MOOC. Sector staff accessing the MOOC will explore the lived experiences of staff and students and understand the reasons for flexible module enhancements and the MOOC is available on the University of Derby's internal intranet as an optional module for staff development.

In creating the evidence base, three students were supported to complete rapid evidence reviews and present their investigations in a data base, referenced in APA7. In this phase of the project students developed their critical thinking by qualifying articles using [CASP](#) qualitative and [NICE](#) quantitative evaluation checklists.

One student was employed to support programme teams to map modules and explore flexibility. The results of the MAPIT interventions were written up as anonymised case studies, each of the partner institutions took part in the student facilitated workshops and asynchronous communication. Furthermore, union of student representatives were invited to comment on the toolkit during focus groups.

Seven of the students were given the opportunity to present at conferences. Two online student participants presented at the GCRF conference, three students presented their engagement with the digital exhibition, at the University of Derby's Festival of learning 2021 and two students presented at the University of Derby Teaching and Learning Conference 2022.

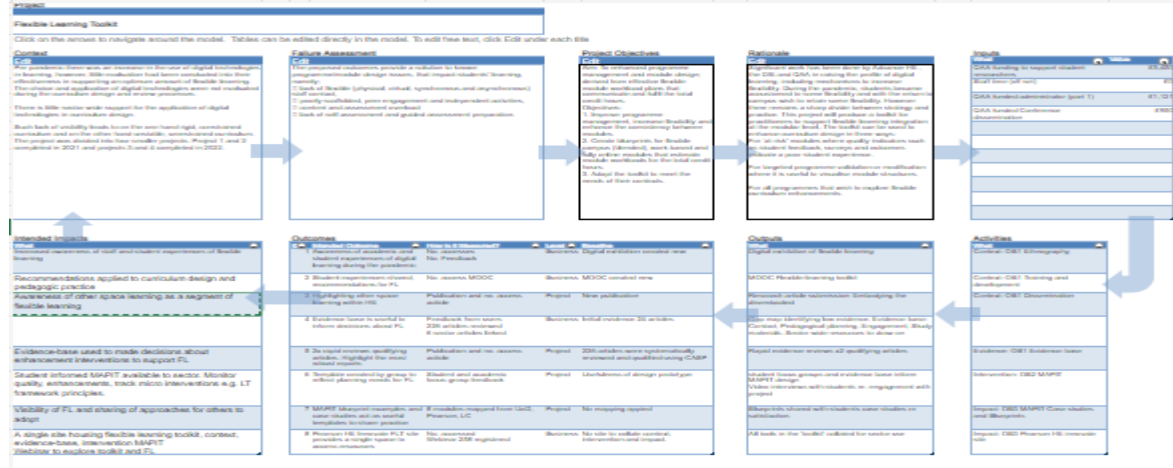
The student researchers were invited to take part in a video to disseminate their experiences of involvement with the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project.

Evaluation

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The project was designed using a logic model, illustrated in image 1 below. The project’s context, failure assessment, objectives, rationale, activities and proposed outcomes were presented in section 1 of this report (outcomes and activity). The progress made towards achieving the outcomes and impacts set out in this logic model will be explored next.

Image 1: Flexible learning toolkit logic model



To conclude the evaluation process, the project’s intended impacts were compared against the actual impacts achieved. Table 2 presents an overview of each small project, its intended impacts, measures and actual impacts. The project’s baseline assumption was that there exists a dispersed set of sector resources about flexible learning; prior to the project a cohesive set of flexible curriculum design training materials and tools did not exist.

Table 2: Intended impacts, measures and actual impacts achieved.

Intended impact	Measurement	Impact
P1: Increased awareness of staff and student experiences of flexible learning	No. accesses Feedback on digital exhibition	Limited engagement and feedback
P2: Training and development in flexible learning.	No. accesses and downloads from FLT MOOC	395 enrolments (1 st July 2022)
P3: International awareness of flexible and other space learning.	Int. book chapter Conferences Journal publication	Chapter published 5 conferences 1 publication (submitted)
P4: HE Evidence-base to fill evidence gaps (engagement and study resources).	226 articles sourced 6 sector reports linked Rapid lit review	Evidence based shared 1 publication (in progress)
P5: Student co-created MAPIT available for sector to use. Visibility of flexible learning and shared approaches for others to adopt.	Templates, guidance and case studies and example blueprints	2 templates, 6 case studies with blueprints and guidance shared
P6: A single website housing flexible learning toolkit, context, evidence-base,	Conferences, webinar & website	3 conferences 1 HE Innovate webinar



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intervention MAPIT tool/s and sector dissemination.	Continued case study evaluation and impact on quality enhancement	1 HE Innovate website Impact evaluation (ongoing)
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Although the initial digital exhibition of flexible learning had limited success, it provided opportunities for traditional methods of dissemination:

- Book chapter Shaw, P., and Rawlinson, S. Pedagogical Models of Digital Learning in the United Kingdom: Lessons for Africa, in Brown, B.A., and Irons, A. (Eds.), The Emerald Handbook of Higher Education in a Post-Covid World: New Approaches and Technologies for Teaching and Learning (in press)
- 5 conference disseminations
- Journal publication, Shaw, P. Embodying the disembodied: A study of higher education learning in 'other' spaces. Learning Environments Research (in press)

The Flexible Learning Toolkit MOOC has been available since September 2021 and has had 395 enrolments. Evidence of MOOC access is indicative of the sectoral need for a training and support from the toolkit.

During the MOOC's creation there was not enough time to conduct an extensive review of research evidence. In the second phase of the project, having explored the existing sector evidence about 'what works' in flexible learning, we identified gaps in evidence pertaining to digital engagement and the value of study materials. Two students conducted a systematic review of institutional databases and the research pertaining to Higher Education (HE) digital engagement and the usefulness of study materials. The resulting [HE evidence-base](#) has been published to close the knowledge gap. The student-produced evidence is being progressed for publication as a systematic review.

The final project was to create a mapping template. The templates, anonymised case studies and examples are available to [download from the Flexible Learning Toolkit website](#). The development teams engaged in the mapping process have found it valuable, as indicated in the case studies.

The project generated sector interest and a further 3 conference proposals were accepted, these events were well attended. Furthermore, our partner Pearson hosted a sector-wide webinar that saw circa 400 people registered for the event and over 100 in real-time attendance, the webinar remains [available to view](#). Feedback from the event was extremely positive with several requests for future events in 2022/23. Analytic data identified that within one week of the webinar the HE Innovate Flexible learning Toolkit website had 150 unique user accesses. This is indicative of initial sector perceptions of the toolkit's usability, sustainability and transportability.

Strategic Added Value

The main sources of strategic added value are derived from the mapping workshops. The MAPIT template and the student-devised checklist were used with development teams to explore flexible curriculum design. The student facilitator was keen to ensure that development teams were able to plan events that promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and Education for Sustainability (ESD (Education for Sustainable Development)), opportunities for feedback, and employability knowledge, skills and behaviours. Through the workshops, development teams were able to



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perceive the planning efficiencies gained by using the MAPIT tool and appreciate the value gained from integrating the wider institution offer.

In the post-project phase, the toolkit will add value to the continual monitoring of programmes by reporting on evidence-based flexible learning solutions. This will be achieved through empirical and potential causal evidence of enhanced modular and programme teaching, learning, and student outcomes. Evidence of impact from the project will inform wider institutional adoption.

Process

Strengths and weaknesses

The strengths of the project can be summarised as:

- extensive student engagement and co-creation of the assets,
- close and regular collaboration,
- sector engagement with the training MOOC,
- the production, use and added value of the MAPIT tool,
- the sharing of good practice through the case studies and examples.

The weakness of the project can be summarised as:

- the survey about taught and private study time highlighted that academics underestimate the time students spend understanding feedback and developing academic and digital skills in comparison to student estimations. This requires further investigation.
- limited empirical evidence of 'What work's' in higher education's digital engagement and study resources, most sourced articles provided narrative.
- MAPIT Workshops conducted online would have benefited from some in-person discussions resulting in more student co-created, detailed maps and case studies.
- a short feedback survey following the workshops to collect individual feedback from colleagues would have provided a measure of statistical value.

Additionally, the project highlighted the need for academic staff development in performing educational systematic reviews. This leads to evidence-based decision making. Undertaking such sectoral comparative analysis, would establish data confidence, before making enhancements. This observation is beyond the scope of the project.

Project Outputs

In conclusion, the project has delivered its expected output, namely, the Flexible Learning Toolkit. This contains a context analysis, training and development MOOC, evidence base, mapping tools and case studies. A summary of each output is described below.

Project 1: Contextual analysis

To conduct the micro level analysis a digital exhibition of flexible learning journeys was created to visualise examples of good practice. Staff and students, across disciplines, modes and levels of study were engaged in a series of in-module reflections on digital flexible learning during the second semester (February to May 2021). These reflections, supported by learning analytics, were summarised in personal video diaries (vlogs). The exhibition depicted students' flexible contact with staff, private study (including remote access to the institution's support facilities) and work-based application.

Project 2: Flexible Learning Toolkit MOOC



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The second completed project was a 5-hour MOOC informed by the results of the digital ethnography. The guide answers curriculum design questions posed by the QAA regarding enhancing quality in a digital environment. The guide contains self-paced learning content and design-enhancing activities alongside an initial evidence-based guide of further reading. We received 10% (39/395) course evaluation feedback. Although there was a slight disagreement on the quantity of video and case study content needed and a request for more links to research, 100% agreed or strongly agreed that the course was easy to understand, included new knowledge, was up-to-date and intellectually stimulating. Furthermore, free text comments valued the excellent pedagogy, application to practice, real-life examples, short videos with extensive knowledge and the MAST (Media, Activity, Space and Time) acronym. Feedback from a member of the National Teaching Fellows network said;

Thanks for this timely information. We are preparing to implement a new curriculum initiative in September 2023. I have engaged with the MOOC programme and am working out the diverse activities that can be used in two thirty credit modules. I am sure the latest templates [in the flexible learning toolkit site] will be very helpful too.

Project 4: HE Evidence-base: Engagement and value of study materials

In creating the digital exhibition and the MOOC, the research team engaged with QAA evaluation of enhancements guidance. Through this process, they identified the limitations of the qualitative study and institutional data alone. Student researchers then undertook a comparative analysis of current educational research pertaining to 'digital engagement' and the 'value of study materials'. Their sources were collated as an evidence-base to support decision-making. Feedback about the evidence base was provided by Pearson:

Thank you for sharing this – this is clearly an immense effort for the researchers given the scope. I think that it will be very useful when we're searching for evidence to support our own insight work.
Gail Capper – Outcomes and Insights Manager, Pearson

Thanks so much for sharing this. Whilst we don't get fully in the weeds of pedagogic / design elements of courses, I still think this will be helpful to my team when we're in the early stages of programme conversations with academic teams (just to get them thinking about these sorts of themes early on in the planning and to help them start to think a bit differently around how they'd create a course for online versus on campus).

Owen Knight - Head of Market Research, Pearson

Project 5: Module Activity Plan with Indicative Timelines (MAPIT) planning tool

To create the MAPIT tool, the research team conducted a sector survey that asked staff and students to rate how much time they expected students to spend on different learning activities. From the 106 responses (50 academic and 56 student) there were some doubts about how they had interpreted terms such as 'taught' and 'private study'. However, academics and students generally agreed that students spent most of their 'taught' time in live or real-time lectures and group or asynchronous discussions, and most of their 'private study' time watching and reading resources, and preparing for assignments. Moreover, 60% of academics felt that students spent *some* time understanding feedback, whereas 68% of students felt that they spent *more than half* of their time understanding feedback, and 84% of academics felt that students would *not* spend time or spend *some* private study time on digital and academic skill development, whereas 66% of students felt that they spent *more than half* of their private study time on this type of activity. The development team suggest that further studies are conducted to substantiate these findings. However, from these initial findings the team agreed that further development of the MAPIT tool was warranted, to enable curriculum development teams to be overt about;



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- designed opportunities to understand formative feedback,
- specific (optional) institutional digital and academic literacy training that coincides with module delivery.

Additionally, to recognise the formal and informal, applied, situated and simulated work-experiences students are expected to undertake, we added a line for this type of activity. To visualise the balance between these distinct types of learning a pie chart calculator was added and to make the tool a valuable trend monitor, a quality RAG (Red Amber Green) status was added. The prototype tool was then tested with development teams in each partner institution and a small range of case studies and examples were produced.

The student facilitator reflected on the lessons learnt from facilitating workshops and writing up case studies;

Working with academics to improve their modules by addressing certain challenges has been a valuable experience. This is because some academics were really insightful and communicative on how they will address challenges. At the same time, others struggled to consider that some challenges need to be addressed. In the future, it would be better to set the scene and explain to the academics that this information will be used to inform anonymised case study. Therefore, they will not feel as though they need to be defensive about their modules and teaching methods and would be more open to taking challenges into account and addressing them.

Expected lifetime outturn of the project

Projects 3, 4 and 6: Project dissemination and impact

Beyond the project end date there are opportunities to achieve greater impacts. Further dissemination is progressing in the form of research publications and future conference presentations. The decision to extend the mapping workshops and impact evaluations for a further year will enable further MAPIT plans to be completed and their enhancements perceived and disseminated.

This report will be used to inform pedagogic research and evaluation practice within the University of Derby and in partner institutions.