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Article:

A Psychology student evaluation of a third-year option module delivered online during COVID-19.

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Abstract

Context and Objectives: This study aims to describe students' evaluation of an adaptation of a third year Psychology option module at a UK University designed for face-to-face delivery. The module was required to be delivered exclusively online owing to suspension of in-person teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Methods:* Student feedback was collected via an online module evaluation survey following completion of the module. *Results:* The module was well received overall; Students provided more positive than negative comments. Thematic groupings in positive and negative comments showed students liked the structure and organisation of the module, including interactive activities and being able to work in a flexible manner at their own pace. They disliked the volume of material, describing it as too much. *Conclusions:* Maintaining a structured approach, incorporating interactive activities and clearly setting student expectations regarding practical learning hours are important considerations for future teaching strategy beyond the pandemic.

Context and Objectives

This study presents an evaluation of an online version of a third-year option module in Psychology designed for face-to-face (f2f) delivery. The aim of the evaluation was to gain an understanding of students' experiences of undertaking the module in its adapted format, in order to improve student experience and satisfaction, and to enhance learning.

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to close campuses and transition courses to remote learning delivery in order to maintain educational continuity (Hodges et al., 2020). This disrupted the lives of students and staff and meant adapting modules that have traditionally run in a f2f format within a very short timeframe to run exclusively online. This can be problematic where improvisation is necessitated rather than well thought through design (Moore et al., 2011; Bryson & Andres, 2020), and creates challenges for both educators and learners. Of consideration is the teacher-student bond created by f2f learning, facilitating the direct transition of information from educator to learner (Bandara & Wijekularathna, 2017; Quershi, 2019). Interpersonal contact is beneficial for creating a sense of community, enriching the learning process and increasing student confidence, but also for addressing issues that can arise from learning in isolation (Kirkup & Jones, 1996).

Although online learning brings with it challenges, and is not suitable for everyone (Garris & Fleck, 2020; Steward & Lowenthal, 2021), the current generation of students may be familiar with technology and adapting to online learning is less likely to cause issues (Masood & Hibberts, 2021). Furthermore, research has shown that there are favourable effects of technology in facilitating and enhancing learning (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Graham, 2006).

When designing online modules, it is important to include a balance of textual and visual learning materials and incorporate activities that are both challenging and interesting (Nazarenko, 2015). It was with this in mind that the module was designed and delivered using the 'lesson plan' facility in the Moodle online learning and teaching platform. The module ran for a 10-week period. Material was set out as tasks for each week. These involved a mixture of narrated PowerPoints, reading, structured activities, worksheets, quizzes, videos, and audio files. Students were able to work through the material in their own time and at their own pace.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, some believe that pedagogical practice in higher education will never be the same (Masood & Hibberts, 2021). In fact, Hodges et al. (2020) propose that it could lead to additional and more effective use of technology to deliver online learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Evaluation of online delivery provides an opportunity to find out what works best and what works not so well (Masood & Hibberts, 2021), in order to adapt teaching practice and inform future teaching strategy beyond the pandemic. The current study therefore aimed to gain an understanding

of third year Psychology students' evaluations of undertaking a third-year option module online, designed for f2f delivery. It broadly adopted an action research approach which allows a cyclical process whereby the re-design of the module by the educator has a direct impact on the experience of the learner, which in turn can lead to an adaptation of future teaching practice in order to improve student experience and satisfaction, and to enhance learning.

Methods

In order to evaluate students' experiences, feedback was collected on completion of the module in the form of an online questionnaire. Module evaluation is routinely undertaken by the department as part of teaching quality assurance. 52 from a cohort of 161 students completed the questionnaire. Questions asked were both quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative questions asked students to respond on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Statements included: 'the module content is delivered in an engaging way', 'the module offers an appropriate level of intellectual challenge', 'the module is well organised', and 'appropriate support is available to me throughout the module'. Student responses to the quantitative questions in the survey were analysed in terms of percentage agreement.

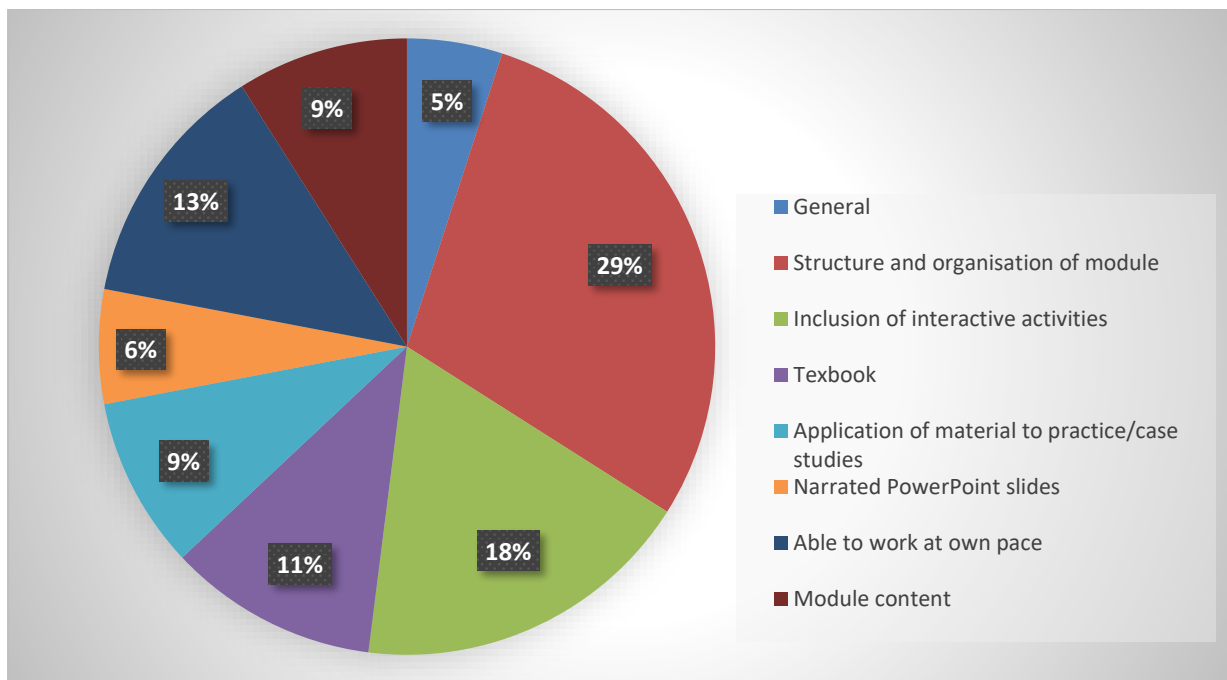
Qualitative questions included free text boxes asking students to name one thing that had most impact on their learning and whether they would like to include any other feedback. In order to analyse responses to the qualitative questions, initially feedback was tallied according to whether comments were 'positive' or 'negative'. Comment type (positive and negative) was further analysed by adopting a light touch thematic analysis outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Text was therefore coded and grouped by specific aspects and then organised into thematic groupings. Thematic groupings of feedback were also represented quantitatively in terms of percentage endorsement.

Results

Student feedback to the quantitative questions highlighted that they generally agreed that the module was well organised (93% agreement), delivered in an engaging way (72% agreement), offered an appropriate level of intellectual challenge (86% agreement) and appropriate support was available to them throughout the module (91% agreement).

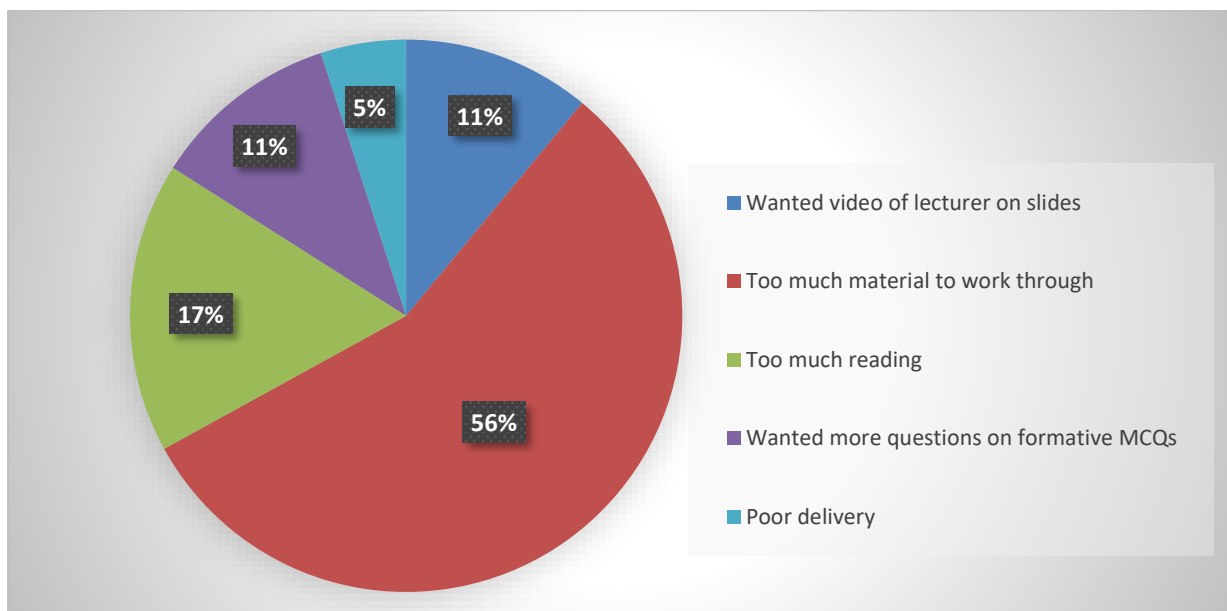
For the qualitative questions, 103 free-text responses from students were extracted from a total of 52 respondents. 85 (82.5%) of these comments were positive and 18 (17.5%) were negative. The largest groups of positive comments related to the structure and organisation of the module (29% of positive comments), inclusion of interactive activities in the module design (18% of positive comments) and students' ability to work at their own pace (13% of positive comments). Students also identified the textbook, application of material to practice and use of case studies and general module content as positive aspects of the module (See Figure I).

Figure I
Pie Chart Showing Breakdown of 85 Positive Comments



The majority of students providing negative comments felt the volume of material to work through was too much (56% of negative comments). Other negative comments included too much reading (17% of comments), wanting inclusion of a video of the lecturer on the narrated PowerPoint slides (11% of negative comments) and more questions on the formative multiple-choice quizzes (11% of negative comments). Students also identified too much reading and poor delivery in their negative feedback (See Figure II).

Figure II
Pie Chart Showing Breakdown of 18 Negative Comments



Examples of specific comments informing the thematic groupings are presented in Table I.

Table I
Example Comments for Positive and Negative Thematic Groupings

Thematic grouping	Example comment
Positive	
Structure and organisation of module	<p><i>"The way the course was structured on Moodle, dividing each week's lectures into separate parts, and having readings and activities incorporated and even used as steps to consolidate the learning from one part of the lecture before moving onto the next was incredibly helpful".</i></p> <p><i>"I find it helpful in how the tasks for each week are structured as it helps to focus my learning and it also helps with time management".</i></p>
Inclusion of interactive activities	<p><i>"The interactive activities between content were very helpful in applying the knowledge learnt and consolidating understanding".</i></p> <p><i>"The activities really help me to properly engage with the content - it is difficult to do this with remote learning otherwise!".</i></p> <p><i>"I think having the activities between the PowerPoints made it more engaging".</i></p>
Able to work at own pace	<i>'I've been able to...go at my own pace, which means I don't miss things out.'</i>
Negative	
Too much material to work through	<p><i>"I found the volume of content some weeks to be a bit too much".</i></p> <p><i>"The module's lectures took excessive time to complete".</i></p> <p><i>"...each lecture has taken me about 4 hours to do which it obviously wouldn't if we were having face to face lectures".</i></p>
Too much reading	<p><i>"I felt the associated reading was quite a lot".</i></p> <p><i>"Far too much reading required".</i></p>

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of how students evaluated an online third year option module, traditionally delivered f2f, that had been re-designed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and delivered online. The evaluation hoped to provide an understanding of students' experience to enable enhanced student learning, experience and satisfaction in future delivery of the module.

Quantitative outcomes showed students agreed that the module was well organised, intellectually challenging, delivered in an engaging way with appropriate support available. Analysis of qualitative feedback indicated a generally positive response from students (82.5% positive comments vs 17.5% negative comments). This indicated favourable effects of using technology in this case in facilitating students' learning (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Graham, 2006). Students appear to have adapted well to the delivery of the module online. This may partly have been due to the current generation of students being familiar with technology (Masood & Hibberts, 2021). Although not used in this capacity, students were also already familiar with the teaching and learning platform Moodle, having experience of Moodle during the first two years of their degree¹. This may have helped the transition process.

Interactive teaching activities were incorporated in the design of the module, which increase student engagement and support active learning (Leahy et al., 2018). When looking at the thematic groupings of the positive comments, it appears they also enhance the student experience and

¹ Moodle is adopted as the learning and teaching platform within the department to provide access to lecture slides, reading material, including information about modules such as exams and assessment.

satisfaction as strong themes in the positive feedback were around the structural organisation of the module incorporating interactive activities. These comments comprised almost half of student feedback (47% of positive comments). The module included a balance of textual and visual learning materials, which may have informed students' positive feedback, as this has been highlighted as important in online module design (Nazrenko, 2015). Students also valued being able to work at their own pace in a more flexible manner, which has been documented in the literature (Garris & Fleck, 2020). Including an interactive element with balanced textual and visual activities that enable students to work at their own pace should be retained in future delivery of the module.

The largest proportion of negative comments (73%) referred to the volume of material students were required to work through each week, including reading, being too much. The module is a 15 CAT² module equating to 150 hours of learning. The traditional structure has been a two-hour lecture and a one-hour seminar each week with associated reading set. In this format, students receive 30 hours of 'formal' learning and teaching input across a 10-week term and two revision sessions, with the remaining hours comprised of self-directed study. With a shift to the online format, this negative feedback may be owing to the amount of 'formal' learning becoming more visible and/or concrete as the module was set out in a more structured and prescriptive way. In order to acknowledge this shift, the structure and organisation of the module in relation to CATs and study hours was communicated to students in a video message at the start of the module. However, it appears additional emphasis is needed in setting student expectations. A comparison to what students are already familiar with, i.e., the traditional f2f delivery method of lectures and seminars with self-directed learning, may more clearly communicate the change in learning style and help to set expectations of what learning will look like when undertaking a module in this format.

It is likely that pedagogical practice will have been altered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Masood & Hibberts, 2021). Given student feedback, this is certainly the case for this particular module. Technology can be used to effectively deliver online learning (Hodges et al., 2020), even for a module traditionally designed for f2f delivery. Moving forward, therefore, it will be important to:

- Maintain a structured approach.
- Incorporate interactive activities as part of the module to permit students to work at their own pace in a flexible manner.
- More clearly and firmly set student expectations at the start of the module in terms of how the module structure translates into practical learning hours.

Overall, the outcomes of this module evaluation indicate that it was well received. What is outside of the scope of this study is whether the redesign and transition to online learning had an impact on achievement. An avenue for future exploration, therefore, is whether this method of delivery improves student learning and/or performance.

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