AdvanceHE

+ Innovative Practice Grants 2025

Contents

Foreword

I'm delighted to share the outputs from this year's Innovative Practice Grants. The funding supports the development of the case studies that highlight and share good practice in small, specialist, independent and college-based HE institutions.

In this, the second year we have run the scheme, we asked for submissions which aligned to our Member Benefit themes of Securing Student Outcomes, Designing Education for the Future and Protecting Inclusion in Times of Change. These themes were developed in collaboration with the sector, in order to meet the challenges that all higher education institutions are facing at the moment.

As such, the good practice that these case studies highlight will be of interest to many others in all types of institution across the sector and to our members around the world. I hope and believe the evidence and solutions offered in these studies can be explored and adapted for use in a wide variety of contexts.

This collection contains 19 case studies from 17 institutions, including **the power of personalised and inclusive feedback at Bridgwater and Taunton College; meeting the training and CPD needs of busy medical and allied health care professionals at the Institute for Optimum Nutrition and; supporting a student with multiple comorbidities at Regent College London** among the many insightful and innovative schemes showcased in this document.

I'd like to thank all of the contributors to this collection for their brilliant work, with the hope that their work will inspire others to develop their own effective and innovative practices in higher education.

Karen Taylor, Head of Membership and Development, Advance HE

Securing student outcomes

Scaling impactful practice across multiple campuses at Arden University

Graeme Hathaway, Sree Beg, Saikou Sanyang, Mike McNeilis, Zulakha Desai, Jacqueline Foley, Arden University

Background and context

Having received degree awarding powers in 2015, Arden University supports more than 27,000 students both online and in person. As a rapidly growing private university, turning 10 in 2025, Arden is embracing a multi-campus model. In the summer of 2024, Arden embarked on investing in individuals to lead this change "in the spotlight".

For the last 10 months, overseen by Deputy Provost Professor Brian Smith, six Academic Directors have been experimenting, refining and scaling impactful practice across UK campuses in Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and London.

Figure 1. Arden University's UK Academic Directors (2024-25). Photo taken at November 2024 graduation ceremony. From left to right: Graeme Hathaway, Dr Saikou Sanyang, Zulakha Desai, Jacqueline Foley, Dr Sree Beg, Dr Mike McNeilis

As Ian Dunn outlines in his HEPI blog (2022), leading change is often painful and needs support, creativity and the frameworks to manage the process. We hope this case study provides insight into how harnessing combined specialisms of leaders can address such challenges. While the examples provided are attributed to individual campuses, this represents an Academic Director leading an initiative. Impactful practice is spread across the University via this network at the earliest opportunity.

The power of presence

At the London-based Tower Hill campus, Dr Sree Berg has embedded the new role within the campus leadership team. By providing physical presence five days a week, collective responsibility has been fostered between large faculty and support teams. Improving communication through contact lists, campus meetings and an appreciation of everyone's role has led to increased student submission rates consistently over the last three semesters.

> "It's good to have an Academic Director on campus. You can already see the difference. There is now someone bringing all the things together."
>
> Tower Hill campus lecturer

Campus team belonging

Since September, Holborn campus in central London has created a vibrant online community, drawing on the principles of Third Space shared by Veles et al (2023), to build relationships and social capital. Leveraging an existing, but previously under-valued, platform, Graeme Hathaway's campus chat provides a space for 200+ participants (academics and support staff) to feel connected both locally and strategically, sharing updates, asking for help and celebrating each other. Increased professional development attendance and morale boosting cross-departmental connections are being seen.

> "Our Holborn chat is a fantastic space that has created community, connection and belonging within our on-campus team; we peer support each other with issues, share exciting news and spotlight good practice. It helps us to feel part of the bigger picture rather than simply turn up, teach, and leave."
>
> Holborn campus lecturer

Confidence building in widening participation

Also in London, at the Ealing campus, Dr Saikou Sanyang has led on early identification of learner needs and the provision of proactive intervention. Aimed at enhancing student outcomes, coordinated academic training with Arden's Wellbeing, Disability Support, Access and Participation teams has helped maximise inclusive classroom resources, teaching approaches and developed confidence. An increase in lecturer referral of students to these support services across the campus is evident.

> "I now feel more confident in triaging support – recognising when a student may require academic flexibility, additional pastoral care, or one-to-one support."
>
> Ealing campus lecturer

Clarifying campus activities and strategic objectives

At Manchester and Leeds campuses respectively, Dr Mike McNeilis and Jacqueline Foley have been refining collaborative work aligned to B3 and TEF priorities. Mike's structured weekly campus meetings bring academic and student experience teams together to co-create campus plans and service level agreements.

> "Weekly meetings have increased visibility of our English Language Hub. Lecturers are more receptive to chatting to us on campus and referring students to us."
>
> Manchester campus English Language Hub tutor

Jacqueline has been engaging the student voice through a university-wide photo storytelling initiative, based on reflective photo-voice principles.

> "I enjoyed the photo contest. It gave me a reason to think about my student experience. It's a joyful activity."
>
> Leeds campus student

Applied professional development

Based at the Birmingham campus, Zulakha Desai has led on establishing academic research groups. As a teaching-intensive institution, Arden is growing its research experience by launching its inaugural Applied Research Strategy in 2025, aligned to teaching improvements. Each campus has had the opportunity to help shape this. Strategically growing others is acknowledged as an attribute of effective leadership which in turn benefits the whole university (Dobree, 2022).

> "Arden is full of active researchers. It's great using our pedagogical evidence to inform our teaching, making our practice truly reflect our students."
>
> Birmingham campus lecturer

It is early to ascertain the long-term impact of these roles. However, we are happy to share some key considerations for organisations embarking on similar journeys.

1   There's an importance placed on who is seen to be *leading* a campus daily. Providing a focal point, primarily for academic staff, is fundamental, especially where line managers may be remote.

2   On-campus, communication goes beyond emails and generic online posting, especially where colleagues may be a mix of permanent and hourly paid. It needs constant, affirming action with dedicated curation time to build a sense of belonging within a larger organisational ecosystem.

3   Providing structure, visibility and acknowledgement of individual work, whether academic or support, within a strategic vision, both values and empowers colleagues to make a break from siloed working tendencies.

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From struggle to success: the power of personalised and inclusive feedback

Qusai Al-Waked, Bridgwater and Taunton College, University Centre

Introduction

Fostering student success in higher education requires nurturing confidence, motivation and academic resilience, especially for those facing initial challenges common across many disciplines. Many students grapple with adapting to rigorous academic demands or lack self-confidence due to prior experiences, necessitating innovative and empathetic teaching approaches. Effective feedback is widely acknowledged as a backbone of this process, directly impacting student learning, engagement and progression (Mahlangu, 2020). This case study details an initiative focused on the impact potential of personalised, structured and inclusive feedback mechanisms. It explores how tailoring feedback to individual needs, embedding encouragement within constructive criticism and providing clear, actionable guidance can shift students from underperformance towards outstanding results. Research consistently highlights feedback as a critical element in the learning process (Al-Bashir, Kabir and Rahman, 2016), yet its effectiveness often centers on its delivery and personalisation. This study argues that personalised, supportive feedback creates a crucial sense of belonging and significantly enhances student engagement, confidence and academic outcomes. The initiative was implemented within Edexel Level 4 HNC Construction and the Built Environment (Construction) Year One students over 12 months, demonstrating a practical application of inclusive pedagogy.

The initiative: designing and implementing personalised feedback

Recognising that generic feedback often fails students struggling with confidence or specific learning barriers, this initiative aimed to create a more effective, human-centered feedback loop, informed by pedagogical research on feedback's impact and reflective practice. The initiative specifically targeted five students identified through early assessments and engagement patterns as underperforming and potentially at risk of disengagement. This focused approach allowed for in-depth application and evaluation of the personalised strategy before considering wider implementation.

The methodology focused on providing highly tailored feedback after key learning outcomes were assessed or just prior to the final submission deadline for major assignments. This timing was crucial, offering students timely opportunities to act upon guidance. Feedback was structured to foreground strengths, building confidence before addressing areas requiring improvement. Suggestions and recommendations were framed as manageable next steps, not deficits, breaking down complex tasks. The feedback language used was intentionally motivational and supportive, showing challenges as growth opportunities. In addition to that, the sample students also received regular, informal one-on-one check-in sessions that supplemented written feedback. These sessions were primarily focused on clarifying feedback points, discussing student progress, and addressing any arising

anxieties, providing a safe space for dialogue and strengthening the supportive teacher-student relationship. This innovative approach was designed to be inherently inclusive, responding to diverse student needs and fostering resilience through sustained, personalised support.
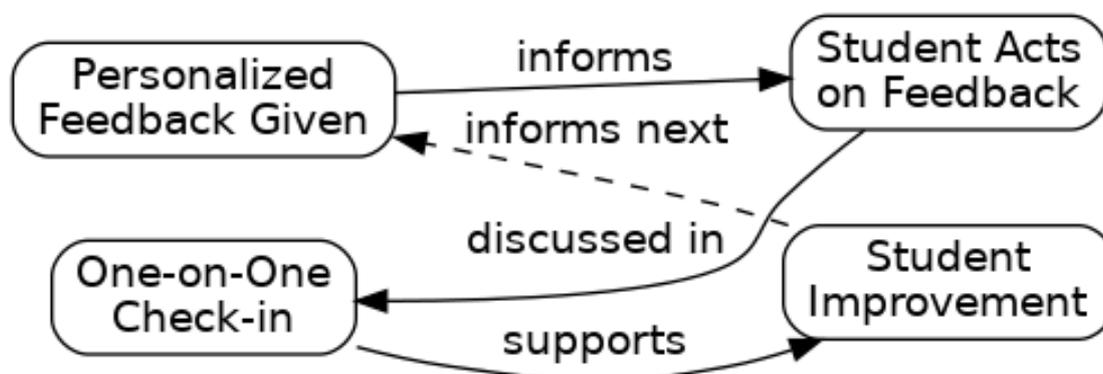
Figure 1. Personalised feedback loop diagram

Measuring impact

Key performance indicators (KPIs) focused on quantitative (assignment grades) and qualitative (student feedback on confidence, motivation, understanding) measures. Qualitatively, feedback was gathered through informal conversations during check-ins.

The results were profoundly positive. Quantitatively, the target group showed a remarkable turnaround, with an average 70% improvement in assignment grades over 12 months, progressing from initial fails or passes to achieving merits and distinctions.

Qualitatively, student feedback highlighted the initiative's affective impact. Comments included: "The feedback made me feel supported and encouraged to keep improving," indicating increased motivation. Another shared, "I finally understood where I was going wrong and how to fix it," pointing to the feedback's clarity and actionability. The value of additional support was also clear: "The one-on-one sessions helped me feel less overwhelmed and more in control of my learning." These testimonials and outcomes align with findings on the benefits of personalised digital feedback approaches (Maier and Klotz, 2022).
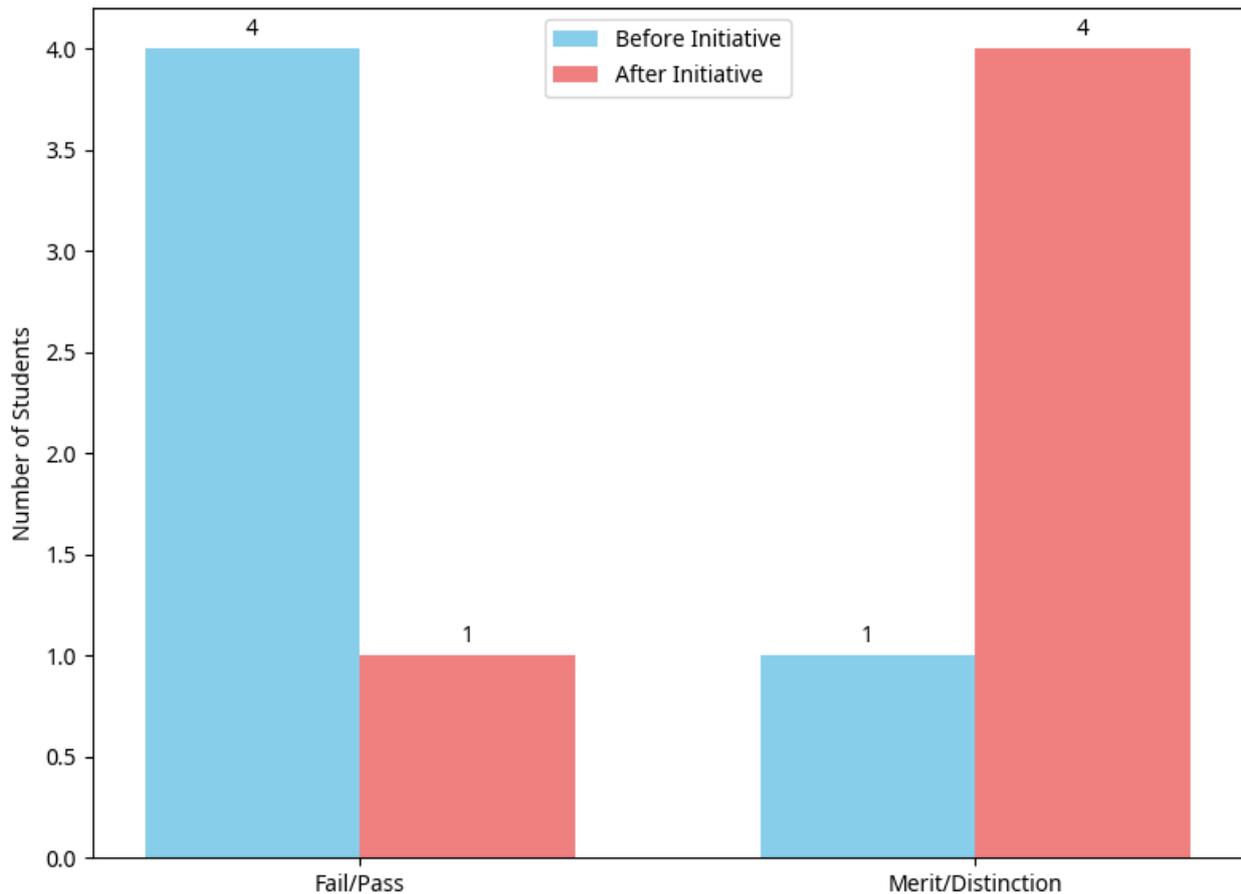
Figure 2. Conceptual grade improvement chart for the target group

Discussion and reflection

The initiative's success stemmed from several influencing factors. Personalised feedback made guidance and support relevant and impactful, helping students feel seen and understood. The constructive and motivational feedback built confidence rather than eroding it. Providing clear, actionable next steps clarified improvement, empowering students by enhancing their self-efficacy – their belief in their ability to succeed. Regular check-ins amplified this, fostering belonging and reducing overwhelm. The initiative demonstrated how inclusive teaching practices can dismantle barriers. Effective feedback serves as a crucial marker for student success in higher education (Mahlangu, 2020).

While impactful, the time commitment for this approach on larger numbers of students can be challenging. Exploring how technology or structured peer feedback mechanisms could support personalisation at scale is a logical next step. Ensuring consistency and quality in any scaled-up approach would be paramount.

Conclusion and future plans

This case study demonstrates the significant positive impact of a thoughtfully designed, personalised and inclusive feedback strategy on student success. By focusing on individual needs, motivation and confidence-building, the initiative successfully transformed the

academic performance of previously underperforming students. The substantial improvement in grades and the powerful student testimonials provide compelling evidence for this practice's efficacy, highlighting that how we communicate feedback is crucial for fostering engagement, academic resilience and a sense of belonging.

The positive outcomes suggest strong potential for wider application. Future plans involve exploring strategies to embed this personalised approach more broadly, potentially leveraging digital tools for feedback delivery or developing guided peer-assessment frameworks aligned with these principles. Further research could also investigate the long-term impacts on student retention, overall achievement and future study or employment. Ultimately, this study strengthens the value of investing in inclusive teaching practices and highlights the transformative power of feedback when delivered with empathy, clarity and a genuine commitment to student academic development.

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'HEART' – The Hartpury Engagement, Achievement, Retention and Transition Project

Matthew Cole, Jeni Thomas, Linda Greening, Kate Wilkinson, Hartpury University

Introduction

Hartpury University is a small (around 2,500 students in 2024-25) and specialist institution. Despite our TEF triple-gold rating, we face ongoing challenges with student engagement and student retention, which is typical of institutions our size and the wider HE sector, likely due to increased cost-of-living pressures making it more difficult for students to engage in their studies.

During 2022-23, we experienced record-high student withdrawal rates, with 14.3% of first-year students and 9.8% of all students, withdrawing during the academic year. This was our second successive year of poor retention, indicating a worrying trend that an increasing number of our students were failing to complete their academic programme, with serious implications for their future earning potential and wellbeing. Clearly, allowing this to continue was not an option as these losses were not only detrimental to the student experience but were also negatively impacting on the university's financial health.

As a TEF gold institution that prioritises excellence in teaching and learning, student continuation and achievement data are important indicators of our quality in these areas. High levels of student withdrawal can have a significant reputational impact and so we decided to put a priority action in place to address these issues.

At Hartpury, our Academic Personal Tutors (APTs) are the key members of the programme team who 'know our students' and receive dedicated training and workload allocation to ensure that they provide effective personalised support. Part of their role involves monitoring and supporting student engagement. However, many APTs reported that current engagement data was either not readily accessible, lacking in accuracy, or of superficial value, thus limiting their ability to intervene effectively. Therefore, our overarching ambition was to provide better quality data, in a timely manner, to enable APTs to perform their role more effectively, improving student engagement, and thus reduce the volume of student withdrawals. Additionally, we aimed to better understand the causes of student disengagement so that we could better support students to achieve their qualification aim and improve their lifelong outcomes.

Methodology

A Student Retention Task and Finish Group was formed to explore the reasons behind student withdrawals and examine student demographic data, along with end-of-year student achievement profiles, to identify trends which may indicate that a student is at a higher risk of withdrawal.

Our analysis revealed several retention risk characteristics, based on the data we held on student profiles, for both undergraduate and postgraduate students (Table 1).

Undergraduate retention risk characteristics	Postgraduate retention risk characteristics
POLAR Quintile 1 & 2 backgrounds	Disclosed learning difficulty
Aged 21 or older	Disclosed mental health condition
Studying part-time	Returning students
Declared any form of disability	Male students
Admitted through the UCAS clearing process	Studying part-time
Returning from previous suspended studies	
First year of study	
Retaking the year or trailing module credit	

Table 1. Retention risk characteristics for undergraduate and postgraduate students

To be considered a retention risk, an individual student needed to possess **two or more** of these characteristics.

Implementation

A new self-service attendance monitoring system was introduced, providing 'live' attendance data to immediately detect changes in student behaviour. A new Student Engagement Policy was developed to guide APTs around the use of student profile information available to them and support students to re-engage with their studies.

Automated weekly Attendance Monitoring Reports (AMRs) were introduced to provide clearer identification of retention risk students. The reports prioritised students with multiple risk factors and marked these with a retention risk flag (see Figure 1).

Student Ref	Student	Retention Risk	Course Name
HYC50		⚠ Yes	BSc (Hons) Equine Science (with foundation year) (FFT)
HYC50		No	BSc (Hons) Equine Dental Science (with Foundation Year) (FFT)

Figure 1. Sample of new AMRs allowing easy identification of Retention Risk students (note: student ref and names removed to protect anonymity.

Additionally, a more comprehensive set of attendance data allowed acute monitoring of individual student attendance on a rolling fortnightly basis, as well over the whole academic year (see Figure 2). Module-level attendance data was also added to better identify specific areas of disengagement.

Module Ref	Module Title			Attendance %	Total Sessions	Marked Present		Attendance %	Total Sessions	Marked Present
HANV8B-30-3	Academic Skills in Practice (Internship)		⚠	70.6	34	24		100.0	4	4
HANV8E-30-3	Foundation Biological Principles		⚠	45.6	136	62	⚠	37.5	16	6
HANVG3-30-3	Foundation Sports Science		⚠	51.2	301	154		50.0	28	14
HANV8C-15-3	Reviewing Literature	☑	⚠	16.7	36	6			0	0
HANVG4-15-3	Foundation Skills Development	☑	⚠	70.0	60	42			0	0
			Overall	50.8	567	288		50.0	48	24

Figure 2. Sample of attendance monitoring data within new AMRs.

New retention risk flags were also added to individual student profiles on our student records system (Staff Advantage), which enabled APTs to explore individual student characteristics and provide personalised support tailored to each student's needs (see Figure 3).
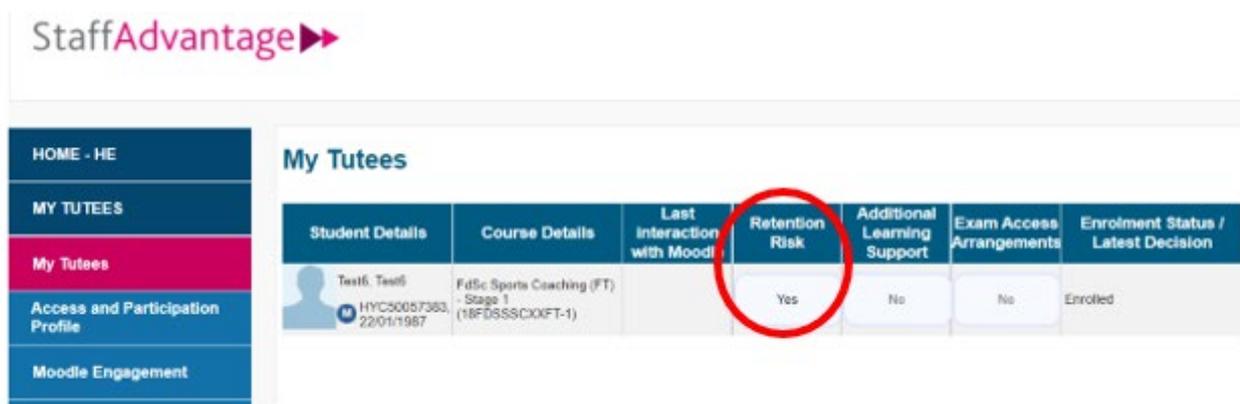
Figure 3. Screenshot from Staff Advantage to show new 'Retention Risk' flag, enabling APT to explore student characteristic data in more detail.

Changes were also applied to our withdrawal/suspension processes that included the option to choose from a more comprehensive set of reasons. Student records data was then updated, enabling more informed analysis and more accurate trends to be identified.

Finally, recognising that a high proportion of students failed to return to their studies after the summer break, we identified three sources of data that would enable us to monitor student engagement during this period and ascertain those who were at most risk of non-return:

1 Engagement with our virtual learning environment (Moodle).

2 Reapplication for student finance.

3 Online re-enrolment for 2024/25.

This data was provided to APTs via weekly reports, which enabled them to target support for individual students and encourage their return.

Outcomes

This project has already demonstrated significant impact, with student withdrawals during 2023-24 decreasing by ~25%, and first-year student withdrawals dropping by a similar magnitude to ~11%. Additionally, the number of students who failed to return to their studies following the summer break reduced by almost a third. Our Exam Board data showed module completion levels were far higher than previous years, meaning that more students will likely now complete their studies and reap the lifelong benefits associated with a higher education qualification.

We attribute these successes to early intervention by our APTs and our ongoing staff training programme, which ensures that APTs are confident in supporting our students and signposting to specialist help when needed. As evidence of this, our recent graduating cohort rated Hartpury's academic support within the Top 10 of all UK universities (2024 National Student Survey), and we are currently ranked sixth in the UK for teaching quality (The Sunday Times Good University Guide 2024).

We are incredibly proud of these outcomes, especially in the context of the challenges of trying to achieve these within a small, digitally immature university and we expect the foundations laid by this project will enhance student engagement and retention for years to come.

Integrating dance science to secure learning-centred outcomes at London Contemporary Dance School

Steph De'ath, London Contemporary Dance School

At London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS), we have developed an interdisciplinary, learning-centred model that enhances student experience and outcomes by embedding dance science into every layer of our BA (Hons) Contemporary Dance programme. This case study outlines how our integrated approach, combining education, research and support, equips students with the tools to manage the demands of training and performance in sustainable and meaningful ways.

While dance psychology is a central thread within our model, it is delivered as part of a broader dance science curriculum that includes anatomy, physiology, injury prevention, hormone health and performance enhancement. Together, these areas cultivate critical understanding of the dancing body and mind, preparing students to make informed, reflective decisions in their training and future careers.

Dance science education in the curriculum

Dance science is structurally embedded across all years of the undergraduate programme, ensuring students receive a progressive, evidence-informed education. The curriculum has been co-created with students and faculty. First-year content introduces foundational knowledge, before progressing to more applied and critical learning in the second and third year.

Dance psychology is a central strand within this broader curriculum, supporting students to engage with topics such as motivation, collaboration, goal setting and emotional regulation. These ideas are explored in taught sessions and through reflective practice frameworks that promote learning beyond the studio. For example, second-year assessment criteria explicitly require students to demonstrate how they apply psychological concepts within a collaborative creative process, using reflection as a lens for evaluation and development. Psychological skills are embedded within broader understandings of performance, recovery and long-term development.

Longitudinal research and learning-informed strategy

Since 2019, we have conducted a longitudinal study tracking student health and wellbeing trends three times per academic year. Using validated self-report measures (such as perceived stress, coping, the PERMA model) and arts-based focus groups, the research provides insight into students' lived experiences. Findings are analysed termly to inform immediate support strategies and long-term curriculum planning. For example, early data revealed that first-term stressors were often non-curricular, including homesickness, visa issues, or social disconnection. In response, we introduced community-building events, enhanced peer support and clearer guidance for international students.

Our study also reveals increasingly regulated stress responses across the academic years. While this may partly reflect the easing of pandemic-related uncertainty, we believe it also reflects deliberate, learning-led strategies, such as addressing assessment bottlenecks, shifting to process-led assessment over performance outputs, and introducing structured rest through 'short weeks' in weeks four and eight of each term.

Periodisation: structuring for sustainability

A major application of our research has been the integration of periodisation into curriculum planning. Periodisation – the structuring of workload, rest and recovery over time – is a well-established concept in high-performance environments and increasingly recognised in dance education spaces.

LCDS is one of the first UK dance HEIs to apply this framework across the academic year. Course leadership works with teaching faculty to define distinct training phases such as crafting, preparing, performing, resting, unloading and transitioning. Class intensity is aligned accordingly, and active rest is scheduled within the timetable. This collaborative process enables us to manage student load strategically and support both physical and psychological preparedness.

Students are taught how to integrate periodisation into their own training. In final year assessments, students demonstrate their ability to apply traditional periodisation principles in a personalised and holistic way, responding to their own evolving goals, health and workload.

This reinforces the message that success is not about constant and maximal exertion, but thoughtful, sustainable progression, an idea relevant to many disciplines beyond dance.

Individualised interventions

Support at LCDS is designed to complement the curriculum and adapt to students' needs. The longitudinal research underscores how students experience challenge differently, so our flexible model emphasises reflection and self-management, while also offering responsive, individualised support.

We scaffold learning through the years, gradually shifting responsibility while maintaining access to key resources. This approach prepares graduates for freelance careers, a common pathway for LCDS alumni. Examples of targeted interventions include:

+ sleep and focus support for neurodivergent students,

+ dance-specific strength and conditioning,

+ collaborative learning agreements,

+ one-to-one check-ins for workload and training planning.

In Year 1, approximately 93% of students access at least one support service; this figure shifts to 82% by Year 3 as students grow in independence. Typically, one in five students have a learning agreement each year, with numbers rising annually as students gain greater understanding or receive formal diagnoses.

> "These services provide a holistic sense of safe dance practice that is comprehensive and accessible, enhancing my experience as an LCDS student."
>
> LCDS student survey response, June 2024

Support pathways are continuously reviewed in alignment with our Access and Participation Plan, recognising that lived experience, identity and systemic barriers shape how students access and engage with both their training and support structures.

Indicators of impact

We use a combination of performance, wellbeing and satisfaction indicators to evaluate success. Key performance indicators (KPIs), developed collaboratively across academic and support teams, include:

+ retention: a non-continuation rate below 5%, with targeted support for any persistent health-related intermissions,

+ injury monitoring benchmarked internally and against sector trends, with termly reports to senior leadership,

+ termly fitness profiling against institutional benchmarks,

+ over 85% satisfaction in internal student support surveys,

+ over 90% satisfaction on student support-related NSS questions,

+ physical and mental health first aid training for all permanent faculty,

+ ongoing CPD: termly development for support teams; annual training for faculty.

> "The support services provided at LCDS are one of my favourite aspects of the school. As a student you feel truly supported and encouraged to achieve your best."
>
> LCDS student survey response, June 2023

Alongside these KPIs, we have begun sharing our work through conferences and academic papers and developing partnerships to share this work externally.

Strategic alignment and transferability

Our approach aligns with institutional priorities around inclusion, sustainable education, and evidence-led practice. It also reflects broader higher education goals: embedding wellbeing in curriculum design, adapting teaching models and supporting complex learner journeys.

Although grounded in dance, our model is relevant to other high-intensity sectors. Fields such as healthcare, business, law and the performing arts all require performance under pressure and long-term wellbeing. By integrating health as both subject and strategy, we offer a replicable approach that values both rigour and care.

In sharing this model, we hope to contribute to a wider cultural shift, one in which academic excellence and wellbeing are mutually sustaining, and learning environments are built on adaptability, compassion and reflective practice.

SEL coaching for academic impact

Laura Massey, Newcastle College

Towards the end of semester one, I was tasked with creating a workshop to help students in the Digital Arts curriculum understand and manage stress, as well as build resilience. This group was identified as a particularly struggling area, and the hope was to encourage students to seek support and reduce disengagement. I did not want to create something that was a band-aid for a big problem, simply giving information and then leaving students to their own devices. After doing research for the workshop, I came across Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and I decided to create a new type of coaching based on its principles. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the process by which we learn to understand and manage our emotions, set and achieve goals, empathise with others, build and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2025). My hope for this new pilot was that the students who took part would develop the pillars of SEL and thus improve their academic experiences and reduce the risk of disengaging with their course.

The pillars of SEL and how they can affect students' academic experience
SEL focuses on developing the '5 Pillars'. These include self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social skills and self-awareness. The new coaching programme aims to cultivate these skills within students. First, coaching can help students develop self-awareness and self-management skills, such as setting goals, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and coping with challenges and emotions. Furthermore, coaching helps improve social awareness and relationship skills by providing insights into diverse perspectives, improving communication, and fostering collaboration with peers. Finally, coaching can help students develop responsible decision-making skills, such as evaluating options, considering consequences and acting ethically. Participating in SEL coaching can help students reflect on their learning and provide constructive feedback, as well as improve their growth mindset and academic resilience.

Tasks are designed to target the 5 pillars and help students develop these areas. Each session focuses on completing one task, slowly developing these areas. One example task is 'Goal Highway'. Within this, the student thinks about and plans manageable goals that will help them achieve something within their course. They then break these down and aim to achieve some of them by the next meeting, where we reflect on the experience. This task can help the student improve their responsible decision-making, self-management and even self-awareness. Not only does this task help foster some of the areas of SEL, it also helps the student to feel more organised, more in control and more motivated, generally improving their experience of their academic journey.

Fostering a growth mindset and improved experience through SEL coaching

Academic resilience was one of the core issues identified when assessing the concerns about student engagement and retention within curriculum. A study conducted by Frisby and Vallade (2021) found that there has been an alarming decline in academic resilience in recent years, which can manifest as low retention and graduation rates, supporting concerns for this issue. Low academic resilience can cause students to feel hopeless, stressed, anxious and lonely (Frisby and Vallade, 2021). The SEL coaching programme aims to enhance students' resilience and experiences, broadening their growth mindset and reducing feelings of isolation and stress. Research has demonstrated that students who improve their social and emotional capabilities can also improve their cognitive development, academic achievement and general wellbeing (Simion, 2023).

Impacts and outcomes

Within the SEL coaching programme I work one to one with students regularly, doing tasks that target different needs. Each student receives approximately 10 sessions that fit around their studies, avoiding high-volume times such as submission weeks. Before starting, students do an evaluation questionnaire to help identify areas of strength and areas for improvement. Tasks are chosen based on these results, and then students are reassessed at the end of coaching to gauge development. Qualitative data is also gathered through feedback and reflective questions.

So far results and feedback have been positive. The web chart below (Figure 1) shows the improvement of one student in various areas of SEL, and the table demonstrates feedback on the process. 100% of students said they would return to the programme next year.
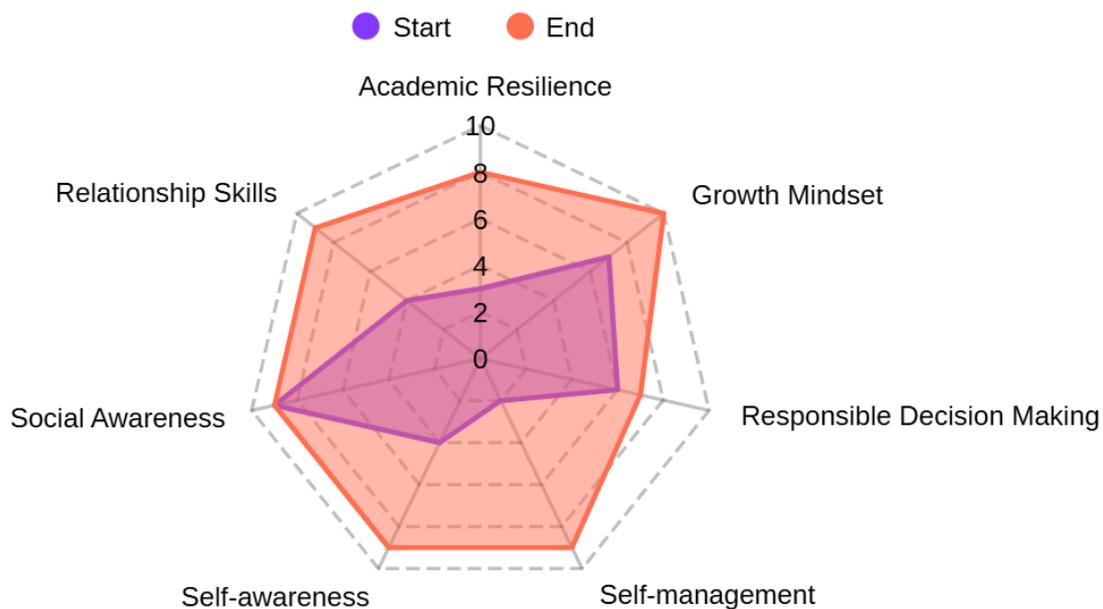

Figure 1. Student "RE" SEL Pillar development

Question topic	Student responses
What was your favourite task or aspect of the coaching?	"I liked the task where I had to take photos of things that made me happy. It got me to think about what I am enjoying during the day. Sometimes you don't realise in the moment so was nice to see it more. Writing about the photos was good too, thinking more about the things that made me happy in the moment."
	"I like how accommodating it was, fitting it to the student. You had a lot of understanding, I felt accepted."
Did you feel an impact on your studies?	"Yeah, it helped take some of the weight off."
	"Yes, it definitely helped with regulating my emotions and getting back to being focused. I used to not be able to get back into things once I got upset or stressed. I feel more organised now too. I write down things I need to do on sticky notes and put them around my desk. Then when I achieve something I can scrunch it up and throw it away!"
	"Yeah, it gave me a boost knowing I was coming in to see you, motivated me to make it into class. It also impacted how I feel about the work I produce."
Would you do it again next year?	"Yeah! I really liked having something regular, a time for me. It was good to reflect on my behaviour as a student too. I enjoyed the process. There were notes I took of something you said that helped me to focus back in and I still look at them now."
	"Yes, definitely. It really helped give me structure."

With this feedback, I aim to fully launch the SEL coaching programme in the new academic year across all curricula. Coaching will be open to any student who would like the opportunity to improve their resilience and grow their mindset. Students can either self-refer or members of staff can refer students they feel would benefit from the programme.

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NMITE's BOOST Initiative – tackling the cost of living and enhancing student wellbeing

Frankie Devereux, New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering (NMITE)

As a small and inclusive institution, NMITE places student support and wellbeing at the core of its educational mission. Through a commitment to personalised support and barrier-free access to education, NMITE works proactively to understand and respond to the challenges students face, particularly those relating to the rising cost of living.

NMITE's BOOST is a comprehensive support package designed to ease students' financial pressures and foster wellbeing and community. It offers free daily breakfasts, free monthly Sunday lunches, access to a free weekly food-shopping scheme, free sanitary products, £1 per day travel reimbursements for commuters, and emergency financial aid – including up to £1,000 via a Financial Assistance Fund and up to two £100 crisis payments annually. Shortlisted in the Times Higher Education Awards in 2024 in the category of Outstanding Student Support, this evolving programme is designed to alleviate financial pressures, support student wellbeing and foster a stronger sense of community.

Context and development

NMITE recognised early that the increase in the cost of living, combined with the annual incremental rise of student maintenance loans not keeping up with inflation, have made the student experience more financially demanding than ever before. The financial strain is not just an economic issue, but one that impacts mental health, academic performance and students' overall ability to thrive in higher education.

BOOST began as a small pilot scheme but, over time, based on student feedback and needs, it evolved into a comprehensive package of practical support which is now embedded as part of NMITE's wider student support ecosystem.

Impact and feedback

The response from students has been overwhelmingly positive. In a 2022/23 student survey, 100% of respondents supported the continuation of BOOST, citing benefits ranging from improved nutrition and mental health to a more connected student community.

One student described the programme as a "lifeline", stating:

> "The programme has helped immensely financially and also significantly enhances social life, especially between cohorts. Without BOOST I think a lot of people would be in a worse position mentally and financially."

Another student highlighted the practical benefits, saying:

> "I have trouble eating regular meals. NMITE BOOST breakfast, access to the larder and Sunday lunches has given me a consistent and affordable way to make sure I'm keeping myself fed."

Broader wellbeing and inclusion benefits

The BOOST initiative has also proven to be particularly impactful for students from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds – those who are first in their families to attend university, those without parental financial support, and those juggling studies with caring responsibilities or health challenges.

One final-year student reflected:

> "As a student who was first in family to attend higher education, I had little guidance from my family because no one had experienced it before. I underestimated the financial balancing required in managing the cost of student accommodation and daily living on the student maintenance loan I was awarded. I blew my first maintenance loan payment in two months. The NMITE Student Support Team helped me with my budgeting skills, but the daily BOOST breakfast and my being able to get a free load of groceries every week really made a difference."

The student went on to say:

> "Breakfast means I was in earlier and had more productive mornings (otherwise I might just miss this meal); it also allowed me to build better connections with other students which helped me to feel part of NMITE."

They also noted:

> "The Larder scheme is definitely the most useful, and I relied on it for most of my weekly shop. All of this has [taken] a lot of financial pressure off my shoulders, and I am concerned with what is happening with the 'cost of living' situation."

> "Over the three and a half years I have been studying, I have heard many other students say how much they appreciate the NMITE BOOST scheme. Each year the Student Support Team have added to or improved the offers available."

> "I have experienced some mental health difficulties and had to take a leave of absence. Knowing that the Student Support Team were there to help and knowing that BOOST was still available meant that I feel more confident to return and resulted in a lot of my financial worries going away. I have been able to refocus on my studies and have recently completed my studies to achieve a BEng in Integrated Engineering."

Evaluation and future planning

The BOOST programme is subject to regular review and enhancement. Throughout the year feedback is gathered through breakfast focus groups and informal conversation, and another annual survey is planned for 24/25 cohorts; this feedback loop ensures the initiative remains responsive to emerging needs.

Conclusion

BOOST is a clear example of NMITE's values in action – demonstrating how a small institution can deliver big impact through thoughtful, student-led and compassionate initiatives. By removing barriers to basic needs, BOOST empowers students to succeed not just academically, but socially, emotionally and financially. In doing so, it exemplifies the power of partnership between students and staff in shaping a supportive and inclusive culture.

Designing education for the future

Immersive technology and higher education: the Askham Bryan experience

Thomas Welsh, Askham Bryan College

Immersive technologies, emerging in higher education, provide three-dimensional visual simulations to explain complex concepts that traditional teaching methods struggle with (Kovalenko et al, 2022). Their use in teaching and assessment is crucial for measuring knowledge and understanding (Figure 1). These technologies can help teachers create content that enhances motivation and learning. Consequently, learners can understand concepts that are difficult to visualise or relate to (Ibanez, 2014) such as the effectiveness of green roofs or the replication of DNA. The positive impacts of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are several, including better motivation and interest, enhanced practical skills (Familoni and Onyebuchi, 2024), and improved engagement. Further AR and VR developments could enhance group work scenarios and formative assessment.
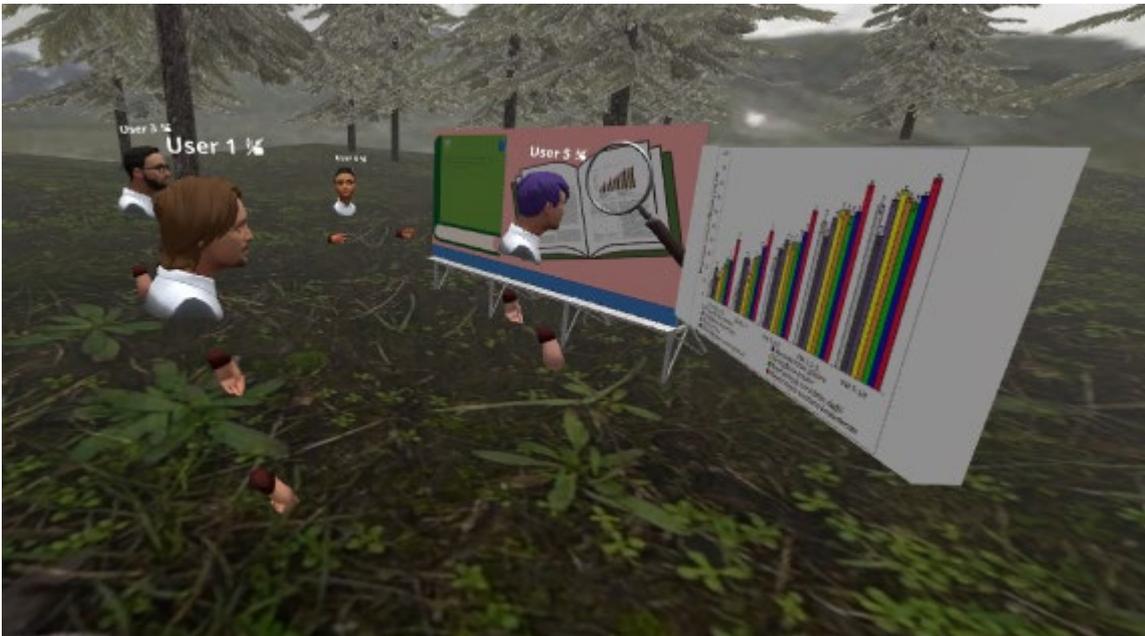
Figure 3. Students evaluate a research paper on sustainability practices in VR.

AR and VR are particularly beneficial as they allow the teacher to change role from being an instructor to becoming a facilitator helping the students explore and learn. Subsequently, and aligning with the constructivist learning theory, students feel empowered and show better engagement after being in control of their own learning process (Dede, 2005; Antonietti et al, 2001). Virtual reality studies have suggested that students show better concentration when using immersive VR as the technology can help block out environmental distractions (Ibanez, 2014). However, the barriers to implementing AR and VR in HE are likely to be financial and educational with space availability, subject expertise and responsiveness to learner needs all potential limitations. Moreover, visual exhaustion and mental fatigue are also reported (Bermejo et al, 2023).

For the chosen modules (Genetics and Biochemistry L4 (Figure 2), Sustainability at L4 and 6 (Figure 3), Microbiology and Parasitology L5), we deliver a mix of classroom-based theoretical content, lab practicals and field trips with VR introduced to enhance the learning experience, reiterate concepts and improve formative assessment.
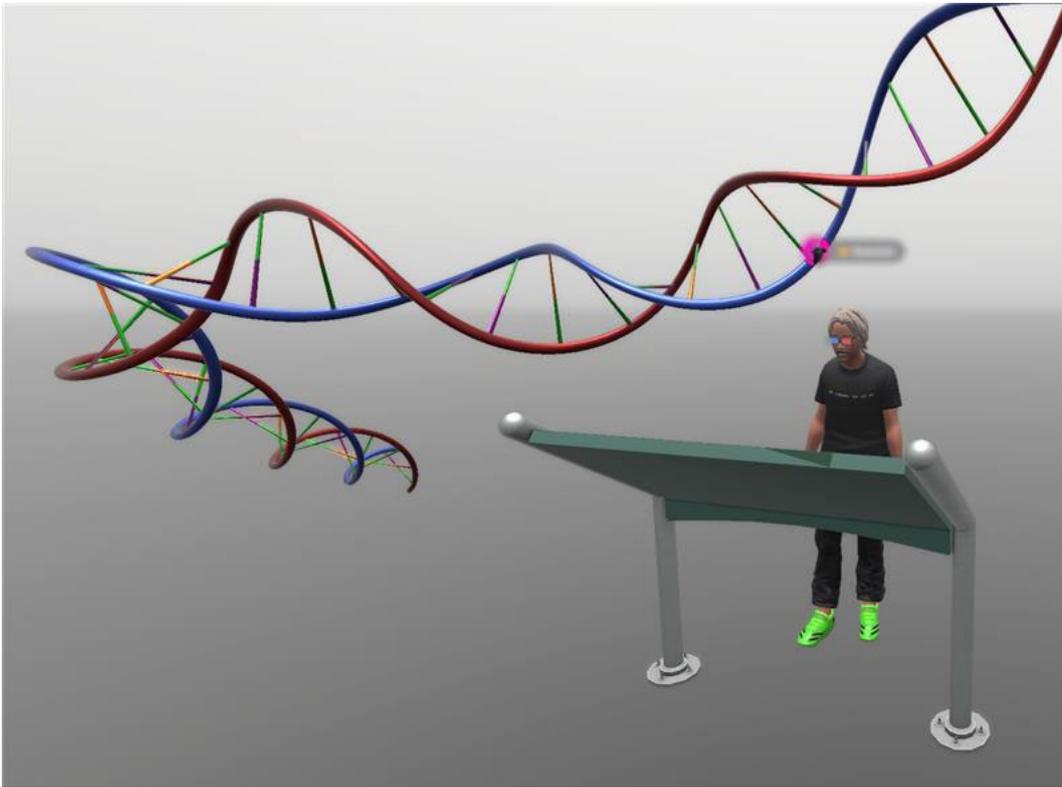

Figure 4. VR is particularly effective at representing DNA and other microscopic structures
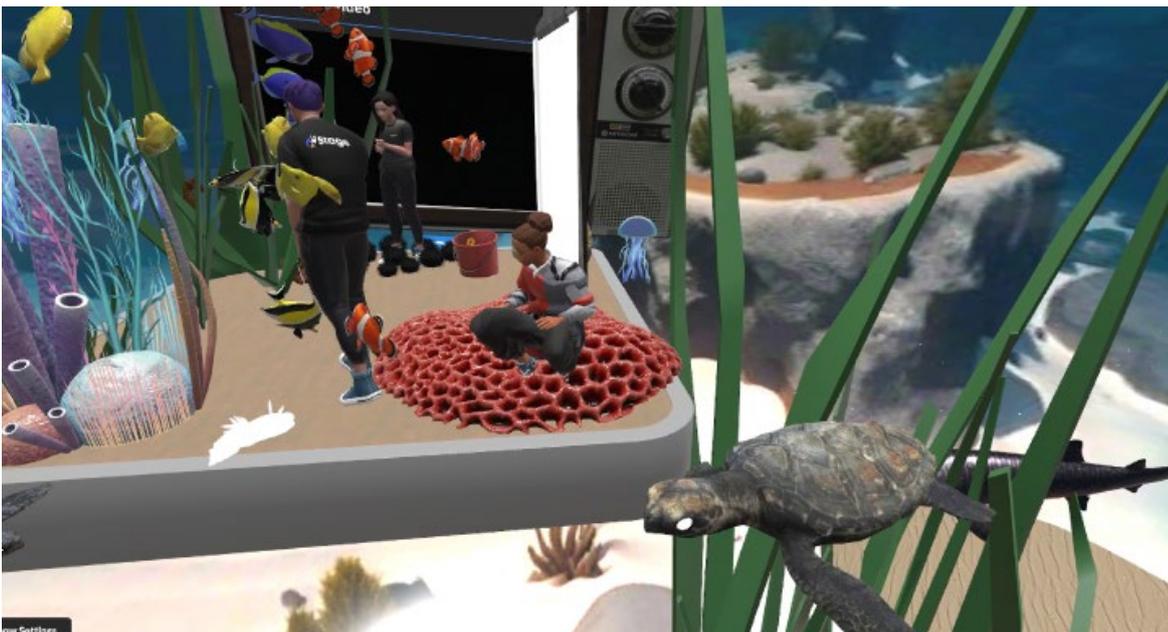

Figure 5. Students investigate a coral reef's decline in VR

Impact on students' learning experience

As immersive technology is new to the college, our results are based on two years of data (2023 and 2024), one year with the use of AR and VR, and the other year without. Although there is potential for confounding factors to affect the results, this is considered minimal as the entry requirement of the course remains the same.

Sustainable Development in the Industry		Genetics and Biochemistry		Microbiology & Parasitology		Applied Sustainable Practices	
Without AR/VR	With AR/VR	Without AR/VR	With AR/VR	Without AR/VR	With AR/VR	Without AR/VR	With AR/VR
62%	72%	55%	59%	60%	61%	63%	68%

Table 1. Mean marks for modules with the use of AR/VR and without the use of AR/VR.

Sustainable Development in the Industry		Genetics and Biochemistry		Microbiology & Parasitology		Applied Sustainable Practices	
Without AR/VR	With AR/VR	Without AR/VR	With AR/VR	Without AR/VR	With AR/VR	Without AR/VR	With AR/VR
92%	100%	90%	100%	90%	100%	80%	100%

Table 2. Retention for modules with the use of AR/VR and without the use of AR/VR.

Focus group discussions and analysis of student grades and engagement indicate a clear shift towards more frequent and enhanced use of AR and VR in college sessions.

Students have identified the value of AR and VR from a teaching and learning perspective and its application in workplace training. Students on the genetics and biochemistry module reported the following.

> "The VR experience is a lot more memorable and engaging than other forms of learning which does improve the retention of information needed. VR enables easy virtual access to places we wouldn't get to see in reality and allows students to use their creativity and imagination."
>
> X - First year BSc (Hons) Animal Bioscience student

"VR is becoming more popularly used within many leading companies, so I
think it is important for students to be offered the opportunity to experience
the benefits of VR within their education.

"Although VR can be a very strong learning tool for students, it was clear
that some struggled with discomfort or motion sickness when taking part.
These students however were given the option to participate using the
screen instead of the headset."

Y- First year BSc (Hons) Animal Bioscience student

Student feedback

As part of the evaluation of VR, we sent out a Google survey to students asking them to
grade my VR lessons against the non-VR lessons on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the
lowest, 10 being the highest. With a response rate of 76%, the results of the survey are
illustrated below (Table 3):

Lessons with AR/VR (mean)	Lessons without AR/VR (mean)
8.5	7.75

Table 3. Students' grading of the lessons with the use AR/VR and without the use of AR/VR
There is a significant difference in the grades with the use of AR and without the use of AR
(paired t-test, $t_{27} = 2.62$, $p<0.014$).

Word cloud representation (Figures 4 and 5) elucidate that majority of the students graded
the VR lessons at a 10. The non-VR lessons show 8 to be the mode.

1. Please grade the Sustainability lesson on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest and 10 being highest) when using AR and V
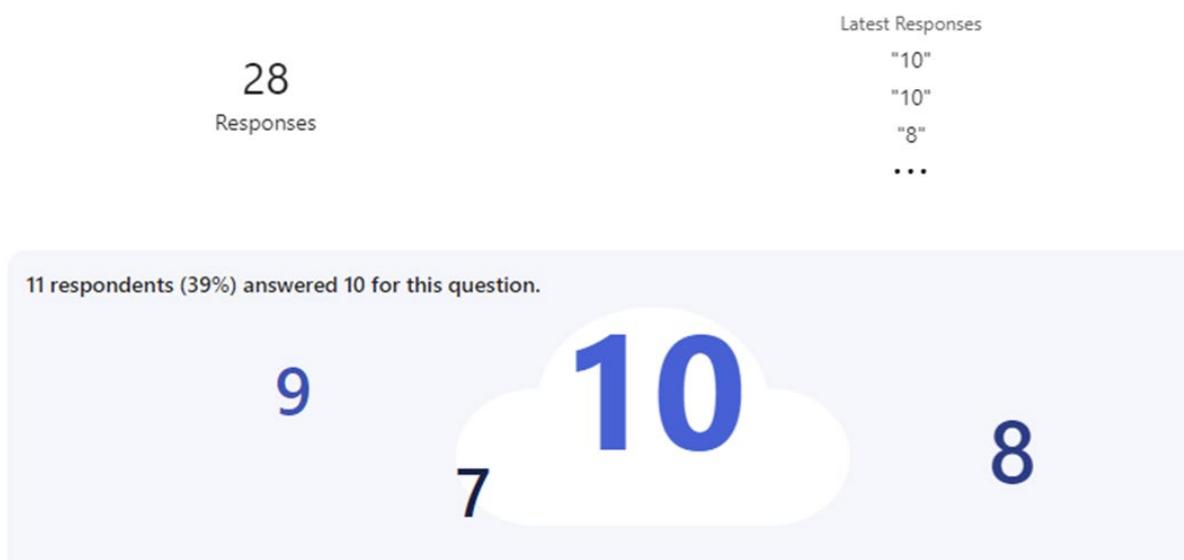R

28
Responses

Latest Responses
"10"
"10"
"8"
...

11 respondents (39%) answered 10 for this question.

9   7   **10**   8

Figure 6. Word cloud representation of the grades given by the students to the lessons when
using AR and VR.

2. Please grade the Sustainability lesson on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest and 10 being highest) when not using AR and VR

Latest Responses

28
Responses

"8"
"10"
"4"
...

7 respondents (25%) answered 8 for this question.

9   7   8   6   10   5
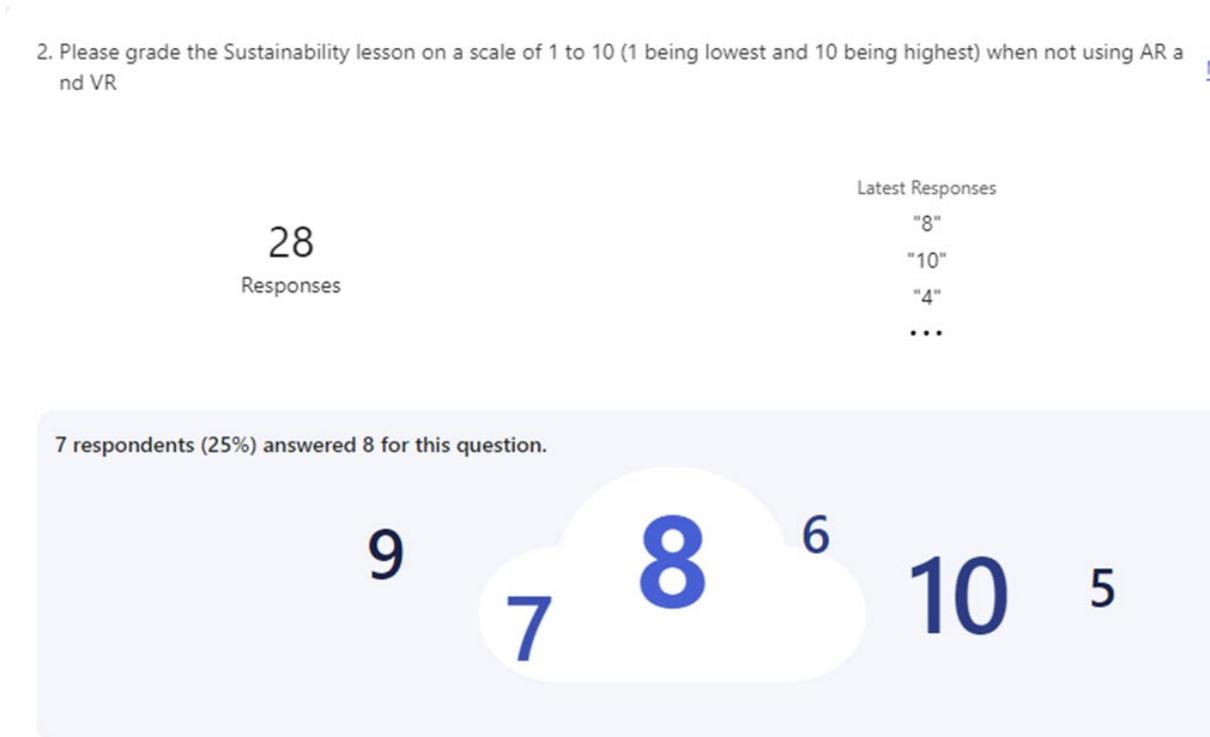
Figure 7. Word cloud representation of the grades given by the students to the lessons when not using AR and VR.

VR in postgraduate courses

Additionally, we have used the sustainability lesson for our postgraduate teaching too. Subsequently, students have embedded, and used the lessons learnt using VR and AR in their own employment as zookeepers making its impact greater, influencing trainee keepers and visitors. Below is the commentary from a post graduate student.

> "I really enjoyed the VR lesson on sustainable energy. The interactive experience was engaging and allowed me to visualise and interact with concepts in a way that felt immersive and practical. It was an innovative way to learn, making the material both accessible and memorable. The use of AR/VR in the session added a dynamic, hands-on element that enhanced my understanding of the subject."

> L – a postgraduate student

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From commitment to curriculum: bridging the UN SDG rhetoric–reality gap in management education

Syed Yaqzan and Toby Whittington, BPP University

Introduction

Can a values-led mission truly transform curriculum design, or does it stay confined to glossy brochures? While management schools[1] increasingly express their commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), the process of embedding these goals into management education often reveals a gap between rhetoric and reality. This case study investigates how UK higher education institutions are navigating this complex terrain, moving beyond symbolic commitments towards meaningful curricular and institutional integration. This study draws on qualitative data collected from six UK management schools, including faculty interviews, curriculum design documents and workshop reflections. A qualitative research design was used to capture insights from six months of institutional engagement.

Findings

1 Drivers of integration: what's pushing institutions forward?

The integration of the UN SDGs into management education in the UK is driven by a confluence of global mandates, institutional pressures and market incentives. Management schools increasingly operate within accountability frameworks shaped by international accreditation bodies, such as AMBA, and networks like PRME. These frameworks emphasise the importance of embedding sustainability, specifically the UN SDGs, into curricular strategy, organisational mission and learning design. One faculty member noted that, "The AMBA accreditation for the MBA… is one of the key, core requirements – to create employability in creating sustainable managers." This reflects how accreditation frameworks are shaping the mission of management schools, aligning employability with sustainability.

Alongside regulatory and reputational motivations, a generational shift in student expectations is propelling this agenda forward. Students today are not only seeking employment readiness but also education that aligns with global impact and ethical leadership. The UN SDGs provide a structured language through which institutions can articulate and deliver this purpose-driven ethos. However, this demand is heterogeneous, and institutions must carefully balance inspirational ambition with the practical realities of curriculum delivery.

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[1] Participating institutions referred to themselves as either *Business Schools* or *Management Schools*, but this case study uses the term *Management Schools* throughout for consistency.

Labour market trends further amplify the case for integration. Although employers may not request 'SDG expertise' explicitly, they increasingly prioritise graduate capabilities aligned with long-term risk awareness, environmental regulation and stakeholder governance. This shift reflects a deeper embedding of sustainability principles within core business functions, making UN SDG fluency a transversal requirement across strategy, finance, operations and leadership. Nevertheless, these drivers do not guarantee coherent institutional response. Their translation into curriculum design and faculty practice is heavily mediated by internal capacities, governance structures and existing academic culture.

The table below summarises the key categories of institutional drivers.

Driver type	Description
Accreditation and market legitimacy	Alignment with accreditation frameworks and regulatory expectations positions the institution as globally crediable and future focused.
Student and social expectations	A generation of students seeking purpose-driven careers continues to drive demand for sustainability-oriented education.
Employer requirements	Employers increasingly require sustainability knowledge integrated into core business areas like risk, compliance and finance – not as a siloed function.
Reputational and strategic relevance	Embedding sustainability helps institutions stay relevant, competitive and aligned with long-term valuie creation trends.

Table 1. Summary of key institutional drivers.

2 Institutional responses: how are management schools adapting?

In response to these converging drivers, management schools are transitioning from symbolic gestures to more embedded and strategic approaches to UN SDG integration. While early initiatives may have included elective modules or policy statements referencing the UN SDGs, institutions are increasingly taking steps to embed these goals into the foundational structures of curriculum design and quality assurance.

One key shift is the recalibration of programme validation processes. Institutions are moving towards requiring explicit attention to UN SDG-related outcomes within learning objectives and module specifications. This not only supports accountability but signals to faculty and students that sustainability and the UN SDGs are integral, rather than incidental, to management education. Another notable response is the mainstreaming of UN SDG principles across traditionally non-sustainability-focused disciplines. Rather than positioning sustainability as a niche or values-driven area, institutions are beginning to embed UN SDG content into core modules such as finance, strategy, marketing and leadership. This

integration reflects a growing recognition that the UN SDGs are closely aligned with long-term organisational performance and risk management.

Executive education plays a particularly dynamic role in this shift. Here, UN SDG integration is often more practical and immediate, as learners bring live organisational challenges into the classroom. These real-time applications foster stronger connections between theory and practice and can act as experimental spaces for new approaches that later filter into full-time programmes. Additionally, some institutions are adapting their language to avoid ideological polarisation. By positioning UN SDG integration as a form of good management rather than as an ethical stance, management schools are enhancing legitimacy while sidestepping political resistance. This framing helps establish the UN SDGs as tools for decision-making, innovation and strategic value.

The table below outlines how institutional responses are evolving.

Response area	Description
Recalibrating curriculum focus	ESG topics are being reframed around material risk, regulatory frameworks and financial performance, moving beyond rhetoric.
Embedding in core business disciplines	Sustainability is increasingly integrated into mainstream areas like finance, strategy and operations, rather than taught in isolation.
Shifting terminology and framing	Some institutions move away from contested ESG language, opting to teach 'sustainability' as effective, data-driven management.
Strengthening applied and executive learning	Executive and professional students apply sustainability principles directly, creating stronger linkages to real world impact.

Table 2. Summary of how institutional responses to UN SDG integration are evolving.

3   Barriers in the middle: what's holding back progress?

Despite the strength of external drivers and the innovation reflected in many institutional responses, the process of embedding the UN SDGs into management education is constrained by a range of persistent structural and cultural barriers. These barriers do not merely slow progress; they actively shape and sometimes dilute the depth and coherence of UN SDG integration.

A central challenge lies in the disconnect between classroom frameworks and real-world complexity. While students may encounter well-structured models in academic settings, they often find that applying UN SDGs in organisational contexts involves navigating ambiguity, competing priorities and shifting regulatory landscapes. This gap between theoretical clarity and practical messiness can undermine the credibility of UN SDG teaching. The second

issue is the lack of technical depth in many programmes. Although UN SDGs are frequently referenced, deeper engagement with their financial, operational and regulatory implications remains rare. Topics such as carbon accounting, climate risk modelling and impact measurement are either missing or insufficiently developed, leaving students underprepared for roles that require such competencies.

Superficiality is another concern. In some cases, institutions meet compliance requirements by simply mentioning UN SDGs in module descriptors, without meaningful integration into teaching methods, assessments, or assurance of learning systems. This performative approach undermines both educational value and institutional credibility. Finally, incentive misalignment remains a critical obstacle. Faculty members are expected to integrate UN SDG themes alongside existing teaching, research and administrative commitments. Without structural support, time allocation, or recognition, the burden of UN SDG integration falls unevenly across staff, often depending on personal motivation rather than systemic reinforcement. This highlights the importance of coherence between leadership intent and grassroots faculty ownership. As one professor noted, "Sustainability in management education should be embedded and come from the bottom-up in line with top-down approaches… aligning those two perspectives is something which might really make a difference." Without adequate structural incentives, faculty may deprioritise sustainability. This concern was echoed by another faculty member: "If people are being paid to do other things, they're going to focus on those other things first… teaching, marking, research, publications."

The following table outlines the primary barriers to integration.

Challenge	Description
Curriculum-workplace gap	Students often encounter idealised ESG frameworks in the classroom but face complex, fast-changing realities in practice.
Lack of technical depth	Areas like carbon markets, regulatory finance and climate risk require deeper, more specialised treatment than currently offered.
Superficial integration risk	ESG can be reduced to symbolic gestures unless tied to measurable business performance and embedded in mainstream teaching.
Institutional incentives misalignment	Without forma structures, cultural incentives or assessment mandates, sustainability teaching risks being deprioritised.

Table 3. Summary of the primary barriers to SDG integration.

Recommendations for stakeholders

The findings of this case reveal both momentum and inertia in how management schools approach UN SDG integration. While external pressures and institutional strategies provide strong incentives, internal misalignments, capability gaps and cultural inertia slow down progress. Addressing these challenges will require multi-level interventions that go beyond compliance and engage with pedagogical transformation for which the following stakeholder-specific actions are recommended.

+ **Management schools** should address the tendency toward superficial integration by embedding UN SDG content within programme learning outcomes, assessment strategies, and curriculum review processes. Additionally, investment in faculty development is needed to build internal capability across disciplines, with particular focus on technical domains such as sustainable finance, carbon metrics and systems thinking.

+ **Policymakers** should support efforts to bridge the curriculum–practice gap by funding collaborative initiatives between industry and academia. These could include experiential learning pilots, live consultancy projects aligned with the UN SDGs and curriculum innovation grants that prioritise applied, cross-sectoral impact.

+ **Government bodies and accreditation agencies** should evolve their quality assurance mechanisms to reward outcome-based indicators of UN SDG integration. Rather than relying on documentation or policy alignment alone, these bodies should assess whether institutions can demonstrate learning impact, cultural coherence and capacity development around the global goals.

Meeting the training and CPD needs of busy medical and allied health care professionals, and those returning to nutritional therapy practice, using credit accumulation

Paula Werrett, The Institute for Optimum Nutrition

Introduction and context

In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation of the significant impact of nutrition on health and wellbeing. The Institute for Optimum Nutrition (ION) is an independent training provider offering a range of personalised nutrition and lifestyle medicine (PNLM) higher education courses in partnership with the University of Portsmouth (UoP). Developing innovative courses to meet students' professional needs is a key aspect of our strategic approach.

In 2015, the BBC broadcast Doctor in the House, in which UK GP Rangan Chatterjee, who trained at the USA's Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM), demonstrated how PNLM can alleviate chronic health conditions. UK medical professionals have limited training in basic nutrition, and a personalised approach is not taught. Enquiries to ION from GPs and allied healthcare professionals suggested a growing interest in PNLM. Competitor courses were lengthy and didn't recognise prior learning. USA-based training is not recognised in the UK. We therefore set out to explore the opportunity to bridge this gap. This case study outlines the steps taken and impact achieved.

Understanding student needs

In 2020, ION surveyed GPs and allied health care professionals on their needs as professionals and students. Demand for training in PNLM was clear. Cost, study flexibility and online delivery were priorities. Professionals were keen to undertake a course that would quickly and effectively enable them to add this specialism into their practice. The ability to register with the regulator (CNHC) was important as was the option to join the professional body, the British Association for Nutrition and Lifestyle Medicine (BANT), on graduation.

Identifying an appropriate award

Entry to the nutritional therapy profession is at degree level or above. The regulator had recently published guidance in which, for the first time, a graduate diploma offered fast-track entry to the profession. Mapping to the National Occupational Standards (NOS) and Core Curriculum (CC) for Nutritional Therapy, the qualifications, and subject benchmarks of a range of medical and allied healthcare professions, identified those with sufficient knowledge and skills to undertake fast-track training.

To facilitate Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), the Institute of Functional Medicine (IFM) curriculum was mapped against the NOS and CC. For IFM UK-based graduates, we identified an RPL route to registration with CNHC and BANT.

The survey feedback and contributions from key stakeholders confirmed the choice of award and course design.

Designing the course

In partnership with the University of Portsmouth, ION developed and validated a full and part-time online trimester-based graduate diploma (6 x 20 credit modules) with an optional post-award 20 credit-bearing clinical practice short course. The course comprises a foundational nutrition module and four body systems-based modules, affording learners a robust understanding of how to use PNLM to support a wide range of body systems and health conditions. Learners also undertake a module on behaviour change – a vitally important skill needed when working with diet and lifestyle change in a health–based setting. Behaviour change is not taught on the USA IFM course, and the foundation nutrition is US-centric and does not fully meet the NOS and CC. Within the UoP Awards Framework, 80 credits of RPL are given. Identifying these gaps in the US course allowed us to identify the must-take modules for those seeking RPL with an IFM qualification. The award equips practitioners to use the knowledge and skills learnt within the scope of their current practice.

The profession does not allow RPL for previous/current training or experience in clinical practice. Following validation, a clinical practice credit-bearing short course was added to facilitate accreditation with the Nutritional Therapy Education Commission (NTEC), enabling graduates to register with CNHC and join BANT. This short course also served to meet the needs of our professional body for two additional groups of nutritional therapy practitioners: those returning to practice, and as an option module for those topping up to a Nutritional Therapy degree from courses not recognised by the regulator. These three groups of students join the final-year degree students in clinical practice, facilitating a rich learning environment and creating opportunities to build future collaborative relationships.

The graduate diploma course structure enables students to complete in one year (full-time) or two years (part–time), offering a rapid and cost-effective route to practice. A flipped classroom structure was chosen to enable busy professionals to fit in study alongside work commitments. Short asynchronous learning resources were designed for each module with embedded interactive exercises to consolidate learning. Asynchronous resources are accompanied by weekly evening synchronous workshops enabling discussion, collaboration and opportunities for practical application of theory. Synchronous sessions are recorded for those unable to attend. Video has closed captions and uses universal design principles (CAST, 2018) for inclusivity. Learners are assessed via authentic case-based scenarios and clinical practice, ensuring application of learning to real life.

Flexibility

Students are afforded flexibility to apply for assessment extensions, study when time allows, defer modules, suspend their studies as needed, and switch between full and part–time options as set out in the University of Portsmouth partnership regulations. In 2022, each module of the course was validated as a 20 credit-bearing short course using the University of Portsmouth Flexible Framework (2017), creating additional continuing professional

development opportunities and enabling students to take modules individually and work towards the overall award at their own pace as part of a credit-stacking approach.

Impact

The Graduate Diploma and associated credit-bearing short courses have created a unique opportunity for medics and allied health professionals to rapidly and cost-effectively introduce PNLM into professional practice, enabling them to improve patient outcomes and generating opportunities for additional revenue creation. The courses have met or exceeded target since inception in 2021. Module surveys show that learners are highly satisfied with the teaching and learning on the course and learner outcomes have been pleasing with most students achieving a merit or distinction. Learners comment favourably on the flexibility of the courses, have thoroughly enjoyed the teaching and learning and have enthused about the benefits for clinical practice.

Since the original validation, the course/s have also been recognised by the Ministry of Defence for ELCA's Enhanced Learning Credits.

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Time for change: adapting the art and design curriculum towards industry-relevant assessment methods

Elaine Robertson, Newcastle College University Centre

Introduction

As the higher education (HE) landscape increasingly prioritises graduate employability and industry-relevant learning, there is a growing need to critically evaluate the authenticity of assessment methods and their alignment with professional contexts (Bridgstock, 2011; Department for Education, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). Skills gaps in the UK workforce are well documented, especially in emerging technologies and digital practice, and widening at pace (Carey et al, 2019). Addressing this gap is critical within the context of HE delivered within a further education (FE) college where the emphasis has traditionally been vocational and applied skills. Recently, at Newcastle College University Centre (NCUC), assessment strategies have evolved across three programmes to better reflect career pathways. These now include a visual essay for the Level 6 BA (Hons) Design Practice top-up, a critical review for Level 6 BA (Hons) Fine Art, and a video essay option on the Level 7 MA Creative and Professional Practice. These alternative approaches at NCUC foster the technical, reflective and creative skills vital for success in today's creative industries. This case study outlines the three models, reflects on staff and student forum discussions, and considers the impact of new assessment approaches on student outcomes.

Current discourse

In 2023, the UK's creative industries contributed £124bn to the economy, representing 5.2% of the total UK economy (Newson, 2025) and continues to expand at pace. Creative roles now account for over 7% of UK employment (Creative UK, 2025), yet recruitment challenges persist. Recent analysis found that 65% of 'hard-to-fill' vacancies in the creative industries were due to skills shortages, particularly in higher-skilled roles (Giles et al, 2025). Government reports acknowledge this growing skills gap within the creative sector, yet there is a disconnect between educational and economic need (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025). The ongoing neglect of creative and arts-based subjects within school curricula has also contributed to a climate where many students feel discouraged from pursuing the arts, making recruitment to creative HE courses difficult. These findings highlight the urgency of pedagogic models that connect academic study with real-world creative practices.

While some argue the focus on employability in HE is politically driven (Hartmann and Komljenovic, 2021) or a response to HE sector competition rather than genuine labour market demand (Durazzi, 2021), arts education remains a critical foundation of the creative industries (Behr, 2024). Furthermore, our experience at NCUC presents a more grounded perspective, where sustained engagement with local creative businesses reveals a clear demand for arts graduates with both disciplinary knowledge and transferable skills. This

feedback has helped to shape our assessment innovation, showing that employability efforts within NCUC reflect genuine sector needs.

Visual essay

The visual essay offers a new and innovative approach to integrating academic research skills with the technical and aesthetic competencies required by the design industry. This assessment requires students to formulate a research question/theme relevant to their individual creative discipline, and explore this through established academic research processes. Students develop skills in sourcing and critically evaluating primary and secondary information, synthesising findings within the theoretical framework guiding their inquiry.

Crucially, students translate their research into visually compelling and professionally presented documents. Applying academic conventions, students must consider design layout, typographic choices, and visual narrative, employing industry-standard software to produce a cohesive and aesthetically engaging outcome. This approach allows students to demonstrate academic rigour alongside applied design skills aligned with real-world creative roles.

Figure 1. Sample spread from a fashion communication student's visual essay demonstrating the student's ability to write academically and communicate creatively, integrating text and imagery in a contemporary editorial layout.

By producing a visual essay, students develop a range of transferable skills including research management, critical thinking, visual communication and professional presentation.

As a hybrid between academic discourse and creative production, the visual essay represents an authentic mode of assessment to mirror the multidisciplinary demands of contemporary design practice.

Critical review

The critical review is a final-year BA Hons Fine Art assessment tool, developed to support critical reflection on individual creative development, enabling students to position themselves within the broader landscape of contemporary fine art. Rather than producing a traditional academic dissertation, students engage with a personal and analytical review of work, influences and intentions. This allows them to situate their practice in relation to current debates, cultural discourses and historical contexts.

In contrast to essays focused on theory alone, the critical review (typically 4,000 words) encourages students to explore *who they are as artists*: what drives their work, how they understand creative methodologies, and how their ideas connect to wider artistic practices. Students draw on relevant theory and discourse, consider the personal, social, cultural and political issues and events which influence and inform their work. As the Fine Art Programme Lead explained, "the critical review is a focused, sustained, but most importantly, personalised, articulation of students' art practices. This is a crucial insight that improves employability; the critical review asks students to place themselves within the art world and examine their contribution to it".

This approach offers a valuable platform for students to demonstrate intellectual independence, contextual awareness and a professional self-awareness to support their transition into fine art practice, whether in studio practice, residencies, curation, education, or community arts. It centres lived experience and practice, fostering a nuanced understanding of contemporary fine art not as a detached field of study, but as an evolving, relational and personal space in which students are active participants. As outlined in Ryan (2014), the ability to articulate a reflective and adaptive creative identity is a vital requirement, where roles are often self-initiated and self-defined.

Video essay

The option of a video essay for the final research module on the NCUC MA Creative and Professional Practice programme aligns research more closely with the real world demands of contemporary creative industries. Where the traditional thesis privileges textual analysis and academic argumentation, the video essay allows students to demonstrate critical thinking and research literacy through a dynamic and multimodal format. This format mirrors the methods of communication increasingly prevalent in artistic, curatorial and digital content production.

Far from replacing the need for academic rigour within research, the video essay still requires students to engage deeply with academic literature, develop a clear research question, and construct a considered argument. The format enables an inclusive form of assessment where students can integrate practice and identity into a research process in a

way which feels more natural to their discipline. As one student pointed out, "presenting work as video essay gave me an opportunity to use moving image, data visuals and artwork to discuss theories, research and practice. Being dyslexic, I was able to use audio and visuals to clearly communicate my ideas and findings".

Using this format as an alternative outcome equips students with skills in digital storytelling, video editing, sound design and visual composition – skills reflecting core competencies across sectors such as film, digital marketing, curating, media arts and creative content production. It encourages a reflective and situated practice, where students must articulate their research process, decisions and contextual influences through reflexivity and critical self-awareness. This form of assessment more authentically reflects how knowledge is frequently disseminated and consumed within the creative industries today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the adoption of new and innovative assessment methods at NCUC demonstrates a strategic and responsive approach to addressing the evolving needs of students and the wider creative industries. By aligning assessment with real-world professional practices, these assessment tools bridge the gap between academic study and industry expectation, particularly in a context marked by significant skills shortages (Giles et al, 2025). The visual essay, critical review and video essay formats promote authentic learning by integrating academic rigour with applied, technical and reflective competencies. They also support students to articulate individual creative identities, building confidence and readiness for diverse professional pathways (Ryan, 2014). Furthermore, the inclusion of multimodal and inclusive assessment methods acknowledges how knowledge is increasingly produced and communicated in contemporary creative sectors. These innovations highlight how HE, particularly in FE settings, can respond to labour market needs and empower students with the tools to thrive in dynamic and interdisciplinary creative environments.

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Bridging the gap: preparing laboratory science apprentices for data-driven workplaces

Lauren Adams, Northeastern University London

Background

Northeastern University London offers a portfolio of degree apprenticeship programmes. In a degree apprenticeship, learners are employed full-time and split their week between working in their job role and studying towards a degree – typically spending four days in the workplace and one day engaged in university-led academic study. We offer a flexible delivery model in which nearly all academic courses are delivered asynchronously through our online learning platform. There are only two in-person courses, which are intensive two-week bootcamps taught during the first and second year respectively.

Our BSc Bioscience with Digital Technologies (BDT) programme is designed to train technician and laboratory scientist degree apprentices. The fusion of biological sciences with digital technology (beyond what is required by the apprenticeship standards) is central to our offer, as we recognise that data science literacy is now an essential skill for navigating the data-rich reality of contemporary laboratory science. Learners need to understand the data science lifecycle and be moderately proficient in at least one coding language. They need to be able to select and apply appropriate software to analyse, interpret, visualise and present large and complex datasets. Perhaps most importantly, they need to be able to tailor those visualisations and presentations to diverse stakeholders.

Rationale

Laying the foundations in data science and Python programming is a central aim of the BDT curriculum's first year. The bulk of this initial learning comes from a two-week intensive bootcamp course: Data Science, Data Visualisation and Communication. When the course was originally designed, learners joined the fundamental coding classes being delivered to Data Science apprentices, in addition to subject-focused sessions with the Bioscience faculty. However, learner feedback indicated that the shared classes did not align with their needs. Given that entrants to the BDT programme vary widely in their digital literacy – many having never coded before – they found the sessions either overwhelming or lacking relevance to their sector/workplace.

Course redesign

We therefore created a bespoke, interdisciplinary bootcamp course to better equip our BDT learners. To boost learner engagement, we began by creating a real-world personalised medicine scenario around which to centre the new curriculum: learners were provided with physiological data (blood pressure, serum lactate levels and respiratory rate) and whole-genome sequencing data for six hypothetical patients on a critical care ward. They were tasked with determining which patient on the ward is most at risk of developing sepsis, and

why. To provide the much-needed chance for cohort interaction, learners were divided into groups to tackle this task.

Around this central narrative, we structured a series of interactive sessions to develop their Python coding skills. Inspired by the delivery of Nelson and Kundegorski's Python Beginner's Course, we structured these sessions using worksheet-style Jupyter notebooks (Figure 1). We found that this format lends itself well to teaching an in-person class with varied skill levels. The instructor talked through a task on the board before setting learners off to work independently on it for a few minutes. The instructor would circulate, helping learners to work through any errors. The class would then come back together for an explanation of the next task, and so on. Importantly, more advanced learners who completed the task quickly were able to carry on through the worksheet at their own pace, thanks to the written explanations. Extra 'stretch' notebooks were also made available for those who finished early, so they could practice and reinforce the skills learned. In addition to the coding sessions, we also introduced learners to a range of open-source, biologically relevant tools for completing tasks such as image analysis (using, for example, ImageJ) and sequence handling (using, for example, IGV). We also incorporated a series of lectures and discussions, covering topics such as biodata, reproducibility in science and effective science communication, to help place their learning into the wider sector context.

Figure 1. Example of a task in a Jupyter Notebook worksheet, with written explanations to guide learners

For Summative Assignment 1, we set an individual assignment designed to assess the knowledge and technical skills acquired during the course (Figure 2). For Summative Assignment 2, we set a group presentation designed to assess learners' analytical, critical thinking and communication skills (Figure 3).

Summative Assignment 1 – Project Report

Subelement 1 – Data Visualisation Task
Take one of the patients from the dataset and visualise each piece of provided physiological data in a Jupyter notebook.
→ *Demonstrates their Python coding and annotation proficiency.*

Subelement 2 – The Data Science Workflow
Write about how their group followed a typical data science workflow, providing specific examples.
→ *Demonstrates their understanding of what the workflow is, and how their work fitted into this.*

Subelement 3 – Reflection on Data Science
Write about:
a) The role of data science in modern laboratory science in their sector
b) How integrating data science skills could enhance their future career
→ *Demonstrates their consideration of the relevance of data science in both their sector and career.*

Figure 2. The tasks set for summative assignment 1, with the key competencies tested shown in blue.

Summative Assignment 2 – Group Presentation

Which patient on the ward is most at risk of developing sepsis, and why?

Communicate the results of their data analysis to a hypothetical panel of intensive care nurses.

→ *Demonstrates their ability to analyse data and draw conclusions.*
→ *Demonstrates their oral communication skills.*
→ *Demonstrates their ability to tailor their data visualisations and delivery to a non-specialist audience with specific motivations.*

Figure 3. The task set for summative assignment 2, with the key competencies tested shown in blue.

Impact and outcomes

We evaluated the success of the programme using (1) a survey that employed a Likert scale for participants to express their level of agreement with various statements regarding the material and (2) summative outcomes compared with the previous course deliveries. When asked how the bootcamp had impacted their confidence in coding, (1-5, much less → much more), 65% of learners rated 4 or above, with one standout comment being "Learning how to code in a safe environment from scratch, I have now developed a new love for it."

91% of learners said they would recommend the course to others. Additionally, summative assessment outcomes improved by nearly 10% compared to previous deliveries. These results suggest that the course not only addressed a critical skills gap but also enhanced learner confidence and engagement. Furthermore, when moving on to a subsequent Data Analytics course in the second year, learners communicated that they felt the bootcamp had really prepared them for this, suggesting that we had been able to more strongly scaffold this part of our curriculum.

This case study highlights the importance of tailored delivery and ensuring subject relevance when teaching interdisciplinary (but increasingly essential) skills such as coding and data literacy. Upskilling the Bioscience faculty to deliver the coding sessions allowed the content to be contextualised for Bioscience learners more effectively. Finally, it underscores the need for agility in responding to the needs of the ever-adapting workforce to ensure degree learners remain competitive.

Integrating digital technology to improve horse riding

Jennifer Fitzpatrick, Equine Lecturer, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)

Introduction

Humans have been using horses for thousands of years. They used to be used primarily as a means of transport and for food. Nowadays they are a leisure and commercial resource and thousands of people enjoy the partnership between horse and rider in a range of activities. Many animal rights activists feel using horses in sport and for pleasure is cruel, so finding methods to improve riders' awareness of the impact they have on the horses is key to allowing horse riding to continue.

At SRUC we have invested in a range of technologies to do just this. Students come to SRUC with a love of horses and the aim to work in the equine industry. They are with us for a relatively short period of time, so having the most impact we can on their knowledge, understanding and riding awareness is important.

Every student comes to us with different riding experience, and with this experience comes 'bad habits'. These bad habits can have minor or major impacts on the horses' welfare and performance. Everyone's posture, reactions, thinking and coordination is different and what 'feels normal' to the rider can be very detrimental to the horse and the rider's own personal progression. Traditional coaching involves an instructor on the ground orally providing guidance and advice on how to correct these bad habits but if the rider struggles to feel them in themselves, they are nearly impossible to correct.

With the use of technology, this awareness can be taught in a more visual, inclusive and diverse way. We developed a project to embed technology into student riding sessions with the aim to allow students to be more aware of how their riding impacts on the horses' movement, balance and performance.

Methodology

Three groups of students who displayed common positional faults (bad habits) took part in the project. They used the technology for one riding session per week for 10 weeks.

The technology used consisted of Pixio robot cameras, saddle pressure mats, biomechanics jackets, rein pressure sensors and multi-functional incorrect position trainers.

Figure 1. Pixio Robot camera system. Automatic follow and zoom functions.

Figure 2. Saddle pressure mat. Detects where the rider is distributing pressure on the horse's back with biomechanics which visualise lines of symmetry.

Figure 3. Rein pressure system: measures the pressure applied to the horse's mouth from the rider's hands with instant visual feedback.

Figure 4. Nagga device. Multi-functional incorrect position trainer with instant feedback.

All the technology can be used individually or combined depending on the need/level of the rider.

Examples of common riding problems

+ Rider leaning to the inside or outside

The rider should be central in the saddle with equal pressure on both seat bones (except for higher-level movements). This allows the horse to carry the weight of the rider equally on both sides of their back and prevents over-development of muscle and fatigue on one side more than the other. In Figure 2, middle picture, the rider is falling to the outside and collapsing the inside of their body (blue line represents centre of the horse). This puts more pressure on the right side of the horse's back as seen by the increase in red colouring on the picture on the right from the saddle pressure mat.

+ Poor and inconsistent rein contact

The horse wears a bit in their mouth and there is much debate in the industry on severity of bits. However, a bit is only severe to horses as a result of the pressure taken via the reins from the rider's hands. Riders can have different pressure on the right rein and the left rein, they can ride with one hand higher than the other and hands being carried very high or too low. All of these can cause the horse to be in discomfort.

+ Insecure and ineffective lower leg

Riders are encouraged to sit in the horse with a straight line from their ear, through their shoulder, hip to heel and with the heel being positioned lower than the toe. This promotes security on the saddle to help the rider stay on and results in the least resistance and discomfort for the horse. Often riders raise their heels, push the leg forward or put the lower leg too far back.

Results

A short survey was completed by the groups of students after the 10-week period of technology use. 32 students completed the survey in total.

The questions in the survey were designed to establish if the riders were aware of their own positional faults and how easy it is for them to correct them with traditional coaching methods. The results showed that 56% were not aware of their own positional faults and 68% found it difficult to correct in traditional coaching sessions. The results also showed that 84% of the students found the technology improved their riding awareness and position, with 10% and 6% reporting often and sometimes retrospectively. Of the students surveyed, 81% found that the horse improved and responded better when they worked on correcting their position, with 0% reporting it made no difference.

Conclusion

The results highlight that students find the technology more useful to use than not to use within sessions. Feedback from students advised they enjoyed the rein pressure sensor as it was visual and gave instant feedback, however they felt it was not as useful for long-term training as the Pixio cameras and jackets. They also reported the Pixio could be used in a multitude of scenarios. They highlighted how the technology gave them a better understanding of what their instructor was seeing, as well as how small corrects have large impacts on horse performance.

Riding horses and using horses in sport consistently raises welfare concerns. Humans make mistakes and animals often suffer the consequences. However, with the use of technology these mistakes can be felt by the rider more easily than with traditional methods, thus reducing them in a quicker and more inclusive way. The technology also supports riders who have a range of different learning preferences and learning challenges, irrespective of their gender, age, riding experience and ability.

In addition, the technologies can be used in other areas of learning. For example, manual handling, sports performance evaluations and many others. They allow for diversity of learning and with this comes inclusivity.

The SEEDABLE Curriculum at Scotland's Rural College

Pauline Hanesworth, Head of Learning and Teaching, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)

Context

In an era of complex global and societal challenges, tertiary education institutions are increasingly being called upon to re-examine our curriculum to ensure it is relevant, inclusive and future facing. Since 2020, SRUC (Scotland's Rural College) has been engaged in a four-year curriculum transformation project centred on its SEEDABLE Curriculum, a framework designed to support the development of graduate competencies in sustainability, enterprise, equality and diversity (SEED), enabled by active and blended learning (ABLe).

The SEEDABLE project represents an effort to embed meaningful change at SRUC by engaging with the values and practices underpinning curriculum design and delivery. This case study offers a reflective account of the project, outlining its rationale, implementation and emerging impact, while acknowledging the learning and challenges encountered along the way.

SRUC is a small, specialist higher education institution with a focus on the rural and natural economy. Its teaching spans from schools (SCQF Level 4) through to doctoral level (SCQF Level 12), and its student body is geographically dispersed across Scotland and beyond. The SEEDABLE Curriculum emerged from the recognition that graduates in this context need not only disciplinary knowledge but also the ability to act competently and ethically in a changing world; it required a competency-based approach.

The SEEDABLE Framework

The SEEDABLE Curriculum brings together four strands.

1 **Sustainability**: encouraging student awareness of, and the ability and motivation to, engage with environmental and societal issues, and so respond thoughtfully to support a sustainable future (drawing on UNESCO, 2017 and Advance HE and QAA, 2021).

2 **Enterprise**: supporting our students to develop enterprising competencies and an entrepreneurial mindset to be able to create broad value for the environment, society and economy (drawing on Bacigalupo et al, 2016 and QAA, 2018).

3 **Equality and diversity**: ensuring that inclusive pedagogies and diverse perspectives underpin the concepts and competencies embedded across programmes (drawing on May and Thomas, 2010 and Hanesworth, 2017).

Rather than treating these as discrete areas of focus, the framework encourages an integrated approach, supporting learning through and for these domains rather than simply about them, enabled by (4) Active and blended learning (drawing on Sharma, 2010 and Laurillard, 2012).

Curriculum review

The curriculum review process was designed to run over four academic years, with cohorts of programmes engaging in review on a rolling basis. This structure allowed time for reflection, adaptation and the development of appropriate support. It also enabled alignment where possible with revalidation cycles, reducing duplication of effort and supporting sustainable change.

Key elements of the review process included the creation of programme-specific review teams, development of support resources, and ongoing evaluation of progress. Staff were seconded to lead the review for their areas at 0.2 FTE to allow time for meaningful engagement, and subject teams selected their own leads based on interest and commitment rather than seniority. This helped foster ownership and trust within programme teams.

Lessons learned

Several key themes have emerged through the course of the project, which may be of interest to colleagues in similar institutional or disciplinary contexts.

1   Building a shared identity

Developing a clear and positive identity for the review was an important early step. The term 'SEEDABLE' emerged organically as a memorable acronym and gradually replaced the more formal 'curriculum review' in everyday usage. This shift in language helped to reposition the work as developmental rather than evaluative and encouraged staff to engage with it on their own terms.

2   Providing time and support

Staff time and institutional backing were essential. While the review was institutionally led, its success has depended on the expertise, insights and commitment of subject-level teams. Ensuring staff had protected time, clear guidance and practical resources was a key enabler of engagement.

3   Supporting staff development

Recognising that staff confidence and familiarity with the SEEDABLE strands varied, a suite of support materials was developed, including primers, planning templates and short videos. These were introduced progressively to avoid information overload and were supplemented with a 12-week online staff development programme.

4   Monitoring progress and impact

The project was underpinned by a theory of change model, identifying short-term outcomes (such as increased understanding and engagement), medium-term changes in practice, and longer-term impacts on student learning and experience. This model provided a helpful structure for continuous monitoring and evaluation through which we could ensure we were on track, adapt as need be and celebrate early wins.

5   Attending to emotions

The emotional dimension of curriculum review has been significant. Staff responses have varied – and often shifted at different stages of the process – from enthusiasm to anxiety. By attending to the emotions experienced during change, we were able to implement timely activities for each cohort that supported, alleviated, or built on these feelings to facilitate the change process.

Emergent impact

To date, more than 100 staff have been involved directly in curriculum review activities, spanning all campuses and subject areas. CPD engagement has steadily increased over the review cycles, with participation rates now consistently over 65% and in some cases exceeding 90%. Feedback from participants has been positive: 100% of CPD survey respondents agreed that their understanding had improved and that they intended to apply their learning in practice.

By the end of the current academic year, every SRUC programme will have either undergone curriculum review or been designed from the outset to align with the SEEDABLE Framework. From this we have seen changes in teaching practice, with greater use of active and blended learning. Examples include the introduction of simulation-based activities on biodiversity and climate change, and student-led storytelling projects on the UN SDGs. Curriculum changes are also evident, with new or revised learning outcomes now embedding SEEDABLE competencies. Assessment has become more inclusive and authentic, including a particular move toward embedding student choice in assessment practice. And beyond the curriculum, there is growing engagement in related extracurricular activities, such as our Enterprising Changemaker Programme, Enterprise Ideas Competition, and Sustainability Start-Up School.

While it is too soon to draw firm conclusions about longer-term impacts such as retention and graduate outcomes, some early indicators are promising, especially in the NSS which has seen improvement in Teaching on My Course (+12 percentage points), Assessment and Feedback (+15 percentage points), and Student Voice (+8 percentage points).[2]

Conclusion

The SEEDABLE Curriculum has been an attempt to embed purposeful, values-led change within the curriculum at SRUC. While the process has not been without its challenges, it has provided valuable insights into how curriculum transformation can be used as a catalyst for change. Although the context of SRUC is in many ways distinctive, it is hoped that some of

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[2] NSS results: 2019-2024 comparisons. Although 2020 was the start of the review, and 2020-24 comparisons would have shown even greater improvements, we have used 2019 so as not to base comparisons on a year where NSS results were negatively impacted by the Covid learning experience.

the reflections offered here may be of interest to others undertaking similar work, particularly in small, specialist, or college-based HE providers.

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Protecting inclusion in times of change

Performers College inclusive creative futures strategy

Dr Nora J Williams, Associate Dean for Access and Participation, Mel Thornton, Associate Dean for Creative Futures, Laura Keeling, Head of Careers for Performing Arts, BIMM University

This case study explores an initiative to lower barriers to performing arts careers by implementing agent panels and in-house auditions across our Performing Arts faculty (Performers College). This approach was first implemented in 2023-24 and supports parity of opportunity for students.

Historically underrepresented students in performing arts face undue barriers to accessing job opportunities. The Sutton Trust's November 2024 report, A Class Act, shows inequality in the creative industries worsening over time. The report recommends that higher education providers facilitate industry connections (Holt-White et al, 2024).

The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated existing barriers. In a recent Student Financial Support Survey, BIMM University students reported that the rising cost of living, and transit costs in particular, affect their ability to take advantage of opportunities such as auditions and internships.

In 2023, BIMM University developed a faculty-wide careers strategy, focused on:

+ creating industry access opportunities for all students,

+ providing career resources and promoting students' professional Spotlight profiles,

+ embedding career development into the curriculum, including showreel preparation.

This case study focuses on the first area of the strategy. We achieve this partly through offering agent panels and in-house auditions.

Agent panels

Agent panels connect students with industry professionals and provide pathways to representation by bringing the agents *to* our students. This creates a useful bridge, allowing students to audition in a familiar environment, while still giving them autonomy over their choice of solo audition material. To maximise opportunities, the Creative Futures teams invite a range of agencies: larger and smaller; more established and newer; more and less specialised.

Kirsty Yates, Careers Manager in Brighton, describes the agent panels as an opportunity to begin 'cutting the apron strings' and for students to step out on their own as they look toward the completion of their course. Laura Keeling, Head of Careers for Performers College, notes that "these professional sessions bridge the gap between education and industry, offering students practical experience into the representation process".

For Musical Theatre and Dance students, the morning consists of dance auditions in groups, in which everyone participates. Agents then call back students to hear them sing. Careers Managers are involved in this callback process, supporting the selection process so that students get to present at their best.

Acting students have a different structure, which in 2025 included an ensemble studio performance in front of agents, followed by individual monologues and coaching.

In-house auditions

In-house auditions support students who excel in a single discipline. Employers often send their own choreographer, allowing students an additional opportunity to work with an industry professional. Some of these are open to any students who wish to audition; others have specific requirements in relation to, for example, vocal range or dance styles.

In-house auditions offer a range of opportunities geared to every skill level.

Results

The success of the agent panels and in-house auditions is measured in several ways.

+ **Participation:** in both 2024 and 2025, more than 500 performing arts students auditioned for around 122 agents, leading to 600 meetings across the four campuses.

+ **Industry connections:** 90+ agents attended panels in 2024 and 2025. Some agents visited multiple campuses to meet additional students.

+ **Representation offers:** 202 graduates secured representation in the 2023/24 academic year. The 2024/25 panels happened more recently, but more than 125 students have already secured representation, and this number continues to grow as graduating students make their decisions.

+ **Employment opportunities:** graduates have secured roles with organisations such as P&O Australia, Disneyland Hong Kong, Moulin Rouge Paris, and productions of Wicked, Hamilton and Matthew Bourne's Edward Scissorhands.

Agents tell us that the panels lower barriers to meeting our graduates.

+ "Agent panels offer a vital platform for us to discover emerging talent in a setting that's equitable and inclusive. Not every student has the same access to industry networks, and these panels allow us to connect with individuals we might not otherwise encounter." - Zoe Wright / Collective Agents.

+ "These in-house panels are a game-changer. They ensure every graduate, regardless of background, gets a real shot at representation. It's refreshing to meet artists in a space that feels supportive and familiar to them." - Ian Jones/Arran Jones Associates.

+ "Bringing auditions directly to students levels the playing field. We're able to see potential firsthand – without the barriers of geography, cost or connections getting in the way. Talent should be seen, not filtered by privilege." - Natalie Varney / Creative and Talent Casting, Haven Casting

Students express enthusiasm for the increased opportunities and exposure provided by agent panels.

+ "The Creative Futures Team have provided me with many opportunities to prepare for the industry. Thanks to them, I was able to secure an agent." - Zachary Shane, Musical Theatre and Dance (Birmingham, 2024).

+ The Agent Panel structure "allowed each individual to be showcased at their strength" and "prepared us for that next step of transitioning into industry" - Georgia Mallaburn, Musical Theatre and Dance (Essex, 2025).

+ "Panel days have been a great opportunity to be seen by industry, and, in addition to being an introduction to professional auditioning, as they have been mostly in house, this has made for a very safe and comfortable environment to audition in for the first time. [...] From this I gained a lot of agent interest, which led to meetings that I wouldn't necessarily have been able to achieve on my own without the help of college." - Grace, Trinity Diploma, Northern Ballet School (Manchester, 2025).

Next steps

As we improve our provision and build support for historically underrepresented students, we are improving our quantitative data collection and sharing practices. This will allow more in-depth analysis of how different demographics of students are supported by agent panels and in-house auditions. Preliminary results, however, indicate that bringing agents and employers to our campuses to meet students provides a levelled playing field, resulting in a broader range of opportunities for our graduates.

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EmpowerMe CPD Initiative at Elizabeth School of London

Elena Carruba, Elizabeth School of London

Introduction
At the Elizabeth School of London (ESL), inclusion is not an add-on – it's our foundation. We're spotlighting EmpowerMe alongside the rich tapestry of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work across departments. Below, colleagues from Quality Assurance (QA), Learning and Teaching, Partnership Development and Wellbeing share concise, data-backed snapshots of their initiatives and impact.

Fostering inclusive excellence among our teaching staff is critical to our EDI mission. Launched in January 2024, EmpowerMe is a six-month continuous professional development (CPD) programme designed specifically for associate lecturers and teaching staff. EmpowerMe has rapidly become a cornerstone of our EDI strategy, equipping educators with the knowledge, skills and confidence to deliver inclusive, engaging and data-informed learning experiences.

Quality Assurance perspective
Our QA team established a rigorous, monthly EDI audit cycle in early 2024, pairing quantitative course reviews with themed awareness campaigns – Pride, Deaf Awareness, Stress Awareness Month, African World Heritage Day and Autism Acceptance Month. Each audit measured syllabus inclusivity, assessment accessibility and staff engagement, revealing a 12% uptick in documented inclusive practices across 35 modules. Complementary posters mobilised 150+ cross-campus conversations, workshop sign-ups, and peer-led discussion groups. By year's end, student satisfaction with a "respectful learning environment" climbed by 15%, and module pass rates for diverse cohorts improved by 8%. This data-driven approach enables targeted interventions and continuous quality enhancement throughout ESL.

Learning and Teaching Manager perspective
As Learning and Teaching Manager, I spearheaded the launch of fortnightly Inclusive Teaching Clinics alongside a comprehensive EDI workshop series, covering topics from culturally responsive pedagogy to neurodiversity-friendly assessment design. Over six months, 60 lecturers engaged in hands-on sessions to redesign nearly 200 lesson plans – incorporating diverse case studies, multi-modal materials and scaffolded supports tailored to varied learning needs. Participant feedback rated the clinics 4.8/5 for relevance and practicality. Subsequent student engagement surveys revealed a 20% rise in active participation, with focus-group interviews highlighting greater confidence among learners to contribute to seminars. Most notably, module pass rates for underrepresented student cohorts increased by 7%, closing a critical attainment gap. Lecturers also reported a 30% reduction in disciplinary referrals, attributing this to clearer, more inclusive instructions. This sustained professional development model not only elevated teaching quality but fostered a

culture of continuous improvement – ensuring all students benefit from equitable and engaging learning experiences.

Senior Partnership Academic Manager perspective

As Senior Partnership Academic Manager, I coordinate ESL's collaborative networks with five higher-education institutions – University of Greater Manchester, Canterbury Christ Church University, Birmingham City University, Newcastle College Group and St Mary's University – alongside industry partners across our 11 campuses in six different cities. These alliances leverage partner EDI policies – such as Manchester's Inclusive Curriculum Framework and Canterbury Christ Church University's Diversity in Practice Charter – to co-create guest lectures, co-develop employability skills, and embed inclusive modules. ESL serves a richly diverse student body of approximately 18,000 learners: 55% from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds; 40% mature learners; and 15% first-generation students. Recognising varied needs – language support, flexible scheduling and culturally responsive content – our joint programmes offer 40 guest lectures a year, three industry fairs, and cross-institutional mentorship schemes. Post-collaboration surveys indicate 60% of participants report enhanced cultural insight and professional confidence. By referencing 11% of our curriculum to partner EDI guidelines, we ensure consistency and quality across campuses. Industry stakeholders have committed to ongoing curriculum co-development throughout 2025, pledging resources tailored to neurodiverse learners. This strategic partnership model not only broadens student horizons but embeds inclusive excellence across ESL's entire learning ecosystem.

Wellbeing team perspective

Our Wellbeing team has pioneered expanded mental-health services – 24/7 online counselling, dedicated BAME and LGBTQ+ support team, and trauma-informed staff training. Inspired by these models, ESL's Wellbeing team increased on-campus drop-in hours by 50%, adding evening and weekend slots to accommodate our diverse student body: 55% BAME, 40% mature learners juggling work and study, and 80% international students navigating cultural transition. We also partnered with a counselling service to deliver trauma-informed workshops – covering resilience-building, mindfulness and peer-support facilitation – specifically tailored to neurodiverse and refugee-background students. In six months, event attendance soared to around 200%, reflecting pent-up demand for accessible support. Four-week post-session surveys demonstrated a 30% reduction in reported anxiety symptoms and a 22% increase in self-reported coping confidence. We have several workshops and guest speakers every month. Importantly, 88% of staff and students agreed they felt "more supported and connected," citing inclusive language, culturally sensitive facilitators and flexible scheduling as key enablers. By benchmarking against national best-practice EDI policies – such as TEF's Mental Health Charter – and continuously refining our offerings based on feedback, ESL's Wellbeing team has cultivated a truly inclusive environment where every learner can thrive.

Context and rationale

In late 2023, ESL's Quality, Wellbeing and Academic teams conducted research-informed surveys and identified two urgent challenges. Firstly, on **student satisfaction disparity:** modules taught by associate lecturers scored circa 30% lower on the National Student Survey (NSS) items related to 'teaching quality' and 'supportive learning environment,' compared to those taught by core faculty. Secondly, **inconsistent inclusive practice:** a staff audit revealed significant variation in how cultural competence and accessibility were embedded in core curricula.

Recognising that associate lecturers constitute around 18% of our teaching workforce – and play a pivotal role in student success – the Committee convened senior academics, EDI specialists and alumni mentors to co-design a bespoke CPD solution. EmpowerMe would address both skill gaps and systemic barriers through a data-driven, collaborative model.

Programme design

1 Curriculum framework

EmpowerMe's curriculum aligns with the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and Advance HE EDI benchmarks.

Key modules

- **Inclusive pedagogy and cultural competence** (two workshops): participants explore intersectionality, unconscious bias and decolonising the curriculum through case studies and peer role-plays.
- **Emotional intelligence for educators** (interactive seminars): using Daniel Goleman's framework alongside an AI-powered reflection tool, staff map triggers, build empathy and practice conflict-management scenarios.
- **Digital and AIQ-enhanced teaching** (hands-on labs): educators learn to integrate AI tools – automated feedback analytics, real-time captioning, adaptive quizzing – into Moodle and campus lecture capture.
- **Community of practice and peer coaching** (monthly circles): small groups of five engage in micro-teaching sessions, provide structured feedback and co-develop inclusive lesson plans.

2 Mentor matching and support

- **Cohort:** 45 associate lecturers across disciplines.
- **Mentors:** eight senior faculty and external CPD experts, selected for coaching experience and EDI passion.
- **Induction:** a two-day mentor training covering evidence-based coaching, goal-setting and reflective practice.
- **Engagement:** bi-weekly mentor–mentee meetings guided by structured workbooks, plus online drop-in clinics.

3   Blended delivery

- **Workshops:** held onsite at ESL's London Harbour Campus.
- **Webinars:** fortnightly Teams seminars on emerging EDI topics.
- **E-learning:** self-paced modules on Moodle, including video scenarios and quizzes.
- **Reflective journals:** digital journals with AI-driven prompts to capture learning and plan next steps.

Implementation timeline

- **Jan–Feb:** participant onboarding, baseline surveys, mentor induction.
- **Mar–Apr:** modules one and two delivered, mid-point satisfaction survey.
- **May–Jun:** modules three and four, launch of peer coaching.
- **Jul–Dec:** advanced labs, optional one-to-one clinics, continuous evaluation.
- **Jan:** final impact assessment and dissemination of outcomes.

Outcomes and impact

Quantitative results

- **NSS teaching quality score:** +15% increase for EmpowerMe-taught modules.
- **Associate lecturer retention:** attrition dropped by 12% (versus 5% institutional average).
- **Programme completion:** 94% completion rate, surpassing the 85% target.

Qualitative feedback

- **Empowered practice:** "I now approach group work intentionally, ensuring every voice is heard," reported 87% of participants.
- **Emotional resilience:** 80% felt better equipped to handle disruptions and conflicts.
- **AIQ integration:** 68% adopted AI-driven formative assessments, reducing grading time by 30% and improving feedback turnaround.

Teamwork and collaboration

EmpowerMe succeeded through a cross-departmental steering group of eight senior staff, the Wellbeing office and student representatives. Partnerships with Advance HE and local CPD providers enriched content and accreditation. Academic volunteers became EmpowerMe Champions, mentoring each new cohort and sustaining momentum.

Sustainability and scalability

Operating on a lean budget – funded by existing CPD allocations, EmpowerMe demonstrates high impact with minimal overhead. Future plans include:

+ **Digital mentorship platform:** a bespoke portal for matching, progress tracking and virtual workshops.

+ **Inter-institutional network:** annual CPD summit and shared resource hub for partner colleges.

+ **Real-time analytics:** enhanced Moodle dashboards to monitor engagement and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

EmpowerMe and ESL's different departments exemplify how specialist institutions can lead EDI innovation by empowering associate lecturers with intellectual rigour (IQ), emotional insight (EQ), and tech-driven foresight (AIQ). Through strategic teamwork, data-driven design and unwavering commitment to inclusion, ESL has achieved measurable improvements in teaching quality, staff retention, and student satisfaction. This case study provides a replicable model for higher-education providers seeking sustainable and scalable solutions to EDI challenges.

Kindness in transition: supporting international students in liminal spaces through social and emotional learning

Victoria Wilson Crane, Kaplan International Pathways

As artificial intelligence reshapes the workplace, the value of human-centered skills such as empathy, emotional intelligence and compassion has never been greater.

Pathways students, preparing for higher education in the UK, navigate not only academic transitions but profound cultural and emotional dislocation. These overlapping developments place students in what anthropologists and educators describe as 'liminal spaces' – thresholds between the familiar and the unknown, where identity, belonging and purpose are often in flux. In response to these challenges, Kaplan International Pathways has partnered with the Kindness Factory to bring the Kindness Curriculum, an Australian social and emotional learning (SEL) initiative, to the UK.

This innovative curriculum is designed to foster emotional resilience, wellbeing and employability among international students. Rooted in the lived experience of its founder, Kath Koschel, and supported by evidence-based themes such as humility and compassion, the programme addresses the full student experience, not only in terms of academic success, but in cultivating a sense of belonging and purpose during a time of deep personal transformation.

Origins and rationale: kindness as a response to disconnection
Kath Koschel founded the Kindness Factory following multiple traumatic events that left her with both physical injury and emotional loss. Rather than retreating, Koschel responded by building a movement that celebrates small acts of kindness. What began as a personal journey evolved into a social enterprise, recording more than eight and a half million kindness acts, globally, by June 2025, and delivering learning experiences to young people in thousands of Australian schools.

At Kaplan, where students arrive from vastly different cultures and educational systems, the need for development of social and emotional skills and resilience is acute. These students often face homesickness, language barriers and financial pressures at a time when they are studying intensive high-stakes academic programmes. They can be adrift from close family and may be missing their established in-person social networks from back home. Embedding kindness as an educational tool meets these needs directly: it helps build community, fosters emotional safety and supports learning in a culturally inclusive way.

Curriculum design: themes, modes, and milestones
The Kindness Curriculum at Kaplan International Pathways comprises 13 thematic modules; 12 based on the original Kindness Curriculum attributes from Australia, including perspective, trust, and humour, and a 13th, that explores intercultural competence. These

are introduced across the student journey, including self-paced online modules, student-led live activities and staff-facilitated sessions.

This learning is contextualised to students' academic timelines. For example, the theme of collaboration is introduced before group projects, and mindfulness is explored ahead of summative assessment periods. This alignment ensures that the curriculum remains practical and relevant, not abstract or performative.

On completion of an activity based on one of the attributes, students receive a digital badge – a microcredential recognising their participation and personal development. These badges provide tangible acknowledgment of soft skills acquisition, which can be shared with future employers as evidence of emotional intelligence and adaptability.

Impact: belonging, growth and employability

Since its UK launch, the Kindness Curriculum has had demonstrable effects. In the three academic years since the launch, students have claimed more than 11,000 digital badges. These figures reflect meaningful engagement across the group of Kaplan Pathways colleges.

Beyond numbers, qualitative feedback reveals a strong emotional impact. One student remarked:

> "There is a Kindness Board in reception that shows that everyone matters, there are themes in our classes that encourage us to show kindness to ourselves and one another as we get ready to join the university community. Kindness is the ray of sunshine that everyone needs in their life." Ashfia Ahsan, International Year One in Life Sciences, University of Essex International College 2025.

This observation underscores how transformative it is to encounter a culture of care.

Embedding kindness also contributes to employability, a core goal of Kaplan's Pathways model. The skills reinforced through the curriculum are thought to be increasingly emphasised by employers as of priority, as evidenced in the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs reports; empathy and active listening appearing in the 2025 report at number 7 of 25 skills thought to be a core need for successful global workforces.

Theoretical foundations: liminality and learning

The concept of liminality is central to understanding the success of the Kindness Curriculum: the state of being 'betwixt and between' and in a space where conventional structures fall away and new identities begin to form.

This resonates with staff in the emerging Pathways 'sector', who also may feel 'in between' further and higher education; their purpose is to help students to prepare to thrive in future academic endeavors and in their working lives. For international students, these moments of transition are profound, yet were not overtly supported by the traditional academic

curricula on offer at Kaplan Pathways colleges, until the introduction of the Kindness Curriculum.

By meeting students in these liminal moments – between homes, between languages, between educational systems – Kaplan's approach affirms their emotional realities and supports their psychological integration.

Looking ahead: a scalable, replicable model

One of the strengths of the Kaplan–Kindness Factory partnership is its scalability. The combination of asynchronous modules, student-led learning and facilitated experiences offers a blended model that can be adapted across geographies and institutional types. The use of digital badging ensures consistent tracking and recognition.

This work aligns with a broader international movement to embed social and emotional learning into higher education. As institutions around the world grapple with how to make student support more meaningful, approaches such as this offer a compelling way forward.

Conclusion: kindness as pedagogy

The Kindness Curriculum is more than a wellbeing initiative, it is a pedagogical intervention rooted in evidence, empathy and innovation. It reflects a profound belief: that emotional safety and belonging are not ancillary to learning, but foundational to it.

Meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student community: supporting prayer and contemplation across a multi-campus university

Sarah Mohammad-Qureshi, Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Nathan Shaw, Head of Safeguarding, The University of Law

Following requests to support the prayer and contemplation needs of students and campus staff, a review was undertaken of existing provisions and best practice. The key issues identified were met with several actions. The combined actions represent the best practice we can offer which satisfy several competing requirements and restrictions: our diverse student body and varying student numbers at each campus, our physical space availability, our Prevent duty, and the availability of resources to provide a safe and appropriate space.

Context

In the UK, the University of Law operates across 17 physical locations, six main campuses and 11 satellite campuses based at the estates of our host universities.

The multi-site offering provides a 'local' campus for many of our Home students, resulting in a high proportion of commuter students – in fact, most of our students fall into this category. In addition, our CampuSwitch option allows for student to experience different UK locations during their studies, dependent on criteria.

There are obvious size differences across our buildings and satellite campus spaces, which produce a difference in the size and capacity of contemplation provisions across each of our UK sites. Where rooms are designated for contemplation, many rooms are only large enough to accommodate two to three users simultaneously. Campuses report current contemplation rooms struggle to meet capacity for all users, particularly at peak times (such as Ramadan, or assessment periods). This leads to extended waiting times, impacts on time out of class and, in some cases, leads to congestion in corridors outside the contemplation rooms with associated potential safety risks.

Review of existing provisions

A university-wide review of contemplation spaces was undertaken. The review considered feedback from a task and finish group, convened to discuss current provisions and their limitations, experiences of representative staff, students and other stakeholders, with insight into good practice where it exists. Wider consultation took place with a representative Widening Participation Champion, the University's Regional Prevent Coordinator, the Head of Safeguarding, members of the Space Management Oversight Board, and feedback from contemplation room users.

Of our current student population, 66% have a declared religion or belief. While we do not strive to provide a space on the scale of accommodating all students with a religious affiliation at any one time, there is a need to expand the current size and number of rooms to

support an increasingly diverse student population and limit the assumed domination by any one group. We also recognise that not all students declaring such will be active users of the contemplation space. In addition, the room should offer a provision for quiet contemplation/safe space for anyone who requires it – including those without a faith.

Outputs

The review resulted in four actions.

1 Creation of guidance for providing temporary provisions to meet periods of extra demand.

2 This includes standard instructions for using the room(s) as a contemplation space when designated. Authorised signage had been supplied to relevant campuses, to be used to confirm the room(s) reserved for prayer and contemplation and the rules for use.

3 Signposting to external places of worship and prayer facilities.

4 Feedback from contemplation rooms users suggested that some students were already accessing external spaces. This, in consideration with having a large commuter population who will pass venues to and from campus, suggested that using these spaces outside of the teaching timetable would limit demand and offer a more tailored and suitably resourced experience for those who required this. We limited the signposting to places of worship/chaplaincy provisions relating to the six major religions as identified in the Census of England and Wales 2021 (and consistent with our student demographic). Three places local to each campus were listed, where available. Each venue was vetted by the Head of Safeguarding and will continue to be checked annually. Instructions for reporting concerns have been added to the list.

5 Advice for finding a place of worship, outside of those listed.

6 This includes safety advice on engaging with new communities and how to recognise and report concerns. The intention is to support those new to the area with finding social and spiritual community, with the expectation that many of our students commuting from their existing neighbourhoods are more likely to have established community and wellbeing links than those less than familiar with the area.

7 Creation of a contemplation room standard; expectations of size and provision when considering new buildings/restructures.

Impact

The impact of this new approach to supporting prayer and contemplation so far has been:

+ clearer and consistent directive for campus staff,

+ managing of expectations from students: the review uncovered that greater transparency around our process and regulatory requirements is valued,

+ providing a safe guidance for students looking to connect with the local community (relating back to feedback from student insight work around belonging),

+ supports wellbeing for staff and students who engage with spiritual and religious practice for this purpose,

+ avoids (assumed) domination of contemplation space by any one religion or belief and confirms space as available to users of all faith and none,

+ commission of a full university chaplaincy review by an external consultant.

The new approach has been in place for six months and will be reviewed for effectiveness towards the end of the year. This will involve consultation with relevant campus staff, and feedback from contemplation space users and staff/students of faith. The evaluation will also be informed by the outcome of a parallel consultation of our chaplaincy provision, commissioned to further delve into the needs of our university community.

Connecting through practice – identity, representation and belonging within higher education dance conservatoire training

Phaedra Pestilas, Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance

This case study provides an insight into Rambert School's CONNECTIONS PROJECT, as an example of innovative practice within a small specialist higher education setting. It was selected as a current practice that "demonstrate[s] innovative ways of protecting and sustaining equity, diversity and inclusion" (Advance HE, 2025). For context, Rambert School is a leading dance conservatoire in the UK, focusing on undergraduate training in ballet and contemporary dance practices, as well as embodied research at postgraduate level for professional practitioners. Diversity and inclusion are critical in sustaining a School in which the histories and traditions of dance are understood and respected, while its boundaries are examined and questioned.

Rambert School is a diverse community built on the ethos of acceptance and inclusion. It is rooted in the values of our founder Marie Rambert, who famously said she did not want the school to be "a sausage factory", highlighting the central importance of diversity. Fast forwarding a century, these values guide us in the way we design and deliver our dance training and research and craft our pedagogic approaches, embedding equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles in our day-to-day. The ways in which EDI principles are activated are multi-fold, but also require reflexivity and responsiveness in relation to shifting societal and industry priorities, as well as changing student cohort demographics.

As we share this case study in June 2025, the long-fought striving for equity, diversity and inclusion is being shaken and rattled from many directions on the global stage, and within university settings we have a responsibility to educate but also to resist. We must educate our community about the multiplicity of voices and practices in dance, celebrate the diverse identities and cultures and how they are manifested or expressed, but also recognise how they are excluded, marginalised or oppressed. Resist the forces that discriminate and divide, as well as challenge any prevailing practices in dance that marginalise individuals or communities.

As part of this institutional responsibility, our approach to EDI is dynamic and we are continually taking steps to ensure that our methods, systems and pedagogical outlooks are built around specific EDI priorities: access, representation and belonging, alongside amplifying voices and identities, celebrating diverse histories and cultures, and fostering dance excellence in a multiplicity of forms. This led us to conceive and implement EDI interventions that complement our diverse and inclusive curriculum, but also address ongoing issues around representation and identity within dance. Student (and staff) voice indicated that learning about our diverse community, exploring topics and practices beyond the curriculum and regularly connecting with each other through our varied artistic and cultural practices would be beneficial in fostering a greater sense of belonging for all. The CONNECTIONS PROJECT aims to address this on a biannual basis; CONNECTIONS

Days for whole-school participation launched from the 2024-25 academic year to share and appreciate Rambert School's diversity and vibrance through a series of workshops, masterclasses, guest talks and discussions with different focus points and topics.

The CONNECTIONS Days were held throughout the academic year, engaging the entire Rambert School community in activities that focus on identity, diversity, inclusion and representation within dance. The curated workshops and talks included a diverse range of dance practitioners sharing their artistic practices and lived experiences from a variety of perspectives – we focused on global majority experiences, LGBTQAI+ and Queer perspectives, gender and sexuality in dance, disabled dancers' access, as well as mental wellbeing. Each CONNECTIONS Day had an umbrella theme and four key activities: artist spotlight, food sharing, student voice and student spotlight.

Events such as CONNECTIONS Day are important as they give us the opportunity to come together as a school community, engage with each other, acknowledge each other and deepen our understanding of who we are as individuals, as a community and as citizens of the wider world. CONNECTIONS interventions have been about enhancing intersectional awareness, fostering diverse representation and belonging, and promoting cultural exchange and networking. Within the HE context, our objectives are to ensure:

+ improved awareness and knowledge of cross-cultural experiences and issues of representation,

+ enhanced attainment for underrepresented and underperforming groups,

+ increased achievement and professional progression,

+ improved student engagement and sense of belonging.

These objectives also fall under the Widening Participation remit of highlighting challenges faced by underrepresented and marginalised groups in the dance industry; looking at how such groups have overcome barriers to become excellent dance artists.

We are now able to include CONNECTIONS within our Access and Participation Plan as a pre-existing intervention activity at Rambert School, which helps build a sense of community. The overarching achievement and continued aim of CONNECTIONS is to increase a sense of belonging – particularly for students who may find the conservatoire dance culture daunting and difficult to 'fit in' to.

In so many cases in dance settings and in the wider world, people are silenced or erased, discriminated against or excluded, and our aim through CONNECTIONS is to ensure that the spaces we hold foster a sense of belonging and that there are role models of excellence for everyone. Belonging is not just about physical presence but a deep emotional connection to a place and the people within it (Hobbs, 2023). This is central to a positive higher education experience that leads to individual and collective motivation and achievement and, as educators, we strive to understand the extent and depth of the social

histories that still shape the experiences and identities of our students, and ensure we create spaces where everyone feels seen, heard, included and represented.

The words of educator and activist bell hooks (2008) resonate still:

> "I dreamed about a culture of belonging. I still dream that dream. I contemplate what our lives would be like if we knew how to cultivate awareness, to live mindfully, peacefully; if we learned habits of being that would bring us closer together, that would help us build beloved community."

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Supporting a student with multiple comorbidities

Morris Anglin, Regent College London

Introduction

This case study, under the theme Protecting Inclusion in Times of Change, shows how Regent College London (RCL) and the University of Greater Manchester (UGM) supported a student during personal and organisational changes. As student needs grow more complex, especially during change, this case highlights how tailored, student-focused support helped maintain both learning and wellbeing.

The support provided went beyond the standard Disability Support Allowance (DSA) provisions. Drawing on the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and inclusive pedagogy (Florian and Black Hawkins, 2011), it emphasised relational, coproduced and forward planning strategies. These included flexible delivery, adjusted workloads and consistent pastoral support. The approach was also informed by research on intersectionality in student experience (Kendall, 2016) and trauma-informed educational practice (Brown and Leigh, 2018; Healey et al, 2020).

Despite changes in leadership roles, including a new Provost, Head of Programme and changes within student support teams, RCL maintained its core values and processes. The student was included in all decision-making regarding academic support, demonstrating a practical model of inclusive and responsive support.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was adopted to provide a contextualised account of the student's experience over a three-year period. The focus was on the processes and practices that supported inclusive engagement during a time of organisational change. Data sources included:

+ weekly 1:1 academic support log,

+ notes from Academic Support Officers and Customer Service Officers,

+ email correspondence between support staff, leadership and the student,

+ structured reflections from academic staff,

+ student academic performance data and feedback.

The support tutor's personal account gave clear insight into how the interventions helped. This was backed up by college records on inclusion and institutional decision-making. Five main themes emerged: building academic skills, emotional support, tailored assessments, teamwork and consistent support. These form the basis of the case study.

Institutional context and challenge

Student X lived with multiple comorbidities and faced challenges related to learning and comprehension, as well as complex personal and health-related circumstances. At HE3, they underperformed to a degree that triggered concerns regarding their progression and retention.

This period was marked by leadership transitions and the ongoing impact of Covid-19, and changes in student services and support systems. These changes raised concerns about consistent support, especially beyond DSA. Hybrid learning made things harder, as the student's health issues made commuting and switching between online and in-person sessions difficult.

In a joint support meeting, the student shared their needs and agreed to attend all sessions online with tutor check ins. This approach (Figure 1) centred their needs and led to wider improvements in support.
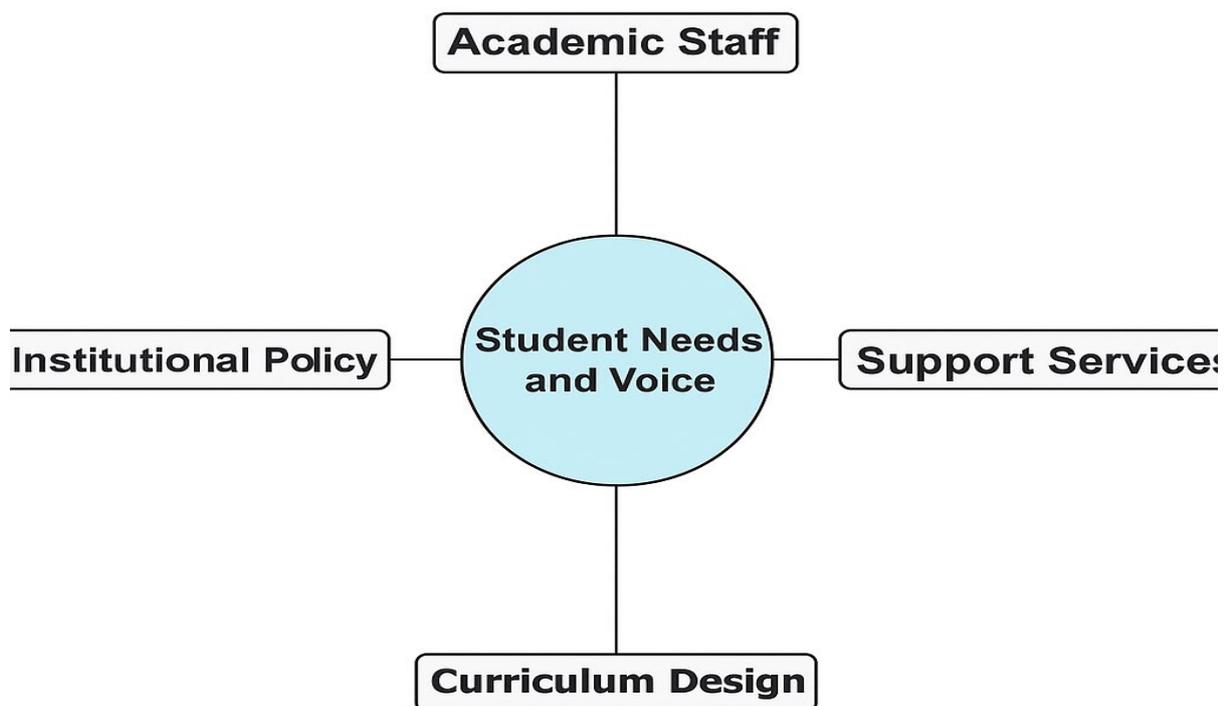

Figure 1. Co-creation model student needs framework

Key challenges included:

+ emotional distress linked to fluctuating health and deadline pressure,

+ weak verbal skills impacting reading and writing fluency,

+ concerns over whether bespoke support would continue under new leadership,

+ Academic Team distress caused by navigating complex student behaviours and needs.

Weekly sessions gave structured help. Tasks were broken into smaller steps with mini deadlines. The student read texts aloud and put them into their own words to understand better. They also got support with paragraphing, referencing and thinking critically.

Ongoing emotional and wellbeing support was offered alongside academic guidance. Encouragement and praise helped rebuild the student's confidence and reduce dependency on extensions. By HE5, the student was meeting standard submission deadlines and demonstrating independent engagement with academic content.

These approaches reflected the principles of the Trauma-Informed Academic Support Model (Diagram 2). This model underpinned many of the interventions provided, promoting a learning environment grounded in trust, consistency and empowerment.

Safety
Consistent tutor presence and predictable routines

Collaboration
Shared decision-making between tutor and student in setting goals and learning approaches

Trauma-Informed Academic Support Model

Trustworthiness
Clear, upfront agreements and deadlines and expectations

Empowerment
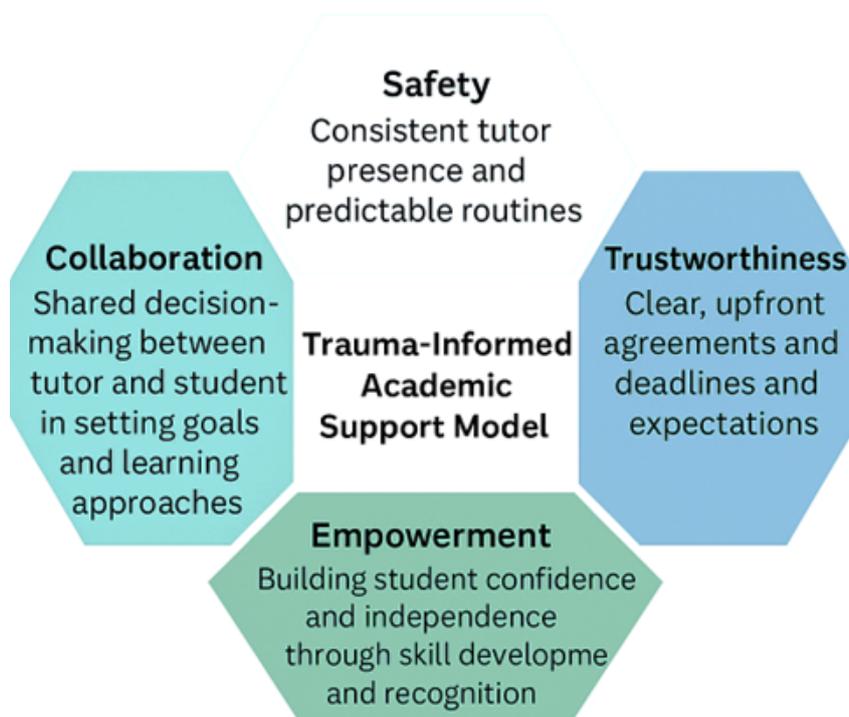Building student confidence and independence through skill developme and recognition

Figure 2. Trauma-Informed Academic Support Model

Extra support was given beyond what DSA covers. In agreement with UGM and RCL policy on reasonable adjustments, instead of a work placement, the student completed a reflective assignment based on their experience as a carer and health service user. This helped them meet the course goals without affecting their wellbeing.

Other support included accessible slides and helpful notes. Staff worked together to follow the student's support plan, sharing updates and making sure everyone knew how best to help.

Despite the leadership transition, consistency in support relationships was prioritised. The student retained their academic mentor throughout, ensuring that established trust and understanding were maintained. New leadership acknowledged the importance of preserving these relationships and did not disrupt existing academic support.

RCL's culture encouraged personalised support and quick action. Inclusion was seen as a core part of teaching and decision-making, not an extra. This ongoing development aligns with the QAA Inclusive Higher Education Framework (QAA, 2023), which promotes staff collaboration in developing inclusive systems.

Impact and outcomes

+ Student X improved from failing to passing all modules.

+ By Level 5, they showed critical thinking and worked more independently.

+ They felt heard, supported and valued.

+ The case showed how important consistent, joined-up support is.

+ The student was later chosen as a student rep, showing their growth into a peer advocate.

Recommendations for other providers

1 Create plans to keep student support stable during staff or leadership changes.

2 Involve students in planning their support.

3 Use data to identify students who need extra help.

4 Appoint inclusion leads in each department to share good practice.

5 Keep trusted staff-student relationships where possible during changes.

6 Make flexibility part of policy, not just through DSA.

7 Support both the learning and emotional needs of students with complex challenges.

8 Support staff wellbeing and training on inclusive teaching.

9 Treat inclusive teaching and assessment as the norm, not the exception.

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We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address inequalities, promote inclusion and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector.

We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

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