

Made Digital: Exploring Student Engagement and Performance During the Shift to Digital Teaching, Learning and Assessment



Contents

Introduction	1
Summary of key findings	2
Made Digital: Impact on teaching, learning and student engagement	3
Made Digital: Impact on assessment and achievement	10
Conclusion	16

List of figures

Figure 1: Effect of digital elements on student contribution to synchronous learning	3
Figure 2: Impact on students' contribution to synchronous learning activities	5
Figure 3: Impact on students' engagement in asynchronous learning activities	5
Figure 4: Effectiveness of methods to increase student engagement compared to before shift to online learning	7
Figure 5: Impact on students' final grades	11
Figure 6: Effect of digital delivery on student achievement	12
Figure 7: Impact of shift to digital on achievement of different student groups	12
Figure 8: Changes to assessment since pandemic	13
Figure 9: Location of provider	17
Figure 10: Type of provider	17
Figure 11: Number of students enrolled	17
Figure 12: Level at which most able to provide informed knowledge or opinion	18
Figure 13: Knowledge-base for impact of digital on student engagement, contribution and achievement	18
Figure 14: Subject area	19
Figure 15: Job role/remit	19

Introduction

This is the full report of our Made Digital project – a study exploring the approaches to digital delivery and assessment that are associated with improved student engagement and achievement. It follows a range of resources we have produced in this area with the aim of supporting QAA Members as they consider longer-term learning, teaching and assessment strategies. Those additional resources are listed in the final section of this report.

As well as drawing on the learning from our earlier work, the Made Digital project involved QAA running a survey of our members during November and December 2021. We received 322 responses to the survey and complemented this with 17 individual in-depth interviews. In all, we recorded responses from more than 90 different providers. Further information about the methodology is included at the end of this report.

This research has provided us with a range of information that will be useful for QAA Members. This includes practical ideas about what works to increase student engagement and how providers successfully adapted assessments and supported their students in a digital and hybrid environment.

It is evident that there is much data still awaiting full analysis within institutions and we encountered colleagues who were hesitant about drawing firm conclusions given the range of factors at play during the rapid shift to digital delivery and the limited opportunity there has been to consider the data in depth – for example, to really understand the differential impact of particular delivery and assessment methods on different groups of students. This is an area where we will continue to work with our members and add to the insights we are able to share – for example, through our [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#).

How to use this report

The key findings are summarised at the start and recapped at the end of each main section. The report also shares examples of how providers overcame key challenges of the pandemic and built changed approaches into current practice.

We envisage these findings – and the discussion points identified throughout the report – being useful as providers consider teaching and learning strategies and the future direction for digital and hybrid delivery. The report can also be used to inform curriculum reviews, module planning and staff development sessions.

We therefore anticipate the report having a wide audience to include academics, professional services staff, heads of departments, teaching and learning leads as well as academic developers and quality teams, all of whom play an important part in securing academic standards and providing a positive student learning experience.



Summary of key findings

Impact on teaching, learning and student engagement

- ‘Live’ interaction with academic staff is key to a positive student experience.
- Using the right combination and sequencing of activities to facilitate individual learning is more important than adopting a particular individual format or using specific digital tools.
- Getting the basics right is crucial for a positive student experience. This includes starting classes on time, students being able to sign in without glitches, being able to contact a member of staff easily (with up-to-date contact details) and having a timetable that avoids overload with too many sequential online sessions.
- Educators think that the shift to digital delivery and assessment has impacted student engagement, but views are divided around whether the effect has been positive or negative.
- Cultivating learning communities is key to promoting student engagement.
- There are concerns about increased staff workload and sustainability due to the shift to online and hybrid delivery.
- It is important that providers are aware of staff digital capabilities and offer support where necessary.

Impact on assessment and achievement

- More than half of respondents thought the shift to digital teaching and learning had affected students’ final grades, with 38% believing the shift promoted an uplift in student grades and 16% reporting it lowered them.
- The shift to online learning has positively impacted students’ digital capabilities and offered potential benefits for future employment.
- 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 important in supporting student success.
- Student groups were affected differently; the achievement of students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds was considered most likely to be negatively affected by the shift to online teaching and learning, while the achievement of mature students was seen as most likely to be positively affected.
- Providers have redesigned many of their assessments to focus on testing understanding, skills and competencies, and place less emphasis on recall.
- Some educators commented that ‘no detriment’ policies and modified mitigating circumstances procedures led to more students with credit deficits progressing in 2019–20.

Made Digital: Impact on teaching, learning and student engagement

Having to swiftly repurpose teaching for online delivery was a Herculean task for all involved. Staff and students had to adapt to new and often unknown ways of working and, for some, this occurred while attending to other family responsibilities caused or exacerbated by the pandemic, such as home schooling. Students were suddenly required to engage in teaching, learning and assessment in a digital environment which, for many, was anxiety provoking and sometimes isolating.

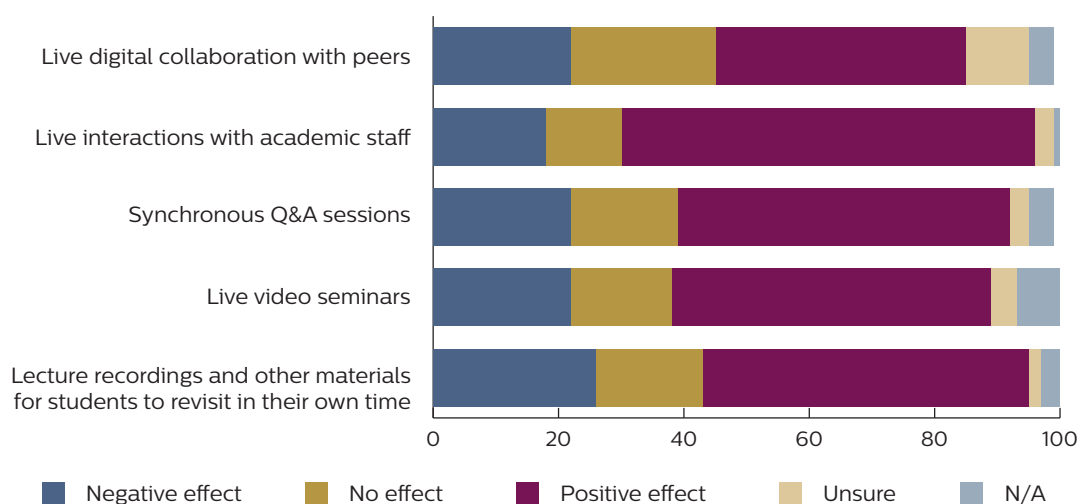
Several providers told us that delivery styles had to change significantly when moving to online teaching and learning, and this called for reimagination, not just translation. In general, staff responded well to this, developing new skills and creatively reconfiguring their teaching. As the experience of living with the pandemic progressed, we have moved towards hybrid and blended modes of delivery, with many activities that were initiated as part of the pivot now becoming permanent.

One very clear message from both the survey and in-depth interviews was the importance of in-person interaction with academic staff, a finding which also aligns with student opinion from the 2021 Advance HE/HEPI Student Experience Survey.

Interaction with academic staff is key to a positive student experience

Regarding synchronous learning activities, 66% of survey respondents believed that live interaction with academic staff had a positive impact on students' contributions in session. Opinions about students' live digital collaboration with peers scored less highly as a means of encouraging contribution during synchronous sessions, with only 40% seeing this as having a positive effect and 22% thinking it had a negative effect. Those who had insight at institution-level, rather than more granular insight or first-hand experience, tended to report more positive impacts across all categories.

Figure 1: Effect of digital elements on student contribution to synchronous learning



Many stressed that the impact was often more dependent on student characteristics or their circumstances, regardless of the delivery format used, and it was difficult to identify digital approaches that worked well for all students.

Using the right combination and sequencing of session types and activities to accompany individual learning seemed more important than adopting a particular individual format or digital tools. Educators also stressed the importance of **getting the basics right**. For example: the importance of starting classes on time; students having the correct link for the session; being able to sign in without issues; and being able to contact a member of staff easily, with up-to-date contact details. Although sometimes taken for granted, getting these basic considerations right was seen to make a very positive difference to the student experience. This extended to careful consideration of timetabling too – for example, when combining campus and online delivery, due thought should be given to sequencing to ensure students can transfer between spaces and sessions in good time and not suffer overload of too many sequential online sessions.

Creatively reimagining teaching

Practical courses were often highlighted as challenging to adapt for online delivery; however, many providers did find new and creative ways, many of which they have retained.

“ Around 66% of our provision fits within art – virtually all courses involve kit, group work, and space. Students really felt this absence, but interestingly in the NSS, drama and music courses performed well above other subjects. In this respect, we **need to rethink what a performance space might mean**, e.g. for a theatre arts space – go outside and do a performance and record it – create your own space. Use audio more. ”

Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, South West

Placements too were affected and had to be reinvented. **Online simulations became key to reimagining placements**, and we heard from a number of providers who had created ‘kits’ that were sent to students to use alongside online sessions – this practice was evident both within and beyond the arts.

“ We encountered challenges as to how to replicate the required lab in students’ homes, so we developed a **lab in a box** – a small kit with most of the things that students would use, e.g. oscilloscope, logic analysers, etc. A third of students paid to keep this equipment after completion of their course. ”

Lecturer, Scotland

“ In Fashion, sessions can require technical equipment that students didn’t have access to during the pivot online. This meant we had to think of alternative ways to meet learning outcomes, using creative play and problem solving. We worked closely with our technical team to get ‘toolkits’ sent out to students containing, where possible, the practical items that students would need to continue with their studies. This included things such as pattern paper, calico, small printing screen and shoe lasts. We also embraced sustainable practices such as natural dying from foodstuffs and upcycling from existing ‘found’ materials within their own environments. **This method brought the physical and practical aspects into the digital field.** ”

Course Leader, East Midlands

“ First year social work normally shadow professional social workers, rather than do a placement. Instead, they did a **simulation of a child protection case which provided a safe space in which to learn**, and the opportunity to revisit the same scenario again. We have plans to extend its use to the psychology department and it may enhance multidisciplinary working too. ”

Head of Department, West Midlands

Educators think the shift to digital has impacted student engagement – but views are divided

Opinions were divided on the impact that the pivot to digital delivery and assessment had on the level of students’ engagement in both asynchronous and synchronous learning activities. For synchronous learning activities, 55% believed it had decreased student engagement, while 30% thought it had increased in relation to in-class teaching. Regarding asynchronous engagement with learning activities, opinion was again divided with 43% thinking it had lowered student engagement with such activities and 41% thinking it had increased, in comparison to pre-pandemic practice.

Figure 2: Impact on students’ contribution to synchronous learning activities

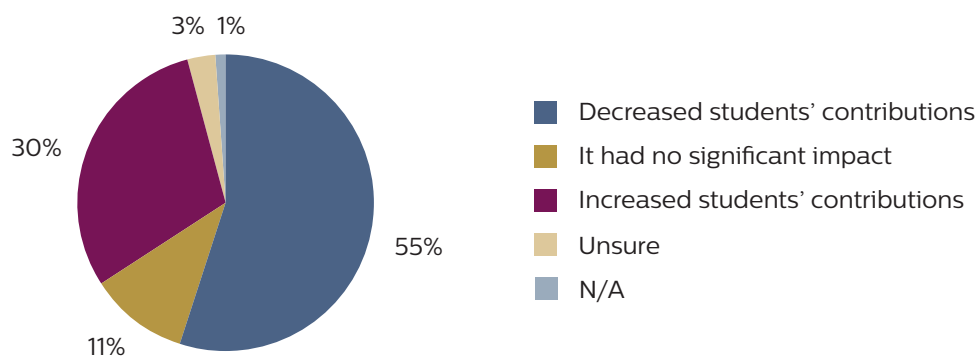
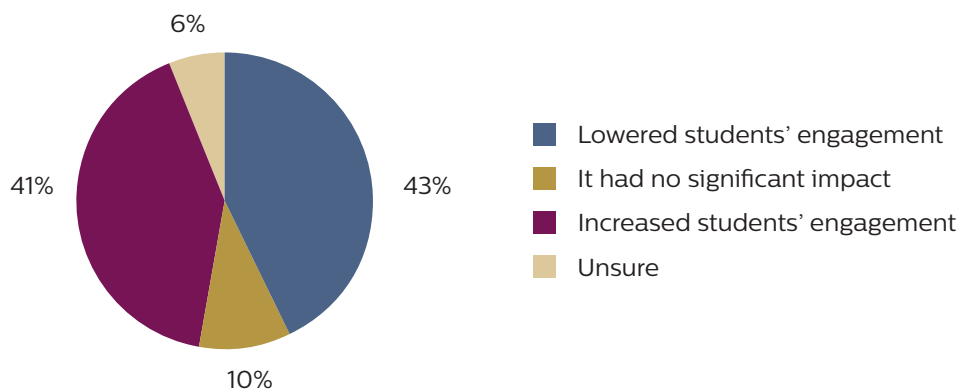


Figure 3: Impact on students’ engagement in asynchronous learning activities



This division of opinion could be due to the different experiences of educators and the support they and their students received from their institutions as part of the pivot online. It is symptomatic of the myriad of challenges the sector faced and how these were managed.

Some survey respondents perceived digital delivery as a barrier that inhibited authentic engagement. We had comments from educators that students often struggled with online groupwork tasks and when placed in breakout groups, conversation soon moved off-task or there was silence. These comments from educators aligns with those of students, who were interviewed as part of a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, [Differing Perceptions of Quality of Learning](#) (2021).

“ Breakout rooms are a bad idea. I am telling you that for free. We would rather, or the majority of us, listen to the lecture and ask questions for the whole lecture than be told to go into breakout rooms and speak about nothing, because no one is willing to engage in the content.

Student, Business Studies

”

Given such commentary, how groupwork and breakout sessions are designed and implemented needs careful consideration to make these activities a worthwhile experience. For example, some of the more negative commentary surrounding online synchronous groupwork **may be due to further scaffolding being needed for the groupwork task and expectation setting of how it could be completed.**

The flexibility that digital delivery offered was viewed positively by 14 out of 17 people we interviewed. While mature learners were seen to benefit the most from this flexibility, younger learners were perceived to sometimes struggle with the lack of structure that being on campus for lectures provided. Over half of those we spoke with during the in-depth interviews thought students felt less obliged to attend online lectures which, in turn, could lead to a reliance on asynchronous content and disengagement from synchronous learning.

The polarisation of opinion could also have been influenced by how students were able to access online activities, their motivation for learning and engagement, or how all of this intersected with any other challenges staff and students faced because of the pandemic. While digital poverty was less prominent in survey and in-depth interview responses than anticipated, some educators noted the additional challenges created for students (and staff) by poor internet connection and insufficient access to technology, often complicated further by makeshift workspaces. Digital access funds and lending equipment by providers helped remedy some of these challenges.

For international students, and those less confident in their English language abilities, prerecorded lectures and other asynchronous materials that they could use at their own pace were thought to have had a positive impact on their contributions to synchronous learning activities. Bolstered by captions and the ability to translate content into their own language, there was a sense that prerecorded materials helped facilitate better synchronous team discussion and activities with peers and staff.

An educator from medical and health sciences described how the ability to post comments and questions about asynchronous resources during synchronous sessions served to stimulate engagement:

“ The comments/questions about asynchronous resources were used to drive the synchronous session. In these sessions, students posted additional questions that were answered during the session. Best levels of student engagement I have seen in 20+ years of lecturing.

Programme Leader, London

”

It was clear that experience of teaching online was highly variable across respondents to the survey and also in-depth interviews. Some staff had taught online for several years pre-pandemic, while others had never taught online. Staff new to an online environment may have needed support for designing online learning activities to facilitate engagement, the opportunity to try new activities, and to continually learn and adapt teaching for a range of student cohorts. For example: being introduced to different pedagogical approaches, presentation and delivery skills that work particularly well in an online environment and trying new digital tools that could encourage student engagement. **It is important that providers are aware of staff's digital capabilities and offer support where necessary.**

What activities positively impacted student engagement?

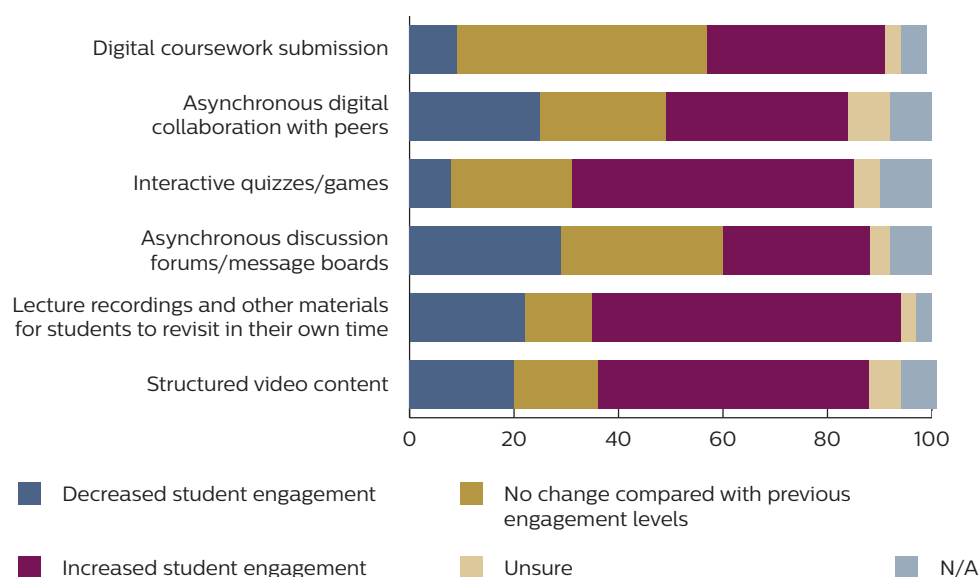
During individual in-depth interviews, educators described how staff got to know their students better as digital delivery encouraged many students to be more confident and keener in their questioning and discussions through facilities like the chat function.

“ Going forwards, large lectures will be online rather than in-person because we get better engagement from students. Students comment in the chat in a far more willing way than they would have if required to raise hands in-person. Also, teachers get to know students better through the chat function. ”

Head of Learning and Innovation, London

As highlighted, direct interaction with academic staff was seen as crucial to student engagement. However, there were comments about whether increased levels of student-staff interaction were sustainable. **Many staff continue to ‘go the extra mile’ for their students but concern has been raised about the impact of this on their health.** Particularly during 2021, many staff were feeling the strain of continued disruption and change, telling us the pace was relentless and unsustainable. Added to this many found themselves producing new material for asynchronous learning activities. Although these resources may prove invaluable and save educators time at a later stage, the workload in producing them was frontloaded and impacted during a time of immense change.

Figure 4: Effectiveness of methods to increase student engagement compared to before shift to online learning



Regarding specific activities, the creation of lecture recordings and other materials for students to revisit in their own time was seen as most likely to increase student engagement compared to engagement before the shift to online learning. This was something that students also commented on in [Differing Perceptions of Quality of Learning](#), with 73% of student respondents to that survey saying lecture recordings were valuable/very valuable. Such positivity was tempered slightly with a note of caution from some educators regarding the availability of lecture recordings and the impact on attendance at synchronous sessions, highlighting that some students did choose to rely on the lecture recordings rather than attend the live sessions. To counteract this, careful consideration will be needed regarding the value added during synchronous sessions and how blended learning activities are enacted to ensure students perceive a benefit in attending.

Cameras on or cameras off?

Some educators thought that switching cameras off encouraged students to participate more, highlighting that the quieter, shy students found their voice by keeping their cameras off and were more likely to participate than when in person. However, some did comment that having cameras off sometimes led to very poor engagement levels overall and that it was difficult not having eye contact or a sense of body language as a way of sense-checking student engagement.

“ With cameras off it is difficult to see who actually attended, rather than just logged in, so we make sure we use active learning techniques and end of session quizzes to monitor engagement. ”

Head of Department, West Midlands

Giving students the choice to keep their cameras off was seen as important from an inclusivity perspective and in many cases institutions had stressed this as a requirement.

Cultivating learning communities is key to engagement

During the pandemic, student support services were often expanded and staff were more readily available to students, as a result of the online environment. Educators were mindful to ask students about how they were feeling, not just how their learning was progressing, and they believed this had created a supportive learning community, which their students appreciated.

Yet, as one provider described, the informal, social learning environment was ‘lost to us online’. While virtual assemblies, quiz nights and equivalent online social activities partially addressed feelings of disconnection, being off-campus did mean that students were denied some of the informal aspects of student life.

“ Student experience is integral to learning. Students need to walk back to digs with mates after classes to digest, complain, gossip. Much learning goes on in these informal situations after classes, over coffee, walking home - and it’s still unclear how to achieve this online. ”

Deputy Head of Department, North

“ A lack of face-to-face provision places obstacles in learner peers developing friendships. This has the consequential effect of lecturers finding it more difficult to get learners to speak up during online lectures, less engagement, less formative assessments, and makes it more difficult to monitor, track and target set for individual learners. ”

Head of Department, Wales

The importance of **regular, open communication, facilitating an emotional climate in which students felt heard and respected**, was clearly an important factor in developing learning communities. Staff being cognisant of student expectations, of the identity and wellbeing of their community of learners, of their need for opportunities to be a community together and to have a say in how they learn, were fundamental considerations that contributed to a positive student experience throughout and beyond the pandemic. Proactive discussion and enactment of such considerations supported students to find new ways to engage with their education and their peers, and enabled staff to find ways to teach based on the expectations, values and preferences of the learning community.

Recap: Impact on teaching, learning and student engagement

- ‘Live’ interaction with academic staff is key to a positive student experience.
- Using the right combination and sequencing of activities to facilitate individual learning is more important than adopting a particular individual format or digital tools.
- Getting the basics right is crucial for a positive student experience. This includes starting lectures on time, students being able to sign in without glitches, being able to contact a member of staff easily (with up-to-date contact details) and having a timetable that avoids overload with too many sequential online sessions.
- Educators think that the shift to digital delivery and assessment has impacted student engagement, but views are divided around whether the effect has been positive or negative.
- 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.
- There are concerns about increased staff workload and sustainability due to the shift to online and hybrid delivery.
- It is important that providers are aware of staff digital capabilities and offer support where necessary.



Made Digital: Impact on assessment and achievement

The severe disruption caused by the pandemic prompted the redesign of many assessments and there was concern that this may place students at a disadvantage in comparison to students assessed in previous years.

Many providers adopted a 'no detriment' approach, devising no detriment policies that ensured students would not be adversely affected by the disruption the pandemic had caused to their studies. No detriment policies usually ensured that students would be awarded a final grade that was no lower than their recent provider assessment of their achievement. Modified mitigation procedures often accompanied no detriment policies and ensured that students could quickly obtain approval for mitigating circumstances where that was necessary.

“ The decision was taken that only SCQF level 10 modules (equivalent to FHEQ level 6) would be graded, as we wanted to recognise the importance of the final Honours year. For earlier years, a traffic light system was developed to identify those students in need of assistance, with pass/fail assessments set to alleviate student stress and give greater importance to feedback rather than the acquisition of a specific grade.

Head of School, Scotland

“ We had a much higher number of students applying for ECA (Exceptional Circumstances Affecting Assessment). Because the evidentiary requirements for ECA were lifted in response to the pandemic, a very high proportion of applications were approved. This resulted in student outcomes holding up but had a heavy impact on the department's ECA Committee workload and meant that many assessments were marked over a longer period.

Director of Learning and Teaching, North

“ We adapted so many policies as part of our safety net to minimise the effect of the pandemic on students. These included extensions up to two weeks without evidence, students were allowed to retake assignments automatically without penalty, a new algorithm for final year students to calculate their degree classification (calculated on the basis of their individual performance benchmark of marks inputted pre-pandemic) and increasing the amount of credit eligible for compensation from 20 > 40 credits.

Digital Learning Lead, South West

Although many of these adaptations enabled students to progress, some educators thought no detriment policies and modified mitigating circumstances procedures may have led to more students with credit deficits progressing in 2019-20. Survey respondents also confirmed that students who had progressed because of these modified processes were being monitored closely.

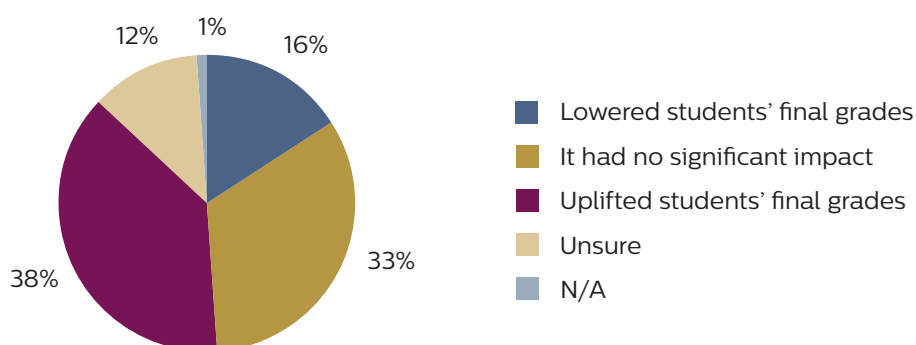
One provider noted that they had a ‘safety net’ (No Detriment Policy) in place for 2019–20 and, following analysis, determined this may have accounted for a 1% increase in the number of first-class degrees awarded. However, they also stated that there was evidence of bimodal performance, with some students described as having had ‘a terrible experience’ while others thrived, which may also have contributed.

While students during this period were supported to complete assessments online, providers told us that only where this was not possible were incomplete profiles treated positively through condonement of any incomplete module profiles. Providers also told us how they had mapped professional body requirements to ensure that any modified assessments were in line with expectations, and external examiners signed off any readjustments.

Impact on achievement

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. Respondents from smaller providers (<1,000 learners) were significantly more likely to think the pivot to digital delivery and assessment had lowered students’ final grades (33% compared to 16% for all provider types), and respondents from higher education in further education providers/colleges followed a similar trend, with 29% saying it had lowered final grades.

Figure 5: Impact on students’ final grades



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.

Some educators thought their students thrived without ‘the same outside distractions’ and this had a positive impact on their achievement. However, they also noted that students faced with a more protracted learner journey, involving requests for extensions and deferrals, often lost motivation, it impacted on their wellbeing and ultimately, their achievement. This, in turn, had considerable consequences for staff:

“

While overall marks in 2019/20 and 2020/21 have not been detrimentally affected, this masks the intense work of staff and administrators to help struggling students ‘over the line’.

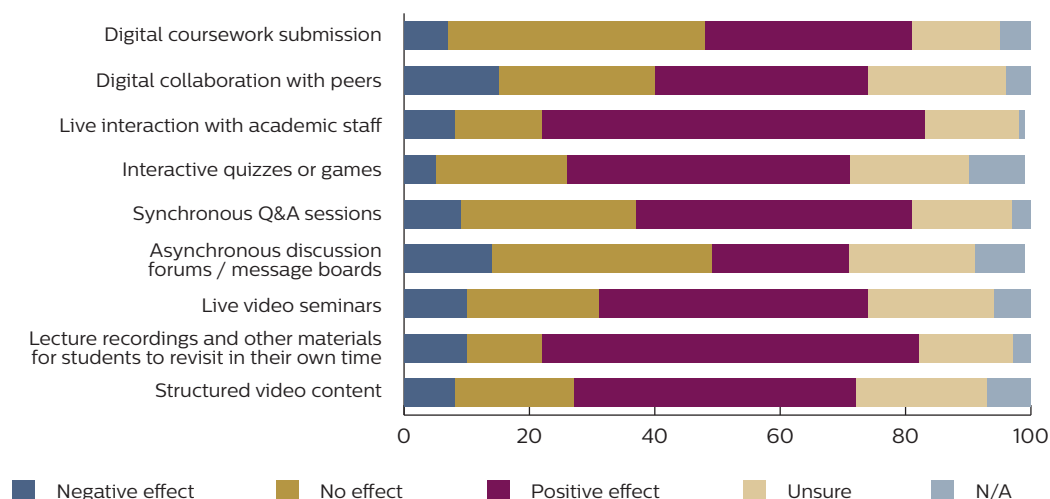
”

Director of Learning and Teaching, North

A strong theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews highlighted the **positive impact that the shift to online learning had on students' digital capabilities and the potential benefits for future employment**. With greater control over when and how they studied, we heard how many students had explored creative and alternative ways to produce their work using podcasts, recorded interviews and software they would otherwise not have considered.

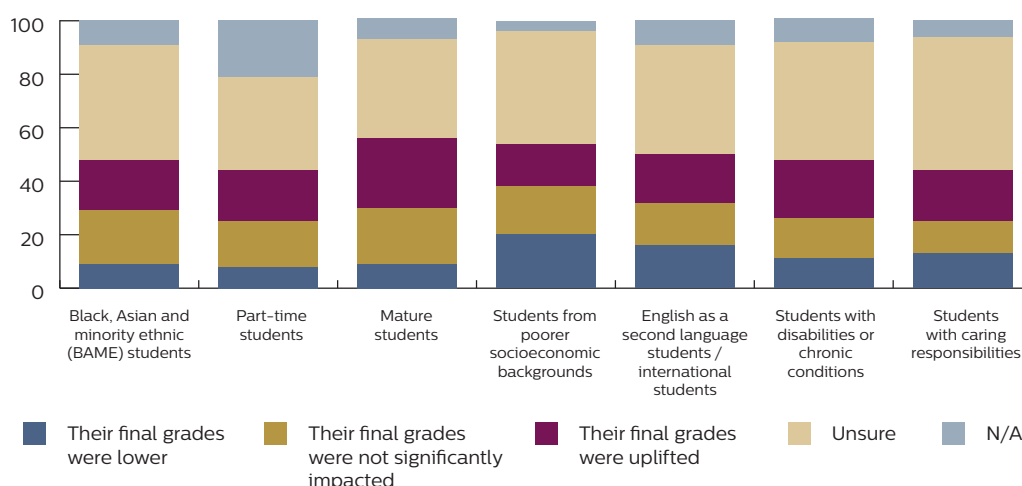
Alongside the development of digital capabilities, educators also noted an increased use of services such as LinkedIn Learning, with students increasingly mindful of developing professional knowledge and skills for employment. In this respect, the broader and more varied engagement that the shift to digital had prompted was believed to have served students well.

Figure 6: Effect of digital delivery on student achievement



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.

Figure 7: Impact of shift to digital on achievement of different student groups



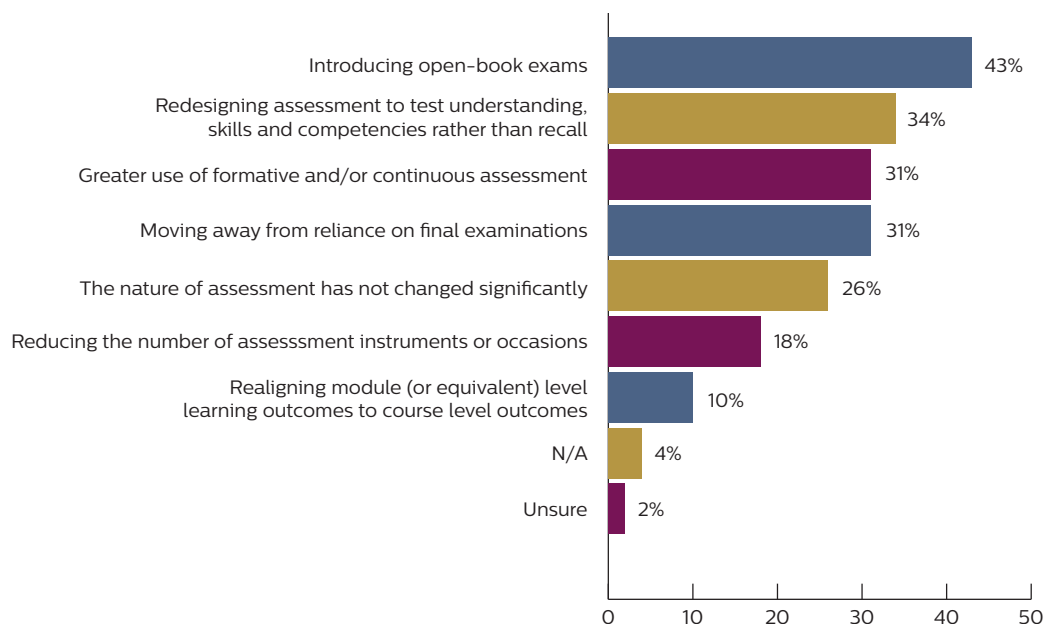
Significant proportions of educators (42% on average) were unsure how the pivot to digital learning had affected the achievement of different groups of students. They found it difficult to assess the impact of delivery methods on achievement in the wider context of the pandemic, as so many other factors had changed too. **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 a par with the facilities on campus, while other students were not in a financial position to do so.

For one provider, the introduction of a contextualised grading scheme that considered the ‘kit’ that a student had access to, their workspace, as well as external responsibilities that might impact their work, helped to mitigate against any perceived advantage. Making staff more keenly aware of the level of ‘stretch’ that students had to make to bring their ideas to life, the revised grading scheme enabled more priority to be placed on criteria such as conceptualisation, critical analysis, development of ideas and professional engagement. Students who would typically have had to produce physical work for assessments were instead allowed to present work that was conceptualised and represented digitally – for example, a curated gallery of digital artwork or a digitally-created fashion collection in place of clothing items.

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 one provider highlighted that attendance and take-up of tutorials had increased by at least 60% when the need to travel was taken away and one provider noted how retention had improved across FHEQ Level 5–7 (SCQF Level 9–11), with students highlighting less travel as a key reason due to it positively impacting their study/life balance.

Evolving assessment

Figure 8: Changes to assessment since pandemic



Due to the shift online, open book exams have become more commonplace and providers have often redesigned assessments to test understanding, skills and competencies rather than purely recall. Focusing 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 was less likely to reward good exam technique and enable parity of achievement between students.

“ There is a general consensus within staff and student groups that open book examinations have improved the abilities of our students. Open book papers, where students should not be able to find easy solutions on the internet or within their notes, force question setters and students to more deeply consider the content and issues raised within the modules. Often this encourages greater reference to real life situations and requires understanding of the module content as the foundation for the solution, rather than the solution itself. ”

Deputy Head of Department, North East

Yet, while open book exams or ‘time-restricted coursework’, as one Head of Department described them, were viewed positively by many, some were concerned about higher levels of plagiarism and collusion, and invigilation was seen as crucial:

“ As vets they need a certain level of knowledge to be clinically competent ... In 2020, when all assessment was remote and open book, with little time to prepare for this change, the students did very well. This led to concerns regarding collusion and lack of underpinning knowledge. In 2021, we modified our approach to open book assessment and results are more aligned to pre-COVID.’ ”

Programme Leader, East Midlands

“ Protracted (5-day) open book exams at the start of the pandemic caused significant grade inflation. Subsequent adoption of short-timed open book assessments (2/3-hour) has returned mark distributions to pretty much normal. ”

Quality Manager, East Midlands

As highlighted in research for QAA Members on [academic misconduct penalties](#), in response to higher perceived risks of academic misconduct, providers have developed enhanced academic integrity modules for students to complete online, which have proven successful in reducing low-level or unintentional cases of plagiarism and collusion. One-to-one coaching, where cohort size and resources allow, and extended induction periods have also been used as supplementary student support measures. QAA research examining [how providers are addressing academic misconduct](#) highlights that providers noticed students are more likely to comply with assessment regulations if smaller, lower-stakes assessments are used throughout the semester, instead of larger assessments at the end of modules.

“ Concentrating on developing understanding rather than memorising facts for an exam is far more rewarding and beneficial all round. This, along with continuous assessment to ensure continuity of engagement, has been key to the move to digital delivery. ”

Module Leader, North

Providers highlighted their commitment to ensuring all students were aware of all types of academic misconduct and approached their assessments fully informed. Our work in supporting the sector has also generated the [Academic Integrity Charter](#) – a set of baseline principles around which UK providers can build their own policies and practices to ensure that every student’s qualification is genuine, verifiable and respected. QAA’s longstanding efforts to prohibit the provision of paid-for cheating services bore fruit in 2021 when the Westminster Government agreed to criminalise essay mills in its Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. The pandemic brought many of these issues to the surface and demonstrated sector commitment to ensuring academic integrity remains a key focus well beyond COVID-19.

Recap: Impact on assessment and achievement

- More than half of respondents thought the shift to digital teaching and learning has affected students’ final grades, with 38% believing the shift promoted an uplift in student grades and 16% reporting it lowered them.
- The shift to online learning has positively impacted students’ digital capabilities and offered potential benefits for future employment.
- Synchronous interaction 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 important in supporting student success.
- Student groups were affected differently; the achievement of students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds was considered most likely to be negatively affected by the shift to online teaching and learning, while the achievement of mature students was seen as most likely to be positively affected.
- Some educators commented that no detriment policies and modified mitigating circumstances procedures led to more students with credit deficits progressing in 2019–20.
- Providers have redesigned many of their assessments to focus on testing understanding, skills and competencies and place less emphasis on recall.



Conclusion

Our evidence indicates that digital delivery can have a positive impact on teaching, learning and student engagement; but having a clear strategy, getting the basics right, setting clear expectations around student contributions, and creating opportunities for interaction with academic staff are all key factors. It is evident that learner characteristics and circumstances have an impact on the kinds of delivery and assessment that will help them to succeed. Not all approaches and activities will work for all learners. However, being proactive in the cultivation of a community of learners, in sustaining a dialogue and culture around how students learn, can be highly effective in providing the right kind of support at the right time. It is important to continue to facilitate a culture in which students (and staff) feel heard and respected.

While for most students (and staff) the return to in-person teaching was welcomed, educators did also recognise digital delivery as an effective and creative way of expanding existing provision and providing students with something different and/or more flexible. Affording students greater control over when and how they study, and how they produce assessed coursework can positively impact on their digital capabilities and offer potential benefits for future employment.

Changes to assessment approaches were also welcomed by many, with particular emphasis on the benefits of focusing on testing understanding, skills and competencies. However, some staff were less positive about approaches such as open book examinations, citing potential challenges around academic integrity. As the sector develops its thinking on future approaches to assessment, these are some of the factors that will need to be addressed.

Where next?

Through the process of conducting the survey and interviews, it is evident that there remains a source of rich data in the sector to explore. Many of those we spoke to highlighted that there had not yet been opportunity to analyse all of the data collected within institutions about student engagement and performance. There was also reluctance by staff to draw firm conclusions about the move to online delivery and student achievement due to the many factors that have a bearing on students' performance.

We will continue to work with our members to learn from the digital pivot with the aim of guiding future approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. For example, through further exploration of the different impacts of digital delivery on different student groups. A number of our [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#) from 2021 and 2022 will provide insights to the experience of different student groups – for example, *Differing Perceptions of Quality of Learning*. A full list of projects can be found on our website.

Methodology

QAA's Made Digital survey was live between 23 November–19 December 2021 and generated a total of 322 responses.

In addition to the survey, QAA completed 17 individual in-depth interviews with seven higher education providers in the UK from August–September 2021. Interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams and lasted up to one hour. We also received two written responses to the semi-structured discussion guide.

Objectives

The Made Digital project had the following aims:

- 1 – to examine the impact of digital delivery and assessment on student performance and achievement
- 2 – to examine the impact of digital delivery and assessment on student engagement.

Survey breakdown

Profile of respondents: provider characteristics

Figure 9: Location of provider

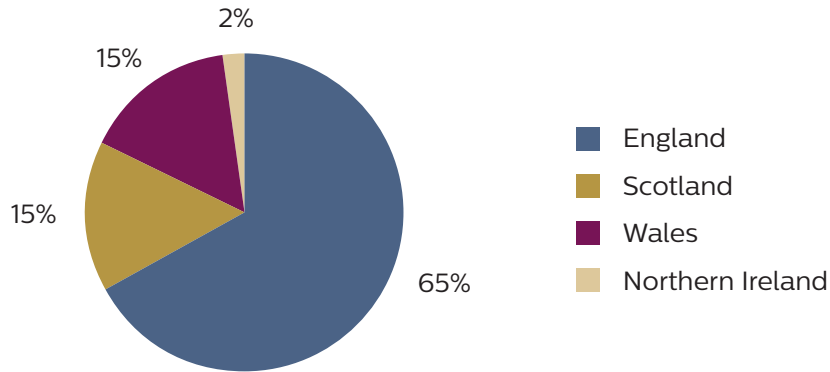


Figure 10: Type of provider

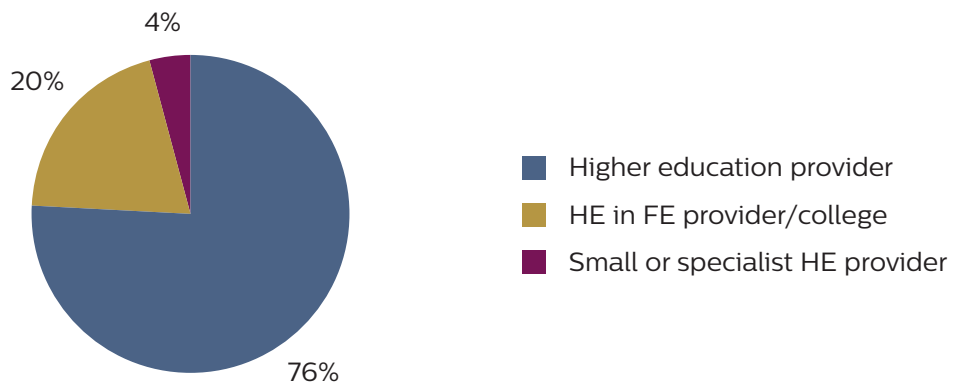
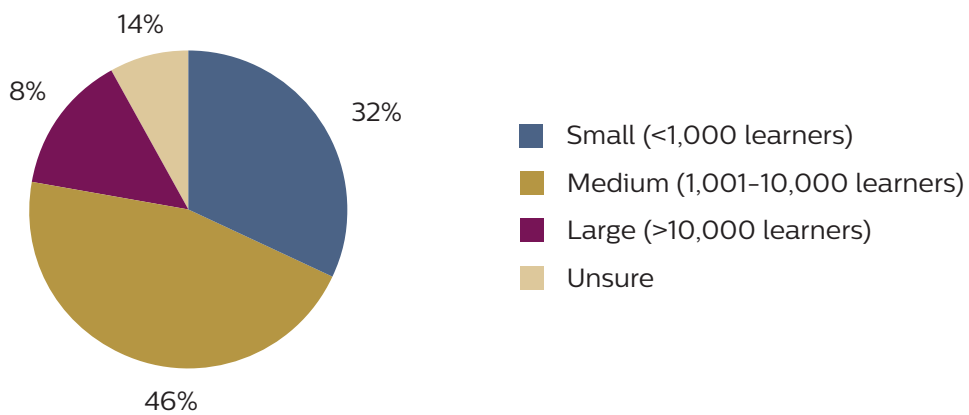


Figure 11: Number of students enrolled



Profile of respondents: knowledge and expertise

Figure 12: Level at which most able to provide informed knowledge or opinion

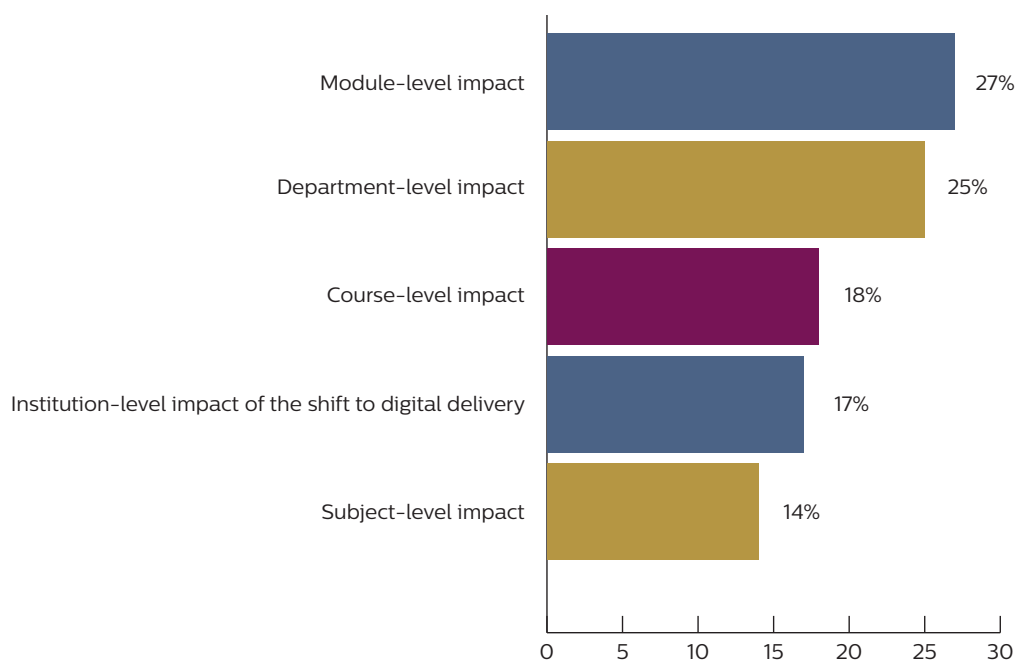
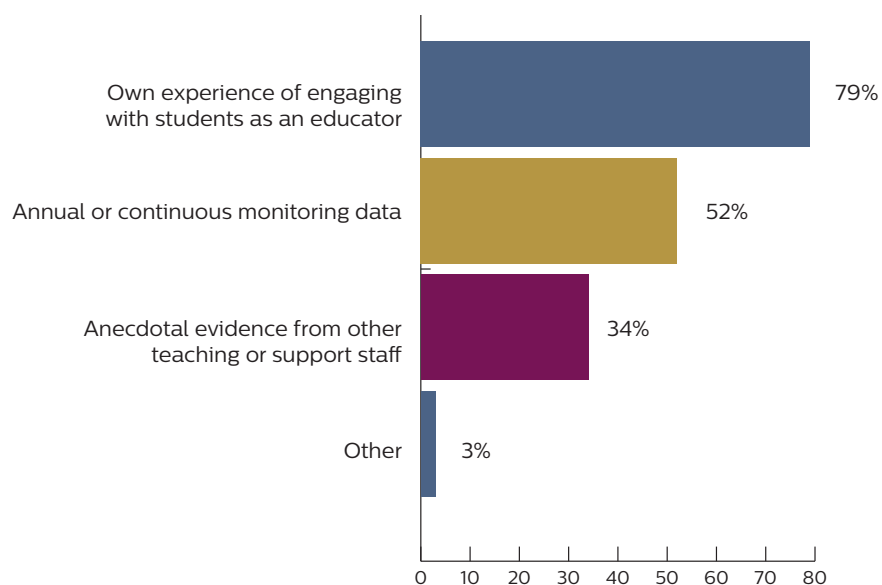


Figure 13: Knowledge-base for impact of digital on student engagement, contribution and achievement



Profile of respondents: role and specialism

Figure 14: Subject area

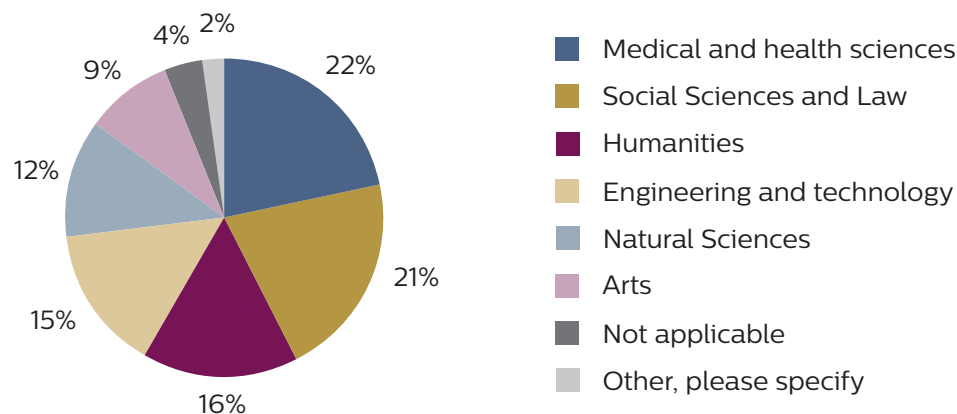
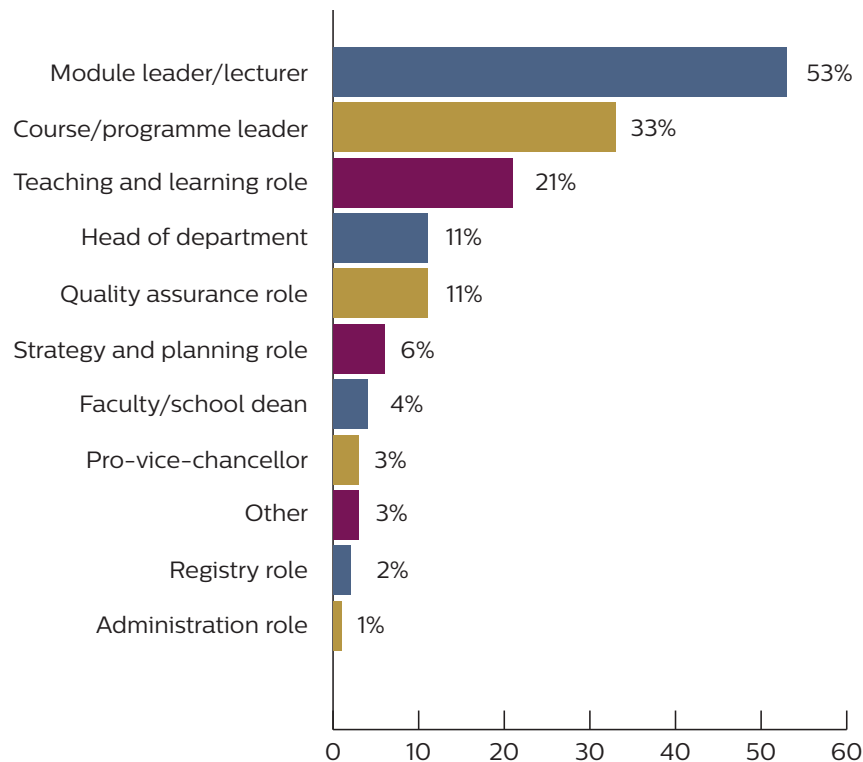


Figure 15: Job role/remit



Acknowledgements

QAA wishes to thank all respondents to the Made Digital survey and all those who participated in individual in-depth interviews. We know your time is precious and we thank you for your commitment to furthering sector knowledge.

Additional resources

- [Hallmarks of Success: Student-Centred Learning and Teaching](#)
- [Hallmarks of Success: Assessment in Digital and Blended Pedagogy](#)
- [Differing Perceptions of Quality of Learning](#)
- [Advice on Digital Assessment Security](#)
- [The Impact of Good Practice in Digital Delivery on Student Engagement, Progression and Achievement \[Overview paper\]](#)
- [The Impact of Good Practice in Digital Delivery on Student Engagement, Progression and Achievement \[Case studies\]](#)
- [How Good Practice in Digital Delivery and Assessment has Affected Student Engagement and Success – an Early Exploration](#)
- [How UK Higher Education Providers Managed the Shift to Digital Delivery during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Quality Compass: Navigating Assessment in a Digital Environment](#)
- [A Launch Pad for Future Success: Using Outcomes-based Approaches to Scaffold the Pandemic Year and Build for the Future \[Briefing paper\]](#)
- [A Launch Pad for Future Success: Using Outcomes-based Approaches to Scaffold the Pandemic Year and Build for the Future \[Overview report\]](#)
- [Using Outcomes-based Approaches to Learning, Teaching and Assessment – Reflections, Tools and Case Studies](#)

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

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2022
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
Tel: 01452 557000
Web: www.qaa.ac.uk