Embedding multiple disciplinary affiliation identities in shared modules to enhance curriculum design

FINAL REPORT

Part of a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project

July 2024

Project Overview

Context: Disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are important but overlooked contexts when conceptualizing inclusivity in the curriculum. Modules, as the building blocks of programmes, have been the focus of significant work on promoting inclusivity, notably the elimination of BAME awarding gaps. Module sharing results in heterogeneous classrooms with multiple disciplinary identities. These classrooms offer opportunities and challenges for inclusivity and interdisciplinarity that remain largely under-researched. To enhance inclusivity in higher education (HE) further, it is important to consider how the curriculum is delivered via shared modules and via siloed/specific modules. Thoughtful curriculum design can help balance the logistical, resource and coordination challenges of shared modules with their interdisciplinary potential and opportunities to produce graduates who have depth of knowledge in their fields and the ability to collaborate across disciplines.

Approach: The term shared module was used in the conceptualisation, design and execution of this project. We took the term shared module to mean modules that are studied by students who are enrolled on different degree programmes. Siloed/specific modules are taken only by students enrolled on the same degree programme. The project comprised a three-phase approach:

      1) A literature review that drew from different perspectives to contextualize shared modules, define their distinctiveness, highlight their curricular challenges and opportunities and then propose a definition and typology of shared modules that guided the design of the questionnaire survey and focus groups.

      2) Partner institutions conducted a questionnaire survey of academic staff and QA professionals who had experience of teaching on shared modules and focus groups with students who participated on shared modules.

      3) All questionnaire and focus group data were subjected to thematic analysis to capture key themes and sub-themes about experiences of designing, teaching and studying shared modules. These themes were used to develop tools for a multi-stage shared module curriculum design and enhancement toolkit.

Outputs: The project has resulted in two main outputs:

1) A multistage toolkit to guide and support a range of stakeholders to enhance the curriculum of shared modules when designing new shared modules; by reflecting on and evaluating existing shared modules; when delivering shared modules
2) A final project report (this document).

Institutional Team

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1. Project Focus and Aims

This project's main aim was to gain insight into the rationale for shared modules and determine whether and how students' disciplinary affiliation identities are brought into the design of shared modules. Another aim was to identify specific activities, contexts, barriers, enablers and other factors that will increase the likelihood of successful implementation of an interdisciplinary and inclusive approach. The findings were used to develop tools that will explicitly underpin curriculum design in the case of shared modules.

The partner institutions covered a cross-section of the HE landscape, all of which make extensive use of shared modules. Collaborating with students and bringing the students' voice into how we gain an understanding of the rationale for shared modules and issues of interdisciplinarity and inclusivity that were relevant to their design were fundamental to the approach adopted in the study. This goal was achieved through appointing student researchers at all three institutions and by collecting interview data from close to 100 students through focus groups.

Project Objectives

1. To identify specific activities, contexts, barriers, enablers and other factors that will increase the likelihood of successful implementation of an approach to enhancing shared modules.

2. To develop tools that will support curriculum design in the case of shared modules.

1. Literature Review

Significant work has been done in the sector around explicitly recognising and catering for diversity in HE teaching and learning. This has led to the development of a body of work on curriculum, pedagogies and environments that support inclusivity at the module and programme levels. The current literature on inclusive curriculum has focused on protected characteristics and has not addressed disciplinary identity as an element of diversity. Our literature review set out to consider academic writing on modularisation, cross-disciplinarity and inclusive curriculum as they relate to the context of shared modules.
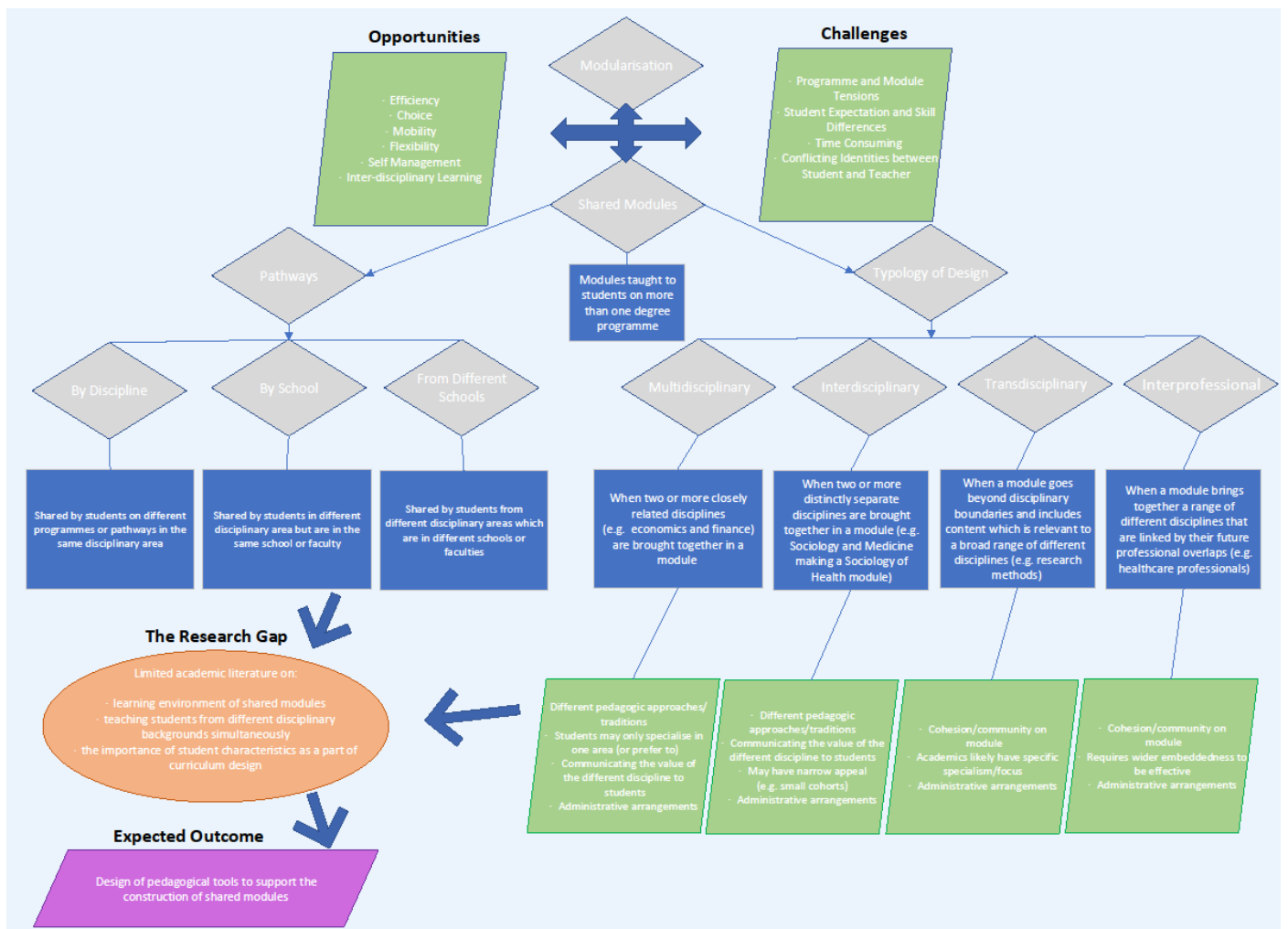
Very early on, we established that the term 'shared modules' is not used systematically in the literature to study mixed discipline classrooms. Furthermore, while a large body of literature on interdisciplinarity and inclusive curriculum exists, the identity, heterogeneity

and curriculum issues that arise from the mixed discipline classrooms have not been the focus of the interdisciplinary literature. The inclusive practice literature is varied and the concept itself is nuanced. In this work, it seemed relevant to highlight that shared modules require us to go beyond adopting the typical diversity lens to view inclusivity but to consider the heterogenous student groups in a mixed discipline class.

Recognising the gap in the literature, undertaking a systematic literature review using either a sequential or a thematic approach was not deemed appropriate. The team decided to review relevant literature that would shed light on possible explanations for the literature gap, identify areas in the higher education sector where sharing of modules is a well-established practice and then piece together a framework for understanding the nature of shared modules and associated curriculum issues. Six initial search terms were generated through brainstorming. These are set out below.

Core search term	Modifier 1	Modifier 2	Modifier 3	Modifier 4
"Shared modules"	Programmatic Teaching	Synoptic Teaching	Identity	Higher Education
Interdisciplinarity	Teaching	Curriculum Design	"Course Structure"	Higher Education
Reflective curriculum	Design	Challenges	Higher Education*	
Disciplinary	Identity	Pedagogy	Higher Education*	
Transdisciplinary	Pedagogy	Identity	Higher Education*	
Interdisciplinary	Modules	Teaching	Pedagogy	Higher Education
Interprofessional	Teaching	Modules	Pedagogy	Higher Education

Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic summary of the literature review.

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Opportunities
- Efficiency
- Choice
- Mobility
- Flexibility
- Self Management
- Inter-disciplinary Learning

Challenges
- Programme and Module Tensions
- Student Expectation and Skill Differences
- Time Consuming
- Conflicting Identities between Student and Teacher

Modularisation

Shared Modules

Pathways

Typology of Design

Modules taught to students on more than one degree programme

By Discipline

By School

From Different Schools

Multidisciplinary

Interdisciplinary

Transdisciplinary

Interprofessional

Shared by students on different programmes or pathways in the same disciplinary area

Shared by students in different disciplinary area but are in the same school or faculty

Shared by students from different disciplinary areas which are in different schools or faculties

When two or more closely related disciplines (e.g. economics and finance) are brought together in a module

When two or more distinctly separate disciplines are brought together in a module (e.g. Sociology and Medicine making a Sociology of Health module)

When a module goes beyond disciplinary boundaries and includes content which is relevant to a broad range of different disciplines (e.g. research methods)

When a module brings together a range of different disciplines that are linked by their future professional overlaps (e.g. healthcare professionals)

The Research Gap

Limited academic literature on:
- learning environment of shared modules
- teaching students from different disciplinary backgrounds simultaneously
- the importance of student characteristics as a part of curriculum design

- Different pedagogic approaches/ traditions
- Students may only specialise in one area (or prefer to)
- Communicating the value of the different discipline to students
- Administrative arrangements

- Different pedagogic approaches/traditions
- Communicating the value of the different discipline to students
- May have narrow appeal (e.g. small cohorts)
- Administrative arrangements

- Cohesion/community on module
- Academics likely have specific specialism/focus
- Administrative arrangements

- Cohesion/community on module
- Requires wider embeddedness to be effective
- Administrative arrangements

Expected Outcome

Design of pedagogical tools to support the construction of shared modules

To contextualise the literature review, we started with exploring the role of modularisation and disciplinarity in providing structural pillars for shared modules. Modules and disciplines are critical to curriculum design. Modules are the organisational building blocks vehicles for arranging the material to be taught, types of learning activities and types of assessment across degree programmes. Disciplines determine the knowledge and skills sets that are included in different degree programmes. The literature review focuses on the interactions between modules and disciplines and problems and opportunities we could identify for curriculum design in the case of shared and interdisciplinary modules. As there is very little previous work on shared modules, the literature on interdisciplinarity allowed us to explore issues that could occur when there is interaction between and integration of disciplines and between people with different disciplinary affiliation in teaching.

We found that where the literature references identities in interdisciplinary curriculum and classrooms, there is a marked overlap with the literature on interprofessional education.

Common problems identified from the literature when there is sharing of modules include fragmentation of learning, lack of cohesion and alienation, student motivational differences and identity entrenchment. Disciplinary polarity can also be a source of tension. The literature review also unearthed that module sharing could offer benefits and opportunities, some of which may be largely untapped because of the way shared modules are designed or included in a degree programme. Opportunities include efficiency from resource sharing, offering choice and flexibility to students and interdisciplinary learning. The literature suggests possible ways forward when working in mixed discipline contexts, notably use of multi and interdisciplinary teams, coordination strategies, repositioning of disciplines and curriculum design and review approaches.

Conclusions from the literature review included the following: considering disciplinarity as part of classroom heterogeneity adds different dimensions to the inclusivity discourse. This emphasis directs attention to identifying and breaking down silos and barriers that can affect the delivery of quality teaching on shared modules. The interdisciplinarity literature highlights that there are different degrees to which disciplines can be connected, ranging from just drawing examples from other disciplines to seamless integration between disciplines.

Determining the nature of a shared module presents challenges, not least because of differences in the degree of disciplinary interaction but also because of the positioning of the module in a degree programme. We decided that there is a case for establishing a formal definition and taxonomy of shared modules based on disciplinarity that would support teaching and learning in interdisciplinary settings. We also realised that just as important for understanding the nature of shared modules are the student pathways that underpin module sharing. Based on the review and our own experience, we proposed three possibilities for such pathways, acknowledging that each of these has different implications for students' experience, particularly in terms of identity and belonging. Modules could be:

- Shared by students on different programmes or pathways in the same disciplinary area
- Shared by students from different disciplinary areas which are within the same school or faculty
- Shared by students from different disciplinary areas which are in different schools or faculties

Modules can also be shared because they are selected by students on a combined honours programme.

We used the interdisciplinary typology of shared modules to define modules and synthesise their likely curricular implications (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Interdisciplinary Taxonomy of Shared Modules

Shared module type	Definition	Teaching	Challenges
Implanted	When a module is taken from a different disciplinary area and inserted into an existing or new programme of study	• Often taught by disciplinary expert from the implanted topic • Taught to a cohort studying a specific area	• Different pedagogic approaches/traditions • Students may lack experience/require scaffolding for a new discipline area • 'Implanted' staff member may have no relationship with students
Multidisciplinary	When two or more closely related disciplines (e.g. economics and finance) are brought together in a module	• Can be co-taught by academics from each discipline • Or can be taught by academics with expertise in both areas • Can bring together students from a wide range of disciplines	• Different pedagogic approaches/traditions • Students may only specialise in one area (or prefer to) • Communicating the value of the different discipline to students • Administrative arrangements
Interdisciplinary	When two or more distinctly separate disciplines are brought together in a module (e.g. Sociology and Medicine making a Sociology of Health module)	• Can involve academics from different disciplines co-developing a module • Can bring together students from a wide range of disciplines	• Different pedagogic approaches/traditions • Communicating the value of the different discipline to students • May have narrow appeal (e.g. small cohorts) • Administrative arrangements

Transdisciplinary	When a module goes beyond disciplinary boundaries and includes content which is relevant to a broad range of different disciplines (e.g. research methods)	• Brings together large cohorts of students from different areas	• Cohesion/community on module • Academics likely have specific specialism/focus • Administrative arrangements
Interprofessional	When a module brings together a range of different disciplines that are linked by their future professional overlaps (e.g. healthcare professionals)	• Brings together large cohorts of students from different areas • Designed to replicate future work-based practices, relationships and environments	• Cohesion/community on module • Requires wider embeddedness to be effective • Administrative arrangements

The literature shows that over the years academics have grappled with the challenges of delivering high quality teaching to mixed classrooms. Finding that motivations for shared modules are largely underexplored in the literature, a key focus of this study was to explore what drives decision making around using shared modules. The empirical work also sought to determine factors that affect their design such as professional body requirements and interdisciplinary learning as well as investigate their challenges, benefits and opportunities.

3.Method

Participants

Following ethical approval, we used purposive sampling to recruit participants consisting of:

• Academic colleagues at each partner HEI who had experience of designing or delivering shared modules (n= 112). They were predominantly experienced module and programme leaders and came from a range of academic disciplines. The most frequent types of shared module they had experience of were modules shared between programmes within the same academic disciplinary area or shared between programmes in different disciplines but within the same faculty or school.

• Students at each partner HEIs who were taking a shared module as part of their programme of study (n=90). They were drawn from all levels of study 4 to 7 and from a range of academic disciplines. The shared modules they were taking were varied and included modules that were shared by: programmes within the same department/school; programmes in different departments/ schools; undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Data collection

We designed an online survey for staff to investigate their experiences of designing and delivering shared modules. Questionnaire topics were guided by the findings of the literature review and our own reflections on our experiences as educators. Questions focused on the prevalence, type and rationale for shared modules as well as benefits, challenges and solutions. Open-ended questions were used to elicit responses that were not constrained by prior conceptions. Following a pilot, minor changes were made to the question wording and response options before the questionnaire was shared with staff at each partner HEI.

Subsequently we used online focus groups at each institution to investigate student expectations and experiences of shared modules. Each focus group consisted of between three and eight participants and was facilitated by a student researcher to encourage participants to be open and honest. The question schedule was designed collaboratively by the research team, including the student researchers, drawing on themes identified in the literature review, survey results and preliminary discussions within the team. After receiving training on running focus groups, student researchers had an opportunity in the first instance to develop a set of questions independently of the academic researchers. The students compiled a list of 6 questions. Given that each university approaches shared modules in a different manner, the students formatted the questions broadly to ensure that institutional differences did not distort responses

The whole research team then met to compare the students' questions with the indicative questions that the academic researchers had developed before moderating and finalising

a set of questions.   The questions were open-ended and followed by further prompts with the aim of exploring participants' views in depth. Indicative question topics included the perceived relevance of the shared module to their programme of study, overall experience of the shared module, and their sense of belonging on their programme. The students' contribution to the design of the project and the conduct of the focus groups added a further dimension to the collaborative nature of the exercise. Students' reflections on the focus group and their perspectives of shared modules because of their participation in the project are included at the end of this report.

Data analysis

Responses to the staff questionnaire were analysed to provide a summary of themes in response to the open-ended questions. Focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and shared with the research team for familiarisation. Partners and their student researchers initially familiarised themselves with the transcripts from their own institution, proposed initial themes and, where necessary, provided context to help with interpretation (e.g. type of module being shared). Then, following discussion and sharing of the initial themes, re-reading of the transcripts and refining of the themes, the overall data set was analysed by a small sub-group to identify important and interesting patterns that could be interpreted in relation to the study aims (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This resulted in a set of overarching themes, which were driven by the questions, and emerging subthemes within them. Results from the staff survey were then considered alongside the student data to highlight common and contrasting viewpoints.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

4.Findings and Recommendations

4.1 Rationale and relevance of shared modules

Responses in the staff survey identified a range of different motivations for using shared modules. They included interdisciplinary learning, teaching of generic skills, providing optional modules, a programme design in which students complete a shared foundation and then specialise, and efficiency.

> *To motivate student interest in emerging global themes and topics. Staff quote.*

> *To breakdown professional barriers. Staff quote.*

> *Broaden students' options and learning opportunities. Staff quote.*

> *To deliver basic academic skills and expectations at the beginning of a programme. Staff quote.*

> *The module enabled six different programmes to be taught the same material. It streamlines what we were offering. Staff quote.*

However, staff acknowledged challenges in ensuring that shared modules are perceived by students as relevant and valuable:

> *Engagement. The idea that this module is "not what the student signed up for". They assume that it is not relevant to them. The challenge is to make it relevant and engage the student. Staff quote.*

> *Many students fundamentally appear to prefer to be taught separately by discipline; they seem to value sessions labelled discipline specific more than shared sessions. Staff quote.*

In the student focus groups, those on programmes where shared modules were used to provide a broad foundation tended to find the module content relevant. Some also referred to added **value** and **flexibility** from taking shared modules because of the opportunities to explore **new horizons** and even change direction later in their programme.

> *All the shared modules I'm taking are related to one another, so it made sense. Student quote.*

> *Shared modules gave me the opportunity to learn about different subjects and get in touch with new ideas. Student quote.*

> *I think the biggest benefit is the ability to jump courses either halfway or at the end of the year. Student quote*

However, some found this experience lacked continuity or that their specific pathway was **devalued** as it lacked a distinctive achievement.

> *You don't feel like you belong in one place. It feels like you're in different places, different areas all the time depending on the module. Student quote.*

> *When the vast majority of your course is shared, it kind of takes away the value of your course because so many other people are doing it. They've also got those skills. So, in essence, I guess you could argue, why do that course that you're doing if you're covering the same stuff as everybody else, it's not very specific, I feel sometimes. Student quote.*

Where students were aware of a clear pedagogical rationale for the shared module, such as interdisciplinary topics, they tended to acknowledge that the module was relevant and valuable.

> *Everyone should learn ethics. Student quote.*

> *Learning the skill of critical thinking and deciding how reliable an article is, that's a really good skill to have as a nurse. Student quote.*

Many students reported that they were not directly informed their module was shared but found out incidentally.

> *I found out by interacting with other people on the course. I found they were doing another degree and that's how I realised I was in a shared module. Student quote.*

> *It was only when I turned up to the first lecture and there were tons of people in there and I didn't know who was who or from what background and actually the lecturer didn't know what backgrounds we were from either. Student quote.*

> *They were talking about the timetabling and the confusion between students about who's going to have what and when and seminars and stuff. Student quote.*

The lack of explanation around the shared nature of the module in some cases led them to assume the rationale for the shared module was not learner centred.

> *They have to create more and more shared modules because of the sheer amount of students. Student quote.*

Students appreciated it when staff communicated explicitly about the sharing of the module including who the different groups of learners were, how the module would meet the needs of all learners, how learners could make use of the opportunity to be with other groups.

I think a good thing to start is by letting us know which ones are and aren't shared modules. I feel like people will be more inclined to reach out to new people if they know that there are other courses in there rather than just the same set of people. Student quote

Maybe having in the description or actually being told in the class that this is a shared module, maybe describing why it is. So saying this is shared because and it's shared with these courses because we're touching on this idea and this idea relates to this subject in this way or this one in this way and like kind of show you how it's integrated within those subjects and why it's even a shared course to begin with. I think maybe it could just help with a more nuanced understanding of the material you're learning. Student quote.

Recommendation 1- Improve awareness and transparency of shared modules

Improving transparency of the curriculum and learning environment are important considerations for enhancing shared modules and accounting for different disciplinary affiliations of students. Clearly identify which modules are shared and which are not to help students prepare and adjust their expectations. Communicate about why the module is shared, who is in the room and how all learners will be supported. Emphasize the benefits of shared modules for broadening perspectives and learning from students of other disciplines and encourage curiosity about different perspectives. Explain to students where shared modules are used to teach skills that are beneficial across disciplines, such as critical thinking and evidence-based practice.

4.2 Learning, teaching and assessment

In the survey, staff identified challenges related to **delivery** of interdisciplinary teaching and **assessment**.

Background knowledge and expectations differs between student cohorts. Lecture delivery/ examples are often discipline specific and risk focusing on specific cohorts. Staff quote.

Varying levels of preliminary maths/quants. Staff quote.

Assessments must be developed that are relevant to each different group. Staff quote.

Students also acknowledged challenges because of the varied **disciplinary knowledge** that students brought with them into the module.

I think it can be quite difficult for some students, especially when they don't come from a science-related background. So, in certain terminologies that are used, it can be a little bit difficult to pick it up. But then when you hear it enough then you can understand what they're saying. Student quote.

I was in a banking module last year and the students were mostly banking and finance students. So, I felt like I lacked some of the banking knowledge that they had. I had to put extra effort in my assignment to get a good grade and I had to ask people like who do banking or finance their knowledge, so yeah, I feel like when you when you do something different then it is quite difficult, too much at our level. Student quote.

However, many referred to learning gains from being in this mixed cohort. They benefitted from **disciplinary interaction** via **peer learning** for example. Group discussions and assessments in which they collaborated with students from other programmes provided opportunities to pool skills and knowledge bases.

I like to get to know the other courses that I'm sharing my module with, like if I'm doing it with an electronic engineering course, know what they've learnt, what kind of perspectives they've been doing so that like I know where everyone's coming from. Student quote.

Great opportunity to exchange to swap knowledges, experiences and backgrounds. Student quote.

I just think shared modules are easier because you can get help from loads of different people. So, for different knowledge, I quite like them. Student quote

The development of teamwork skills through working with colleagues from different disciplines was also highlighted as contributing to employability.

The multidisciplinary part of the shared module is beneficial because we end up learning from others as well, and we will be healthcare practitioners and will be required to work with the multidisciplinary team in the future. Student quote

In terms of assessment, we had to perform a group dilemma. We performed a drama where I was thinking about (another student's) perspective in different roles. So, it was how are you going to come up with solutions and how ethics helps to make decisions in daily life and business. Student quote.

In the creative industry, collaboration is essential. Shared modules can provide experience in working with different faculties and enhance employability. Student quote.

However, some students struggled to work effectively in group assessments, owing to poor teamwork skills per se or to different approaches to the work. Another concern was differing expectations around assessment criteria, which could make assessments more difficult to navigate.

> *Essays were formatted differently and that was rather confusing*. Student quote.

> *We felt as though we were given this new assessment style, and for computer scientists who don't write essays, we had no clue what to do so they could have given us an example of how they wanted it or just some walkthrough of how they wanted this new kind of assessment to go rather than just leaving everyone to it and just kind of saying interpret as you will and do what you want. Student quote.*

> *Referencing styles which can differ between disciplines. Student quote.*

They wanted staff to be aware of the different groups of students on the module and to act on this by giving additional guidance and support where it may be needed.

> *I really appreciate it when lecturers say, "this would be really useful for certain types of students". For instance, I don't know. We'll talk about marketing, so they might go, oh, psychology students, you'll know this. But particularly banking students, maybe you might want to brush up on this knowledge. So, it really highlights what you personally need to learn so you don't spend time on things you already know about, and you get to learn about new things and improve that. Student quote.*

Some felt that opportunities to interact with peers in seminars/ tutorials was the key to a good learning experience.

> *What matters is the content and the way that lecturers provide this content and the way they make it engaging and interesting for us, not the people around you. Since I have a very good tutorial group of people who actually engage, and we all work together well I'm happy with that. Having shared lectures doesn't affect me at all. Student quote.*

> *I like the fact that we could go to our seminar, which wasn't shared, and then we could specifically discuss with her just about our assignments. I think that was very, very beneficial to have. Student quote.*

> *I don't mind the fact that the lectures are mixed. Some modules can be relevant throughout multiple disciplines. However, I believe it's important that the tutorials*

do not mix because that's when we actually interact, ask questions, and do exercises more specific to our course. Student quote.

Others suggested how staff could enhance shared modules by tailoring their teaching for the different groups of learners and these ideas were reflected in the strategies mentioned by staff.

Take into account each group's current understanding of the topic, as it varies. Staff quote.

Find examples which contextualise why the learning might be beneficial within different disciplines. Staff quote.

Setting tutorial tasks that all students find engaging and challenging given their different backgrounds. Staff quote.

Provide catch-up and extension activities. Staff quote.

Giving a choice of titles for assessments e.g. asking students to critically discuss application of specific techniques for discipline-specific outputs. Staff quote.

Recommendation 2- Identify and leverage the opportunities that shared modules offer for interdisciplinary learning and for students to develop valuable skills from interdisciplinary interaction

Identifying and leveraging the opportunities that shared modules offer through interdisciplinarity such as providing students with broader disciplinary perspectives and skillsets and aspirations are important for enhancing the curriculum of shared modules. Tailor module content by paying attention simultaneously to relevance and cross disciplinarity. Select elements, such as examples, case studies and assessments to fit various disciplines effectively. Be mindful of knowledge gaps and different expectations around assessment methods, including details such as formatting and referencing. Create opportunities for students from different courses to interact and collaborate and include support for teamwork skills as part of the teaching activities. Use programme level planning to ensure a balance of opportunities for students to work with peers from their own programme and other degree pathways.

4.3 Sense of belonging

To develop their social connectedness with peers on their programme, some students wanted opportunities to be in small groups that were specific to their programme, either by having programme specific (i.e. non-shared modules) or by being allocated to separate seminar groups/ tutorials within the shared module. Otherwise, they may be unable to get to know their peers or feel a sense of belonging to their specific cohort.

> *So no, you don't really get a sense of belonging. Shared modules are beneficial, but as a business with finance student attending accounting and banking lectures, it doesn't feel like my degree, so you don't have that sense of belonging.* Student quote

> *I prefer it where we have some shared and then the rest to ourselves, because it, it's about your classmates***.** *Student quote.*

However, many students appreciated the **social** opportunities that shared modules can provide, by enabling them to mix with a larger and more varied group of peers, which could lead to new friendships.

> *They're a bit better for the social side of things, because when you're limited to a small class of about, I think, 15, we don't really mingle with a lot of different students and that sort of thing. I think that can be a big benefit of having those shared modules, just getting to meet new people. Student quote.*

> *I feel like it's good to get out of your comfort zone, speak to new people and build different relationships with people from different cultures. I feel like that's a good aspect of being in shared modules. Student quote*

> *You get to meet a lot of different people doing different courses and you can make new friends. Student quote*

> *I think the benefits of shared modules in the first year are really good because you get to meet such a wide range of people when a lot of people are coming in not knowing anybody.*

However, they noted that this only worked if the teaching on the shared module facilitated peer interaction, otherwise these potential social benefits could be lost.

> *On the social front however, I haven't really benefited from the presence of students from other degrees because interactions were minimal. Student quote.*

Recommendation 3– Embed interactive activities in shared modules to enhance inclusivity and the student experience on shared modules.

Interaction contributes to embedding inclusivity in shared modules. The social side of shared modules was not explicitly mentioned as a rationale or potential benefit by staff in their survey responses, yet it was an important theme in student focus groups. While students wanted to spend time with peers on their own specific programme, many also appreciated the opportunity to meet new people via shared modules. Shared modules could be an underused resource for supporting students to transition into HE, to connect with peers and, ultimately, to form new friendships. This could help to increase engagement, decrease loneliness and support student wellbeing. However, for this to work, shared, as well as non-shared, teaching sessions need to include activities that support peer interaction.

4.4 Communication, organisation and quality enhancement

Although not a universal theme, concerns around communication, organisation and quality enhancement were identified by many staff and students as important to their experiences on shared modules.

Students highlighted **communication** problems as a cause of concern and confusion that negatively impacted their experiences.

> *We ended up getting a lot of the emails that were specifically just for the MSc students. So for you guy's assessment, we kept getting emails about it, which in our group chat there's like over 200 students. So everyone was really confused and there was a lot of misinformation about it that it wasn't something that we were being assessed on, but we were still getting the emails for it and it wasn't even like one e-mail. It was like multiple emails.* Student quote

It was also important to students that where different programmes are referred to in communications, all groups are acknowledged, particularly where small programmes are combined with larger ones.

> *When they're counting what programmes are in the lecture hall, they never even mention my course. So, I think a lot of people in my class feel a bit forgotten in all of the shared modules. Student quote.*

> *Sometimes I've thought, what's the point in doing this course when no one's even heard of it. Student quote.*

Staff highlighted practical difficulties in organisation (e.g. timetabling, policies).

> *The timetable. Impossible to get the students in one room - so the same thing has to be taught multiple times. This is NOT efficient for staff. Consistency of material across lectures and seminars as they are run by different staff members. Different disciplines have different year planners, making timetabling extremely complex. Staff quote.*

> *Practical challenges – conflict in timetable e.g. one school operates a reading week, the other does not.*

> *Miscommunication between module leads and fair distribution of work.*

> *The time spent liaising and dealing with administrative differences across the teaching team is a challenge.*

> *Differences in administration and policies between schools e.g. to deadlines, communications, extensions, etc. It is confusing to students who are used to one system then experience another.*

They also raised issues around **oversight,** citing the lack of evaluation processes that can illuminate different perspectives, thereby creating a barrier for quality enhancement.

> *The feedback of students on the module is not separated by programme so the module leader is unable to consider such views. Staff quote.*

> *One school "owns" the module from the point of view of programme leadership, programme review and assessment boards. Staff quote.*

> *Only through Evasys – there are no particular efforts made to gather the views of the other stakeholder programmes. Staff quote*

> *QA processes, alignment of vision, lack of control – these are the key challenges. Staff quote.*

Strategies used to assure and enhance quality tended to focus on ensuring good communication between stakeholders, though some respondents used standard evaluation processes.

> *Having clear reasons as to why it is done and involving colleagues from all subject areas concerned.*

> *Even when leading and delivering such modules alone, discussion with other tutors and teaching staff is essential for shaping content within the module.*

Good communication between stakeholders; designing activities allowing students from different groups to work together, involving students as co-creators.

To be honest, we generally ignore the fact that the module is shared at all.

Recommendation 4 – Involve different stakeholders in decision making at strategic points in the life of shared modules and establish clear protocols for communication and decision making that are known to all stakeholders.

Shared modules have a wider set of stakeholders than siloed/specific modules. Coordination is essential to maximise benefits and mitigate constraints of shared modules both in terms of resource use and embedding interdisciplinarity. Effective coordinated communication is essential for the effective design of new shared modules, for redesigning existing shared modules and to deliver them well.   Ensure clear information and communication about module organisation is provided to students, acknowledging all student groups within the module. Involve all stakeholders, both at module level and programme level, through consultation and feedback to design, monitor and enhance shared modules.

5. Student Researchers' Reflections

Since the student experience on shared modules was at the heart of this project, student researchers were employed to allow the building rapport and shared experiences with participants and to give students an increased voice in the project. In that spirit, each student researcher has completed a reflective position statement about their experiences on the project and with shared modules generally. The statements which follow add to our evidence-base for this project.

Reflection 1

My personal experience of the project, and what it was for me to be put in the shoes of researchers

Participating in the project as a student researcher was a transformative experience—the project aimed to understand students' perspectives on shared modules. Initially, I was excited yet apprehensive about taking on this role, as it involved stepping into the shoes of researchers and engaging directly with my peers.

One of my primary responsibilities was data collection and analysis, which gave me a first-hand view of the complexities and challenges students face with shared modules. This role demanded a prominent level of active listening. I quickly realised that to gather comprehensive and authentic information, I needed to pay close attention to details and appreciate that only some share the same experiences. Engaging with fellow students required me to listen actively to their perspectives and ask follow-up questions to dive deeper into significant insights relevant to our research.

This project significantly enhanced my organisational and communication skills. I had to manage the coordination of recruiting participants, scheduling meetings, and ensuring smooth focus group discussions. These tasks required meticulous planning and coordination, which honed my ability to organise tasks effectively and communicate clearly with diverse groups.

Understanding and analysing students' feedback about shared modules was another critical aspect of my role. I had to interpret their feedback accurately and ask detailed questions to elicit more information. This process improved my analytical skills and taught me how to encourage participants to share valuable insights without leading their responses. Maintaining the natural flow of conversations was essential to ensure the integrity of the data collected.

Moreover, this project opened my mind to different career paths. I thoroughly enjoyed the interactions with students and the process of recruiting participants for the study. I developed and found incredibly rewarding skills for managing meetings and maintaining the focus group's flow. The experience highlighted the importance of flexibility, patience, and empathy in research and interpersonal communication.

One significant challenge was collecting data without manipulating participants' answers. I learned to create an environment where students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts freely, ensuring the authenticity of their responses. This experience reinforced the importance of ethical considerations in research and the need to uphold integrity throughout the data collection.

Overall, being a student researcher on this project was one of my most rewarding experiences. It expanded my understanding of research methodologies, improved my interpersonal skills, and exposed me to various perspectives and experiences regarding shared modules. The project enriched my academic knowledge and inspired me to consider new career opportunities. It was a transformative journey that taught me the value of active listening, effective communication, and ethical research practices. I am grateful for the opportunity to have been part of it.

My views about shared modules are, and how they have evolved along leading focus groups?

Initially, I was familiar with the concept of shared modules, having encountered one or two each year throughout my studies. My early views were neutral; I saw shared modules as a convenient arrangement for universities, especially given the nature of the modules and degree areas. I did not hold any strong positive or negative opinions about them, although I did notice that human distractions could sometimes affect the focus within these modules.

Leading the focus groups provided a deeper and more subtle understanding of shared modules. The focus groups were conducted online via Teams, requiring meticulous planning and coordination. I was responsible for recruiting participants, scheduling meetings, and conducting the focus groups. To recruit students, I made shoutouts during classes and tutorials and contacted student representatives of the shared modules selected for the study. We also offered a £20 Amazon voucher to incentivise participation. Once participants agreed, I shared the meeting link after receiving their signed consent forms.

During the focus groups, the main objective was to gather diverse perspectives on shared modules across different degrees and faculties to identify any systematic issues or benefits. As the facilitator, I ensured that discussions were conducted ethically and without bias, allowing participants to express their views freely. The common themes that emerged from these discussions highlighted several key points.

Firstly, students frequently mentioned that larger groups led to more distractions, detracting from the learning experience. Additionally, there was a recurring sentiment that a degree with more shared modules made students feel undervalued by the university. Despite these concerns, many students acknowledged the benefit of meeting peers from different disciplines, which offered diverse perspectives and enriched their educational experience.

A significant point of feedback was related to assessment methods. Students noted that some assessment formats might favour specific disciplines over others, depending on students' prior experience. Furthermore, some shared modules were deemed repetitive for students in particular degree programs, diminishing their educational value. The issue of distractions in large groups was also a critical concern, as it impacted the learning environment's effectiveness.

As I led more focus groups, my perspective on shared modules shifted. Initially, I did not have a strong opinion, but through these discussions, I gained a clearer understanding of the underlying reasons for the existence of shared modules. It became evident that these

modules are often designed for the convenience of universities, streamlining resources and fostering interdisciplinary learning. However, the more feedback I gathered, the more I realised that the university's agenda for shared modules often overlooks the impact on students. Many students felt that shared modules did not adequately consider the varying needs and experiences of different disciplines, potentially leading to an imbalance where some students benefit more than others.

By the end of the project, I developed a more critical view of shared modules. While I appreciated the intention behind them, I became increasingly aware of their drawbacks. The feedback highlighted that universities might need to fully consider the student experience when implementing shared modules, focusing more on administrative efficiency than educational quality. This realisation has made me more empathetic towards my peers' concerns and has deepened my understanding of how university programs are organised.

In conclusion, leading focus groups on shared modules have been an eye-opening experience. It has transformed my neutral stance into a more informed and critical perspective. While I recognise the benefits of interdisciplinary interaction, I also see the need for universities to address the systematic issues that can arise from shared modules. Ensuring that these modules are equitable and hugely beneficial for all students requires more thoughtful planning and a greater emphasis on the student experience. *Maria Mateo University of Greenwich*

Reflection 2

My personal experience of the project, and what it was for me to be put in the shoes of researchers

When my tutor Emma Pullen suggested that I become a student researcher on the QAA project, I was thrilled about such an opportunity. It allowed me to make a real impact on the delivery of shared modules, student experiences, and satisfaction. This role as a student researcher, where my responsibilities included recruiting students, scheduling focus-groups, drafting emails with reminders, and afterwards conducting the focus groups and analysing key insights, taught me invaluable skills. I learnt how to manage the parts of the project independently, how to be more organised, and manage my time wisely.

Initially, recruiting students was quite challenging. Even with an incentive of 20£ Amazon vouchers students were reluctant to participate. However, with the help of the lecturers from the University of Lincoln, and by leveraging my personal connections, I successfully secured the required number of participants. This process required creativity in thinking of ways to recruit students and quick problem-solving when students didn't attend the scheduled focus-groups.

Conducting focus groups was a significant part of my role. At first, I felt nervous, but as the time went on, I became much more confident. I have acquired active listening skills, learnt how to spark the conversation, extract various perspectives and fill the awkward silence, while not interrupting other people. Although we had a set of determined questions, I always tried to bring in new points from each focus-group by asking additional questions. This not only enriched the data we collected but also honed my ability to think on my feet and adapt to different situations.

Working as a team was another crucial aspect of the project. Collaborating with partners from other universities and student researchers helped deepen my understanding of the tasks. Through various meetings, we were able to coordinate our efforts, and to ensure that everyone felt confident in what they were doing. This experience underscored the importance of teamwork and communication in achieving common goals.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to take part in the analysis phase as much as I would have liked due to the exam season in May. However, if given another opportunity, I would definitely take on such an activity as it presents an opportunity to further develop analytical skills. The skills I developed during this project - organisation, time-management, creativity, problem-solving, active listening and teamwork - will undoubtedly be beneficial in my professional life.

In conclusion, my experience as a student researcher on the QAA project was immensely rewarding. It allowed me to step into the shoes of the researcher, develop academic and professional skills, and gain confidence in my abilities. I felt satisfied knowing that I made an impact on the students' experiences. I would highly recommend such a role to any student who wishes to undertake some extracurricular academic activities alongside their studies. The experience not only enhances academic understanding, but also prepares students for future professional challenges, equipping them with the skills that are valuable in any career path.

 My views about shared modules and how they have evolved along leading focus groups?

"Before becoming a student researcher on the QAA project, I had already formed opinions about shared modules due to my experiences and interactions with friends from various degree programs. I was aware of both the benefits and drawbacks of shared modules but believed that the advantages generally outweigh the disadvantages. In degree programs with a small number of students, like those at the University of Lincoln, modules exclusively taught to one program can limit the potential for student connections.

 Leading focus groups significantly deepened my understanding of shared modules. It was insightful to hear perspectives from students in different schools, whose shared module

experiences differed greatly from those in the Business School. This experience highlighted the importance of several key practices in improving student satisfaction with shared modules. Clearly indicating that a module is shared, incorporating ice-breaker activities, revising fundamental concepts in the first lecture, and thoroughly structuring and explaining assessments to suit various degree programs are essential steps. To my mind, these practices can greatly enhance the overall student experience and satisfaction in shared modules." - *Anastasiia Pashchenko, University of Lincoln*

Reflection 3

My personal experience of the project, and what it was for me to be put in the shoes of researchers

The QAA project was my first time as an academic research assistant; the role was offered to me by a professor of mine from Strategic Management module. Although new to research, I wasn't scared to take on the researcher role, on the contrary I was eager to jump on the QAA project not solely due to the novel nature of the experience, but also because I've always wanted to contribute to the improvement of UK higher education.

Despite entailing a high level of independence as well as plenty of responsibility, I haven't found my role to be stressful at all; I attribute this to the team's kindness and deep appreciation for us student researchers. Personally, I'm of the opinion that the innate humanity of the team is what made this project particularly special for me. All the work experiences I've done prior to QAA have been very educating yet slightly dehumanizing. The QAA team was the first 'place' where I was fully respected, listened to, and had decisional freedom; what struck me the most, however, was how professors held us student researchers in great esteem, putting us to their same level. I still cannot fathom why disrespecting students on the workplace is normalized, when there's nothing normal with it. That said, I appreciate that the treatment I got on the QAA project is a rarity, but the approach professors had with researchers should become the new, common practice; after all, the human element is what really marks the experience, in positive or in negative.

Another highlight of this experience was the ability to closely work with my professors; what I found interesting was the shift of my relationship with them, that is going from pupil to essentially a peer.

Speaking of the project's challenges, I would say that focus groups were the only hurdle I encountered. Despite being a student myself, I found carrying out focus groups to be a bizarre process, mostly because I had to interview peers on a subject that I'm familiar with, that is shared modules. By the time I carried out the focus groups, I already had done

shared modules in all three years of my bachelor and was taking a couple too simultaneously to QAA. I've always been aware of shared modules; indeed, when I started the first one (International Business Management) in year one, I already knew that it was shared as mentioned on the SBM modules guide. Although not specified on the latter, I imagined that shared module meant sharing a subject with other degrees; I however got the confirmation from the module leader, which during the first lectures, mentioned how his subject was undertaken by various degrees all at once.

Working with partner universities and their respective professors was the easiest part surprisingly; the team felt very collaborative. Furthermore, the fact that each university approaches shared modules differently has exposed me to different viewpoints that I wouldn't have thought of otherwise. Lastly, the moment I'll treasure the most was the CABS conference in Birmingham, whereby I presented the project with the rest of the team. The goal of CABS was to gather higher education institutions from all over the UK, to discuss current challenges of the sector, and to allow them to present their respective pedagogic, research projects. My contribution at the conference was to prepare and present a five minute slide about the focus groups; I both showcased and explained the structure, the questions and the execution process of the interviews, whilst also emphasizing the multilayered (dynamic) approach adopted when surveying the students. Needless to say, it was exciting to see a project I was part of, being brought to life in front of universities from all over the country.

My views about shared modules and how they have evolved along leading focus groups

"My view of shared modules is rather conflicted; while I appreciate that they allow students to access different disciplines as well as engage with peers from a wider background, I on the other hand think that their design is deeply flawed. I'm of the opinion that group assessments and poor module organization are the main criticisms of shared modules. Group assignments certainly enable students to learn or improve their teamwork skills; this benefit is strongly hindered by the university weak penalty system, which fails short in safeguarding hard working students from freeloaders. As of module organization, numerous students have remarked that shared modules are often disorganized, particularly in terms of module guides; many have expressed the need to have more exhaustive module descriptions, as well as prerequisites.

Frankly, my views on shared modules haven't really changed after leading the focus groups; rather, I gained a larger and deeper understanding of other students' perspectives on the topic. This has allowed me to envisage potential solutions to shared modules' disadvantages, whilst maintaining an objective eye as much as possible. Listening to other students has indeed led me to comprehend whether some of my critiques were actually

shared by many others, or solely personal. With this in mind then, I believe shared modules are a great academic tool, yet some aspects should be revised to enhance their usefulness" *Diletta Cerasuolo, Royal Holloway*

6. Development of the Reflective Toolkit

The toolkit is designed to help educators enhance transparency, interdisciplinarity, inclusivity and efficiency in the curriculum of shared modules. The emphasis is on how we approach the teaching of shared modules rather than what we teach on shared modules. Curriculum is taken to be more than content but also delivery and assessment. For our purposes, an inclusive curriculum is one that recognises disciplinarity as an element of diversity and recognizes and accommodates all students' disciplinarities. The toolkit was developed collaboratively and co-produced with project partners.

Based on themes from the study and recommendations, the research team identified types of tools that could be used by different stakeholders when designing, evaluating and delivering shared modules. To enable researchers to express their views and consider the findings from the research activities, three online workshops were devoted to toolkit development. The deliberations in these workshops allowed for insights to develop a suite of tools to emerge. Three subgroups were formed to work on components of the toolkit. A multi – stage tool was developed that and three components covering different curricular phases -designing new shared modules, evaluating existing shared modules and delivering teaching on shared modules.

Stage 1: Design Tool for new shared modules incorporating the shared modules design typology

This tool can be used to facilitate run workshops aimed at module teams, programme leaders, academic developers and quality assurance practitioners who lead and support programme/module design.

Driven by a review of existing literature relating to shared modules ([Decker et al 2023](#)), a typology was developed to classify different versions of these modules. The typology reflected on the different teaching methods and challenges faced in delivering shared modules. This tool uses the interdisciplinary shared modules typology to frame initial design considerations for developing new shared modules. A flow chart guides decision-

making based upon expected benefits of using a shared module, guiding users to choose an appropriate type.

Each shared module type has an associated resource table, a Considerations Template, with prompt questions for use in module design. The template encourages users to consider and plan for how to overcome the typical challenges that were identified from both the literature review and the research from this enhancement project, at the design stage.

Stage 2 – **Evaluate and Reflect Tool**

This reflective tool is for current or newly appointed leaders of shared modules and their teams to use for curriculum evaluation tool and enhancement.   The tool can be used in different scenarios. It can be used at the end of term to appraise a module and develop an action plan by a new module leader who has taken over an existing shared module, by a module leader who may have had their module implanted in a new programme, by a module leader who may be leading a shared module for the first time. The tool will help module leaders to reflect on a module's curriculum and their own actions to identify good practice, concerns and challenges that can inform module redesign.

Conceptually, the tool is guided by a definition of a curriculum that includes context, content, pedagogy and assessment. Shaping the work are Principles/guidelines that are seen as important considerations when designing shared module curriculum. These are interdisciplinarity, inclusivity and transparency. Transparency includes intentional actions to highlight and communicate relevance, purpose, rationale; consider potential biases; collect and use information on classroom composition and explore disciplinary awareness reflexively.

The reflective tool has 27 questions and is divided into 3 sections. Questions in section 1 of tool deals with disciplinary cultures and positionality. In section 2, users can evaluate their learning outcomes, content, pedagogy and assessment. Section 3 explores the logistical and administration elements of shared modules. The tool is available online as a worksheet and in a condensed paper form. The online tool explains the implications of the areas probed by the questions for tutors and students learning. It also incorporates a scoring system that can be used to identify areas for enhancement.

Stage 3 – **Delivery and Engagement Tools** – We provide a set of practical interventions module leaders and tutors can use to

- prepare to deliver a shared module
- inform students about a shared module

- engage students and facilitate interaction between students

Informing the development of these tools are: insights gained from the research about the different benefits students derive from shared modules in terms of interaction; the need for module leaders to incorporate measures that recognize and cater for students with different disciplinary backgrounds in their preparation for teaching shared modules; the need to support students to make informed choices around shared modules through enhanced transparency; a need to manage students expectations.

6. Institutional Policies and Next Steps in Shared Modules design

The financial circumstances of higher education are challenging, and many institutions are looking to make efficiencies. The sharing of modules may be seen as a way to teach greater numbers of students with fewer staff.   The toolkit designed as part of this project has always accepted the reality of this situation, but we advocated that especially in the face of such pressures it is paramount to make careful and deliberate decisions about curriculum design.   This work has identified that attention to **transparency, interdisciplinarity, inclusivity and coordination** will enhance the design of curriculum for shared modules. While modularisation has dominated structures of higher education programmes, an increasing focus on programme design, including assessment has arisen in recent years. Good practice in curriculum design should view the programme holistically, but that can be challenging with the use of shared modules from different programmes or even departments. We intend the findings and outputs of this project to be helpful for colleagues to resist short-term change by making use of evidence and good practice. The findings and outputs will be relevant to a wide range of colleagues including module leaders, teaching teams, programme leaders, quality assurance professionals and academic developers

 A key area in which shared modules fits well with current trends around development of curriculum frameworks, is the standardisation of module and programme credits. Programmes naturally consist of separate modules, each with specific learning outcomes and assessments. The credit value of a module is based on the number of learning hours it requires is determined by the depth, demand, complexity of the learning. However, it is commonplace that schools, faculties and other administrative sub-divisions of universities have their own idiosyncratic programme structures and frameworks. Standardisation of these processes can be a vehicle for more inclusive and more evidence-based teaching practices (Kandiko-Howson & Kingsbury, 2023). Additionally, institutional alignments of credit-weighting will open the door for greater sharing of modules.

The organisation of programmes is a core component of the NSS and by extension an institution's reputation through league tables. A key challenge to designing interdisciplinary modules is ensuring they are appropriately situated in compatible administrative and quality assurance systems and processes. Equally, a significant challenge to an effective student experience for sharing modules is when students are faced with an alien administrative system from a different discipline. This project surfaces the experiences of both staff and students when faced with shared modules and provides practical recommendations of how to ameliorate any challenges. These recommendations would be more straight-forwardly implemented in an institutionally standardised curriculum framework and credit structure.

Exploring disciplinary identity adds to the body of literature on diversity and embedding inclusivity in HE teaching and learning. Future research projects can study how disciplinary identity interacts with other recognised characteristics of diversity and investigate the implications for providing quality education.

Kandiko Howson, C. and Kingsbury, M., 2023. Curriculum change as transformational learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *28*(8), pp.1847-1866.