![The University of Manchester logo: MANCHESTER 1824 — The University of Manchester]

Flexible **Learning**

Flexible Learning
Our strategy for the future

Foreword

In early 2020, *Our future* — the University's vision and strategic plan — set us on a path towards increased student choice and flexible learning through a combination of face-to-face, online and blended learning. Just weeks after its publication, the world changed in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, we adapted our teaching and learning approaches at a pace that would have previously been unthinkable.

Foreword

During this time, we learnt a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of new and traditional ways of teaching and learning. We also began to understand how the lived realities of intergenerational inequality and societal injustice extend into the online space - to privilege, distance and even exclude.

Greater flexibility in our education, work and private lives is more desirable and valuable than ever. Yet making this work for all our students and staff demands more than new technologies and modes of delivery. It requires a distinct philosophy of flexible learning - one that actively champions teaching, research, and social responsibility.

There are long-held assumptions to be challenged and opportunities to be grasped. Our future students will expect an education that prepares them for an increasingly flexible, digital, interconnected and intercultural world.

To achieve this we must, as a University community, think differently about the future of teaching and learning at Manchester.

The strategy

This is an educational strategy, underpinned by an approach of enabling, rather than enforcing, change. We aim to put in place the processes, infrastructure, policies and support that will allow us to be agile and adapt with minimal friction as the world changes around us.

Our strategy sets out the fundamental changes in mindset and culture necessary to achieve the ambitions of The University of Manchester's *Our future* vision and strategic plan. It also defines the dimensions of flexibility that will frame this work and provides a five-year plan of action that will enable and embed our flexible future.

Professor Dan George,
Associate Vice President for Blended and Flexible Learning

Professor Steve Pettifer,
Deputy Programme Director and University Academic Lead for Digital Learning

Overview

This strategy aims to create the right conditions and support structures to allow us to explore new ways of teaching and learning. This will include giving students more flexibility over pace, place and pathway of study; developing student and staff digital skills; setting up a new Digital Learning Service to support staff; enhancing our digital infrastructure; and providing spaces on campus where students and staff can innovate and collaborate.

Drivers

- A growing need for a learning offer that empowers learners to choose the pace, place and pathway of study to fit their individual circumstances and interests via different educational pathways.

- Policy shifts in higher education towards more flexible access.

- An increasingly digital world in which we must support and encourage learners to develop their digital capabilities at every point of the student journey.

Vision
Lifelong flexible learning that is inclusive, accessible, and international.
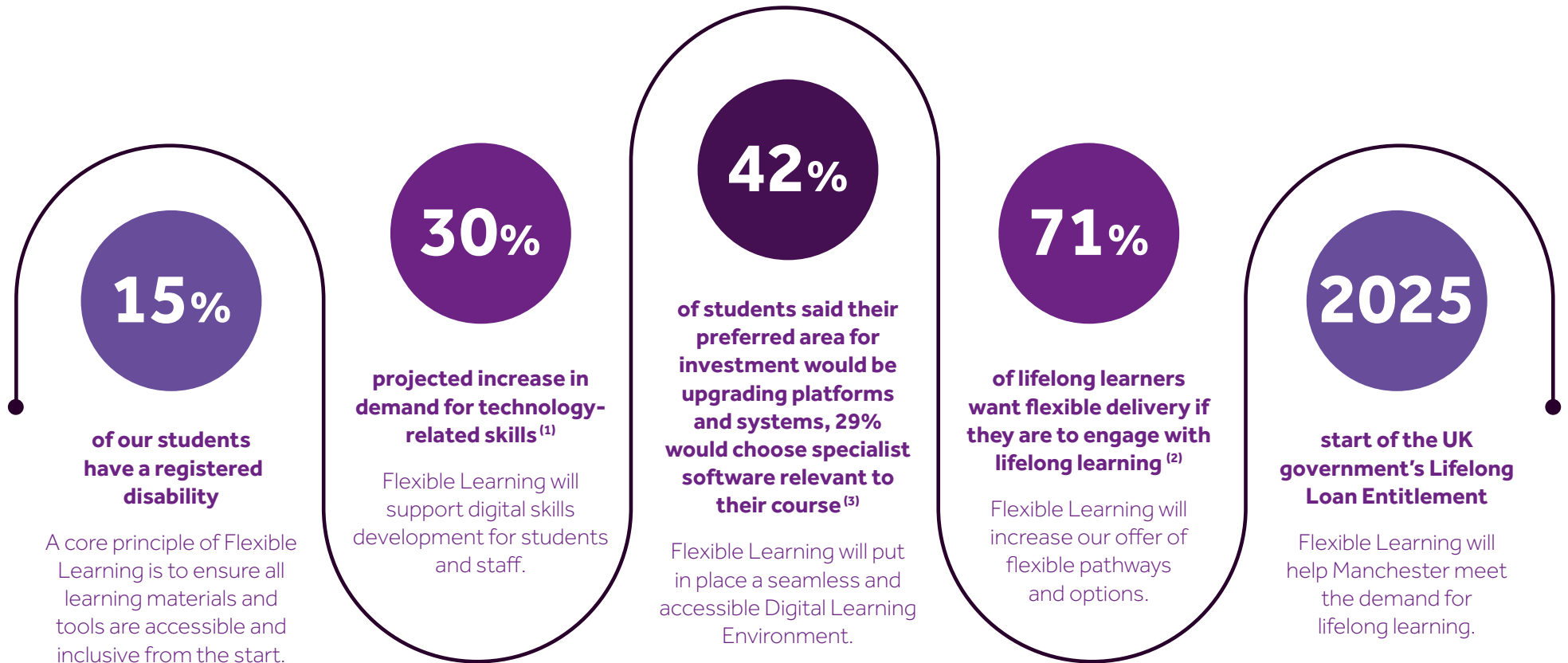
What we want to achieve

- Improve the quality of our flexible and blended learning provision

- Break down cultural and societal barriers to accessing a Manchester education

- Increase our offer of flexible learning pathways and options

- Attract students from all backgrounds

We will

- Enhance the technology available to students and staff to support flexible learning

- Identify and develop new opportunities for innovative course content and delivery

- Shape our campus to accommodate flexible learning

- Support digital skills development for students and staff

- Expand our transnational offer so it's accessible worldwide

- Identify and develop additional strategic partnerships for flexible learning

Drivers – facts and figures

15%

of our students have a registered disability

A core principle of Flexible Learning is to ensure all learning materials and tools are accessible and inclusive from the start.

30%

projected increase in demand for technology-related skills [1]

Flexible Learning will support digital skills development for students and staff.

42%

of students said their preferred area for investment would be upgrading platforms and systems, 29% would choose specialist software relevant to their course [3]

Flexible Learning will put in place a seamless and accessible Digital Learning Environment.

71%

of lifelong learners want flexible delivery if they are to engage with lifelong learning [2]

Flexible Learning will increase our offer of flexible pathways and options.

2025

start of the UK government's Lifelong Loan Entitlement

Flexible Learning will help Manchester meet the demand for lifelong learning.

(1) Industrial Strategy Council, UK skills mismatch in 2030 report (2019).
(2) Carrington Crisp/LinkedIn, The future of lifelong and executive education (2021).
(3) Jisc, Digital Experience Insight survey (2022).

How we developed our strategy

In 2021/22, we held 30 workshops, attended by more than 650 students and staff, to learn what they needed to make the move to flexible and blended learning a success. We also visited a series of local meetings and collected ideas via an online open feedback form.

The key themes we asked students and staff about were accessibility, assessment, training and skills, innovation, technology and space on campus.

Overall, we collected more than 4,000 comments, which were collated and analysed by 12 theme leads from across the University. Student and staff feedback and the recommendations of our theme leads are at the heart of this strategy.

How our students and staff will benefit

Greater accessibility and inclusivity

- Consistent, high-quality and accessible hardware and software
- More support for staff in producing accessible and inclusive teaching
- New flexible pathways and programmes of study at The University of Manchester

Improved student success

- Improving academic and graduate outcomes and attainment
- Equipping our students with the right tools to succeed in an increasingly digital world
- Enabling students to better evidence their skills

Improved experience for staff

- More opportunities for staff to develop their skills as appropriate to their role
- Improved quality and consistency of teaching and blended learning
- Flexible ways of teaching

Improved student experience

- Greater flexibility to fit study around learners' individual needs
- Improved study spaces
- More expert support for teaching staff to provide a consistently excellent learning experience

Improved financial sustainability

- A more coordinated approach for software purchase and the deployment of teaching materials across different learning modes
- A more diverse student population
- New pathways and programmes
- Reduction in costs from teaching and learning software

And supporting the University's strategic priorities for teaching and learning

As laid out in *Our future*, our priorities are:

Lifelong and flexible learning:
"We will create increased student choice and flexible learning through combinations of face-to-face, online and blended learning at greater scale."

A transformative student experience:
"New digital platforms and ways of learning will create a more personalised and inclusive approach, giving students a greater voice."

Enhancing the quality of our teaching:
"We will optimise our systems to free up more time for our excellent people to enable transformational student experiences."

Our future: vision and strategic plan (2020)
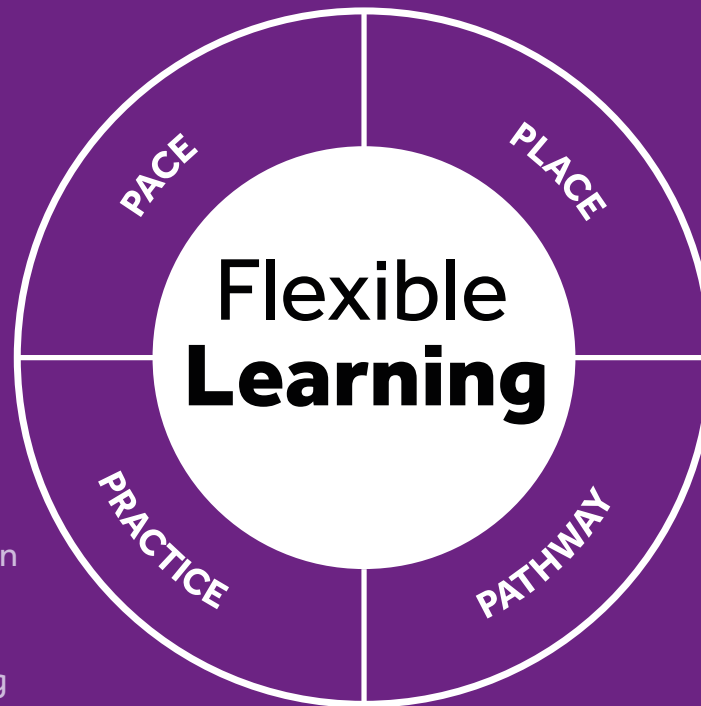
What we mean by flexibility

We will increase flexibility across four areas. Three of these – pace, place and pathway – typically feature in definitions of 'flexible learning'. We have added 'practice' as a fourth area, to emphasise that we will bring flexibility to our staff as well as to our students.

Pace

Giving learners greater control over how much, at what level, and what kind of intensity they study – as well as allowing them to stage their learning throughout their lifetime.

Place

Giving students greater choice over the physical and virtual spaces in which they learn – remote, on-campus, online, hybrid and transnational.

Practice

Allowing staff to play to their strengths and balance the demands of research and teaching to maximise job satisfaction and outcomes. We will achieve this through greater support for teaching staff in designing and delivering teaching and new ways of recognising excellent teaching practice.

Pathway

Creating new pathways beyond our regular on-campus programmes that are seamless and agile, allowing us to respond to changes in demand: micro credentials, stackable qualifications, lifelong learning.

Flexible Learning

PACE · PLACE · PRACTICE · PATHWAY

We need to think differently

To offer a university experience that is truly accessible, inclusive, and international we need to change how we think about delivering teaching.

Our aim is to embed three key shifts in mindset across The University of Manchester. These will help us design and deliver teaching that offers learners new routes into higher education, allows our colleagues to play to their strengths, and helps us become more flexible in our approaches.

Our strategy sets out how these three shifts in mindset – Flexible pathways, Design & delivery by team, Flexible first – will be supported by the right infrastructure, processes and policies to enable us to adapt as the world continues to change around us.

Flexible pathways

There is a clear and growing need for new education pathways to support learners' aspirations at every stage of their lives.

This is reflected in the government's Lifelong Loan Entitlement, which aims to "support more flexible access to courses, helping people train, upskill or retrain alongside work, family and personal commitments, as both their circumstances and the economy change".

Embracing and embedding a breadth of educational pathways that give access to a Manchester education throughout a learner's lifetime must become the Manchester norm.

Design and delivery by team

Not all world-leading researchers can be experts in pedagogy, design, assessment and digital media creation.

As education has become more inclusive, accessible and digital, we need to offer colleagues more support in designing a learning offering that works for diverse audiences and can be delivered through various modes.

The Flexible Learning strategy shifts the ownership of course creation towards design and delivery of teaching and assessment by a specialist team.

Flexible first

We need to ensure students and staff can benefit from the flexibility that digital technologies provide.

This means supporting students and staff to develop their digital skills, producing interactive digital learning resources that work for students both on-campus and online, providing seamless and accessible digital infrastructure, and adapting a campus that supports flexible learning.

As part of this, all students must have access to the right software and hardware to support their learning.
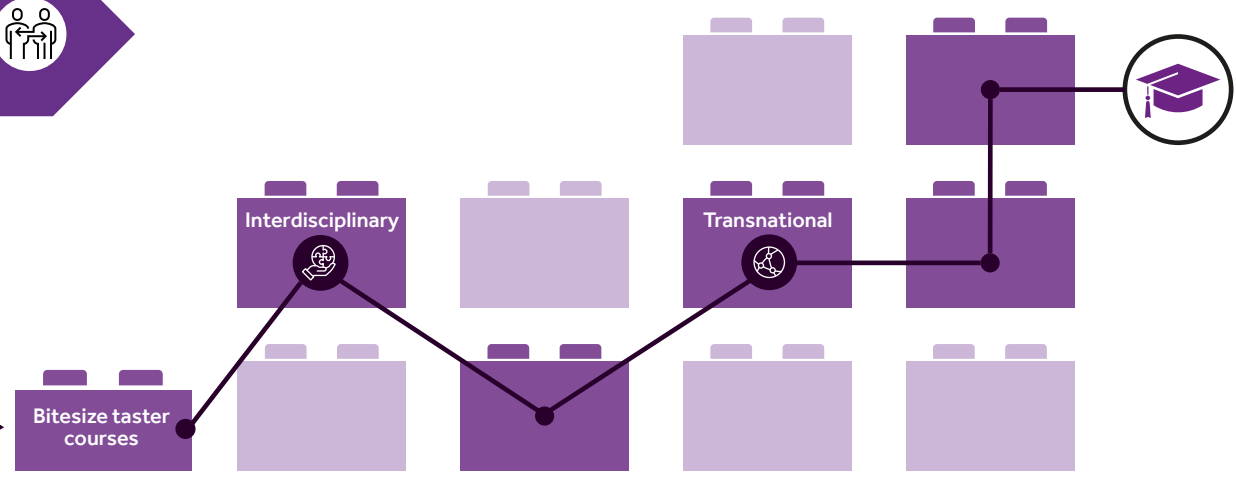
Flexible pathways

Innovation through:

Staff and student partnerships

External partnerships

Increased access to a Manchester education

Bitesize taster courses

Interdisciplinary

Transnational

What we'll deliver:

- Greater access to higher education through part-time courses, open access courses and stackable degrees

- Pilot courses to support innovation

- Partnerships with industry and others

- More transnational and interdisciplinary courses.

A selection of educational pathways through more part-time courses, open-access courses and stackable degrees.

Our aim

By expanding our flexible offer, we can provide programmes that can fit around learners' work, family and personal commitments – allowing study at any time and, importantly, at a pace that works for them.

To meet this demand, we must start rethinking how we deliver learning by moving towards micro-credentials, modular and stackable degrees and CPD. We will not only expand new pathways, but also help to remove barriers to innovating our teaching and learning, allowing us to respond to the needs of our students and employers in a more agile way.

How we will achieve it

Improving access to higher education:
We will develop a portfolio of micro-credential courses, that can be stacked together to form larger qualifications. We will expand our offer to give local communities greater access to training and education and address skills shortages. We will also expand our portfolio of online courses to give learners a taster of our offer, helping them to choose a programme of study that meets their needs and interests.

Pilot courses: We will work with colleagues to trial innovative approaches to teaching and learning and course delivery, helping us to identify where changes are needed to enable more flexibility.

New opportunities for transnational and interdisciplinary learning: We will develop a diverse portfolio of interdisciplinary units, which respond to our students' interest in critical and complex global issues – empowering students to draw on their own knowledge, experiences and practice, and offer a unique perspective on shared problems. We will expand our transnational offer to ensure learners have access to a Manchester education – no matter where they are.
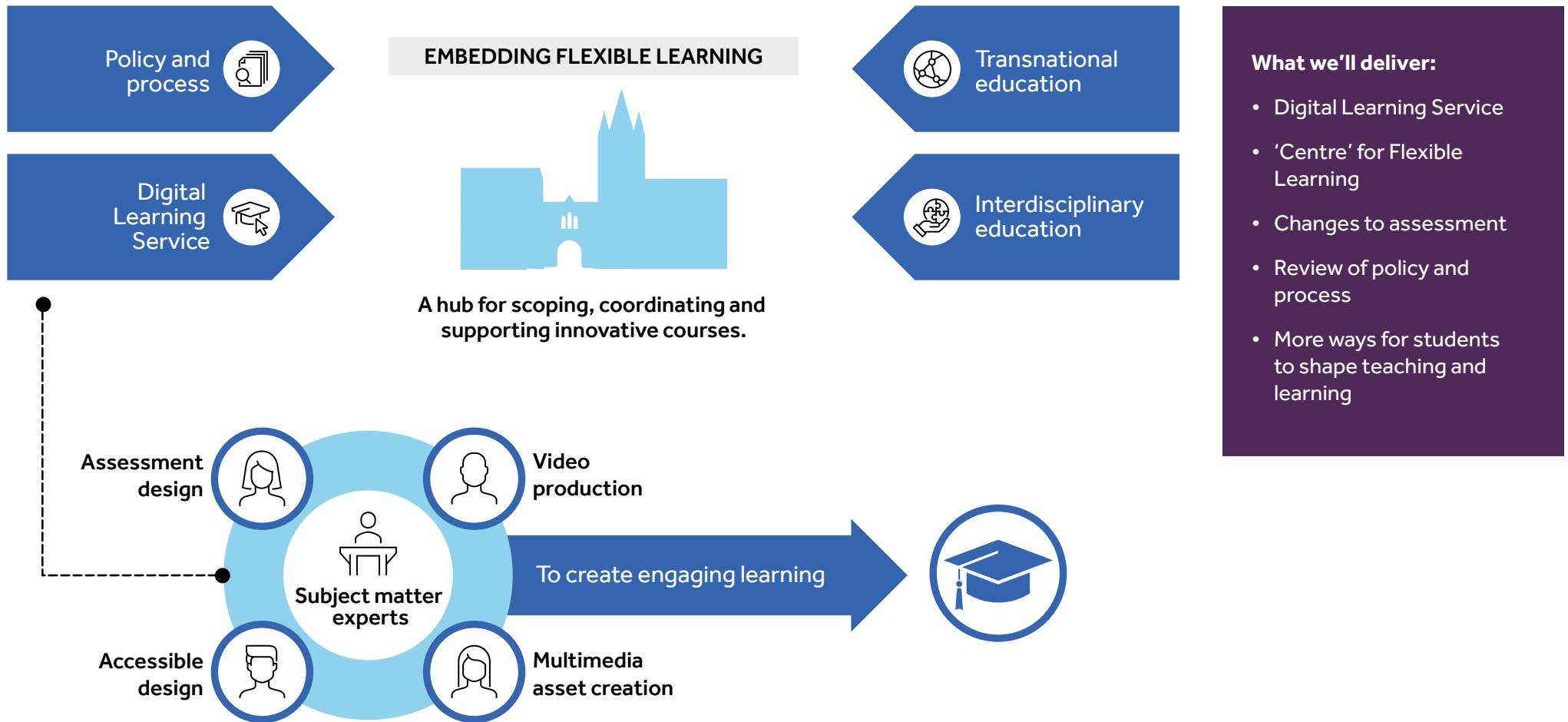
Partnerships: We will create new courses and programmes with strategic business partners, employers in the Greater Manchester region and key stakeholders – developing flexible education and training to address current, emerging, and future changes to market needs.

What Flexible Learning will deliver:

Design and delivery by team

EMBEDDING FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Policy and process

Digital Learning Service

A hub for scoping, coordinating and supporting innovative courses.

Transnational education

Interdisciplinary education

What we'll deliver:

- Digital Learning Service
- 'Centre' for Flexible Learning
- Changes to assessment
- Review of policy and process
- More ways for students to shape teaching and learning

Assessment design

Video production

Subject matter experts

To create engaging learning

Accessible design

Multimedia asset creation

Our aim

We will meet the future demands of higher education with a mindset of design and delivery by team, which will help us to create resources that can be used in various educational settings, whether students are studying remotely or on campus. Teaching staff will be supported by skilled instructional and learning designers, multimedia creators, and experts in accessible design to create their teaching content.
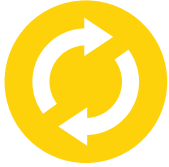
How we will achieve it

Digital Learning Service: We will provide a service that supports staff in creating digital resources in addition to trouble-shooting support and advice. It will also offer training to colleagues who want to gain advanced digital learning skills or enhance their understanding of digital and online pedagogy.

'Centre' for Flexible Learning: We will explore setting up a 'Centre' for Flexible Learning – a hub for scoping, coordinating, and supporting innovative courses for the future - that will develop and support the strategy beyond the Flexible Learning Programme, alongside national and global policy. It will house Flexible Learning services, such as the Digital Learning Service, transnational education and UCIL (University College for Interdisciplinary Learning).

Assessment: Ensuring that the recommendations on assessment development work effectively for all flexible pathways.
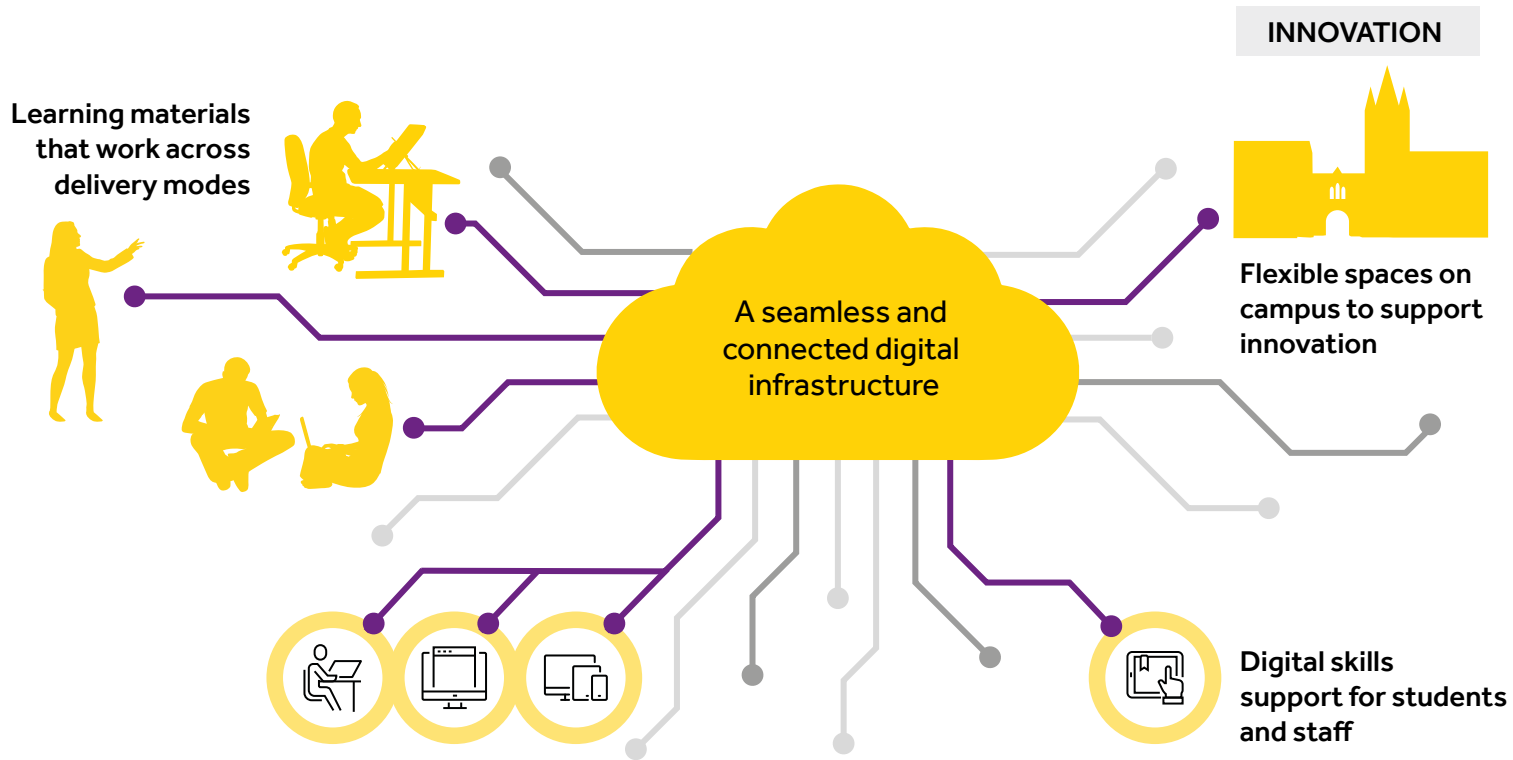
Review of policy and process: As the Flexible Learning Programme progresses, we will gain more insights into what's required to make these new approaches to teaching and learning a success. This will increasingly be an opportunity for us to identify, review and make changes to policies and processes to support flexible learning.

More ways for students to shape teaching and learning: We will work with our students to design and deliver teaching that is accessible and inclusive, and meets our students' needs and interests. To deliver the Flexible Learning Programme, we will establish a student design group representative of the diversity of our student population, that will feed into all plans and designs and review accessibility.

Learning materials that work across delivery modes

INNOVATION

A seamless and connected digital infrastructure

Flexible spaces on campus to support innovation

Digital skills support for students and staff

What we'll deliver:

- A seamless and accessible Digital Learning Environment

- Digital skills development and support

- Student hardware and software

- Space on campus

Our aim

We will enable students and staff to benefit from the flexibility that digital technologies bring. Key to our success will be empowering students and staff to develop their digital skills. We will also set up the right digital infrastructure to give students a seamless and accessible experience, and ensure all students have access to the right software and hardware to support their learning.

How we will achieve it

Space on campus: We will create spaces on campus to trial new approaches to teaching. These will empower students and staff to engage with flexible and technology-enhanced educational experiences. It will be a place where colleagues can develop new methods of teaching and learning, as well as promoting lifelong learning. In addition, they will help us better understand how new digital tools can add real value to teaching and learning, before rolling these out across our campus.

Digital Learning Environment: We will put in place integrated, interconnected, inclusive and accessible digital infrastructure that supports learners throughout the student lifecycle – from browsing our offer to receiving their qualification. The new system will be implemented by 2025/2026 and will meet the following underlying principles: Consistency of approach; Openness and sharing; Connected and seamless journeys; Accessibility; Student focus; Device agnostic; and Resilience.

Digital skills and literacy support: Digital skills will be integrated and promoted throughout our practices and culture. Support for digital skills development will be embedded within curricular and extracurricular opportunities for students and staff. Students will be supported to develop, take ownership of and showcase their skills – enhancing their experience and employability. Staff will be supported to develop the skills relevant to their roles and effective practice will be shared, recognised and celebrated. Our work will focus on five key themes: Raising awareness; Supporting and empowering; Promoting and recognising; Embedding; and Evaluating.

Student hardware and software: To support the move to blended and flexible learning, we will identify future student computing needs and offer solutions to ensure our students have equitable access to the hardware and software they need to succeed in their studies.

Glossary of key terms

Asynchronous/Synchronous: These terms describe whether activities take place at a specific scheduled moment in time, usually led by a member of staff (synchronous), or whether students are free to choose a time before a certain deadline that suits them (asynchronous). There is little difference in practice between an 'asynchronous activity' and 'guided self-study'.

Blended learning: Blended learning is an approach to education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods. It requires the physical presence of both teacher and student, with some elements of student control over time, place, path, or pace.

Distance/remote learning: Distance learning and remote learning are terms that are used interchangeably by providers when describing teaching and learning activities. Both describe a method of delivery which involves activities that happen away from the physical site of a provider, with students using digital means to engage with a programme, rather than having any requirement to visit the provider.

Flipped learning: A pedagogical approach in which the conventional notion of classroom-based learning is inverted: students are introduced to the learning material before class with classroom time then being used to deepen understanding through discussion with peers and problem-solving activities facilitated by teachers. Flipped learning is a kind of blended learning.

Hybrid flexible/Hyflex: The hybrid flexible, or HyFlex, course format is an instructional approach that combines face-to-face (F2F) and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered in-person, synchronously online and asynchronously online. Students can decide how to participate.

On campus: The term 'on campus' has the same benefit as 'in person', as it clearly articulates where the learning and teaching activities of a programme will take place, rather than how students and staff will communicate during these activities. It is a term that can also be used to describe how a whole programme will be delivered.

Online learning: The term 'online' works well as an umbrella term as it is in common use beyond the UK higher education sector; it focuses on the connectivity of the learning, teaching, and support delivery methods that may be employed by a provider. However, it carries with it the connotations that all the learning may be web-based, requiring students to use a connected device in order to access any of the learning, teaching, and support activities that are on offer. There is also the suggestion that online could be considered as happening at a physical distance from a provider, where students could be detached from onsite classroom learning.

Digital/Virtual/Central Learning Environment: The term 'digital learning environment' (DLE) includes our Central Learning Environment (CLE) plus the wide range of digital tools and applications required to support the teaching, learning and student experience. At the centre of our DLE sits the Central Learning Environment - an environment which provides structure to learning content and tools, and allows staff and students to navigate them with ease. This may be a previously recognised Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as Blackboard, or another system such as Teams.
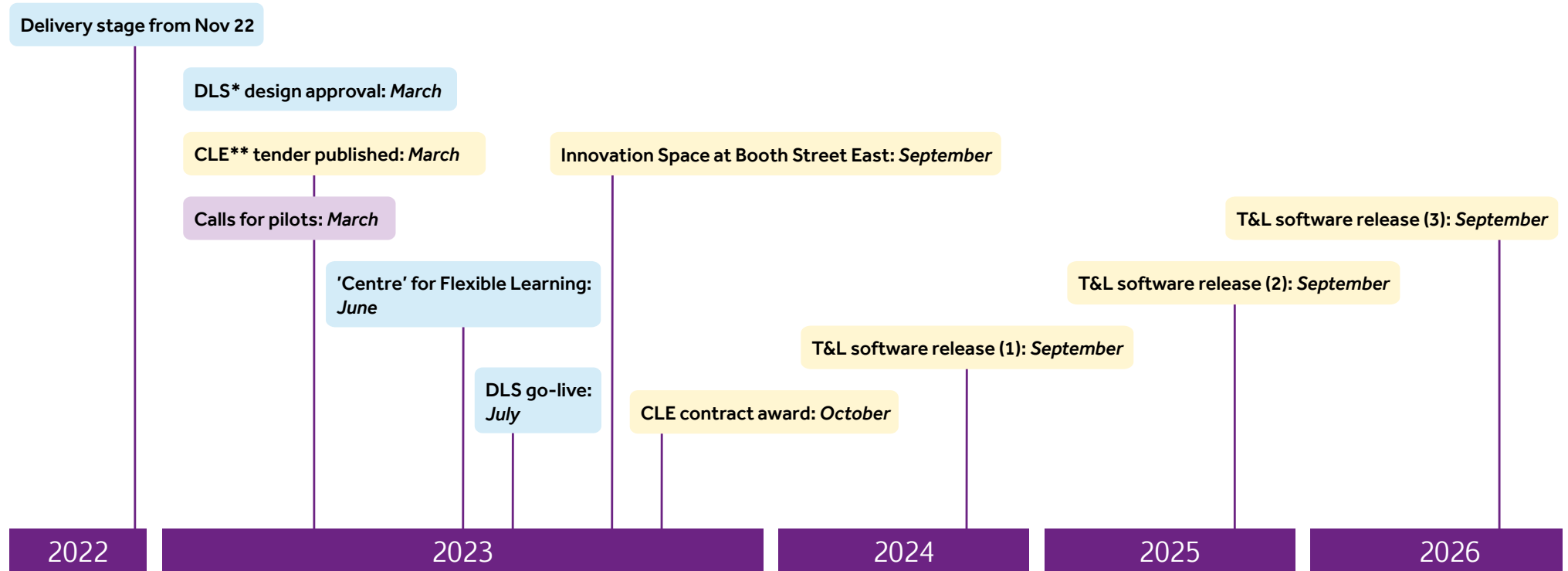
Access the full glossary of teaching activities and related concepts.

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Timeline for delivery

Delivery stage from Nov 22

DLS* design approval: *March*

CLE tender published:** *March*

Innovation Space at Booth Street East: *September*

Calls for pilots: *March*

T&L software release (3): *September*

'Centre' for Flexible Learning: *June*

T&L software release (2): *September*

T&L software release (1): *September*

DLS go-live: *July*

CLE contract award: *October*

2022	2023	2024	2025	2026

Design and delivery by team

Flexible first

Flexible pathways

Please note, on-going activities not represented here. This overview focuses on deliverables with clear delivery dates.
*DLS – Digital Learning Service
** CLE – Central Learning Environment