



## Introduction

This collaborative project addresses the QAA's strategic theme of **Future Approaches to Pedagogy** through capturing and examining a range of practice innovations in multimodal digital education and co-creating cross-institutional principles and interactive resources that model for truly future-facing learning, teaching, and assessment.

The now standard integration of mobile technologies and multi-purpose digital devices in higher education practice environments has blurred the boundaries between the physical and the virtual, ushering in a new orientation toward learning that is increasingly experiential, flexible, and connected. With the staples of traditional learning and teaching no longer sufficient for new and emerging forms of knowledge production in disciplines and industries, universities are moving to capitalise on the affordances of the multimodality of digital educational environments to realise a broader range of possibilities for teaching and learning practices. In this context, the term multimodal refers to the different modes of communicative action (audio-visual, spatial and behavioural) that work together in the expression, creation, and representation of meaning in and through learning amongst staff and students. Designing, supporting, and assessing multimodal work, and understanding and creating meaningful multimodal learning opportunities is complex for both educators and students, with affordances and possibilities evolving alongside digital interfaces and new media to elicit changing demands, roles, and relations for each.

There is increasing evidence of educators recognising the value of devising structured opportunities for students to create and share multimodal artefacts and participate in multimodal disciplinary practices as part of integrated and active pedagogic strategies (see Varga-Atkins, 2024). To value the learning that occurs within and through the multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted textual representations available to learners, we as educators need to devise ways of actively engaging students with the affordances and constraints of modes, mediums, and tools for the purposes of learning. Different spaces and arrangements have modal affordances that can help to improve the relevance and utility of integrated pedagogic approaches, as well as set up learning opportunities that support personal and professional connections with students. Multimodal approaches to learning, teaching and assessment model the potential for digital media to personalise the learning process, strengthen the quality of learning artefacts, and foster an increased sense of agency and belonging for students (Lim and Tan-Chia, 2022).

This project aimed to generate and utilise actionable knowledge related to how educational spaces and practices are being reimaged through different conceptualisations of multimodality to inform new avenues for learning, teaching, and assessment. Through collaborative fieldwork involving a consortium of [University Alliance](#) institutions, the project captured and examined shared learning from accounts of integrating multimodal practice interventions and initiatives to leverage the pedagogical affordances of networks, devices, resources, applications, physical learning spaces and/or virtual environments.

# Project Overview

## Project Objectives

- 1) To develop a shared understanding of cross-institution multimodal strategies, approaches, and arrangements through identifying and examining a range of practice-based interventions and initiatives designed to provide for flexible and inclusive learning, teaching, and assessment.
- 2) To devise a set of evidence-informed principles for effective digital multimodal learning, teaching, and assessment designs and practices.
- 3) To create a series of accessible and interactive resources that model for the effective implementation of the principles for multimodal learning, teaching, and assessment.

## Project Approach

These objectives were practically achieved through a combination of collaborative project work and fieldwork that comprised four main phases of activity:

### Phase 1 – Sector insights on multimodal approaches to learning and teaching

At the QAA's annual [Quality Insights Conference](#) (23 February 2023), we introduced our initial definitions and mapping of key terms as a conceptual basis for the project. In this online collaborative session, we engaged participants with prompt questions (i.e., "What does multimodality mean to you?") to further examine our early mapping work as a project team and used these insights to consolidate and affirm the conceptual focus and parameters for the project itself in the form of a working conversational framework.

### Phase 2 – Developing a working conversational framework

We met regularly as a team during this phase of the project to reflect on what we had learnt about what multimodality means to peers in the sector, and in relation to the four intended areas of development we proposed for Phase 3 as project partners. Between us, we had generated a miasma of meanings demonstrating our diverse interests as educators. We agreed all had validity and sought a way to structure them. We developed a useful conversational framing to encapsulate the philosophic positions, experiences, pedagogical practices, and opportunities for multimodal innovation for individuals and their organisations. The development and application of the conversational framework is discussed in Chapter 2 and incorporated in the chapters describing the Themed Institutional Research Projects.

### Phase 3 – Themed Institutional Research Projects

To further interrogate and develop the emergent conversational framework for harnessing multimodality in HE, each partner designed and conducted an institutional research project aligned to a relevant and significant (internal) strategic theme. Focus themes covered in the institutional research project series included simulation-based learning, spatial fluency, generative AI, and digital assessments and comprised a range of methodological approaches. Each institutional research project has informed an associated themed chapter in this playbook.

#### *Simulation-based learning @ Teesside University*

The aim of the Teesside study was to understand what comprises effective multimodal learning, teaching, and assessment practice for a simulation pedagogy. The project sought to capture and analyse staff and student experiences of simulation across a selection of undergraduate taught courses identified as utilising simulation as a core pedagogic strategy as part of their curriculum delivery. To facilitate the understanding of staff and student experiences of simulation pedagogy, and to examine the extent to which these practices and processes are effective in facilitating relevant and meaningful learning experiences for students, a qualitative research approach was adopted. This consisted of in-depth semi-structured online interviews with module staff and semi-structured online focus groups with students from the same course/discipline area.

#### *Developing Spatial Fluency @ Anglia Ruskin University*

The ARU project aimed to develop the idea of spatial fluency to describe a person's confidence to work and study effectively in and across physical and digital spaces. Multimodality reflects an ecology of media, spaces, tools and situations used by students and staff for teaching, learning, and work. The study has looked at experiences of the formal curriculum and beyond towards life-wide behaviours and strategies, recognising how multimodality can foster diversity and inclusivity through a person's navigation and negotiation of their multidimensional lives. The study engaged staff and student respondents using a qualitative methodology incorporating Photovoice (Gravett *et al.*, 2022) and 'Day in the Life' methods. These allowed respondents to capture their experiences over a single day as a basis for individual interviews. We asked our respondents, "What strategies do you deploy for successfully navigating your use of formal and non-formal physical, digital and connected spaces for learning?" Through analysis, the project team has developed personal stories, thematic articles, workshop provocations, tips, infographics, podcasts, and a set of principles.

#### *University of Greenwich*

The University of Greenwich project aimed to explore student and staff understanding of the growing (and increasingly multimodal) area of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) as applied to learning, teaching and assessment within higher education. The project used

surveys to capture existing knowledge and understanding, familiarity with key terms and platforms, and confidence in using GenAI among staff and students across the university. Focus groups then explored in more depth experiences around assessment, academic integrity, creative pedagogies, and support needs. The project has produced key insights into how students and staff are using GenAI in the present, and how they envisage a GenAI-enabled future. These insights will help the higher education community embrace the possibilities, tackle the challenges, and face the complexities of GenAI in the 21st century.

### *Digital exam practice @Birmingham City University*

At Birmingham City University the focus for the project was on multimodal exam practice and delivery. With a successful hybrid (remote/onsite) exam model implemented over the course of the last three years, the research aimed to explore student and staff experiences of digital exam practice and delivery in this context, as well as the advantages and challenges in implementing a radical move from pen and paper based in-person exams to digital provision. The project team undertook interviews with academic staff teaching on Nursing, Engineering, Law and Accounting & Finance courses to capture insights and experiences around key areas of inclusivity, innovation and academic integrity in relation to the digital exam model, drawing out key themes and implications for practice. The interviews were complemented by a questionnaire completed by students on those courses to gather the student perspective and perceptions of the exam provision. This chapter brings together these themes and insights to provide an overview of key aspects and considerations for digital exam practice, alongside guidance on approaching a move to digital exams drawn from the research outcomes and the experience of the Birmingham City University digital exam team.

### **Embedding student partnership throughout the project**

Co-creation with students was fundamental to the ethos and philosophy of the wider Collaborative Enhancement Project with funding received used to support student partners within each institution. Each partner institution recruited and deployed student partners as part of the institutional research project team where students helped to undertake relevant focus group research and subsequent analysis, as well as the co-design, development, and evaluation of themed chapter outputs (included in this Playbook).

### **Phase 4 – Exploring Multimodal Practice: Four Lenses**

The final phase of the project brought together and reviewed the combined insights gained from institutional projects through a period of reflection and consolidation that informed a series of practical principles - presented as “lenses” - and key considerations designed to frame and engage design thinking around effective multimodal learning, teaching, and assessment. Each lens is grounded in one of four intersecting themes that comprise the ‘conversational framework’ that underpins the emerging contemporary view of multimodality in higher education being developed.

The Four Lenses captured in Chapter 7 of this Playbook are offered to provide a basis for structured reflection and design thinking around how to devise and embed effective multimodal learning,

teaching, and assessment practices and to aid action planning to enhance students' holistic learning experience. While each project chapter connects to the four lenses, Chapter 7 draws out key insights and considerations for practice that these lenses enable.

## **Linked Project Outputs**

In addition to this Playbook resource, the project produced several interrelated multimodal artefacts as a means of showcasing and modelling for the diversity of multimodality in academic practice captured throughout the project. This took the form of QAA and SEDA blog posts charting project progress alongside an accompanying podcast series designed to explore the strategic themes in focus through institutional research projects in greater depth.

### *Project Blog Posts*

1. QAA blog post: [How are we using different modes of communication to engage students with their learning?](#) (July 2023).
2. SEDA blog post: [How can staff development harness multimodality in higher education?](#) (November 2023).
3. QAA blog post: [Introducing the Harnessing Multimodality in HE Podcast Series.](#) (July 2024).

### *Multimodality in HE Podcast Series*

A podcast series was developed with a view to utilising the project's working conversational framework to elicit wider thinking about the Harnessing Modalities project themes (captured in Phase 3) and the idea of multimodality itself. Each podcast episode offered a vehicle for engaging invited expert guests who were external to the project in thinking about and discussing multimodalities in higher education framed by and mapped to the core themes of simulation-based learning, spatial fluency, GenAI, and digital assessment.

[Episode 1 – Spatial Fluency](#)

[Episode 2 – Simulation](#)

[Episode 3 – Assessment and Multimodality](#)

[Episode 4 – Generative artificial intelligence and multimodality](#)

The conversations and insights gathered through the podcast series have been used as a basis for continuous reflection by partners leading aligned institutional research projects. These insights have gone on to shape and inform the working conversational framework that underpins the project and, in turn, the Four Lenses for exploring multimodal practice (presented in Chapter 7).

## **Partner Institutions and Teams**

### **Teesside University (project lead)**

Professor Sam Elkington

Professor Paul Chesterton

Dr. Ann Thanaraj

### **Anglia Ruskin University**

Professor Andrew Middleton

Birgit Fraser

Sarah Elsegood

Nic Collenette

### **University of Greenwich**

Dr. Emma Kennedy

Jimmy Lo

### **Birmingham City University**

Maggie Gibson

Rachel Curzon

## Key Sources

Lim, F. V. and Tan-Chia, L. (2023). *Designing learning for multimodal literacy: Teaching viewing and representing*. London: Routledge.

Varga-Atkins, T. (2024). [\*Multimodal Learning: A practitioner guide\*](#). York: Advance HE.