

## Briefing: Gravity Assist Report

September 2021

### Introduction

The report, which has the full title of 'Gravity assist: Propelling higher education towards a brighter future – Digital teaching and learning review', was commissioned by Gavin Williamson, who was then Secretary of State for Education, in June 2020. The report was written by the Office for Students (OfS), and its findings were published in February 2021.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the research for the report, the OfS 'conducted 52 interviews with digital teaching and learning experts and higher education professionals from around the world, received 145 responses to our call for evidence and surveyed 1,285 students and 567 teachers'.

The report considers the learnings from the change in teaching delivery methods following the Covid-19 pandemic, establishing what they call the 'essential components of successful digital teaching and learning'. Recommendations for all colleges and universities regarding digital teaching and learning are included, which the report claiming that if these core practices are implemented it will 'improve for the benefit of generations of students to come'.

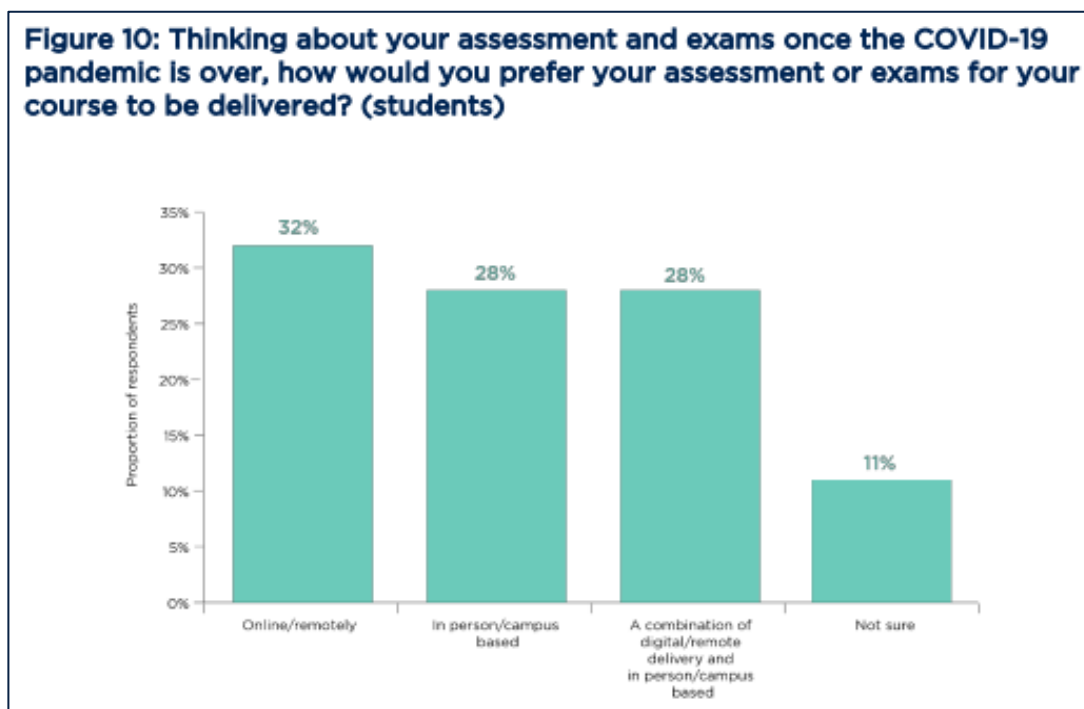
### Key Findings

- » Of those polled for the report, 58% of students and 47% of teaching staff polled had no experience of digital teaching and learning before the pandemic. By December 2020, 92% of students surveyed were learning either fully or mostly online.
- » However, the research conducted also highlighted the need for increased support for teaching staff. Only 21% of teachers polled said they were 'very confident' that they had the skills to design and deliver digital teaching and learning. Almost half of students (49%) were very confident that they had the skills to benefit from online learning.
- » The report highlighted a number of examples of best-practice from universities responding to the shift to digital learning. Examples included delivering 4G dongles to students, expanding existing laptop loan schemes for students in need, making learning resources available on mobile apps and developing alternative modes of assessment.
- » Five main benefits of online learning were established throughout the findings:
  - Increased flexibility.
  - Personalised learning.
  - Increased career prospects.
  - Pedagogical opportunities.
  - Global opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ofslivefs.blob.core.windows.net/files/Gravity%20assist/Gravity-assist-DTL-finalforweb.pdf>

When considering how students wanted their assessment or exams delivered once Covid-19 is over, answers were split between various online and in-person delivery elements.



## Components for Online Learning

The report distinguishes six key components required for successful digital teaching and learning:

### 1. **Digital teaching must start with appropriately designed pedagogy, curriculum and assessment:**

Examples mentioned in the report include students benefiting from round-the-clock access to resources ahead of taught sessions, like short instructional videos demonstrating lab techniques.

### 2. **Students must have access to the right digital infrastructure:**

This includes making sure that potential risks around plagiarism are addressed and that changes to assessment methods do not bake in unwarranted grade inflation. However, the report makes it clear that digital assessment is 'not just consistent with the maintenance of rigorous standards and consistency over time; when it is done well it can actually enhance it'.

### 3. **Good access enables staff and students to build the digital skills necessary to engage:**

Of students polled, 30% reported lacking good enough internet access, and 30 per cent did not have access to an adequate study space. The report also provides a definition of digital access, which includes the following elements:

- » Appropriate hardware.
- » Appropriate software.
- » Robust technical infrastructure.
- » Reliable access to the internet.
- » A trained teacher or instructor.
- » An appropriate study place.

The report offers some direction on how this can happen, such as by designing resources that can be used by students who have lower bandwidth, making alternatives available online, asking universities and colleges to consider how to communicate to students the digital skills they'll need for their course, and providing the necessary support to staff to deliver digital teaching.

4. **Technology can then be harnessed strategically, rather than in a piecemeal or reactive way, to drive educational experience and outcomes:**

The report's findings state that students and staff do not wish to use overly complex systems across multiple digital platforms. Instead, it suggests that platforms can be streamlined into a seamless digital environment for students and staff, ideally combined with regular training and opportunities for students to build skills, in addition to considerations of how accessible virtual platforms are to different student groups.

5. **Inclusion for different student groups must be embedded from the outset:**

According to the report, the pandemic highlighted a number of benefits relating to inclusion, with broad agreement that some students who did not previously feel able to fully contribute are significantly more engaged. The report provided the example of how chat functions enabled more questions than in-person settings, and outlined three broad stages to embedding inclusion systematically:

- » Review and evaluate.
- » Design inclusively.
- » Adapt safeguarding practices.

6. **All the elements need to be underpinned by a consistent strategy:**

The report strongly advocates for significant investment to ensure high-quality digital teaching and learning, such as in staff training, buying equipment, staff time to develop resources, and updating old platforms.