Q&A – 'first steps to flexible learning' open meeting

Pre-submitted Questions:

Q: One size or approach to flexible learning does not fit all learners, teachers or disciplines. There is a need for different approaches to learning and teaching, with different levels of flexibility, structure and guidance for different cohorts and learning contexts. Who is to decide?
& Q: What criteria will be applied to decide whether a PGT programme will deliver some or all its course units on-line?
A: *We propose that as a University, we make a conscious move to adopt Blended Learning as our default model of delivery at Programme level. This provides freedom for individual academic course unit leaders to lead on defining the appropriate methods of delivery in consultation with those responsible. This applies to both UG and PGT courses. Decisions about what is online and what is on-campus should be informed by the pedagogy and the delivery of the highest possible student, teaching and learning experience. Programme teams will generally be in the best place to decide what should be on campus and what should be online.*

Q: For hybrid learning, will lecturers be expected to answer questions live for both students attending in-person and those attending remote? Some staff require their own flexible approach to teaching (e.g. disability-related adjustments), will these be prioritised over a flexible learning approach students or will staff be required to follow a set format?
A: *While we may have to offer a degree of dual delivery in semester 1 to accommodate any ongoing government restrictions, it is not our preferred approach in terms of the longer term strategy. In a University-wide move to flexible learning, disability related adjustments take priority both for staff and students.*

Q: Is there a plan for the next 3-5 years of what flexible learning will look like, or is it an organic development? How will we measure performance of achieving our goals?
A: *We are currently in the beginning stages of making that plan and this open meeting is part of that process. We will be recommending some first steps to flexible learning to Senate at the end of April, but beyond that there will be lots of opportunities for staff and students to get involved with shaping the detail of the strategy. To ensure the efficacy of blended methodologies and tools, the Flexible Learning Programme is setting up an advisory group, with members of SEED who have experience of blended/flexible learning.*

Q: How will flexible learning/teaching effect where students and staff are based or live? Do you envisage a situation where a student may be attending the course at Manchester from abroad and the lecturer may be living abroad or in a different part of the country?
A: *The model we are proposing is blended, which assumes a mix of on campus and online. There may be some fully online offers, but this is further down the line. One idea is to try and pilot an 'online twin' of on-campus courses and we could offer both options to students and we are currently looking to identify some pilot areas across the Faculties.*

Q: How will the University ensure accessibility for staff and students with disabilities where this has not been done since the start of the pandemic? One example of many is the lack of a working solution for lip readers in face-to-face contact with opaque face masks.
A: *In our paper to Senate, we have highlighted that accessibility should be embedded in course design from the outset and that to support this, clear guidance will be produced to make provision uniform across the organisation. In addition, many flexible learning tools and technologies we are exploring provide advantages for enhanced accessibility and inclusivity.*

Q: I deliver the Year 3 Themed Case Discussion Programme (Flipped Classroom module) at Salford and would like to learn what the students and other tutors thoughts on blended learning and how we can improve for next year

& Q: The need for blended learning at the moment is clear. It's less clear to me that students want blended learning as the default, assuming we eventually emerge from COVID-19: can the panel comment?

& Q: What steps are being taken to ensure that the student voice, and opportunities for student engagement, are built into new policies and procedures? How can we ensure that students continue to be engaged after we "launch" the new plan?

A: *Research conducted by the Campus Foresight Team revealed that there was a keen interest from students to continue blended learning in the future, with however revisions to the support and plan for developing in-person activity. Among the negative feedback was that students felt there was not enough structure and they felt overwhelmed, which is why we are proposing to introduce signposting and recommended time slots for asynchronous activity. We agree that the student voice and student engagement is essential as we move forward with the Flexible Learning Programme. We are exploring ways to enhance our engagement through our reps system and the use of Unitu software. In the pilot we will look to see if this approach enhances engagement and provides a diverse student voice.*

Through ITL and faculty based programmes we are happy to share our [good practice](#) in the delivery of flipped classrooms. We have examples on our website and colleagues are happy to share through our [Teaching and Learning Online Network](#) (TALON) which can be accessed through the ITL website.

Q: I'd like to understand the models for delivery of the programme - eg UMW model is built on 10 week units - which leaves very little "off time" for academic leading these programmes. I'm concerned that we build a model that also takes into account the pressures and resource restrictions staff are also facing

A: *UMW is built for purely online with a well-defined model, but that's not how flexibility is defined for our on-campus programmes. Instead it will be a set of guidance, support and tools to allow staff and students to teach and learn more flexibly.*

Q: Will there be investment to train staff in online teaching methods and the use of technology?

& Q: If the intention is to shift to a flexible learning plan in the long term, should we be aiming to establish a media support office in each department that can assist with the generation and development of high quality professional teaching videos and materials for students?

A: *We recognise that to ensure staff wellbeing, manageable workloads and the creation of high-quality resources, a blended model should be supported by appropriate resourcing, including support in the practicalities of creating blended teaching materials, instructional design and training, digital tools and pedagogical support. We've already invested in 22 e-learning technologists spread across the three Faculties, and in the Digital Learning Service. We are aware that this probably won't be enough as we all move towards digital learning and we would need to invest more. Several additional projects are already underway to evaluate how we can best offer this support across the university. If there are areas that staff need support, the [Institute of Teaching & Learning](#) can offer specific sessions with experts.*

Q: In the future, are there any plans to develop B2B opportunities between UMW and relevant companies to encourage them to send their staff on our courses?

A: *FLP is looking to reshape UMW to get the most out of what it offers and build on its success. Part of this reshaping is to look at making UMW the home of CPD, including CPD with companies. We'd*

like to try and get as much as we can from our existing units - for example some of our UCIL units would be very attractive to companies

Q: Reflective groups building up to a larger lecture are one models that can impact learning but timetabling constraints prevent this at times. How do we reconcile pedagogy with timetabling?
& Q: Our University systems and resources have not been designed for a blended learning model, and we face challenges making this work with large student cohorts (e.g. inflexibility in timetabling and our physical teaching spaces). How will the University adapt?
A: *By moving explanatory material online, we will be able to introduce some additional flexibility into the timetable. We will however have to review the current use of the university estate. This will need to consider availability of AV suites, dual delivery, and spaces on campus for students to engage with online content. We'll also have to look at how we split up a big cohort to smaller groups e.g. we currently have large tiered lecture theatres, but we may want fewer in the future if we move towards a more flexible model.*

Q: The majority of second and final year online January exams for lecture-based units in the School of Biological Sciences were essay-based. This created massive marking loads for staff, particularly for those teaching in units with more than 100 students. In addition, there was a surge in student malpractice (e.g. plagiarism, collusion) and students complained of overlapping exam windows and excess work. Therefore, if we are to incorporate online assessments in our future teaching, we do need to find alternative online assessment methods that will: 1) assess knowledge acquisition by students in a fair and streamlined manner, 2) make staff workload more manageable and 3) ensure good student practice. Has the University got a plan on how to address these issues?
A: *In a blended model, assessments are not necessarily online – they may take place in-person and on-campus, or online, depending on requirements. Our preferred model would not be for online assessments. However, looking at assessments is part of the FLP and will be considered. We currently have a Task and Finish group that have completed work on this over the last 2 semesters and we are in the process of determining what we want to keep and what will need to change. As an example, in Humanities a strict word limit on essay-based exams (1000 words) was introduced to reduce staff workloads. There haven't been many cases of malpractice, or major problems with overlap of exams and improvements have been made each time. We recently undertook a pulse surveys of student and staff experiences of online exams. We have evolved our guidance for students and staff on the basis of this feedback. We are working to manage student expectations around over-lapping exams. Most of our exams are 7 day open book exams so there will inevitably be overlap in the exam period and we need to explain to students that this is likely to be the case.*

Q: There has been a lot of discussion about moving the University to one VLE but can we be reassured that bespoke, enhanced VLEs, such as the OneMed suite of sites will continue to be utilised and invested in? Or even considered as the best solution for the University. The OneMed suite is an excellent example of innovation, which should be celebrated. It's head and shoulders above what is happening across other institutions and could be an example of best practice.
& Q: We are currently using Blackboard as our VLE. For excellent blended/online learning, there are numerous platforms out there that provide much more opportunities for excellent online delivery. What are the universities thoughts on potential VLEs going forward?
A: *We are reviewing the Digital Learning Environment and looking at the digital estate and tools to figure out what we need and that it is fit for purpose. This includes digital infrastructure related to teaching and learning, but also tools to facilitate access to support services, contact academic advisors and build learning communities. We are aware of OneMed and will ensure that the*

requirements for a OneMed type tool are captured as part of the Digital Learning Environment engagement.

Q: Will flexible working, especially for those staff who can do their jobs 100% from home or other locations, become part of a policy if created?
It's important to re-iterate that the proposed model is that of **blended** *learning not fully online learning. While we're proposing that the 'blend' is balanced at programme level to allow for some flexibility at course-unit level, we'd expect that most course units are a combination of online and on-campus activities, with 'fully online' or 'fully traditional' delivery being the exception rather than the common case. That said, other factors being equal, increasing asynchronous activity should reduce scheduling pressure on the timetable, providing more flexibility for teaching staff in terms of managing their time and place of work. Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) are already governed by UK law, however that law is not particularly sympathetic to the HE teaching model/cycle, and additionally we as an institution we have an issue with long-standing and often legacy FWAs making it difficult to support new FWA requests. A university-wide project has been set up to look at this, however we expect a move to blended learning (and the other recommendations made in the senate paper) to improve flexibility.*

Q: How will teaching and learning for MSc course at AMBS be?
& Q: What are the current plans for teaching and learning in the coming academic year? Is there any potential for in-person attendance?

The Flexible Learning Programme focusses on a long-term shift to blended learning. However, it is also important to note that -- while an end to the pandemic may be in sight -- there is still considerable uncertainty about timescales for returning to 'normal' on-campus teaching, and it would be prudent to plan – at least by way of a contingency – for one more academic year disrupted by travel restrictions and social distancing. The first steps we have proposed are compatible with that contingency.

Q: Besides Carbon Literacy Training/Stellify's Ethical Grand Challenges, do you foresee any opportunities to incorporate climate education within university curriculums, perhaps this shift to digital learning could make that simpler to implement (e.g. more time for extra concepts due to fewer classroom-based queries/interruptions)?
A: *One of the advantages of a greater emphasis on digital learning will be the potential opportunities to embed pan-University content into curricula, e.g. without having to resolve timetable conflicts. It is not within the scope of the Flexible Learning Programme to decide exactly which initiatives would be taken forward in this way, but it is certainly our ambition to put the tools and systems in place that will enable such activities where desired.*