Supporting student progression and attainment through sustainable Inclusive Assessment Practices: What Works?

PROGRESSION REPORT

Contents

Executive Summary

Context

This report outlines a research project which was completed in 2023 by researchers from 7 higher education institutions, to understand how (and if) inclusive assessment policies and practices across these institutions which were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic could be successfully implemented in a post-pandemic world. The project, which has been undertaken with the help of funding from the University Alliance, is a continuation of the work carried out in a previous QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project in 2021-22 in which all the partners in the current project participated.

Approach

As for the first project, the research process fell into three distinct phases: 1) each partner undertook an analysis of internal data relating to assessment outcomes to identify programmes in which awarding gaps had reduced in 21-22 or continuation rates had improved for 20-21; 2) and students from those programmes were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews or focus groups online to explore the ways in which assessments had changed (or otherwise) since the pandemic and to discuss what helps students with assessment and the challenges faced by staff and students around assessment. Finally, 3) each partner carried out thematic analysis of its own staff interview and student interview/focus group data to identify key themes and subthemes both at institution and programme level.

Outcomes

The final thematic data from each partner was compared and contrasted at an online sandpit event to identify overall themes from the project. Those themes could be broken down into enablers and barriers that staff and students had encountered in relation to assessment since the previous project completed, and we have been able to map these against the inclusive assessment attributes that we identified in the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project so as to provide further practical insight for the sector as to what works in the promotion of the inclusive assessment attributes, and what barriers need to be addressed. In addition to this report and the mapping of these enablers and barriers to inclusive assessment, the project team has also created case studies as to what works, a short video exploring some of the key issues arising from the project and an interactive version of the toolkit.

Report structure

The report is split into 4 sections: an introduction, which provides additional context to the research, and its aims; a methodology section; the key outcomes of the project, including discussion of what the enablers and barriers to implementing the inclusive attributes identified during the research were; and an outline of some of the further outputs of the research.

Introduction

This research seeks to extend the work done by the previous QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project (April 2021-July 2022) by members of the University Alliance. The

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goal of the project was to analyse assessment practices for cohorts of students during and post the Covid-19 pandemic, considering the impacts of large-scale assessment change triggered by the pandemic and the resulting educational pivot. Despite the challenging times, it was recognised that many of the changes made to assessment policy and practice had positively affected awarding and/or continuation gaps. The project team were keen to understand how these changes were implemented, why they were successful and if they had continued post-Covid, in order to form guidance - and examples of best practice - for inclusive assessments.

Most of the project partners from the QAA Collaborative Enhancement project chose to remain involved with this continuation phase, and the team was therefore able to draw upon its established ways of working together, led once again by Teesside University, with regular meetings taking place online between the partners.

A collaborative agreement was established and entered into by all partners to ensure that all were clear as to project aims and expectations, and to set out agreed parameters for confidentiality and publication.

Teesside University's Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee approved an overarching ethics application for the project, which most partners were able to have ratified through their own ethics approval procedures. Where partners had to make a separate application for approval, they were able to draw upon the wording of the Teesside application.

Each of the seven partners was given a share of the University Alliance funding to help to recruit one or more students to work as research projects on the project, helping with data collection and analysis and the creation of the project outputs.

The first phase of this project focused on assessment practices during the pandemic. Each institution used qualitative research with staff and students to produce practical, evidence-based insights into the impact of alternative assessment arrangements on student outcomes. The findings highlighted areas of good practice and creative implementation, which developed a shared understanding of inclusive practices and practical changes that have enhanced assessments, as well as student experiences. A set of inclusive assessment attributes was collectively developed to reflect the insights generated through the research work undertaken. In addition, a selection of case studies was produced to illustrate effective approaches and their impact.

Phase 2 aimed to build on the outputs from Phase 1, extending the focus to years 2 and 3 of the pandemic to identify and examine evidence of "sustainable inclusive assessment practices" and their impact on the ability of higher education (HE) providers to improve student retention and success. With a sharper focus on practice-level innovations in inclusive assessment, Phase 2 again used qualitative interviews and focus groups with staff and students in order to better understand "What Works?" in the context of inclusive assessment for student "success" and "retention", distilling actionable insights and models for practice across disciplines.

A list of all partner institutions and staff working within each institution can be found in the appendices.

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Project Aims

1. To analyse assessment outcomes for specific cohorts of students during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years (pandemic years 2 and 3) to understand the specific retention and success challenges and opportunities in each discipline.
2. To examine the extent to which the inclusive assessments attributes are sustained across assessment arrangements during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years.
3. To identify evidence-informed interventions and principles of practice that address key issues of concern in relation to student retention and success.
4. To devise a series of evidence-informed practice exemplars of sustainable inclusive assessment practice in each discipline.

Methodology

Data Collection

Interviews and focus groups were conducted across the seven participating institutions, with both staff and students. Slightly differing question schedules were used for the staff data collection and the student data collection to ensure that the questions were relevant and understandable. All institutions used the same question schedules to ensure that the focus of the data gathering was consistent. Focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed using the Microsoft Teams automatic transcription software, and then transcripts were checked by members of the research team by hand for accuracy. Interviews and focus groups were utilised as they allow for rich, in-depth data to be collected. Online interviews and focus groups in particular were chosen as this format allowed for more flexibility for staff and students to be able to fit interviews around their schedules and meant that staff who work entirely or predominantly from home would not be excluded.

The programmes were identified in the following ways:

- **Teesside University** reviewed all non-continuation internal data and identified programmes with the lowest levels of non-continuation. They then reviewed the attainment data in the same way and created a list of the top 10 courses. Finally, they contacted all course leaders/student representatives to set up interviews.
- **UWE** used internal data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 to produce programme level data for awarding gaps and continuation gaps to compare. The groups compared were for Disabled and Non-disabled students, mature and younger students, POLAR Q1 and POLAR Q5 students, and Black and White students. Small programmes and programmes with only a few students with the relevant protected characteristics were redacted from the data collation. They then created a shortlist of eight programmes from those programmes where there had been a significant reduction in either the awarding gap or the continuation gap for one or more of these groups of students between 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.
- **University of Brighton** found that the Schools of Education, Sport and Health Sciences, and Humanities and Social Science had all increased in awarding of Good Degrees from 2020/2021 to 2021/2022. To select courses within subject areas, they used data about changes in the awarding of good degrees from 2020/2021 to 2021/2022. They found that sixteen Internal Subject Groups increased in the awarding of Good Degrees from 2020/2021 to 2021/2022.
- **Oxford Brookes University** used institutional data to select the top 10 performing programmes in terms of attainment and retention in pandemic years 2-3. 6 programmes that remained in the top 10 programmes based on those with 10 or

more students, and programmes that had achieved top 10 status across both years were selected and the other 4 programmes were selected based on whether they had been in the top fifteen programmes in one of the pandemic years. All 10 programmes were thereafter tracked to see if they had done especially well in terms of good results for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, Polar Q1 and Disabled students as good indications of inclusion.

- **University of Hertfordshire** reviewed all non-continuation internal data and identified programmes with the lowest levels of non-continuation. Within these programmes they then also considered non-continuation data for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students and students with a declared disability and refined our list to include programmes with the best non-continuation data for these groups.
- **Birmingham City University** used an internal system that provides information on awarding and continuation gaps and identified 10 courses to contact and approached the course leaders, inviting them to participate.
- **Kingston University** utilised bespoke differential attainment dashboards available to all staff at course and module level, which highlight differences in outcomes for students based on a variety of demographic characteristics. These dashboards were interrogated by the faculty researchers. Courses and modules where awarding gaps between students from White and Black backgrounds had reduced or been eliminated in 2021-2022 were identified. They focused on understanding the assessment ethos and strategy of each course as a whole, but focused specifically on the modules where the awarding gap was smallest.
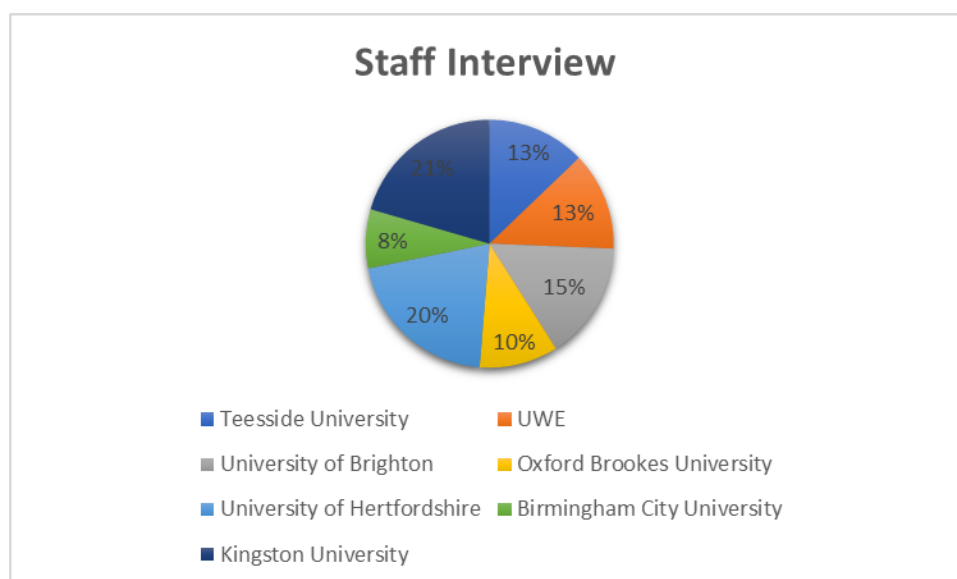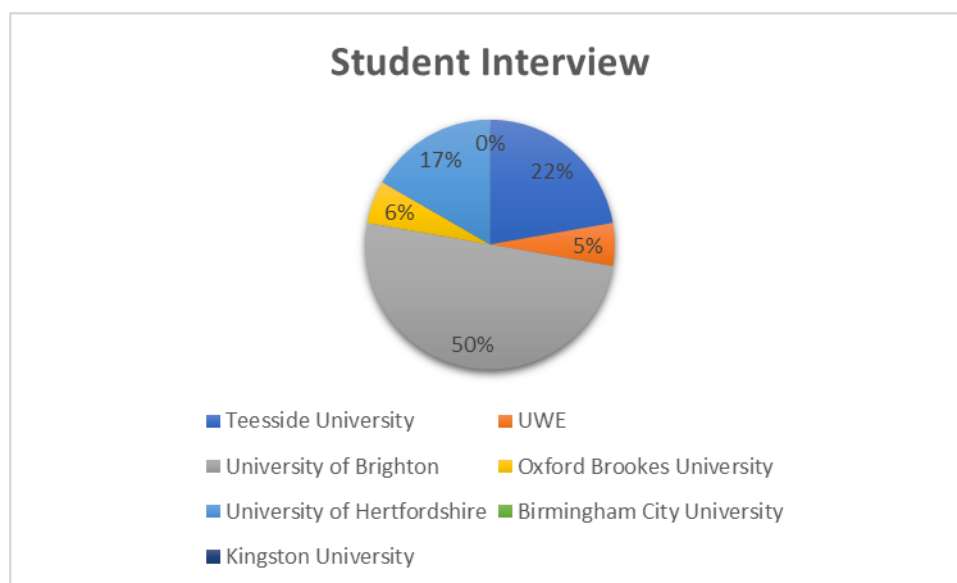
Institutional Data Collection

After the programmes/courses were identified, student focus groups (or where required due to accommodate student availability, individual interviews) and staff interviews were conducted by each partner institution:

- **Teesside University** conducted a total of 4 student interviews. The students were from Biological Sciences; Management Practice; Operating Department Practice; and Computer Games Programming. There was a total of 5 staff interviews conducted and the staff members were from Biological Sciences; Forensic Sciences; Management Practice; Computer Games Programming; and Forensic Psychology.
- **UWE** conducted 1 interview with a Biomedical Science student and a total of 5 staff interviews. The staff members were from Forensic Science; Business and Management; and Biomedical Science.
- **University of Brighton** conducted 2 interviews with the students from Media; and Education and 1 focus group consists of 7 students from Early Childhood Education and Care. The university also conducted 6 staff interviews from Education; Media; Sports Journalism; Early Childhood Education and Care; Adult Nursing; and Child Nursing.
- **Oxford Brookes University** had 1 interview with a student from Media Journalism and Publishing. For staff interview, there were 4 interviews conducted with staff members from Midwifery; Philosophy; Physiotherapy; Media Journalism and Publishing.
- **University of Hertfordshire** conducted a total of 3 interviews with students from Law; Physiotherapy; and Social Work. Staff members from Economics; HR Management; Law; Physiotherapy; Social Work; Geography; Maths; Philosophy were interviewed with a total of 8 interviews at this university.
- Due to time and other constraint, no student interview was successfully conducted from **Birmingham City University** conducted 3 interviews conducted with staff

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members from Psychology and Diagnostic Radiotherapy, with no interviews with students.

- **Kingston University** conducted 8 staff interviews within Midwifery and Geography, and 0 interviews with students.

Institution Name	Student Interview	Staff Interview
Teesside University	4	5
UWE	1	5
University of Brighton	9	6
Oxford Brookes University	1	4
University of Hertfordshire	3	8
Birmingham City University	0	3
Kingston University	0	8

Student Interview

- Teesside University
- UWE
- University of Brighton
- Oxford Brookes University
- University of Hertfordshire
- Birmingham City University
- Kingston University

Staff Interview

- Teesside University
- UWE
- University of Brighton
- Oxford Brookes University
- University of Hertfordshire
- Birmingham City University
- Kingston University

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Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2006) was used to analyse the transcripts and to identify themes, with the aim of capturing patterns in participants' accounts and identifying enablers and barriers in relation to assessment which students and staff have experienced post-pandemic. Each institution was responsible for engaging in their own coding, as well as revising codes as the process proceeded. Codes were clustered together at each institution, and with staff and student transcripts being kept separate, in order to identify candidate themes, and these were later shared in sandpit events (see below) so that partners at each institution could determine whether patterns were evident across most or all of the dataset and map these patterns onto the inclusive attributes (see outcomes section). Thematic analysis was chosen in order to identify common themes across the data, therefore providing rich and detailed analysis of the successes and concerns regarding implementation of the inclusive attributes post-pandemic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each institution completed its own thematic analysis and ensured that this data was anonymised before being shared, to avoid sharing the sensitive personal information of participants.   The key themes and sub-themes for both staff and students were recorded for each institution using a thematic analysis template (Maguire and Brid Delahunt, 2017).

Sandpit Events

2 Sandpit events were organised for partner institutions to share their research findings, updates, and identify outputs.

Sandpit 1

On Friday 21st July 2023, Sandpit Event 1 was led by UWE and University of Brighton as the first opportunity for partner institutions to share and discuss research findings across the QAA / UA Inclusive Assessment project group. In this event, initial themes from each institution were discussed and mapped onto the inclusive assessment attributes that were identified as part of the original QAA project. A Padlet was used to summarise themes to date by institution, together with a Jamboard with the overall themes mapped to the nine inclusive assessment attributes. Participant institutions undertook to complete any outstanding data collection and analysis ahead of the next Sandpit meeting and to add their data to the template created on the Teesside University Teams site and to the output from the first Sandpit.

Sandpit 2

The Sandpit Event 2 was led by Birmingham City University and University of Hertfordshire. The goal of this meeting was for institutions to update on themes if there were any changes arising from previously outstanding data and to discuss outputs for the project.

The meeting identified that the updated themes could be grouped as Enablers or Barriers:

Enablers	Barriers
Authenticity	Patchy understanding of inclusivity
Choice and flexibility	Time / resource
Communication	Lack of co-creation

Curriculum alignment	External pressures
Innovation	Student mental health issues
Student mental health awareness	Support (when not in place, or delayed)
Support (when in place)	

Key Outcomes

Do the Attributes Still Work Post-Pandemic?

The below table discusses the nine inclusive attributes which were developed as part of phase one in relation to their key enablers (elements which allowed for successful implementation of the attribute) and their challenges (elements which made it difficult for the attributes to be implemented successfully), as determined through phase two.

Attribute	Enablers	Challenges
Embeds support	Students and staff expressed that increased flexibility, personalisation, and choice in their course since the pandemic made students feel more supported. Students and staff found that having a range of support available from staff to students was beneficial to their studies and their wellbeing. Students found support in other students and stated that this was helpful to them in some ways that staff-to-student support was not. Students and staff stressed the importance of communication around assessments which is both meaningful and effective. Students discussed some of the employability and career support they received, as well as how professional standards could help to improve their employability. Staff discussed the importance of having consistency across teaching and assessment, which helps students to keep up with	Students felt like some issues that they face are ignored or dismissed by some staff, which can lead to frustration and falling behind. These included mental health and financial issues. Students found that some modules and courses seemed to be designed with minimal consideration of student needs and other commitments, such as paid work. Staff also expressed concerns about the effects of similar non-academic pressures on students. Students found that many aspects of university life and assessments caused them anxiety, which was difficult to get support for. These anxieties included fear of presenting, and worries about how staff might react, especially when they didn't know staff well. Staff discussed how students are starting to feel anxious about returning to "normal" after the pandemic and how different it will be. This included removals of special measures and support that was available during the pandemic, and poor in-person attendance.

	what is expected of them and supports their studies. Staff talked about some of the formal and informal support systems and training that they found useful, stressing the importance of embedding support for staff as well as students. Staff discussed how providing students with opportunities to practice assessments before a summative assessment reduced anxiety and improved students' grades. Staff reported that students who were given mental health support, in a way that was embedded into the curriculum, were able to perform better in assessments and engage more in teaching hours.	Staff found that the ability to innovate in assessment was stifled by a range of official processes and red tape. This could mean that some support could not be embedded. Staff frequently reported that they were overworked and under-resourced, which meant that they were unable to take on a lot of work to embed or provide support to students.
Develops assessment literacy	Students and staff found that having a range of support available from staff could help students to understand what was expected of them in assessments. Students found that other students could help them to understand their assessments, and were sometimes more approachable than staff, or could explain the requirements in more accessible terms. Students and staff both stressed the importance of communication which is both meaningful and effective around expectations in assessments. Staff discussed the importance of having consistency across teaching and assessment, which helps students to keep up with what is expected of them and understand how assessments are supporting their learning.	Students often found that marking criteria were unclear, and the support offered to help them understand it was either not forthcoming or did not help. Staff frequently reported that they were overworked and under-resourced, which meant that they were unable to take on a lot of work to help students to develop assessment literacy or to embed this understanding within teaching and support. Staff shared concerns about artificial intelligence, and its increasing use by students to write assessments, especially in online assessments. A lot of this concern was around unclear policy, as it is such an emergent technology.

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	Staff discussed how providing students with opportunities to practise assessments before a summative assessment helped students to understand how to do well in assessments.	
Provides formative opportunities	Staff discussed how providing students with opportunities to practise assessments before a summative assessment reduced anxiety and improved students' grades.	Assessment bunching was reported to be a barrier to success by students, as it meant that certain periods in a year were stressful and overwhelming, whilst others were unproductive. This could be worsened by too many formative assessments in the busy periods. Staff found that the ability to innovate in assessment was stifled by a range of official processes and red tape. This meant that it may not be possible to include formative opportunities within a course. Staff frequently reported that they were overworked and under-resourced, which meant that they were unable to undertake additional work to design and mark formative assessments. Students and staff expressed concerns that some modules and courses seemed to be designed with minimal consideration of student needs and other commitments, such as paid work, which could be exacerbated if there were additional formative assessments.
Communicates meaningfully	Students and staff both consistently stressed the importance of communication which is both meaningful and effective. Students found that having a range of support available from staff was beneficial to their studies and their wellbeing. This could include improved communications, or communication around support available elsewhere, e.g., library services.	Students found that meaningful communication with staff was sometimes difficult, as some staff did not feel approachable. Staff reported that many students had reduced social skills as a result of the pandemic, which meant that they were less likely to ask for help and were not as good at working in groups. This could also affect communication, as staff might not know what is needed. Staff frequently reported that they were overworked and under-

	Staff discussed the importance of social connection between staff and students, as well as students with each other. This can be achieved through consistent and meaningful communication.	resourced, which meant that they had less time for communication with students. This was especially pertinent with regards to email communication.
Enables personalisation	Students and staff felt that students performed best when they were offered choice and personalisation in module content, teaching modes, and/or assessment types. Students in particular felt that they could choose elements which better prepared them for their future careers.	Some students expressed that their assessments often did not match what they needed from them, e.g., skills development, and alignment with potential future careers. Where there were certain requirements for the course that were dictated by the professional body, staff reported that there was less flexibility to change certain elements of assessment to increase student choice. Many staff reported that they felt overworked, which meant that taking on more work in order to change assessments was not possible, even if they could see the benefits.
Fosters digital capabilities	N/A	Staff found that some students experienced digital poverty, which meant that they were much less able to utilise online support and learning and were less able to enhance their digital capabilities. Staff discussed how there was a lack of clear policy from institutions about how to deal with some of the issues around artificial intelligence, in part because it's such a new piece of software. This potentially indicates that institutions are falling behind in the new digital landscape.
Promotes authenticity	Staff frequently stated that authentic assessment was important to their students, and that this authenticity improved their employability post-university. Students expressed that increased flexibility, personalisation, and choice in their course since the pandemic meant that they were able to	Where there were certain requirements for the course that were dictated by the professional body, staff reported that there was less flexibility to change certain elements of assessment to increase authenticity. Some students expressed that their assessments did not match what they needed from them, e.g., skills development, and alignment with

	choose parts of the module and/or assessment types that felt authentic to them and their needs. Students stated that when assessments were matched to what they might be expected to do in a career in the field, they felt more confident that they would be able to succeed in the future, and that the course was more authentic to their needs. Staff reported that collaborating with students in creation of assessment could increase authenticity and make students feel appreciated and listened to.	potential future careers. This reduced feelings that the assessments were authentic to real life.
Assumes considerate policies and processes	Students expressed that increased flexibility and choice in their course since the pandemic meant that they could more easily work around other commitments and personal life issues. This reduced pressure on them and improved wellbeing. Students who need additional support due to disabilities, international student status, mental illness, and caring responsibilities found that staff were considerate of these additional needs, especially if the student had documentation. Students expressed that compassionate staff, who listened and made the student feel seen, were an important aspect of effective support. Students and staff stressed the importance of communication which is both meaningful and effective. This is considerate of student needs, as it means that they are fully informed and included. Staff discussed how certain ways of doing assessments	Students felt that some issues that they face are ignored or dismissed by some staff, which can lead to frustration and falling behind. Some students reported that there were delays in receiving support for a range of issues, which left them feeling demotivated. Staff also talked about how, when there were delays to more formal student support, students felt increased anxiety and performed worse in assessments. Students found that some modules and courses seemed to be designed with minimal consideration of student needs and other commitments. Some students stated that they also felt unable to contribute to, or feedback about, their courses and assessments in a way that they felt heard or empowered. Some students stated that the recent university staff strikes had caused them anxiety around graduating on time, receiving feedback, and being able to get all of the course content. Staff found that the removal of special measures introduced during the pandemic, such as longer

	were causing students undue stress and they were finding ways to reduce this anxiety. Examples included having students record presentations in advance, rather than doing them live; reducing the amount of traditional, closed-book exams; and having additional staff present at in-person assessments, so that they can support students who are feeling anxious. Staff found that students were more likely to be able to engage with assessments, and often do well, if the assessments are adaptable to student needs, e.g., different exam time slots for students who are working or have caring responsibilities.	submission windows, made students stressed. Some students were also not aware that these special measures had been dropped, leading to further confusion.
Requires continuous reflection	Staff talked about some of the formal and informal support systems and training that they found useful, and how this helped them to reflect more upon their practice.	Some staff reported that some of their colleagues did not seem to have an interest in reflecting on how they could improve inclusivity in assessment. There also seemed to be a misunderstanding from some staff as to what inclusivity in assessment could involve, with some staff understanding it only in terms of extenuating circumstances or disability. Many staff reported that they felt overworked, which meant that taking on more work to reflect throughout the year was not possible, even if they could see the benefits.

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Word Cloud of Main Themes

assessment formats · pandemic · grades · signposts · awareness · variety · knowing · teaching · questions · assessment tasks · people · sessions · feel · workshops · attendance · anxiety · aligned · process · meet · module · practice · adapt · professional body · read · confidence · level · time · inclusive · lead · amp · curriculum · response · mode · option · type · profession · exams · learning · assessment · presentations · activities · understand · communication · skills · met · fair · expectations · personalise · relation · focus · lectures · person · helpful · engagement · assignments · success · change · support · feedback · learn · campus · lecturers · assessment form · live · cohort · techniques · low · programme · develop · address · difficult · online · ability · engage · resources · content · team · positive impact · assessment design · build · access · conversation · understanding · identify · inclusivity · person assessments · helps · seminars · pressure · submission · strengths · alternative · enables · feeling

Outputs

Teesside University provided video resources; while University of Brighton and UWE co-produced this project report to capture the progression from phase 1 to phase 2. Case studies were provided from institutions as follows: Oxford Brookes University: Humanities; University of Brighton and Kingston University: Health; UWE and Teesside University: Forensics. University of Hertfordshire was committed to mapping current enablers and barriers and relationships with identified Attributes. Finally, Birmingham City University has created an interactive version of the toolkit.

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Appendix

List of Contributors - Partner institutions and Teams

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