

From Pivot to Permanent: Examining Lessons Learned from the Shift to Online and Hybrid Teaching and Learning

Introduction

It is not new to recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic has instigated ongoing and unprecedented change for higher education providers. Hybrid teaching has become the norm, whereby some teaching is offered online and some in-person, with students often given a choice of how they would like to experience their learning. But what is the impact of this shift in delivery and assessment on student engagement and achievement? That is the question our latest study seeks to answer.

The shift online has been positive for many individuals, for example those with caring and/or work responsibilities. Removing the need to travel to a campus for many such students has proved beneficial. However, we also know sector-wide surveys, such as the NSS and the Advance HE/HEPI Student Experience Survey, have reported an increase from previous years in the number of students who felt their experience of teaching during 2020-21 did not meet their expectations. The main drivers of student dissatisfaction at that time tend to center around the absence of in-person teaching and reduced opportunities for interaction with staff and other students.

To understand which forms of digital and hybrid delivery and assessment have positively and/or negatively impacted student engagement, contribution and achievement, QAA ran a survey of its members during November and December 2021. We received 322 responses to the survey and complemented this with 17 individual in-depth interviews.

A full report of the findings will be published in February 2022 and will offer a broad perspective of practice and lessons learned from the impact of digital teaching, learning and assessment throughout and beyond the pandemic. In the meantime, we are able to share top-line findings to help our members in their module and course planning discussions.



Shift to digital: Impact on engagement

Educators think the shift to digital has impacted student engagement - but views are polarised

Table 1: Impact on students' engagement in asynchronous learning activities

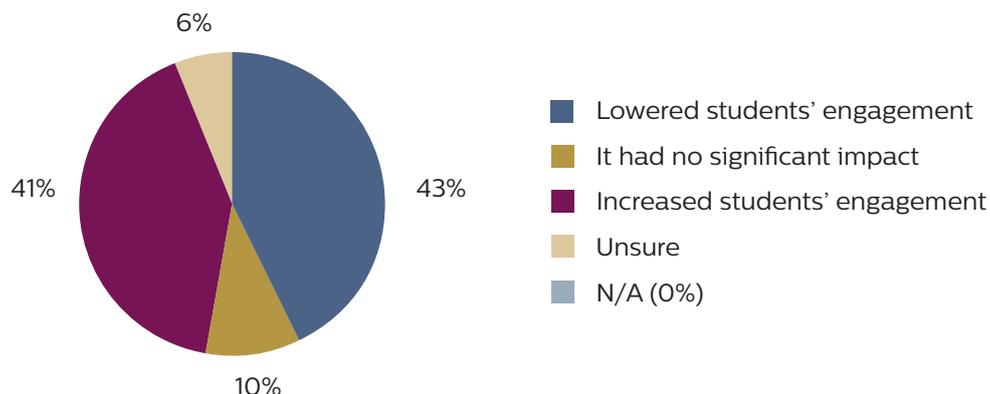
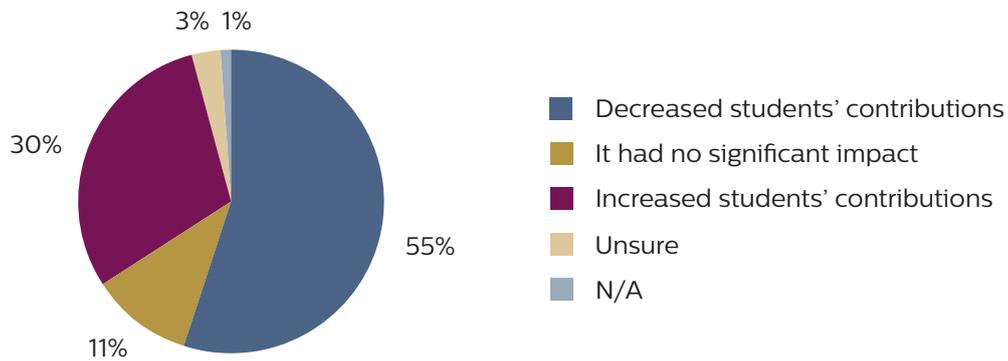


Table 2: Impact on students' contribution to synchronous learning activities



Opinions were divided on what impact the pivot to digital delivery and assessment had on the level of students' engagement in asynchronous learning activities, with similar proportions of educators reporting a positive or negative effect.

More than half of respondents thought the shift to digital teaching and learning had negatively impacted students' contribution during synchronous online learning activities. However, almost one third perceived a positive impact, suggesting either different experiences of educators regarding the support they and students had received as part of the pivot online and/or different impacts and motivation for different students.

In individual in-depth interviews, several providers described how staff got to know their students better as digital delivery encouraged many students to be more confident and keener in their questioning and discussions through facilities like the chat function.

“ The content was not the hurdle, the human desire and need to interact, brainstorm and innovate together proved the most challenging issue. ”

“ We have seen a tremendous uplift in digital capacity/skills. However, there was also an increasing lack of student motivation during the Spring 2021 lockdown. ”

Head of School, Scotland

“ Approaching staff has been made easier for students and masterclasses have been much better attended online. ”

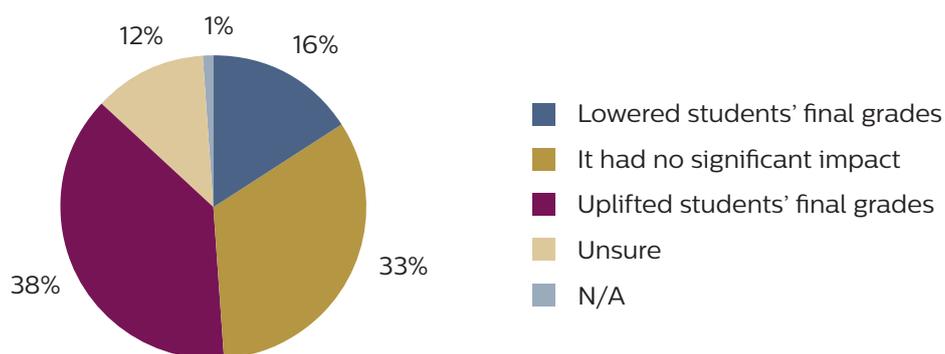
Head of Department, England

“ Staff did get to know their students better and had far greater contact with them online. ”

Deputy Subject Leader, England

Impact on assessment and achievement

Table 3: Impact on students' final grades



More than half of respondents thought the shift to digital teaching and learning had affected students' final grades, with 38% believing the shift had promoted an uplift in student grades and 16% reporting it had lowered them. Potential reasons behind this will be examined further in the full report but, as an example, some providers attributed increases in performance to students having greater control over when and how they wanted to engage with their learning, as well as the extent to which educators worked to creatively reimagine their courses for digital delivery. One provider highlighted their use of online sessions to better prepare student groups for practical in-class work. This minimised the amount of time needed to introduce students to new techniques and/or equipment onsite, leading to a more confident and competent cohort – something they had not considered doing pre-pandemic.

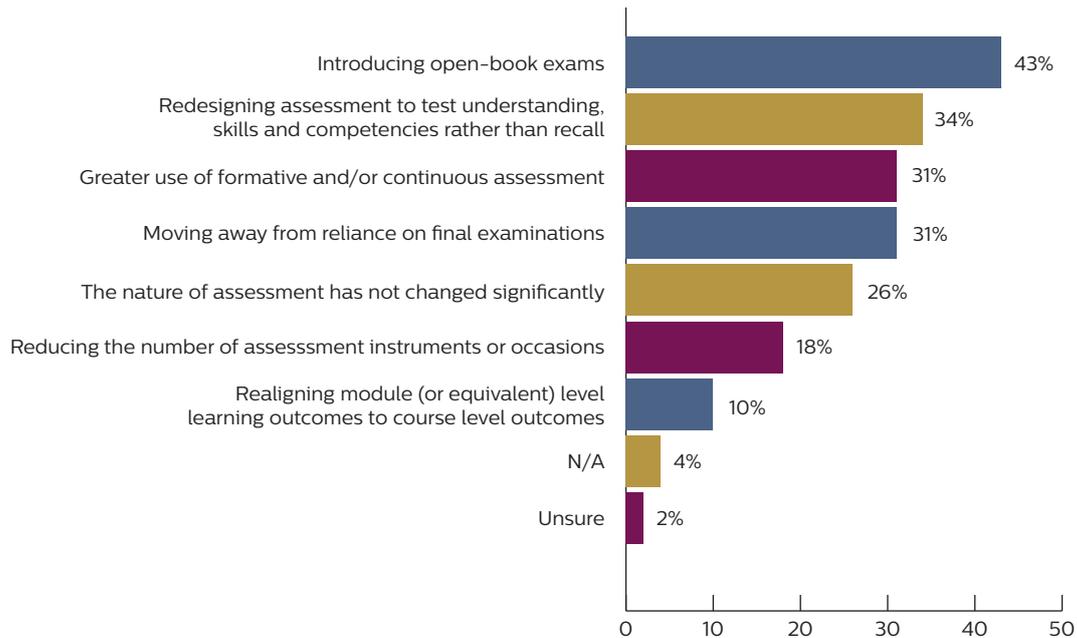
Synchronous interactions with staff were considered to have a very positive effect on student achievement, with structured video content, lecture recordings and other materials for students to revisit in their own time also seen as being important contributors to an uplift in student achievement.

Respondents thought the achievement of students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds was most likely to be negatively affected by the shift to online teaching and learning. Discussions during in-depth interviews also highlighted how some students from arts courses, for example, were spending large amounts of money on equipment and materials to ensure they could produce work on par with the facilities on campus, while other students were not in a financial position to do so.

The achievement of mature students was seen as most likely to be positively affected by the shift to online learning, given it removed the need to travel to campus and the associated time costs this brings. Examples from the in-depth interviews highlighted that attendance and take-up of tutorials had increased by at least 60% when travel was taken away, and one provider noted how retention had improved across FHEQ levels 5-7, with students highlighting less travel as a key reason that had improved their study/life balance.



Table 4: Has assessment changed post-pandemic?



Due to the shift online, open book exams have become more common place and providers have often redesigned assessments to test understanding, skills and competencies rather than purely recall. Focusing more on examining understanding, skills and competencies can facilitate more authentic assessments that prepare students to fully contribute to work and society, and those we interviewed generally perceived this as a positive move. The shift from final exams towards more formative and continuous assessment was also viewed positively in that it is less likely to reward good exam technique and enable parity of achievement.

Full report to follow in February 2022

We have identified some of the key findings from the survey and in-depth interviews. Please look out for the launch of our full report in February that will explore in greater detail the impact of digital and hybrid teaching and learning on student engagement and achievement.

You may also be interested in our [earlier publications](#) considering the link between good practice in digital pedagogy and student engagement.

This report is published in QAA's capacity as a membership organisation.