

Booth Street East Flexible Learning Space Evaluation

Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive evaluation of three innovative teaching spaces—Hyflex (G.08), Tech Free (G.07), and the VR Suite (1.10)—developed through the University of Manchester’s Flexible Learning Programme (FLP) and located in the Booth Street East building. These spaces were designed to support future-focused, flexible, and digitally enhanced learning environments.

The evaluation draws on usage data from Semester 2 of the 2024/25 academic year, alongside qualitative insights from teaching staff and student workshops. It aims to assess the effectiveness of these spaces in enhancing teaching and learning, inform future estates planning, and guide strategic decisions around space utilisation and digital infrastructure.

Key Findings

Hyflex Space: Widely used for hybrid/hyflex/dual delivery teaching, group work, and workshops. Staff praised its flexibility, modern design, and positive impact on student engagement.

Tech Free Space: Used less frequently due to limited awareness and lack of timetabling integration. Valued for its quiet, distraction-free environment, ideal for filming and deep work.

VR Suite: Highly impactful for immersive learning, especially in healthcare education. Students and staff highlighted its value in building confidence, supporting neurodiverse learners, and enabling realistic simulations.

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This report evaluates the usage of three innovative learning spaces at Booth Street East—**Hyflex (G.08)**, **Tech Free (G.07)**, and the **VR Suite (1.10)**—developed through the Flexible Learning Programme to enhance flexibility, support digital readiness, and trial future-focused teaching environments. The data covers the academic year 2024/25 and aims to inform space utilisation strategies, scheduling practices, and future planning.

The Hyflex space enables simultaneous in-person and online teaching via advanced A/V technology; the Tech Free zone offers a relaxed, discussion-friendly setting for in-person learning; and the VR Suite provides a space for immersive VR experiences using departmental VR headsets. This analysis seeks to uncover how each space is currently being used and the unique value they bring to teaching and learning. It also aims to enhance how we communicate their availability and purpose, support more diverse and widespread use, guide future estates planning, and assess the demand for additional specialised learning environments across campus.

FLP has invested in a number of pioneering teaching spaces. As such the evaluation of the Hyflex, VR, and Tech Free spaces is to better understand their effectiveness in supporting the Flexible Learning Programme's goals of building an infrastructure fit for the future. The purpose of these spaces is to help inform future campus development by assessing how these distinct and newly created environments foster innovation and collaboration, provide flexibility, and offer students a greater choice in their learning environments. This way we can ensure future physical estate investments are aligned with enhancing digital infrastructure whilst supporting a more flexible learning approach. Whilst FLP also supported the investment of other spaces in BSE (such as the lifelong learning suite) we have prioritised the evaluation of these three teaching spaces because they don't exist in this form anywhere else on campus and so provide us with a unique opportunity to understand the extent to which we might need to include them in estates campus planning.

Due to delays in the refurbishment of Booth Street East the spaces were only available for booking from January 2025 and so we are only able to provide data usage from Semester 2, noting that bookings were made on an adhoc basis as they were not able to be included in central timetabling planning process for Semester 2. Therefore, most bookings were made based on an individual's awareness of the space, rather than through a formal timetabling mechanism.

Occupancy Data

Hyflex Space Usage

Hyflex is a teaching space, which contains advanced A/V kit which enables synchronous teaching sessions to be delivered in person and online at the same time. Default table layout is cabaret style but the furniture is all moveable and flexible so can be rearranged.

Key Metrics

- **Total Sessions:** 102
- **Total Hours Booked:** 307.5 hours (Appendix 3).
- **Average Group Size:** 28 students (Room Capacity: 36)
- **Average Session Duration:** 3 hours (Appendix 2).

Usage by Day of the Week

Day	Sessions	Notes
Wednesday	41	▲ Peak usage
Tuesday	26	
Thursday	16	
Monday	13	
Friday	6	⚠ Underutilised

(Appendix 1)

Session Duration Insights

- **Longest Session:**
FLP Filming – Josh Patmore (9 hours, 09:00–18:00)
- **Shortest Session:**
TNE Delivery Catch Up (1 hour, 14:00–15:00)

Session Type Trends

- **Workshops & Training:** Longest average durations
- **Lectures:** Shorter, more structured
- **Other:** Mixed formats

Interpretation

- **Wednesdays** dominate usage, suggesting a scheduling preference or bottleneck (Appendix 1).
- **Fridays** are significantly underused, presenting an opportunity for redistributing sessions.
- The average group size (28) indicates moderate occupancy, with potential to increase usage closer to the room's capacity.

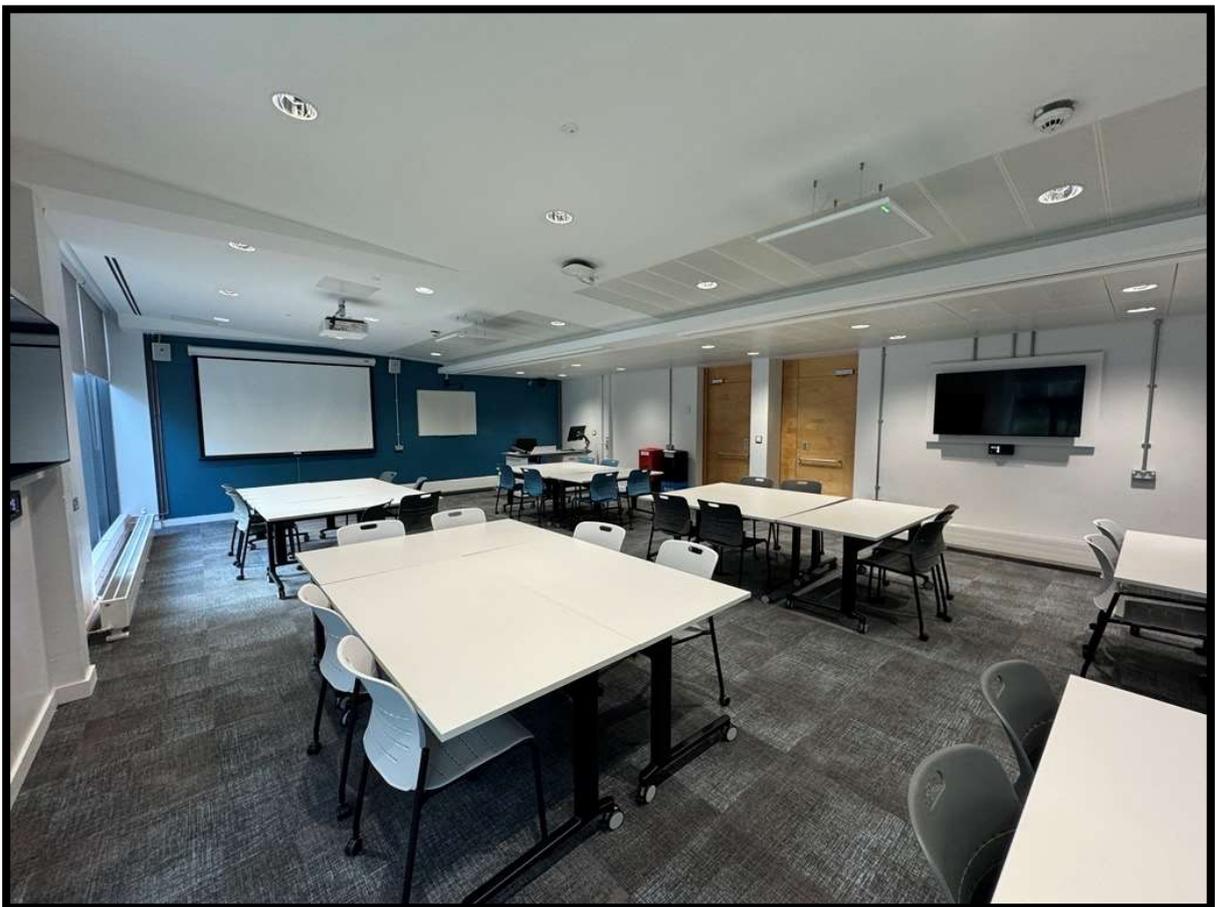


Figure 1- Hyflex Space

Tech Free Usage

A teaching space for discussion style sessions and a versatile space for hybrid learning where students can come to sit and relax in-between teaching sessions. It is important to note that the teach free space was not on the timetabling system for semester 2. This in turn directly impacted usage level and the space was only booked by those aware of it.

Key Metrics

- **Total Sessions:** 7
- **Total Hours Booked:** 42.5 hours (Appendix 3).
- **Average Session Duration:** 6 hours (Appendix 2).

Usage by Day of the Week

Day	Sessions	Notes
Wednesday	3	▲ Most frequent
Tuesday	2	
Thursday	2	

Session Duration Insights

- **Longest Session:**
FLP Filming – Josh Patmore (9 hours, 09:00–18:00 on 29/01/2025)
- **Shortest Session:**
TNE Delivery Catch Up (1 hour, 14:00–15:00 on 04/02/2025)

Interpretation

- The Tech Free space is used for fewer but longer sessions, suggesting it supports deep work, filming, or extended workshops.
- Wednesday is the most common booking day, aligning with Hyflex trends (Appendix 1).
- The high average duration (nearly 7 hours) indicates intensive use per session, which may reflect the nature of activities requiring a distraction-free environment.

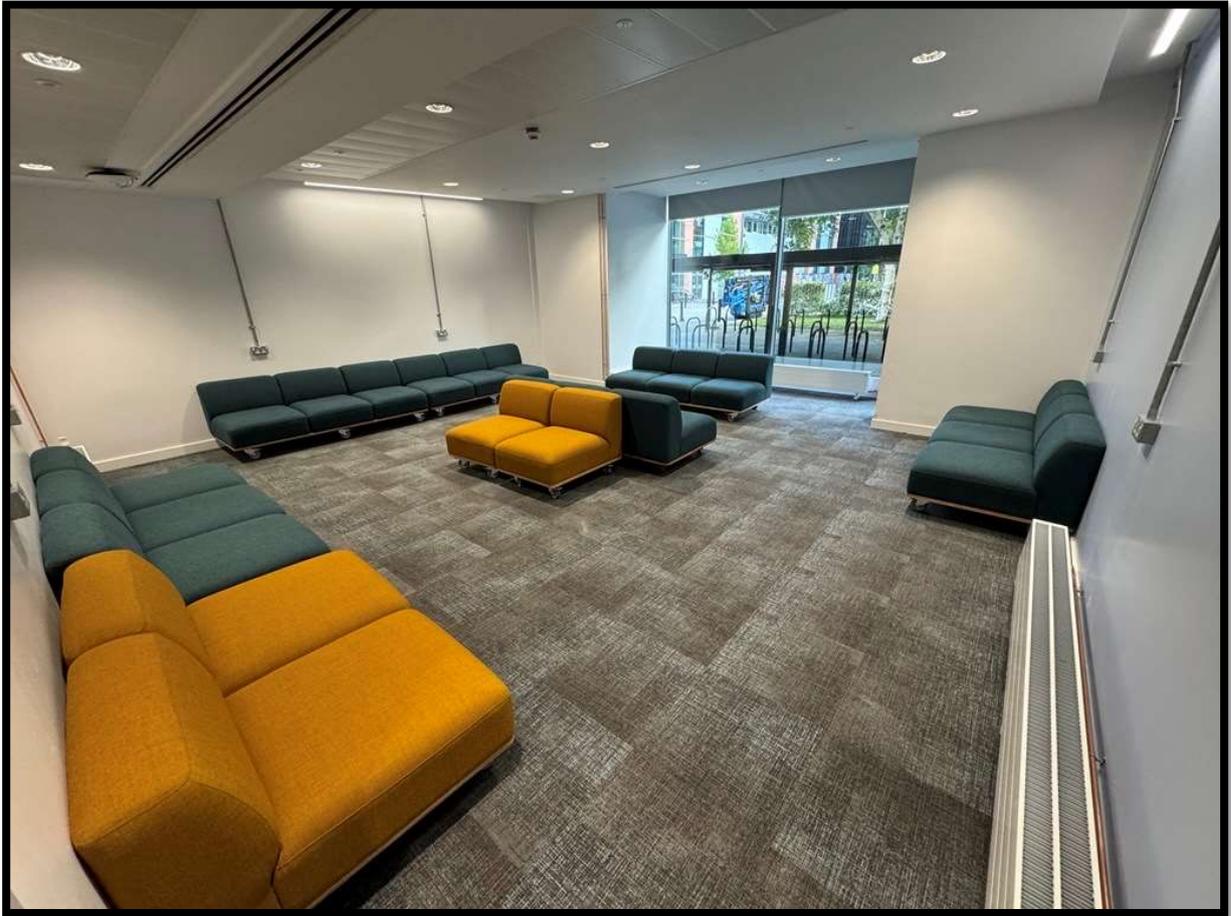


Figure 2 - Tech Free Space

VR Suite Usage

The suite contains 8 VR pods that have been specially designed to facilitate multiple users engaging in VR activities safely. There are 12 SentiraXR VR Headsets available in the suite.

Key Metrics

- **Total Bookings:** 20
- **Total Hours Booked:** 84 hours (Appendix 3).
- **Average Session Duration:** 4 hours 12 minutes (Appendix 2).
- **Estimated Student Users:** 300+

Top Usage Months

Month	Total Hours
September 2024	17
March 2025	17
November 2024	12.5

Understanding our users

- **Primary Users:** Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health
- **Common Activities:**
 - Healthcare simulations
 - VR teaching and pilot studies
 - Training demos and evaluations

Interpretation

- The VR Suite is heavily used for immersive, discipline-specific learning, particularly in healthcare education.
- High session durations reflect the intensive nature of VR-based activities.

- Usage peaks in **September** and **March**, aligning with term starts and project timelines.



Figure 3 - VR Suite

Recommendations

1. Redistribute Hyflex Sessions

Encourage scheduling on underutilised days (e.g., Fridays) to balance room usage (Appendix 1).

2. Capacity Optimisation

Promote larger group bookings in the Hyflex space to maximize its 36-student capacity.

3. Support VR Expansion

Given the high engagement from healthcare faculties, consider expanding VR access or scheduling support during peak months.

4. Tech Free Space Strategy

Explore opportunities to increase bookings by promoting its benefits for focused work, filming, and long-format workshops.

Teaching Staff Focus Group Results

This section of the report presents the findings from 13 one-on-one focus groups conducted between June and August 2025. Each session, lasting 30 to 45 minutes, was conducted via Teams with either a teaching or a professional services staff member who supports teaching at the University of Manchester. Participants, who have used one or more of the flexible learning spaces being evaluated, were asked 15 questions regarding the Flexible Learning Spaces in Booth Street East.

The findings are organised into 11 distinct themes, each covering responses related to the three learning spaces. It is important to note that over 80% of the respondents had used the Hyflex and VR spaces, while less than 20% had used the Tech Free space. The usage patterns among the interviewed staff varied significantly, with some having used the spaces only once, while others had used them several times and experienced more than one type of flexible learning space.

1. Types of Sessions & Impact on Teaching Experience:

VR Suite: This space was primarily used for VR anatomy, consultation simulations such as, virtual patient for speech therapy and VR documentaries. Participants found it well-organised, providing a safe, comfortable, and self-immersive experience with no distractions. The features of the space were found to reduce student consciousness and making knowledge sharing easier for teaching staff. It reduced teaching staff workload by enabling AI-generated feedback and practice repetition, freeing up teaching staff time. We also know that it has been used in combination with traditional lectures to give insight into the knowledge that is going to be shared in the teaching session.

Hyflex: The space is used widely for different knowledge-sharing and learning activities such as group work, presentations, internal meetings, student workshops/conferences, and AI workshops, including masterclasses and study days with a mixture of traditional teaching and group work. Participants appreciated the layout for group work, adaptability, and the positive, clean, modern, and bright environment compared to traditional teaching spaces. It provided convenience for both learners and teachers, with flexible furniture and hybrid functionality. The "informal feel" of the Hyflex space encourages students to ask questions and participate more readily.

Teaching Impact: The spaces were seen as supporting students who were worried about speaking to patients, allowing them to take their time and practice repeatedly. They helped integrate new technology like AI into teaching, providing unique workshop opportunities. For Hyflex, the flexibility allowed for easy switching between lecture-style teaching and group activities, supporting a dynamic teaching style. The aesthetics of the Hyflex space was also seen to have an impact on the teaching experience.

2. Comparison to Traditional Learning Environments:

Generally seen as "better" or offering "huge benefit" compared to older, traditional spaces.

VR Suite: Offers a dedicated, bespoke, and organised space for VR equipment, which traditional rooms lack. It provides privacy and reduces distractions, creating a comfortable learning environment. The key identification here is that we have VR kit across campus within the faculties, but do not have a dedicated space to use this comfortably and safely. It is usually used in traditional learning spaces that are not designed for the use of VR kit. (Appendix 4)

Hyflex: Offers flexibility in moving furniture and multiple screens, allowing for breakouts without needing to send students to other spaces. It addresses issues like bass from mics in traditional hybrid sessions. The "underlying psychological impact" of a clean, modern space was noted as positive. The aesthetic and "caring" environment makes it more inclusive and student centred. It provides a good impression of the university, especially for students traveling from far, making them feel valued. The Hyflex space has been used for cross-boarder teaching where some student travel to campus and other join online. This type of session could not go ahead so seamless without spaces like Hyflex.

3. Most Beneficial Aspects:

This section highlights the strengths of the spaces that were mentioned the most often by participants in the focus group.

VR Suite: The individual, soundproof pods are a major strength, providing privacy, safety, and a comfortable space for focused work. The dedicated space for VR equipment, ease of booking, and on-site technical support was also highly valued. (Appendix 4)

Hyflex: Flexible layout and space, individual displays for group work, multiple screens, and easy screen linking/unlinking. Wireless connection to screens and hybrid functionality (cameras). Adaptable room size and modern design. The tech was relatively straightforward to use, even without formal media services training, due to technical support staff being on hand.

In addition to the individual spaces, the surrounding areas and the building were also beneficial, allowing movement between the room and outside spaces. The Booth Street East Building was easy to locate even for those not familiar to campus.

4. Facilitation of Learning Process:

VR Suite: The VR kit allowed students to learn at their own pace, offered repetition, reduced pressure, and enhanced comfort and privacy, leading to deeper focus. This way students could learn at their own pace and understand better. Built confidence in students for patient interactions. It also brought experiences to life ahead of lecture and more theoretical learning.

Hyflex: Enabled flexible group collaboration due to room size and layout. Encouraged different learning styles, natural group work, and breakouts. Reduced anxiety about group formations, as students were already comfortably in groups. The smart look and feel contributed to a nice student experience, making them feel valued, especially those

traveling long distances. The seamless tech and comfortable environment (e.g., good temperature) removed distractions, allowing focus on communication and discussion quality. The space gave teaching staff that flexibility to teach from anywhere in the room for all the screens and not feel stuck to the desk (this was for those that brought their own 'clickers')

5. Contribution to Blended Learning Quality:

VR Suite: Significantly enhanced learning quality by providing a safe, comfortable, and private space for immersive experiences. Crucial for meeting curriculum standards, especially when clinical placements are limited, offering practical application of theoretical knowledge. The VR space allows for traditional knowledge sharing to be elevated by VR experiences bring history and experiences to life.

Hyflex: While not extensively used for blended learning by all, it was expected to improve quality if technology was reliable. Its design around hybrid teaching (vs. ad-hoc solutions) was seen as a strength. The ability to host sessions with participants from across the world enhances the quality of interactions and knowledge-sharing, leading to high attendance rates. The room supports effective group work, which is important for building learning communities, particularly for distance learning students. One of the courses at University of Manchester that uses all the functionality of the space for blended learning is MSc in Financial Crime and Compliance. 78% of students attending a workshop for this course felt that the quality and suitability of the venue was 'excellent'. According to a questionnaire conducted by course organisers following the workshop.

6. Accessibility:

The spaces were considered physically accessible, with wheelchair access in pods and lifts. Ground floor location of Hyflex was helpful. It's easy to find and navigate once in the building.

More specifically the VR suite was considered excellent for neurodiverse students due to lighting, soundproofing, and reduced distractions. An option for desktop simulation was suggested for those with motion sickness.

There were some areas for improvement in terms of accessibility such as, headsets being uncomfortable for those who wear glasses. Outside area of the building on the ground floor can be noisy/confusing for autistic individuals with sensory differences. For Hyflex, the doors are heavy and not automatic, which could be an accessibility concern.

7. Innovation and Continuous Improvement:

The spaces facilitated new ways of holding workshops and using new technologies like AI in teaching. They helped teaching staff "stretch and flex" their teaching skills and meet governing body standards by providing practical application opportunities. The ability to reshape rooms and create breakouts easily encouraged innovation. Specifically for Hyflex, the spaces' group setup encourages small group activities and teamwork, prompting teaching staff to think differently about teaching practices rather than just lecturing.

8. Strengths of the Learning Spaces:

The strengths of the spaces covered a wide range of areas including technology, usability and environment.

VR Suite:

- ❖ Individual booths/pods
- ❖ Soundproofing
- ❖ Privacy, safety (for users and equipment)
- ❖ Comfort
- ❖ Dedicated and bespoke space
- ❖ Easy to find on campus
- ❖ Inviting atmosphere
- ❖ Good WiFi
- ❖ Reduced staff workload and cost (This is specific to patient stimulations and more specifically Pharmacy & Speech Therapy) (Appendix 4)

Hyflex:

- ❖ Large and adaptable space
- ❖ Good for breakouts
- ❖ Multiple screens
- ❖ Wireless connection
- ❖ Hybrid session capability
- ❖ Contemporary design
- ❖ Clean, fresh and modern
- ❖ Good atmosphere, professional and relaxing.
- ❖ Helpful training from media services
- ❖ Good temperature control

- ❖ Tech generally working well
- ❖ Giving a good impression to students.

Tech free space:

- ❖ No distractions
- ❖ Good for teaching staff and student meetings
- ❖ Useful as a breakout room
- ❖ Identified as a great space for filming due to its quietness, aesthetic (look and feel, soft furnishings)
- ❖ Ideal natural lighting, making it perfect for video content.

9. Limitations of the Learning Spaces:

The limitations of the spaces covered a wide range of areas including technology, usability and environment.

VR Suite:

- ❖ The space can get too warm and stuff especially when headsets are being worn
- ❖ Headsets can get uncomfortable and get sweaty
- ❖ Not enough waiting space for large groups (50/60 students)
- ❖ Limited number of pods (only 8 people at a time), more desired
- ❖ Need for more chairs (especially swivel chairs) and easily removable chairs to make the room accessible to those with mobility issues
- ❖ Need for better promotion/information about the spaces on StaffNet
- ❖ Access to next-door room sometimes an issue when using the VR space

Hyflex:

- ❖ Solstice system was problematic for presentations (delay, freezing, skipping slides)
- ❖ Lack of cables for alternative TV inputs
- ❖ Initial tech issues with TVs
- ❖ Camera tracking issues in Hyflex
- ❖ General teaching staff weariness about managing hybrid delivery
- ❖ There is a lack of power sockets on the desks in Hyflex, creating a trip hazard with extension leads
- ❖ Confusion over who provides technical support, leading teaching staff to test equipment themselves
- ❖ The computer console in the corner can make teaching staff "stick in the corner" for the mic, which doesn't work well with the flexible space
- ❖ Chairs are heavy and not flexible, hindering movement.
- ❖ Noise from AC/vents can be distracting during teaching

- ❖ Not good for "really big groups," and a clicker would be useful for increased flexibility
- ❖ Hard to use if not tech-savvy
- ❖ Need for better promotion/information about the spaces on StaffNet
- ❖ The university needs to address the general "weariness" of teaching staff regarding managing hybrid delivery
- ❖ The current setup can feel like the space "dictates" how teaching is done, rather than supporting diverse practices.
- ❖ No food/drink allowed, which was a concern for some groups.

Tech Free space:

- ❖ Need for better promotion/information about the spaces on StaffNet

10. Impact on Student Engagement, Collaboration, and Motivation:

The focus groups found that the Flexible Learning spaces had a very positive impact on student engagement during teaching. The "informal feel" of the Hyflex space was noted as a key factor in boosting student confidence and engagement. Student were equally motivated about the spaces as quoted by teaching staff Students were "very, very positive," "excited," "satisfied," "motivated," and "engaged." In Hyflex, the group setup encourages students to talk to each other, fostering a learning community, which is particularly valuable for distance learners.

In a more specific example from the focus groups a participant found that students; Enjoyed sessions more than in traditional spaces. Increased confidence in speaking to patients. Wanted to use the spaces more for practice. Equity of learning opportunity for students who might not contribute in group discussions. High engagement due to choice and comfortable environment.

11. Future Development & Other Space Types:

Firstly it's important to note that all focus group participants strongly supported developing more spaces like those piloted by the Flexible Learning Programme across campus. It was seen as "valuable" and making a "big difference to teaching experience."

Furthermore, more dedicated hybrid learning spaces with high-quality cameras and microphones. More VR rooms with an increased number of pods. A combination of VR and Hyflex in one space to improve capacity and timetabling. The creation of a "virtual healthcare hub" and informal "Tech Free" spaces was also suggested.

During conversations there were also suggestions of different types of learning spaces such as, a combination of VR and Hyflex in one space to "levitate capacity and timetable." Spaces with flexible furniture that can be easily adapted. "Full immersive space with multiple projectors for the visual experience." Collaborative spaces with central flexible tables and displays, alongside individual working pods for focused work or private calls. Virtual healthcare hubs. Informal "Tech Free" spaces for less formal conversations. One suggestion was for "loads of little breakout rooms" in a larger space to manage noise and allow for separate group work, as well as areas specifically for informal chats.

Recommendations for the University of Manchester (Teaching Staff)

Based on the finding from the focus groups conducted the key recommendations:

1. Invest in Expansion of Flexible Learning Spaces:

Develop More VR Suites: Given the overwhelmingly positive feedback on student engagement, confidence, and the unique learning experiences (especially for clinical simulations and neurodiverse students), the University should actively plan for more dedicated VR spaces. Prioritise increasing the number of individual pods to meet demand and enhance safety. This should always include the better management of existing VR Kit for better value. It would also be useful to develop a platform to help trainers build sessions more easily and independently.

Expand Hyflex Capabilities: Invest in more dedicated Hyflex space, perhaps with varied capacities (smaller and larger options) to cater to different group sizes and session types.

Consider Combined/Flexible Spaces: Explore creating hybrid spaces that integrate VR and Hyflex features, or larger rooms with numerous smaller breakout areas for varied activities.

2. Prioritise Technology Reliability and User Experience:

Review of Solstice and Presentation Technology: Look into the issues with the Solstice system (Media Services have been contact already). Thoroughly test and trial all presentation and hybrid learning technologies *before* widespread rollout. Provide necessary cables for alternative inputs. Consider how to better implement media services training before using the Hyflex space.

Enhance Hybrid Audio-Visual: Focus on camera setups with pan/zoom functionality and microphones in Hyflex spaces to ensure seamless hybrid delivery and improved recording quality. Address camera tracking issues.

Address Power and Connectivity: Install more power sockets on tables in Hyflex space to prevent trip hazards from extension leads.

Clarify Technical Support: Clearly define and communicate who is responsible for providing technical support for these rooms to reduce teaching staff frustration.

Improve Console Placement: Re-evaluate the placement of the computer console in Hyflex space to ensure it supports flexible teaching styles and microphone effectiveness.

3. Optimise Space Design and Comfort:

Address Environmental Controls: Consider installing or improving air conditioning in VR suite to manage temperature, especially during extended use.

Flexible Seating Solutions: Provide more, easily removable, and comfortable chairs (including swivel chairs) in both VR pods and Hyflex space to support various activities and comfort needs, particularly for accessibility.

Dedicated Waiting Areas: Create sufficient and comfortable waiting spaces adjacent to the VR suite to accommodate larger groups of students.

Accessibility: Address the heavy doors in Hyflex space, exploring automatic or lighter door options.

4. Enhance Support, Training, and Promotion:

Comprehensive Staff Training: Offer more training on using the technology effectively, especially for hybrid delivery, to reduce teaching staff "weariness" and build confidence, and to encourage more innovative teaching practices. This is in addition to the training offered before using the Hyflex space

Improved Communication: Actively promote the availability and benefits of these spaces on staff-facing platforms (e.g., StaffNet) to reduce silos and encourage wider adoption. Share examples of successful sessions and innovative uses.

5. Explore Innovative Learning Space Concepts:

Hybrid Space Model: Strongly consider developing "combination" spaces that integrate the best features of VR and Hyflex – for example, a central collaborative area with flexible furniture and displays, surrounded by individual soundproof pods for focused or immersive work. This would offer maximum versatility.

Focus on Pedagogical Fit: Ensure any new space development is driven by pedagogical needs, aiming to enhance diverse teaching and learning styles.

Student Workshop Results

This section of the report presents the findings gathered from the student evaluation of the Flexible Learning spaces implemented in the Booth Street East building. The findings are based on two one-hour focus group workshops conducted in October 2025 via Microsoft Teams, involving a total of six participants (three students in each workshop). Students were re-introduced to the Flexible Learning Spaces and asked a series of questions. All questions were delivered through Mentimeter, allowing students to submit their responses digitally or verbally, ensuring both accessibility and comfort. The participant group included a mixture of both undergraduate and postgraduate students who had prior experience using one or more of the Flexible Learning Spaces.

It is important to note that while the Booth Street East building offers three distinct Flexible Learning spaces (Hyflex, Tech Free, and VR), this analysis focuses exclusively on the Hyflex and VR spaces. This is because no participants in either workshop had previously used the Tech Free space, limiting the scope of the collected data. Consequently, the findings, which are organised around six key themes, reflect the experiences within these two specific environments. Readers should also be aware of the significant weighting in the responses: 83% of the feedback and comments were directed toward the VR suite, with 17% relating to the Hyflex space. This disproportionate use and detailed feedback on the VR experience heavily influences the nature and depth of the subsequent findings.

1. Learning Experience and Pedagogical Value:

Students consistently described the flexible learning spaces—particularly the VR Room—as transformative in terms of how they engaged with course content. The VR environment allowed learners to practice clinical decision-making in a realistic, low-pressure setting, which they found more effective than traditional simulations with actors or paper-based case studies. Many students appreciated the opportunity to make mistakes and reflect on their performance without fear of judgment, highlighting the pedagogical value of self-directed learning and active recall. The immersive nature of VR was seen as enhancing understanding and retention, with one student noting that it helped quiz their recall without relying on notes.

The Hyflex space also received praise for its inclusive setup, enabling interaction between in-person and online students. A postgraduate student described it as a motivating and comfortable space that encouraged extended engagement beyond scheduled class time. Overall, both spaces were seen as valuable additions to the curriculum, offering practical, engaging, and reflective learning experiences that complemented traditional teaching methods.

2. Engagement and Motivation:

The Flexible Learning spaces were described as significantly more engaging than traditional classrooms. Students felt more motivated to participate, with several noting that they would have been more inclined to choose the University of Manchester had they known about the availability of VR sessions. The motivation is rooted in two core areas: the VR space's capacity for experiential learning and the Hyflex space's promotion of comfortable collaboration. The novelty and interactivity of the VR suite were key drivers of engagement, with students reporting that they felt more proactive and invested in their learning. One student mentioned staying longer than their scheduled lecture time because the space was so conducive to focused work.

The Hyflex space also contributed to increased motivation, particularly for students who appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with both in-person and online peers. These spaces were seen not only as tools for learning but as environments that encouraged deeper involvement and sustained attention. It is important to note that the primary threat to this high level of motivation, however, is the technical friction, suggesting that simplifying the access and setup process is the key to maintaining this enthusiasm.

3. Emotional Safety and Comfort:

Emotional safety emerged as a central theme across both workshops. Students repeatedly emphasised how the VR suite provided a private and non-judgmental environment where they felt safe to explore their learning. The booths with curtains were appreciated for creating a sense of personal space, allowing students to focus without feeling observed. This sense of comfort was particularly important for students who felt anxious in traditional learning environments, such as simulations with peers or assessors. One student described the VR experience as “less daunting” and appreciated the ability to revisit answers and take time to think through decisions.

The concept of "safety" in the Flexible Learning spaces extended beyond physical security and is a core driver of deep engagement and participation. Students explicitly described the spaces as fostering an environment where they could take risks and build confidence. Furthermore, the Booth Street East building itself was praised for being quieter and less crowded than other campus locations, contributing to a more relaxed atmosphere. These elements combined to foster a learning environment where students felt emotionally supported and confident in their abilities.

4. Guidance and Accessibility:

While the overall feedback was positive, students highlighted the need for clearer guidance and improved accessibility. Several participants expressed uncertainty about how to use the VR equipment and how long they were allowed to stay in the space. One student shared that they felt more confident because someone helped them with the headset, but noted that others might not have received the same support. Suggestions included providing laminated instruction sheets, pre-session FAQs, or online resources to help students prepare. Accessibility concerns also extended to sensory issues, with multiple students noting that the lack of noise-cancelling features in the VR booths made it difficult to concentrate. This was particularly problematic for neurodivergent students, who may be more sensitive to auditory distractions. Physical access to the rooms was not reported as a challenge, but the need for better onboarding and sensory accommodations was clear. The one physical accessibility challenge that was mentioned by users who wear glasses and the challenge of wearing the headset and not having fully clear images.

5. Strengths of the Learning Spaces:

- ❖ The ability to simulate complex clinical scenarios results in realistic simulations and immediate feedback in the VR suite

- ❖ Safety and privacy allow students to comfortably make mistakes and reflected on their learning.
- ❖ The inclusive design of the Hyflex space enables interaction between on-campus and remote learners
- ❖ The spaces are well-designed with engaging environments conducive to active learning
- ❖ A recurring theme was the students' appreciation for autonomy and control over the learning process, including the ability to learn at their own pace and revisit content as needed.
- ❖ Both spaces were recognised for helping bridge the gap between theory and practical application of skills.

6. Limitations of the Learning Spaces:

- ❖ Noise pollution in VR booths disrupted concentration and reduced the sense of immersion necessary for effective learning.
- ❖ Limited access to the spaces with limited usage opportunities (This is based on course programs and the creation of simulations rather than the physical space)
- ❖ There is a lack of clear instructions and onboarding materials within the VR space and ahead of using the space.
- ❖ Students were unsure of basic operational parameters, such as the ability to take a break from the headset and return, or the length of the simulation.
- ❖ Booths in the VR suite not fully sealed, leading to sensory distractions and reduced concentration.

Recommendations for the University of Manchester (Student)

Based on the findings from the workshops conducted the key recommendations are:

1. Increase Operational Clarity and Access:

Simplify Booking and Increase Frequency: Make the VR suite bookable online and actively look for ways to allow students to revisit the spaces more frequently to reinforce learning.

Proactive VR Guidance: Provide clear guidance for the use of SentiraXR headsets before sessions, such as instructional sheets, online FAQs, or a simple informational website (such as SharePoint), to help users feel more confident and prepared while reducing time spent troubleshooting. This could also reduce the need for paid tech support from SentiraXR

Tech/IT Support: Implement a visible "**Tech Buddy**" or student ambassador to provide immediate, on-site assistance for the VR room setup and usage. There should be a consideration of tech support being internal from the Universities Media Services team.

2. Environmental and Sensory Improvements:

Noise Control: Prioritise noise control and sensory accommodations, especially within the VR booths, which currently disrupt concentration and reduce immersion.

Sealing and Privacy: Address the finding that the VR booths are not fully sealed, contributing to sensory distractions and reduced privacy. Consideration should be made to the individual booths in the VR suite and how they can potentially be closed at the top to reduce noise pollution. This is particularly important for neurodivergent learners.

Ergonomics: Address the finding that the Hyflex space chairs are "very hard" by improving ergonomic seating for extended study sessions. This is particularly important for extended workshops and full day learning sessions.

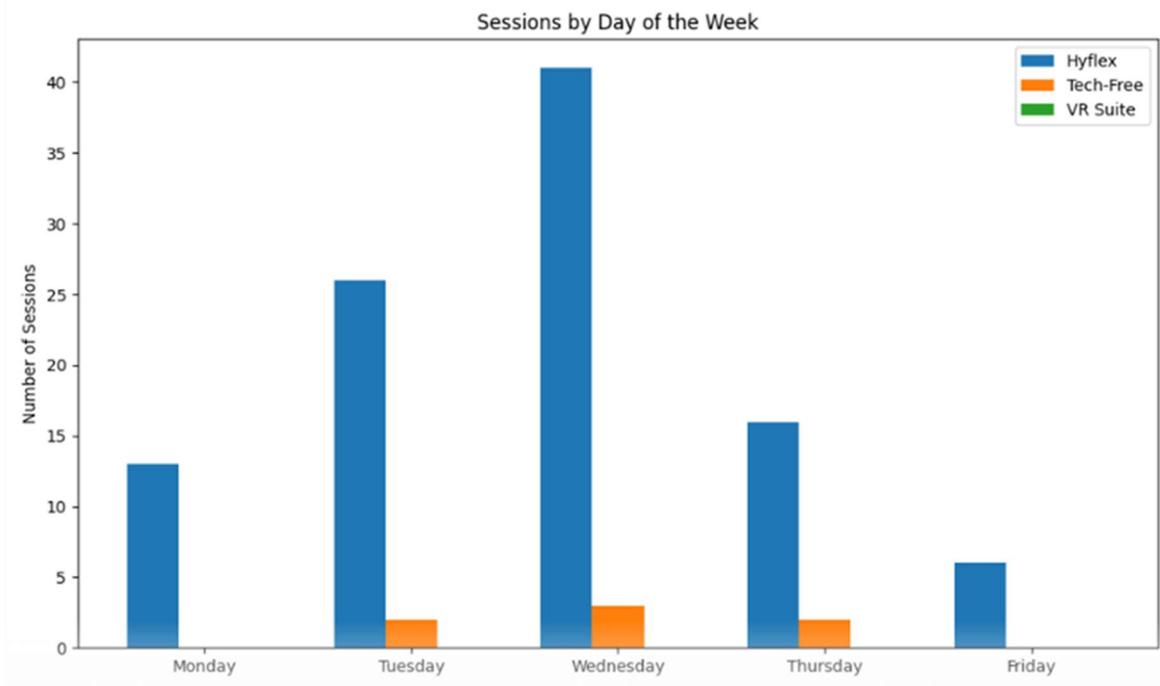
3. Invest in Expansion of Flexible Learning Spaces and Strategic Integration

Expand Scenario Diversity: Offer multiple scenarios and client types within the VR software to broaden the practical application of learning. This need for a variety of simulations will need to be considered by individual courses/programmes at the University.

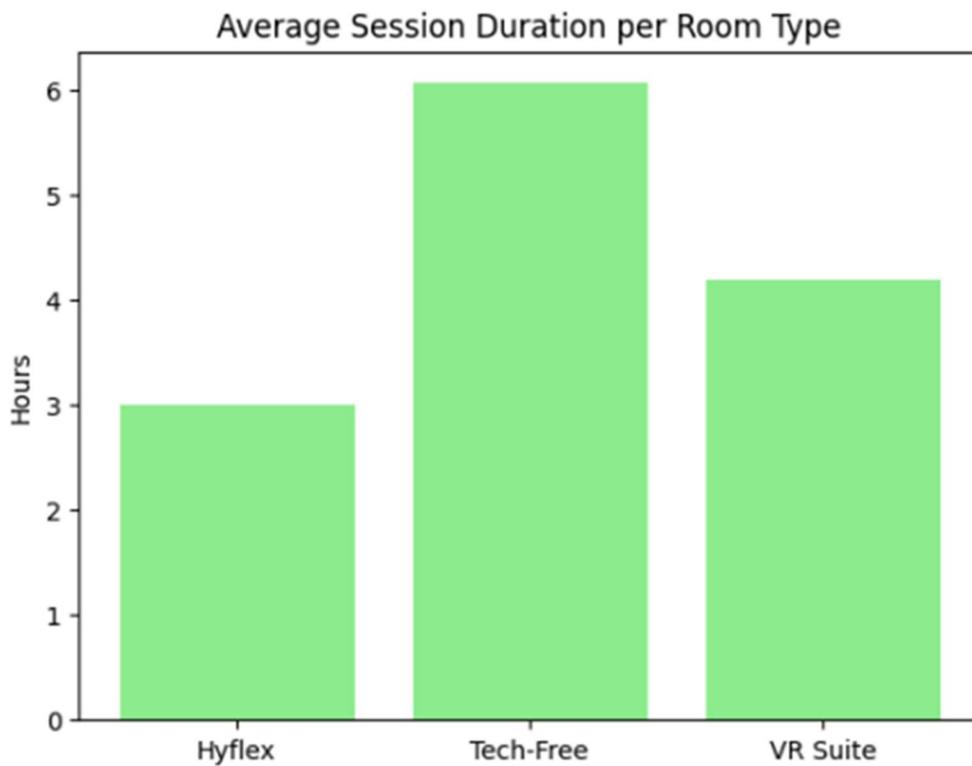
Cross-Campus Integration: Students demonstrated strong support for expanding these spaces across campus, noting that they could benefit a wide range of courses beyond the current healthcare focus.

Formal Integration: Ensure these spaces are integrated more fully into the university's teaching strategy and promoted as a modern, progressive approach to education.

Appendix

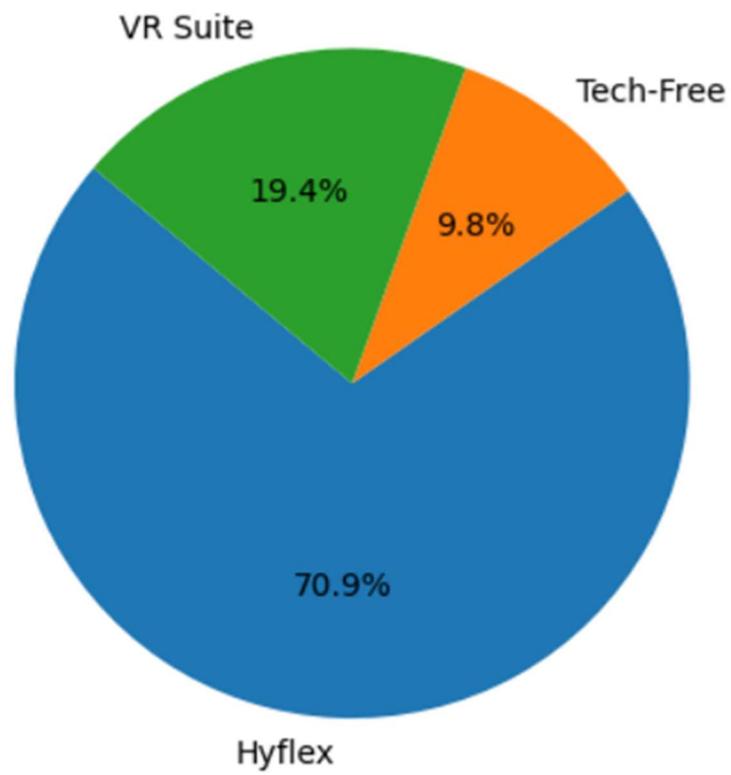


Appendix 1



Appendix 2

Total Hours Booked per Room Type



Appendix 3

Comparison of Student Clinical Practise Settings

	 Traditional Classroom Consultation	 VR Consultations
Students	35	35
Staff Required	5 Assessors, 1 Teacher, 5 Actors	1 Teacher, 1-2 Assessors Possible VR Support
Costs	1/2 a day pay for each actor (£115) + time/salary of both Assessor & Teacher	£500 per day/ per tech support staff member or No cost
Limitations/Benefits	Limited practice, less immersive, more pressure for students	Unlimited practice, safe, scalable, accessible

Please note that actors are only used for 2 hours during consultations, but they are required to be hired for a minimum of half a day (4 hrs)

Also, note it is recommended by SentiraXR who provide the VR headsets in the VR suite in Booth Street East would recommend one member of tech support per 10 students. They also advice that the support is not complex, just time consuming so it can be done by those running the sessions.

Appendix 4



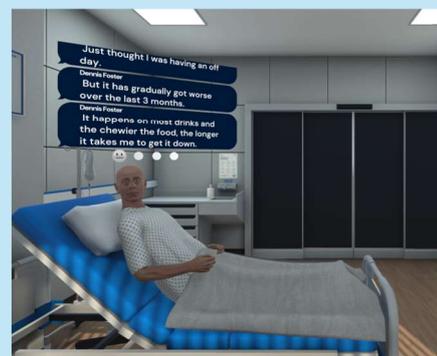
Eating, drinking & swallowing clinical competencies and virtual reality simulation: Evaluation of speech & language therapy student experiences and learning

Purcell, R., Abid, H., Delaney, J., Greenwood-Davies, S., Ormerod, E. & Freed, J. (2025)
Dept. Speech & Language Therapy, University of Manchester

Background: Clinical competencies are required of SLT students in eating, drinking & swallowing difficulties to successfully graduate & enter the workforce from 2026 (RCSLT, 2021). Clinical placement learning is varied and limited in capacity. A virtual reality (VR) simulation was designed to create a virtual environment where SLT students could practise their practical clinical skills.

Aims: To investigate whether the use of VR simulation was a viable teaching method for acquiring practical clinical competencies for speech & language therapy (SLT) education.

The VR Simulation: Dennis, a 72-year-old man who had recently been admitted to hospital with a chest infection. When asked appropriate questions, he described a gradual onset of difficulties swallowing. Participants were able to practise practical competencies such as gathering relevant case information and forming a diagnostic hypothesis.



Participants: 16 second year SLT students at the University of Manchester completed the study. This included the VR simulation, debrief & evaluation discussions & online pre and post evaluation surveys to explore their experiences and attitudes towards the use of VR simulation in SLT education.

Results

- 60% of participants rated themselves as having higher levels of self-confidence in most of the clinical competencies.
- All participants gained in confidence in at least one of the targeted clinical competencies.
- 73% of participants agreed VR was useful for their learning.
- 80% of participants agreed VR technology was easy to use.

Thematic Analysis

Post-simulation discussion groups revealed the following key themes:

VR created a realistic clinical environment and a 'safe space' for learning

The VR experience provided opportunities to practise structured conversations with clients to prepare them for real-life clinical interactions

Limitations of the VR simulation included lack of emotion in Dennis's voice, making some of his responses difficult to 'read'

Outcomes & impact on SLT curriculum: Overall, students appreciated the VR simulation experience and considered it a valuable addition to SLT education. These findings indicate that the use of VR simulation is both a viable and welcomed addition to the SLT programme at UoM. SLT students now use the VR simulation as part of their clinical skills learning which has been integrated into the curriculum.



With thanks to the Flexible Learning Programme, University of Manchester, for funding & support

Appendix 5

Click on the image to link to our pilot's page