

# Using blended learning to facilitate large room seminar provision in the era of TEF

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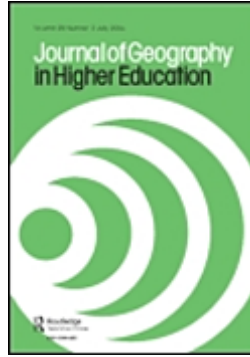
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**Using blended learning to facilitate large room seminar provision in the era of TEF: reflections from a year two cultural geography module**

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**Using blended learning to facilitate large room seminar provision in the era of TEF: reflections from a year two cultural geography module.**

For Peer Review Only

**Abstract**

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 has placed the practice and quality of teaching centre of the UK university agenda, with concerns around contact, delivery, research/teaching balance and facility support framing debates within institutions. Situating the implementation of blended learning on a year 2 cultural geography in the broader context of these discussions, this paper explores some of the challenges and opportunities this approach has in addressing some of these broader concerns, whilst improving student engagement and performance.

**TEF, Blended Learning, Cultural Geography, Research Intensive Teaching**

## Introduction

In 2016 the UK Government introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework, to address the perceived disparities between Research Intensive universities and more teaching focused institutions. This aims to capture student experience of learning following the introduction of increased fees in 2012, to promote teaching excellence across the sector and to place teaching on an equal footing with research (Hubble 2017). As the landscape of the neo-liberal university increasingly seeks to hold teaching and learning to greater account, and a context of increased corporate managerialism and planning enters institutions to monitor national and local initiatives (Gibbs et al 2008; Brew and Manatai 2013; Walkington et al 2017), academic departments need to create innovative ways to deliver high quality, research-focused, learning and teaching. As academics try to meet these challenges, along with pressures on institutional space and resources, new ways of placing the educational benefits to the student need to be sought (Brew 2003; Malcom 2013). Situating teaching in the context of the changing internal and external pressures faced by academics, this paper explores the role that blended learning offers in overcoming a number of challenges faced in delivering an innovative curriculum.

Over the last couple of decades there has been much debate covering the moves from lecturer-focused strategies for research knowledge delivery to the development of strategies to foster more interactive forms of research and enquiry that place the student at the centre of the learning experience (for a good overview see Brew and Manatai 2013; Wood and Su 2017). As universities aim to address the aspirations of the TEF and other excellence indicators such as the National Student Survey, there is an increased pressure on staff to increase student contact hours, whilst balancing other pressures around research performance and increasing student numbers. This often comes at a time when there is a lag in institutional investment in teaching facilities and learning support technology.

The use of digital learning environments over the past 20 years has often been viewed as a panacea to engage students with a more proactive style of learning, with the ability to record, store and replay lectures, linked with online materials and assessments allowing a wider breadth of access and

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3 a flexibility of interaction. Blended lectures have become an increasingly popular mechanism for  
4 adding 'value' to the student experience, by providing a learning mechanism and context that  
5 encourages deep learning strategies, and fostering small-group discussion. One aspect that is often  
6 absent in discussions is the potential to address underlying institutional constraints. In the current  
7 UK Higher Education landscape, with students paying high fees, increased attention is being placed  
8 on the support and provision students receive as educational consumers. However, institutions and  
9 staff alike need to meet these aspirations in the face of a disjuncture in capital investment in  
10 teaching space and educational technology. Taking the case study of a second-year Cultural  
11 Geography module, this paper explores the ways in which blended delivery offers opportunities and  
12 challenges - for both teaching staff and students alike - in addressing the problems timetabling  
13 restrictions and spatial constraints create in the face of demands for increased contact in the  
14 modern neo-liberal fee-paying university sector in the United Kingdom. It then opens this out to  
15 explore the impact this has on student engagement and performance (Healy 2005; Turner et al 2008;  
16 Cuthbert et al 2012; Spronken-Smith et al 2014)

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27 Improving student engagement with a subject is a familiar problem for lecturing staff, particularly  
28 when teaching a range of theoretical and conceptual ideas, which may at times appear disconnected  
29 from everyday experience. In a perfect world, students would act as independently motivated and  
30 engaged individuals, critically reflecting on, and applying a range of theoretical ideas and concepts  
31 themselves. However, experience has shown that students often need a range of support  
32 mechanisms to develop a deeper understanding of ideas, and provide confidence in their  
33 application. This paper reflects upon the experience of introducing a 'blended lecture' structure to  
34 the teaching of Cultural Geographies to a cohort of year 2 students at a UK university as a response  
35 to timetable and room-booking constraints. It outlines the methods of delivery and evaluates how  
36 this encourages deeper learning amongst students, whilst creating a feedback loop that allows for  
37 guided discussion and in-class debate. It will then evaluate the impact on student engagement and  
38 the influence on assessment outcomes. Finally, the paper reflects on the impacts of the changes in  
39 relation to staff teaching strategies, and how Blended Learning fits with calls for an increase in  
40 research intensive teaching.

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52 Blended learning has become a focus of much academic attention, as educational practitioners  
53 have explored new ways of engaging students and improving the quality of student performance (ref  
54 in here). By combining traditional methods of delivery, such as face-to-face instruction with support  
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3 from technological innovations - ranging from podcasts, through interactive online tests to online  
4 lectures and project work, new ways of facilitating student engagement, and challenging different  
5 pedagogical goals have been created. Often a mix of classroom work and self-guided study these  
6 approaches have been regarded as a way of fostering a culture of independent critical enquiry and  
7 peer-assisted learning amongst students (Hinterberger et al 2004; Moore and Gilmartin 2010). As  
8 new technology has developed over the past two decades, and universities have invested in  
9 interactive electronic learning environments, technology-mediated learning support at a number of  
10 levels has become a norm for most courses.  
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18 Much has been written in recent years about the impact that blended learning has had on student  
19 performance, highlighting the benefits that more flexible approaches to delivery have on student  
20 satisfaction, and a perceived improvement in feedback (Collopy and Arnold 2009; Mitchell and Forer  
21 2010; Owston et al 2006; Owston et al 2013). However, one issue that needs further investigation,  
22 and is often underplayed in the literature, is the way in which blended approaches to learning can  
23 facilitate ways of overcoming institutional constraints caused by increased student numbers, such as  
24 congested timetabling and a desire to reduce repeat teaching, something alluded to recently by  
25 Martin et al (2017) in the context of teaching in Australia. Further, although attention has been paid  
26 to concerns over the investment in a robust IT infrastructure (Moskal et al 2013), the disjuncture  
27 between capital investment and the time needed to construct modern, flexible learning spaces,  
28 allied to wider sectoral demands to introduce more high-quality research-intensive teaching, means  
29 that blended teaching is becoming an ever more important part of the lecturer's repertoire.  
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40 In practical terms, blended delivery provides a mechanism by which teaching staff can overcome  
41 institutional constraints by 'creating' more space in the timetable and making more proactive use of  
42 the available teaching space. However, in the context of the case outlined in this paper, this meant  
43 that the course team needed to carefully consider the impact that this would have on both the  
44 content of the material delivered and the ways in which a change in delivery could alter the dynamic  
45 of how the material was received. The most important decision, and the one that formed the  
46 foundation of the changes was pedagogical rather than practical: how could we increase the level  
47 and quality of student engagement with the material, and improve their critical thinking skills?  
48 Rather than a merely practical response, there needed to be a clear educational rationale to all the  
49 changes made.  
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3 The case study for this paper is the changes made to a long-standing second-year optional module  
4 in Cultural Geography, which provides students with a theoretical and thematic grounding in the  
5 sub-discipline. Delivered through a series of traditional lectures to a group of over 80 students, and  
6 assessed by examination, this module had consistently scored well in student module feedback for  
7 content and delivery. However, for the 2015/16 session a need to reconfigure the module as part of  
8 wider, ongoing curriculum reforms, presented an opportunity to address student feedback  
9 requesting an increase in seminar-style interaction. This presented a challenge, not for purely  
10 pedagogical reasons, but also from a practical point of view.  
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18 Like many large institutions there are a wide range of constraints that the academic has to work  
19 with. Firstly, timetabling often restricts the amount of available contact time available for each  
20 module, meaning that contact time is particularly at a premium with large groups. Secondly, there is  
21 a finite amount of teaching space that has not kept pace with the increase in students and increase  
22 of teaching contact hours. This space is often dated and not always suitable for small-group work,  
23 and the capital investment and the work needed to replace these is lengthy. This means that  
24 innovative ways of increasing contact needed to be sought. For the module under discussion it was  
25 decided to introduce 'blended lectures' to facilitate and reorient an increase in content. This  
26 reorientation also presented the possibility to introduce new formative opportunities to challenge  
27 and evaluate student understanding.  
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38 The decision to pre-record the lecture material was primarily a practical response to the  
39 institutional time pressures the course team experienced, from multiple directions. The university  
40 has a finite number of teaching slots, and thus increasing 'in-the-room' time is not an option.  
41 Likewise, the combined time pressures of teaching, research and administration means that any  
42 increase in student contact needs to be balanced out against other work commitments. Pre-recording  
43 the lectures could be spread out over the summer teaching recess, reducing its initial time impact.  
44 Once recorded this archived material could then be amended and altered as and when needed over  
45 future iterations of the module. It further allowed time for the team to prepare the material for the  
46 in-class sessions.  
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54 A key concern for the lecture team was managing the dynamics of small-group work in a large  
55 cohort and within the space of a large lecture room. In an ideal situation, there would be ample  
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3 time to see the cohort in small groups, in a room that enabled students to work in clusters over  
4 numerous sessions. However, reality rarely meets the ideal, and so the situation requires careful  
5 management. At the risk of the sessions becoming stilted, as the lecturer moves between groups, a  
6 focus for each discussion is needed to keep the students engaged. Likewise, regular moments to  
7 pause, comment or feedback to the larger group are needed. As Healey *et al* (1996, p. 168) note,  
8 'simply putting students in groups and telling them to work together does not automatically lead to  
9 these benefits [higher achievement, positive student relationships]. The learning situations have to  
10 be carefully structured'.  
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18 This module teaches a range of topics in Cultural Geography, from the sub-discipline's  
19 historiography, through to issues of landscape, memory, power, time, gender and modernity.  
20 Lectures that had previously been delivered in a traditional lecture theatre setting, and later  
21 provided as an online podcast, were replaced and in places re-written. The taught components of  
22 the module were pre-recorded ahead of the classroom sessions, taking the form of the lecturer  
23 speaking to the powerpoint slides. These were posted on the institution's VLE allowing the students  
24 to watch the material in advance. The module team expected the students to watch the lectures at  
25 a time convenient to them and to reflect on key ideas before engaging with the seminar material.  
26 This flexibility of engagement would allow students of varying abilities to engage with the content at  
27 their own pace. More importantly, blended lectures would do more than simply mix traditional and  
28 online content, but would encourage students to develop independent deep learning strategies to  
29 reinforce their understanding of the subject (Hinterberger *et al* 2004; Moore and Gilmartin 2010;  
30 Kanard 2013, Graham *et al* 2017). By providing all study material a minimum of 5 days in advance of  
31 the session, students were also afforded plenty of opportunity to engage with the module team  
32 during drop-in sessions if required.  
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45 In addition to the pre-recorded lectures, the students were also required to have read a related  
46 academic paper before the classroom session. The article provided the focus for a structured  
47 seminar replacing the conventional lecture with a 'flipped' format (Rowley and Green 2015). The  
48 first half of the seminar session required students, in small groups of 6 to 8 students, to consider a  
49 set of pre-set key questions raised by the paper. An informal discussion then followed with each  
50 group asked to report back to the wider cohort. This proved an effective delivery mechanism on a  
51 number of levels. Firstly, it allowed time for the lecturer to move between the groups to answer  
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3 queries and ask questions to challenge student understanding, providing instantaneous formative  
4 feedback. Secondly, it provided an extra level of formative feedback as the groups listened and  
5 responded to the other group's points.  
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9 In the second half of the classroom session, the key themes and concepts identified in the first half  
10 were then utilised to interpret a chosen case study, often a piece of video, which illustrated the  
11 lecture themes, again with structured questions and discussion. This has the benefit of reinforcing  
12 the student's understanding, allowing them to try applying theoretical positions to real life examples  
13 and discuss the understandings they may generate.  
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18 Although the result is the doubling of content delivered in the module, the benefits are wider than  
19 merely an increase in academic material. This was also a pedagogic response to allow students more  
20 time to engage with the lecture material. However, as a teaching team we need to make a number  
21 of decisions in advance about the ways in which we are going to deliver the in-class workshop  
22 material. Central to this were the techniques needed to overcome the restrictions placed upon us  
23 by the allocated teaching space, and ways in which small-group work could be fostered without the  
24 dynamic in the room becoming forced or stilted. Although some of this could be planned in  
25 advance, we needed to make sure that there was a certain amount of adaptability to cater for the  
26 nature of the students taught. In this case, we needed to adopt a delivery strategy that fostered  
27 small group work to a large cohort in a teaching space that was not spatially designed for such  
28 interaction. Although timetabling a space for a group of 80 students was not a problem, the quality  
29 and nature of the teaching spaces was an issue.  
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### 39 **Evaluation of the module: feedback forms; focus groups**

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41 To evaluate the impact of introducing a blended delivery format to the module and student's  
42 reactions to the work expectations three different ways we drew upon three different methods of  
43 feedback over two cycles of delivery:  
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- 49 • Firstly, we used the university's standard module feedback forms, to provide a comparative  
50 to the module before the implementation of blended lectures.  
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- Secondly, we issued students with an additional bespoke form at the same time which asked specific questions about the students' experience of using pre-recorded lectures, preparative material and of attending the workshops.
- Finally, follow-up focus groups were held by a neutral party after the examination was taken. Two groups – one that had attended 80%+ of workshops and one that had attended 20% or less- were then invited to discuss whether they felt their engagement had influenced their exam preparation.

By triangulating these different evaluations, we hoped to gain a greater depth of understanding about: how the students engaged with the change in delivery styles; the perceived increase in workload; the level of engagement with the wider course material. Further, the focus group aimed to provide a qualitative element to examine if there were any links between the level of engagement with the recordings, workshop attendance and exam performance.

In the first iteration of the revised module the allocated room was a traditional, single level lecture theatre with fixed benches and seating, which was full to capacity. This made putting students in to small groups difficult, and may well have discouraged students to attend all the sessions. As one respondent in the focus groups following the first iteration of delivery notes, '[the] setting was quite difficult with people sitting on tables and getting chairs, it hard to write notes', whilst another commented that the room was, 'Timetabled for a lecture...' and as such '...was awful for discussion... needing space for flipcharts and a roundtable format.'

In the second iteration of the module, the room allocated was an improvement, although again, had fixed desks, restricting the ability to easily put students in to small groups. This experience echoes that of Graham *et al* (2017), who reflecting upon lecture flipping at an Australian university argue that, '...teaching spaces appropriate to your class size, course materials and learners' needs is one of the most critical pragmatic considerations for a flipped classroom approach...', but are the hardest to obtain due a dominance in most institutions of traditional teaching spaces, and timetable competition to access the more flexible spaces available.

Pedagogically, whilst providing a structured depth of engagement with key concepts, the blended method of delivery importantly provided students with a safe, non-judgemental environment where they could try out ideas with their peers via face-to-face interaction in small groups, and more

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3 formally through presenting to the wider group. This allowed them to build confidence in their  
4 abilities, and as a consequence a number of students commented that they began to make  
5 connections between themes and topics across the module, producing a deep level of  
6 understanding. As the student feedback for the second iteration of teaching showed, 'The fact the  
7 lectures and reading had to be done in preparation for the workshop meant that the time within the  
8 workshop could be used to gain a broader understanding of the topic,' whilst another added that the  
9 format 'Gave a wider understanding of the topic and now feel more prepared for the exam, being  
10 able to draw upon wider material and ideas.' This supports Brook and Beauchamp's (2013, p. 20)  
11 assertion that blended learning, 'potentially offers many advantages for both students and lecturers  
12 as it provides greater flexibility and responsiveness, can overcome limitations of time and space, and  
13 can support novel ways to learn...'

### 22 **Aspiration**

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27 Following the insights of Kanard (2013), who provides a comprehensive overview of the use and  
28 impact of recorded lectures, it was hoped that use of a blended delivery would improve the cohort's  
29 overall exam performance, due to the students being more secure in their abilities to deploy their  
30 critical understanding of the subject matter. Notwithstanding, blended delivery also presented  
31 challenges and raised a number of pedagogical concerns. A key concern with making the lectures  
32 available in advance was an anticipated decline in attendance by those who did not perceive value in  
33 attending the seminar sessions or felt that the pre-recorded lectures could be viewed at a later date  
34 as part of exam preparation. Further, there was a concern that some students would over-rely on  
35 the recordings rather than engaging with the breadth of module material. These concerns were  
36 borne out at times by the level of attendance. In the first year of implementing blended delivery the  
37 module had 80 students registered, but the average attendance for the seminar sessions was in the  
38 mid-20s. In its second year of delivery, the cohort was again around 80, but the average attendance  
39 was around the mid-40s. Although, this could be in part explained by an unpopular early morning  
40 slot, on a day after a regular university student social evening, the level of attendance still surprised  
41 the module team, there were other reasons for non-attendance. This matches the experience of a  
42 number of studies, which recorded a decline in attendance compared to live sessions (Brook and  
43 Beauchamp 2015; Kanard 2013).

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3 Redesigning course material to try to circumvent institutional constraints, however, can have  
4 unintended impacts elsewhere, especially around some of the 'softer', qualitative elements of  
5 teaching. A previously unconsidered issue that emerged after the first iteration of the redesigned  
6 module was a change in the delivery dynamics of the lectures. As the course material was prepared  
7 in advance of the session, by staff members talking to the PowerPoint slides in their offices, it was  
8 found that the vitality and performative qualities engendered by presenting to a room of students  
9 were diminished. A lack of spontaneity and immediate visual feedback when gauging understanding  
10 may have made the delivery seem dry to some. Although students were able to pause, rewind and  
11 revisit things that they may not have fully understood, this may have detracted from the student's  
12 engagement with the recordings and wider material. This was reflected in student feedback that...

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22 Another impact, that has been noted elsewhere, is the perceived increase in work from the student.  
23 This can be seen in both a positive and negative light in the feedback. For some, the need to prepare  
24 ahead of the workshop sessions provided an incentive to engage with the material in way that they  
25 may not have done in other, lecture-based modules. As one student noted the format, 'Forces us to  
26 engage with the reading outside of the lectures', whilst another noted that under a conventional  
27 lecture structure they would be '...be less motivated to carry out further reading and engage less  
28 with the course content.' A sentiment echoed in a number of responses. However, others found  
29 the level of work required in preparation a challenge, and a detriment to attendance. In one focus  
30 group, a student remarked that it was sometimes '...hard to get it all done (reading and listening to  
31 lectures) especially when expected to engage, so if you haven't done the work you are really unlikely  
32 to go.' This is echoed by another student who remarked that, 'If you haven't done reading no point  
33 being there.'

#### 44 **Is there a connection between engagement and performance?**

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46 It is always difficult to evaluate the impact of a teaching intervention after a short period of  
47 implementation. However, one clear measure of the impact of blended lectures can be seen in the  
48 metric examination of exam performance. The institutional VLE used allows the instructor to  
49 examine a range of statistics as to who accesses the online lectures, when, how often they do so,  
50 and for how long. It also enabled the team to observe engagement during the semester's teaching  
51 period, and the two week period immediately before the exam to give a broad sense of when and  
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3 how students accessed the material (cf. Owston *et al.*, 2013). This was then compared with student  
4 responses in a focus group and feedback form specifically designed to address the blended delivery.  
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### 8 9 Observations

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11 For both iterations of the delivery we identified the 20 students who engaged most fully with the  
12 lecture videos by the number of minutes watched at the end of S2. Out of these students, those  
13 that attended 80% or more of the seminar sessions were noted (12 out of 20 in year 1; 25 out of 50  
14 in year 2). The exam performance of each cohort was then compared to attendance of the  
15 workshop sessions.  
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22 More than two thirds of those that watched the pre-recorded lectures for the longest amount of  
23 time, were also amongst the most regular attendees of the seminar sessions. For both iterations of  
24 the module, nearly all these students scored 66% and above for each exam answer, with half the  
25 students scoring marks greater than 70% on at least one question. This suggests that having time to  
26 engage with and reflect upon the lecture, along with developing a deeper level of engagement  
27 through the readings, discussions and worked examples gave the students greater opportunity to  
28 become more critically engaged in the subject matter. In contrast to this, the outcomes for those  
29 that only engaged in watching the online videos, and who attended 20% or less of seminars was very  
30 different. The average mark was 58% for those in the first year of delivery. This reflects a lower  
31 depth of critical engagement with the course material. For some, their engagement with the  
32 recorded material was in the three-week period immediately before the exam. This raises an issue  
33 that is difficult to tease out from the data, whether this merely indicates that the more engaged  
34 students are by their nature those that perform better, reinforcing their higher scores, and that  
35 those less engaged are the opposite? However, a rough metric evaluation matches the comments  
36 made by students made in the focus groups following the exam. For those that attended most  
37 sessions, they noted that, '...although it felt like a lot of work, it was worth it, and was a massive  
38 advantage going into the exam.' One student observed that 'it made it easier to move beyond the  
39 lecture material in the exam' enabling them to engage with the exam questions in a more critical  
40 and reflective manner.  
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<b>Positive Comments</b>	<b>Negative Comments</b>
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<b>How much of the course content did you engage with?</b>	
'Did all the wider reading and watched the videos, but the seminars were a bit scary.'	'I listened to all the lectures, but not all the way through.'
'All of it and felt the seminars helped challenge your ideas.'	Hard to get it all done (reading and listening to language) especially when expected to engage so if haven't done work you really unlikely to go.
<b>How do the pre-recorded lectures rate against attending a live lecture?</b>	
'Easier to make comprehensive notes'	'I get easily distracted at home and often forgot to watch the lectures'
'Panopto allowed you to focus, you could pause and make notes'	'Less motivating'
<b>What aspects of the seminars did you like?</b>	
'Makes you feel like you are discussing ideas properly'	'The way people reported back was at times awkward and repetitive'
'You had a better interaction with the staff and it forces you to engage with the ideas.'	
'talking and hearing – wider sense of what's being said – not just what's being lectured.'	
<b>How Useful were the workshops for developing your understanding?</b>	
'...it builds on the lecture material and due to talking about it... you remember it more.'	'If you hadn't done the work it was hard to engage'
'It brings more purpose to the lecture...'	
'alternative interpretations of ideas/readings could be explored'	

Table 1: Examples of student responses and comments.

As seen in the comments outlined in table 1 the pre-recorded lectures do not necessarily fit with all students' ways of learning. For some the formality of a traditional lecture session allows them to focus and restricts distraction, finding that they lacked motivation or adequate time management skills to engage with the material sufficiently in their own time. However, for others watching the lectures at home, this had the opposite effect. Many appreciated the ability to stop, rewind or revisit elements of the lectures to reflect on key themes. For others, it had the positive effect of

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3 encouraging a higher level of engagement. A common view was as follows, 'I would have only come  
4 to the lectures and probably not done any reading.'  
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9 **Reflections on practice and impact on learning and assessment performance. TEF context of**  
10 **research intensive teaching.**  
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15 Our observations over two years of using blended delivery on this module, along with student  
16 comments and feedback, show a set of positives can be taken from this approach to organising  
17 teaching. This must be tempered, however, with improvements in delivery and expectation  
18 management going forward. There is a certain level of disjuncture between students wanting an  
19 increase in content, whilst simultaneously not wanting an increase in personal workload. This is in  
20 part due to the perception of lectures as 'proper' contact, where material, which they are paying for  
21 with their fees, is delivered to them. This requires an engagement with students from the start of  
22 the degree programme to elucidate work expectations, and a to develop a clear understanding of  
23 active learning practices.  
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33 With a wider range of pressures on student time, such as balancing study and work, students like  
34 the flexibility of access to the pre-recorded lectures on Canvas, allowing them to listen and make  
35 notes at their own pace. For those attending the seminars regularly, this enabled them to be  
36 proactive in targeting reading around the topic areas. A significant number, however, preferred the  
37 spontaneity of traditional face-to face lectures and only really engaged with the recordings as exams  
38 approached. As a theoretically driven course, the seminars encouraged the students to explore and  
39 debate ideas, and apply these to practical examples. For those that regularly attended, this fostered  
40 debate and wider thought. However, for many the prospect of speaking in front of other students  
41 was onerous and even intimidating. This had the consequence of a number of students missing the  
42 chance to synthesise and apply material to a range of material. Debate and discussion in the flipped  
43 sessions allowed the students to reflect on the ideas of others and to receive constant feedback and  
44 challenge from staff. These deeper, critically develop and more nuanced understandings were those  
45 that we sought in the examinations.  
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56 **Conclusion**  
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3 In the UK University sector, the role and nature of teaching is increasingly becoming a focus of  
4 Government attention. On the back of the Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework  
5 (REF) (2016), a greater emphasis is being placed on the need to link the impact of research to that of  
6 teaching, stressing the intertwined nature of the two processes. A key recommendation of the  
7 report is a call for universities to align the REF and the TEF, emphasising that ‘...research leading to  
8 major impacts on curricula and /or pedagogy within or across disciplines should be included’ (2016,  
9 p. 23). As universities engage with the remit of the Teaching Excellence Framework, they are  
10 beginning a process of re-evaluating their pedagogical strategies in line with an increasing focus on  
11 Research Intensive Teaching. As a central tenet of the next iterations of the process (TEF 3 and 4)  
12 greater focus will be placed on individual academic departments to emphasise how they embed  
13 critical research-informed and research-based pedagogies as part of a wider strategy to develop  
14 Research Intensive Teaching focused curricula.  
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25 Pressure on developing increased points of Research Intensive Teaching, from an institutional point  
26 of view, means that staff need to adopt innovative methods to deliver high quality academic  
27 content. Staff and senior managers alike need to acknowledge the challenges this poses in the face  
28 of institutional lags regarding investment in and the building or refurbishment of suitable flexible  
29 spaces, the implementation of appropriate and robust teaching technologies and pressures on  
30 timetabling caused by both increased content and large groups at key stages of the curriculum. The  
31 ability of change how a module is delivered is a crucial component in meeting these new demands.  
32 This paper illustrates the pragmatism needed to meet these demands, whilst aiming to produce  
33 motivated, critically engaged learners, able to fulfil the role of undergraduate researchers. Blended  
34 delivery applied and linked to research focused applications allows one way to do this. However,  
35 this comes with some caveats. Developing new delivery strategies takes additional time to create,  
36 and as our experience has shown, will take a number of iterations to identify best practice and  
37 resolve problems. Further, innovating across multiple modules needs careful thought at the  
38 curriculum level to maintain a coherent teaching and assessment strategy.  
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**Using blended learning in place of formal lecture provision to overcome institutional constraints:  
reflections from a year two cultural geography module.**

For Peer Review Only

**Abstract**

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 has placed the practice and quality of teaching centre of the UK university agenda, with concerns around contact, delivery, research/teaching balance and facility support framing debates within institutions. Situating the implementation of blended learning on a year 2 cultural geography in the broader context of these discussions, this paper explores some of the challenges and opportunities this approach has in addressing some of these broader concerns, whilst improving student engagement and performance. The paper argues that university teaching staff need to develop innovative and pragmatic approaches in delivering research intensive teaching and learning, whilst senior managers need to acknowledge that staff need time to create and refine new curricula in relation to lags in investment in infrastructure.

**TEF, Blended Learning, Cultural Geography, Research Intensive Teaching**

## Introduction

Following the introduction of increased fees in the UK in 2012 there has been a concern to capture student experience of learning across a diverse sector and to promote teaching excellence across the sector to place teaching on an equal footing with research (Hubble 2017). In 2016 the UK Government introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework, to address the perceived disparities in student engagement between Research Intensive universities and more teaching focused institutions. As the landscape of the neo-liberal university increasingly seeks to hold teaching and learning to greater account, and a context of increased corporate managerialism and planning enters institutions to monitor national and local initiatives (Gibbs et al 2008; Brew and Manatai 2013; Walkington et al 2017), academic departments are responding in part by exploring innovative ways to deliver high quality, research-focused, learning and teaching. As academics try to meet these challenges, along with pressures on institutional space and resources, new ways of placing the educational benefits to the student need to be sought (Brew 2003; Malcom 2013). Situating teaching in the context of the changing internal and external pressures faced by academics in a Russell Group institution, this paper explores the role that blended learning offers in overcoming a number of institutional challenges, such as room structure and timetabling pressures, faced in delivering an innovative curriculum that aspires to use research-led framing to increase student engagement and develop higher level learning.

Over the last couple of decades there has been much debate covering the moves from lecturer-focused strategies for research knowledge delivery to the development of strategies to foster more interactive forms of research and enquiry that place the student at the centre of the learning experience (for a good overview see Brew and Manatai 2013; Wood and Su 2017). This trend has been augmented by the TEF initiative as universities aim to address the schemes aspirations as well as other excellence indicators such as the National Student Survey and respond to the changing funding realities of the HE sector. In some Russell Group universities there is heightened pressure on staff to increase student contact hours, whilst balancing other pressures around research performance and increasing student numbers. This often comes at a time when there is a lag in institutional investment in teaching facilities and learning support technology.

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3 An issue that needs further investigation, is the way in which blended approaches to learning can  
4 provide innovative opportunities to surmount institutional constraints. Taking the case study of a  
5 second-year Cultural Geography module, this paper explores the ways in which blended delivery  
6 offers opportunities and challenges - for both teaching staff and students alike - in addressing the  
7 problems of timetabling restrictions and spatial constraints created in the face of demands for  
8 increased contact in the modern neo-liberal fee-paying university sector in the United Kingdom. It  
9 then opens this out to explore the impact this has on student engagement and performance (Healy  
10 2005; Turner et al 2008; Cuthbert et al 2012; Spronken-Smith et al 2014)  
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18 The use of digital learning environments over the past 20 years has often been viewed as a panacea  
19 to engage students with a more proactive style of learning, with the ability to record, store and  
20 replay lectures, linked with online materials and assessments allowing a wider breadth of access and  
21 a flexibility of interaction. Blended lectures have become an increasingly popular mechanism for  
22 adding 'value' to the student experience, by providing a learning mechanism and context that  
23 encourages deep learning strategies, and fosters small-group discussion. One aspect that is often  
24 absent in discussions is the potential to address underlying institutional constraints. In the current  
25 UK Higher Education landscape, with students paying high fees, increased attention is being placed  
26 on the support and provision students receive as educational consumers. However, institutions and  
27 staff alike need to meet these aspirations in the face of a disjuncture in capital investment in  
28 teaching space and educational technology.  
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38 Improving student engagement with a subject is a familiar problem for lecturing staff, particularly  
39 when teaching a range of theoretical and conceptual ideas, which may at times appear disconnected  
40 from everyday experience. In a perfect world, students would act as independently motivated and  
41 engaged individuals, critically reflecting on, and applying a range of theoretical ideas and concepts  
42 themselves. However, experience has shown that students often need a range of support  
43 mechanisms to develop a deeper understanding of ideas, and provide confidence in their  
44 application. This paper is structured as follows: a reflection upon the experience of introducing a  
45 'blended lecture' structure to the teaching of Cultural Geographies to a cohort of year 2 students at  
46 a UK university as a response to timetable and room-booking constraints. It then outlines the  
47 methods of delivery and evaluates how this encourages deeper learning amongst students, whilst  
48 creating a feedback loop that allows for guided discussion and in-class debate. It will then evaluate  
49 the impact on student engagement and the influence on assessment outcomes. Finally, the paper  
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3 reflects on the impacts of the changes in relation to staff teaching strategies, and how Blended  
4 Learning fits with calls for an increase in research intensive teaching.  
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### 8 9 **Literature review**

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14 Blended learning has become a focus of much academic attention, as educational practitioners have  
15 explored new ways of engaging students and improving the quality of student performance  
16 (Hinterberger 2004). By combining traditional methods of delivery, such as face-to-face instruction  
17 with support from technological innovations - ranging from podcasts, through interactive online  
18 tests to online lectures and project work, new ways of facilitating student engagement, and  
19 challenging different pedagogical goals have been created. Often a mix of classroom work and self-  
20 guided study these approaches have been regarded as a way of fostering a culture of independent  
21 critical enquiry and peer-assisted learning amongst students (Hinterberger et al 2004; Moore and  
22 Gilmartin 2010). As new technology has developed over the past two decades, and universities have  
23 invested in interactive electronic learning environments, technology-mediated learning support at a  
24 number of levels has become a norm for most courses.  
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34 Much has been written in recent years about the impact that blended learning has had on student  
35 performance, highlighting the benefits that more flexible approaches to delivery have on student  
36 satisfaction, and a perceived improvement in feedback (Collopy and Arnold 2009; Mitchell and Forer  
37 2010; Owston et al 2006; Owston et al 2013). However, one issue that needs further investigation,  
38 and is often underplayed in the literature, is the way in which blended approaches to learning can  
39 facilitate ways of overcoming institutional constraints caused by increased student numbers, such as  
40 congested timetabling and a desire to reduce repeat teaching, something alluded to recently by  
41 Martin et al (2017) in the context of teaching in Australia. Further, although attention has been paid  
42 to concerns over the investment in a robust IT infrastructure (Moskal et al 2013), the disjuncture  
43 between capital investment and the time needed to construct modern, flexible learning spaces,  
44 allied to wider sectoral demands to introduce more high-quality research-intensive teaching, means  
45 that blended teaching is becoming an ever more important part of the lecturer's repertoire.  
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55 In practical terms, blended delivery provides a mechanism by which teaching staff can overcome  
56 institutional constraints by 'creating' more space in the timetable and making more proactive use of  
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3 the available teaching space. However, in the context of the case outlined in this paper, this meant  
4 that the course team needed to carefully consider the impact that this would have on both the  
5 content of the material delivered and the ways in which a change in delivery could alter the dynamic  
6 of how the material was received. The most important decision, and the one that formed the  
7 foundation of the changes was pedagogical rather than practical: how could we increase the level  
8 and quality of student engagement with the material, and improve their critical thinking skills?  
9 Rather than a merely practical response, there needed to be a clear educational rationale to all the  
10 changes made.  
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### 18 **Case Study: A year 2 Optional Module on Cultural Geography**

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22 The case study for this paper concerns the changes made to a long-standing second-year optional  
23 module in Cultural Geography, which aims to provide students with a theoretical and thematic  
24 grounding in the sub-discipline. This 10 credit worth of module forms part of a suite of year 2  
25 optional modules open to students taking B.A. and B.Sc. degrees in Geography at a UK redbrick  
26 university. This module was originally delivered by a team of two experienced fulltime lecturers over  
27 an 11 week semester through a series of traditional, 2 hour lectures to a group of over 80 students.  
28 It is assessed by examination, and the module had consistently scored well in student module  
29 feedback for content and delivery. However, for the 2015/16 session there was a need to  
30 reconfigure the module as part of wider, ongoing curriculum reforms and changes to module contact  
31 time implemented by the university. This afforded an opportunity to address both past student  
32 feedback requesting an increase in seminar-style interaction, and to provide wider opportunities for  
33 formative feedback. This presented, however, a challenge, not for purely pedagogical reasons, but  
34 also from a practical point of view.  
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46 Like many research-intensive institutions there are a wide range of constraints that the academic  
47 has to work with. Firstly, timetabling often restricts the amount of available time available for each  
48 module, meaning that contact time is particularly at a premium. Secondly, there is a finite amount  
49 of teaching space, which has not kept pace with the increase in students and increase of teaching  
50 contact hours. This space is often dated, initially constructed in the post-war era of university  
51 expansion, and not always suitable for small-group work, and the capital investment and the work  
52 needed to replace it is lengthy. This means that innovative ways of increasing contact needed to be  
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3 sought. For the module under discussion it was decided to introduce 'blended lectures' to facilitate  
4 and reorient an increase in content. We define 'blended lectures' as a mix of pre-recorded lectures  
5 supported with powerpoint slides, the guided reading of key papers, supported with in-class  
6 discussion and the use of a workshop session in which ideas and concepts are applied to a case  
7 study. In practice, this required module staff to pre-record  $n$  lectures/upload these lectures with  
8 new course seminar materials, etc., etc. This reorientation also presented the possibility to  
9 introduce new formative opportunities to challenge and evaluate student understanding.  
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17 The decision to pre-record the lecture material was primarily a practical response to the  
18 institutional time pressures the course team experienced, from multiple directions. The university  
19 has a finite number of teaching slots, and thus increasing 'in-the-room' time is not an option.  
20 Likewise, the combined time pressures of teaching, research and administration means that any  
21 increase in student contact needs to be balanced out against other work commitments. Pre-  
22 recording the lectures could be spread out over the summer teaching recess, reducing its initial time  
23 impact. Once recorded this archived material could then be amended and altered as and when  
24 needed over future iterations of the module. It further allowed time for the team to prepare the  
25 material for the in-class sessions.  
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33 A key concern for the lecture team was managing the dynamics of small-group work in a large  
34 cohort and within the space of a traditional lecture room. In an ideal situation, there would be  
35 ample time to see the cohort in small groups, in a room that enabled students to work in clusters  
36 over numerous sessions. However, reality rarely meets the ideal, and so the situation requires  
37 careful management. At the risk of the sessions becoming stilted, as the lecturer moves between  
38 groups, a focus for each discussion is needed to keep the students engaged. Likewise, regular  
39 moments to pause, comment or feedback to the larger group are needed. As Healey *et al* (1996, p.  
40 168) note, 'simply putting students in groups and telling them to work together does not  
41 automatically lead to these benefits [higher achievement, positive student relationships]. The  
42 learning situations have to be carefully structured'.  
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52 This module teaches a range of topics in Cultural Geography, from the sub-discipline's  
53 historiography, through to issues of landscape, memory, power, time, gender and modernity.  
54 Lectures that had previously been delivered in a traditional lecture theatre setting, and later  
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3 provided as an online podcast, were replaced and in places re-written. The taught components of  
4 the module were pre-recorded ahead of the classroom sessions, taking the form of the lecturer  
5 speaking to the powerpoint slides. These were in the format of a traditional lecture, with a pause in  
6 content every 20 minutes. However, due to the lack of an audience feedback dynamic, these were  
7 on average a half hour shorter than a traditional 2 hour face-to-face session. The recordings and  
8 powerpoint slides were posted on the institution's VLE, allowing the students to watch and rewatch  
9 the material in advance. The module team expected the students to watch the lectures at a time  
10 convenient to them and to reflect on key ideas before engaging with the seminar material. This  
11 flexibility of engagement would allow students of varying abilities to engage with the content at  
12 their own pace, and afford the opportunity to revisit material as many times as they like. More  
13 importantly, blended lectures would do more than simply mix traditional and online content, but  
14 would encourage students to develop independent deep learning strategies to reinforce their  
15 understanding of the subject (Hinterberger *et al* 2004; Moore and Gilmartin 2010; Kanard 2013,  
16 Graham *et al* 2017). By providing all study material a minimum of 5 days in advance of the session,  
17 students were also afforded plenty of opportunity to engage with the module team during drop-in  
18 sessions if required.  
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31 In addition to the pre-recorded lectures, the students were also required to have read a related  
32 academic paper before the classroom session. The article provided the focus for a structured  
33 seminar replacing the conventional lecture with a 'flipped' format (Rowley and Green 2015). The  
34 first half of the seminar session required students, in small groups of 6 to 8 students, to consider a  
35 set of pre-set key questions raised by the paper. An informal discussion then followed with each  
36 group asked to report back to the wider cohort. This proved an effective delivery mechanism on a  
37 number of levels. Firstly, it allowed time for the lecturer to move between the groups to answer  
38 queries and ask questions to challenge student understanding, providing instantaneous formative  
39 feedback. Secondly, it provided an extra level of formative feedback as the groups listened and  
40 responded to the other group's points.  
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50 In the second half of the classroom session, the key themes and concepts identified in the first half  
51 were then utilised to interpret a chosen case study, often a piece of video, which illustrated the  
52 lecture themes, again with structured questions and discussion. This has the benefit of reinforcing  
53 the student's understanding, allowing them to try applying theoretical positions to real life examples  
54 and discuss the understandings they may generate.  
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4 Although the result is the doubling of content delivered in the module, the benefits are wider than  
5 merely an increase in academic material. This was also a pedagogic response to allow students more  
6 time to engage with the lecture material, and to allow the student to develop their critical thinking  
7 skills. However, as a teaching team we need to make a number of decisions in advance about the  
8 ways in which we are going to deliver the in-class workshop material. Central to this were the  
9 techniques needed to overcome the restrictions placed upon us by the allocated teaching space, and  
10 ways in which small-group work could be fostered without the dynamic in the room becoming  
11 forced or stilted. Although some of this could be planned, we needed to make sure that there was a  
12 certain amount of adaptability to cater for the nature of the students taught. In this case, we  
13 needed to adopt a delivery strategy that fostered small group work in a teaching space that was not  
14 spatially designed for such interaction. Although timetabling a space for a group of 80 students was  
15 not a problem, the quality and nature of the teaching spaces was an issue.  
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#### 25 **Evaluation of the module: feedback forms; focus groups**

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27 To evaluate the impact of introducing a blended delivery format to the module and student's  
28 reactions to the work expectations three different ways we drew upon three different methods of  
29 feedback over two cycles of delivery:  
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- 35 • Firstly, we used the university's standard module feedback forms. This had been used in  
36 past iterations of the module before the delivery change and would provide a comparative  
37 to the module before the implementation of blended lectures.  
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- 40 • Secondly, we issued students with an additional bespoke form at the same time which asked  
41 specific questions about the students' experience of using pre-recorded lectures,  
42 preparative material and of attending the workshops.  
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- 45 • Finally, follow-up focus groups were held by a neutral party after the examination was  
46 taken. The cohort was invited to participate in focus group sessions to discuss the new  
47 delivery format. From the volunteers two groups were created – one that had attended  
48 80%+ of workshops and one that had attended 20% or less- which were then invited to  
49 discuss whether they felt their engagement had influenced their exam preparation. Each  
50 session lasted an hour, and allowed students to reflect on the impact the blended format  
51 had had on their performance post exam.  
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5 By triangulating these different evaluations, we hoped to gain a greater depth of understanding  
6 about: how the students engaged with the change in delivery styles; the perceived increase in  
7 workload; the level of engagement with the wider course material. Further, the focus group aimed  
8 to provide a qualitative element to examine if there were any links between the level of engagement  
9 with the recordings, workshop attendance and exam performance.  
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15 In the first iteration of the revised module the allocated room was a traditional, single level lecture  
16 theatre with fixed benches and seating, which was full to capacity. This made putting students in to  
17 small groups difficult, and may well have discouraged students to attend all the sessions. As one  
18 respondent in the focus groups following the first iteration of delivery notes, '[the] setting was quite  
19 difficult with people sitting on tables and getting chairs, it was hard to write notes', whilst another  
20 commented that the room was, 'Timetabled for a lecture...' and as such '...was awful for discussion...  
21 needing space for flipcharts and a roundtable format.'  
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29 In the second iteration of the module, the room allocated was an improvement, although again,  
30 had fixed desks, restricting the ability to easily put students in to small groups. This experience  
31 echoes that of Graham *et al* (2017), who reflecting upon lecture flipping at an Australian university  
32 argue that, '...teaching spaces appropriate to your class size, course materials and learners' needs is  
33 one of the most critical pragmatic considerations for a flipped classroom approach...', but are the  
34 hardest to obtain due a dominance in most institutions of traditional teaching spaces, and timetable  
35 competition to access the more flexible spaces available.  
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41 Pedagogically, whilst providing a structured depth of engagement with key concepts, the blended  
42 method of delivery importantly provided students with a safe, non-judgemental environment where  
43 they could try out ideas with their peers via face-to-face interaction in small groups, and more  
44 formally through presenting to the wider group. This allowed them to build confidence in their  
45 abilities, and as a consequence a number of students commented that they began to make  
46 connections between themes and topics across the module, producing a deep level of  
47 understanding. In the original lecture-based format for the module, students in-class performance  
48 was predominantly restricted to the group being asked to respond to questions from the lecturer  
49 during the lecture itself. This was either met with reticence, engaged with by a small cadre of  
50 confident students or relied on the lecturer selecting respondents at random - none of which was  
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3 satisfactory. The blended format provided a less confrontational arena that allowed a more diverse  
4 range of students with different levels of confidence to discuss and debate ideas. In the first  
5 iteration of teaching we asked groups to present feedback to the rest of the group formally from the  
6 front of the room. This was unpopular, as one focus group respondent noted, 'some people didn't  
7 like it and felt thrust up to the front'. As the module developed a more informal system of groups  
8 feeding back from the floor developed, which garnered more positive reactions. Feedback from the  
9 second iteration highlighted how the '...discussion brought to light ideas that I previously would not  
10 have thought of', whilst another student noted that the sessions were '...extremely helpful both as  
11 motivation to engage in wider reading and a chance to discuss things to get different perspectives  
12 and a greater understanding'.  
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21 The change in dynamic that required students to prepare material in advance, rather than engage  
22 with it post-lecture meant that students became increasingly confident with the material. As the  
23 student feedback for the second iteration of teaching showed, 'The fact the lectures and reading had  
24 to be done in preparation for the workshop meant that the time within the workshop could be used  
25 to gain a broader understanding of the topic,' whilst another added that the format 'Gave a wider  
26 understanding of the topic and now feel more prepared for the exam, being able to draw upon  
27 wider material and ideas.' This supports Brook and Beauchamp's (2013, p. 20) assertion that  
28 blended learning, 'potentially offers many advantages for both students and lecturers as it provides  
29 greater flexibility and responsiveness, can overcome limitations of time and space, and can support  
30 novel ways to learn...'  
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### 39 **Aspiration**

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44 Following the insights of Kanard (2013), who provides a comprehensive overview of the use and  
45 impact of recorded lectures, it was hoped that use of a blended delivery would improve the cohort's  
46 overall exam performance, due to the students being more secure in their abilities to deploy their  
47 critical understanding of the subject matter. Notwithstanding, blended delivery also presented  
48 challenges and raised a number of pedagogical concerns. A key concern with making the lectures  
49 available in advance was an anticipated decline in attendance by those who did not perceive value in  
50 attending the seminar sessions or felt that the pre-recorded lectures could be viewed at a later date  
51 as part of exam preparation. All optional modules on this degree programme do not stipulate that  
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3 attendance is compulsory, although there are a few points during the semester when all courses  
4 undertake compulsory attendance monitoring. Beyond this the module team believed that the  
5 students needed to take personal responsibility for their engagement with course sessions and  
6 materials. Even with this in mind, there was a concern that some students would over-rely on the  
7 recordings rather than engaging with the breadth of module material. These concerns were borne  
8 out at times by the level of attendance. In the first year of implementing blended delivery the  
9 module had 80 students registered, but the average attendance for the seminar sessions was in the  
10 mid-20s. In its second year of delivery, the cohort was again around 80, but the average attendance  
11 was around the mid-40s. Although, this could be in part explained by an unpopular early morning  
12 slot, on a day after a regular university student social evening, the level of attendance still surprised  
13 the module team, there were other reasons for non-attendance. However, this matches the  
14 experience of a number of studies, which recorded a decline in attendance compared to live sessions  
15 (Brook and Beauchamp 2015; Kanard 2013). It does raise issues going forward about the nature of  
16 module evaluation at both a course level, and how this fits into the wider evaluation context of both  
17 the National Student Survey (NSS) and a subject level TEF, with a perceived tension between  
18 traditional lectures seen as 'value for money' and broadening of online material to support  
19 innovative delivery.  
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33 Redesigning course material to try to circumvent institutional constraints, however, can have  
34 unintended impacts elsewhere, especially around some of the 'softer', qualitative elements of  
35 teaching. A previously unconsidered issue that emerged after the first iteration of the redesigned  
36 module was a change in the delivery dynamics of the lectures. As the course material was prepared  
37 in advance of the session, by staff members talking to the PowerPoint slides in their offices, it was  
38 found that the vitality and performative qualities engendered by presenting to a room of students  
39 were diminished. A lack of spontaneity and immediate visual feedback when gauging understanding  
40 may have made the delivery seem dry to some. Although students were able to pause, rewind and  
41 revisit things that they may not have fully understood, this may have detracted from the student's  
42 engagement with the recordings and wider material.  
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52 Another impact, is the perceived increase in work from the student. This can be seen in both a  
53 positive and negative light in the feedback. For some, the need to prepare ahead of the workshop  
54 sessions provided an incentive to engage with the material in way that they may not have done in  
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3 other, lecture-based modules. As one student noted the format, 'Forces us to engage with the  
4 reading outside of the lectures', whilst another noted that under a conventional lecture structure  
5 they would be '...be less motivated to carry out further reading and engage less with the course  
6 content.' A sentiment echoed in a number of responses. However, others found the level of work  
7 required in preparation a challenge, and a detriment to attendance. In one focus group, a student  
8 remarked that it was sometimes '...hard to get it all done (reading and listening to lectures)  
9 especially when expected to engage, so if you haven't done the work you are really unlikely to go.'  
10 This is echoed by another student who remarked that, 'If you haven't done reading no point being  
11 there.'

### 20 **Is there a connection between engagement and performance?**

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22 It is always difficult to evaluate the impact of a teaching intervention after a short period of  
23 implementation. However, one clear measure of the impact of blended lectures can be seen in the  
24 metric examination of exam performance. The institutional VLE used allows the instructor to  
25 examine a range of statistics as to who accesses the online lectures, when, how often they do so,  
26 and for how long. It also enabled the team to observe engagement during the semester's teaching  
27 period, and the two week period immediately before the exam to give a broad sense of when and  
28 how students accessed the material (cf. Owston *et al.*, 2013). This was then compared with student  
29 responses in a focus group and feedback form specifically designed to address the blended delivery.  
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### 38 Observations

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40 For both iterations of the delivery we identified the 20 students who engaged most fully with the  
41 lecture videos by the number of minutes watched at the end of S2. Out of these students, those  
42 that attended 80% or more of the seminar sessions were noted (12 out of 20 in year 1; 25 out of 50  
43 in year 2). The exam performance of each cohort was then compared to attendance of the  
44 workshop sessions.  
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51 More than two thirds of those that watched the pre-recorded lectures for the longest amount of  
52 time, were also amongst the most regular attendees of the seminar sessions. For both iterations of  
53 the module, nearly all these students scored 66% and above for each exam answer, with half the  
54 students scoring marks greater than 70% on at least one question. This suggests that having time to  
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engage with and reflect upon the lecture, along with developing a deeper level of engagement through the readings, discussions and worked examples gave the students greater opportunity to become more critically engaged in the subject matter. In contrast to this, the outcomes for those that only engaged in watching the online videos, and who attended 20% or less of seminars was very different. The average mark was 58% for those in the first year of delivery. This reflects a lower depth of critical engagement with the course material. For some, their engagement with the recorded material was in the three-week period immediately before the exam. This raises an issue that is difficult to tease out from the data, whether this merely indicates that the more engaged students are by their nature those that perform better, reinforcing their higher scores, and that those less engaged are the opposite? However, a rough metric evaluation matches the comments made by students made in the focus groups following the exam. For those that attended most sessions, they noted that, ‘...although it felt like a lot of work, it was worth it, and was a massive advantage going into the exam.’ One student observed that ‘it made it easier to move beyond the lecture material in the exam’ enabling them to engage with the exam questions in a more critical and reflective manner.

<i>Positive Comments</i>	<i>Negative Comments</i>
<b>How much of the course content did you engage with?</b>	
‘Did all the wider reading and watched the videos, but the seminars were a bit scary.’	‘I listened to all the lectures, but not all the way through.’
‘All of it and felt the seminars helped challenge your ideas.’	Hard to get it all done (reading and listening to language) especially when expected to engage so if haven’t done work you are really unlikely to go.
<b>How do the pre-recorded lectures rate against attending a live lecture?</b>	
‘Easier to make comprehensive notes’	‘I get easily distracted at home and often forgot to watch the lectures’
‘Panopto allowed you to focus, you could pause	‘Less motivating’

and make notes'	
<b>What aspects of the seminars did you like?</b>	
'Makes you feel like you are discussing ideas properly'	'The way people reported back was at times awkward and repetitive'
'You had a better interaction with the staff and it forces you to engage with the ideas.'	
'talking and hearing – wider sense of what's being said – not just what's being lectured.'	
<b>How Useful were the workshops for developing your understanding?</b>	
'...it builds on the lecture material and due to talking about it... you remember it more.'	'If you hadn't done the work it was hard to engage'
'It brings more purpose to the lecture...'	
'alternative interpretations of ideas/readings could be explored'	

Table 1: Examples of student responses and comments.

As seen in the comments outlined in table 1 the pre-recorded lectures do not necessarily fit with all students' ways of learning. For some the formality of a traditional lecture session allows them to focus and restricts distraction, finding that they lacked motivation or adequate time management skills to engage with the material sufficiently in their own time. However, for others watching the lectures at home, this had the opposite effect. Many appreciated the ability to stop, rewind or revisit elements of the lectures to reflect on key themes. For others, it had the positive effect of encouraging a higher level of engagement. A common view was as follows, 'I would have only come to the lectures and probably not done any reading.'

### Reflections on impact of blended delivery in the context of TEF.

Our observations over two years of using blended delivery on this module, along with student comments and feedback, show a set of positives can be taken from this approach to organising teaching. This must be tempered, however, with improvements in delivery and expectation management going forward. There is a certain level of disjuncture between students wanting an increase in content, whilst simultaneously not wanting an increase in personal workload. This is in part due to the perception of lectures as 'proper' contact, where material, which they are paying for with their fees, is delivered to them. By encouraging students to become pro-active participants in how they learn, and to reflect on their own learning strategies goes some way towards developing an ethos where students become increasingly involved in the creation and pedagogical development of content (for a wider discussion of student co-production and creation see Bovill et al 2011; Cook-Sather 2008a; 2008b; 2009; Cook-Sather and Des-Ogugua 2018). However, this is a culture that needs nurturing beyond the level of the individual module, and requires an engagement with students from the start of the degree programme to elucidate work expectations. Moving students away from feeling as though they are educational consumers, to develop a clear understanding of active learning practices, over time may help to build towards a curriculum that aligns itself more fully to the wider pedagogic ambitions of the TEF. More importantly it helps develop students who are best placed to take ownership of their own learning strategies.

With a wider range of pressures on student time, such as balancing study and work, students like the flexibility of access to the pre-recorded lectures on a VLE, allowing them to listen and make notes at their own pace. For those attending the seminars regularly, this enabled them to be proactive in targeting reading around the topic areas. A significant number, however, preferred the spontaneity of traditional face-to face lectures and only really engaged with the recordings as exams approached. As a theoretically driven course, the seminars encouraged the students to explore and debate ideas, and provided a context for them to apply these to practical examples. For those that regularly attended, this fostered debate and wider thought. However, for many the prospect of speaking in front of other students was onerous and even intimidating. This had the consequence of a number of students missing the chance to synthesise and apply ideas to a range of material.

Debate and discussion in the flipped sessions allowed the students to reflect on the ideas of others

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3 and to receive constant feedback and challenge from staff. These deeper, critically develop and  
4 more nuanced understandings were those that we sought in the examinations.  
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## 9 **Conclusion**

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11 This study has shown that blended learning provides an opportunity for those currently working in  
12 fast-changing sector to create innovative responses to institutional constraints on space and time. In  
13 doing so, it can allow a change in pedagogic engagement which encourages students to proactively  
14 develop and hone their critical thinking skills in an applied way. However, underlying this is a  
15 tension between student's perceptions of contact and workload that requires a wider change in  
16 learning culture. A consideration of this may prove timely. In the UK University sector, as elsewhere  
17 in the HE world, the role and nature of teaching is increasingly becoming a focus of Government  
18 attention. On the back of the Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (2016), a  
19 greater emphasis is being placed on the need to link the impact of research to that of teaching,  
20 stressing the intertwined nature of the two processes. A key recommendation of the report is a call  
21 for universities to align the REF and the TEF, emphasising that '...research leading to major impacts  
22 on curricula and /or pedagogy within or across disciplines should be included' (2016, p. 23). As  
23 universities engage with the remit of the Teaching Excellence Framework, they are beginning a  
24 process of re-evaluating their pedagogical strategies in line with an increasing focus on Research  
25 Intensive Teaching. As a central tenet of the next iterations of the process (TEF 3 and 4) greater  
26 focus will be placed on individual academic departments to emphasise how they embed critical and  
27 reflective research-informed and research-based pedagogies as part of a wider strategy to develop  
28 Research Intensive Teaching focused curricula.  
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43 Pressure on developing increased points of Research Intensive Teaching, from an institutional point  
44 of view, means that staff need to adopt innovative methods to deliver high quality academic  
45 content. Staff and senior managers alike need to acknowledge the challenges this poses in the face  
46 of institutional lags regarding investment in, and the building or refurbishment of, suitable flexible  
47 spaces, the implementation of appropriate and robust teaching technologies and pressures on  
48 timetabling caused by both increased content and large groups at key stages of the curriculum. The  
49 ability of change how a module is delivered is a crucial component in meeting these new demands.  
50 This paper illustrates the pragmatism needed to meet these demands, whilst aiming to produce  
51 motivated, critically engaged learners, able to fulfil the role of undergraduate researchers. Blended  
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3 delivery applied and linked to research focused applications allows one way to do this. However,  
4 this comes with some caveats. Developing new delivery strategies takes additional time to create,  
5 and as our experience has shown, will take a number of iterations to identify best practice and  
6 resolve problems. Further, innovating across multiple modules needs careful thought at the  
7 curriculum level to maintain a coherent teaching and assessment strategy.  
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3 **Using blended learning in place of formal lecture provision to overcome institutional constraints:**  
4 **reflections from a year two cultural geography module.**  
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For Peer Review Only

**Abstract**

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 has placed the practice and quality of teaching centre of the UK university agenda, with concerns around contact, delivery, research/teaching balance and facility support framing debates within institutions. Situating the implementation of blended learning on a year 2 cultural geography in the broader context of these discussions, this paper explores some of the challenges and opportunities this approach has in addressing some of these broader concerns, whilst improving student engagement and performance. The paper argues that university teaching staff need to develop innovative and pragmatic approaches in delivering research intensive teaching and learning, whilst acknowledging that staff need time to create and refine new curricula in relation to lags in investment in infrastructure.

**Blended Learning, Cultural Geography, Research Intensive Teaching TEF**

## Introduction

Following the introduction of increased fees in the UK in 2012 there has been a concern to capture student experience of learning across a diverse sector and to promote teaching excellence across the sector to place teaching on an equal footing with research (Hubble 2017). In 2016 the UK Government introduced the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, (TEF) to address the perceived disparities in student engagement between Research Intensive universities and more teaching focused institutions. The aim of this assessment is to use a range of existing statistical measures, across six categories (Teaching on my course; Assessment and feedback; Academic support; Drop-out rate; Employment or further study; Highly skilled-employment or further study), to evaluate teaching quality, learning environment, and student outcomes and learning gain (HEFCE 2016). Unlike traditional university league tables the TEF assesses performance against benchmarks based on their student intake, rather than providing an absolute measure of performance. The ratings are thus a measure of whether a university exceeds, meets or falls short of expectations based on the profile of students admitted and subjects taught. The benefit for those institutions achieving the highest level – Gold – will be the government determining their ability to raise course fees.

As the landscape of the neo-liberal university increasingly seeks to hold teaching and learning to greater account, and a context of increased corporate managerialism and planning enters institutions to monitor national and local initiatives (Gibbs et al 2008; Brew and Manatai 2013; Walkington et al 2017), academic departments are responding in part by exploring innovative ways to deliver high quality, research-focused, learning and teaching. As academics try to meet these challenges, along with pressures on institutional space and resources, new ways of placing the educational benefits to the student need to be sought (Brew 2003; Malcom 2013). Situating teaching in the context of the changing internal and external pressures faced by academics in a UK redbrick university (the term for a civic, city-based university founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), this paper explores the role that blended learning offers in overcoming a number of institutional challenges, such as room structure and timetabling pressures, faced in delivering an

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3 innovative curriculum that aspires to use research-led framing to increase student engagement and  
4 develop higher level learning.  
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9 Over the last couple of decades there has been much debate covering the moves from lecturer-  
10 focused strategies for research knowledge delivery to the development of strategies to foster more  
11 interactive forms of research and enquiry that place the student at the centre of the learning  
12 experience (for a good overview see Brew and Manatai 2013; Wood and Su 2017). This trend has  
13 been augmented by the TEF initiative as universities aim to address the schemes aspirations as well  
14 as other excellence indicators such as the National Student Survey and respond to the changing  
15 funding realities of the HE sector. In some [redbrick](#) universities there is heightened pressure on  
16 staff to increase student contact hours, whilst balancing other pressures around research  
17 performance and increasing student numbers. This often comes at a time when there is a lag in  
18 institutional investment in teaching facilities and learning support technology.  
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28 An issue that needs further [investigation](#) is the way in which blended approaches to learning can  
29 provide innovative opportunities to surmount institutional constraints. Taking the case study of a  
30 second-year Cultural Geography module, this paper explores the ways in which blended delivery  
31 offers opportunities and challenges - for both teaching staff and students alike - in addressing the  
32 problems of timetabling restrictions and spatial constraints created in the face of demands for  
33 increased contact in the modern neo-liberal fee-paying university sector in the United Kingdom. It  
34 then opens this out to explore the impact this has on student engagement and performance (Healy  
35 2005; Turner et al 2008; Cuthbert et al 2012; Spronken-Smith et al 2014)  
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44 The use of digital learning environments over the past 20 years has often been viewed as a panacea  
45 to engage students with a more proactive style of learning, with the ability to record, store and  
46 replay lectures, linked with online materials and assessments allowing a wider breadth of access and  
47 a flexibility of interaction. Blended lectures have become an increasingly popular mechanism for  
48 adding 'value' to the student experience, by providing a learning mechanism and context that  
49 encourages deep learning strategies, and fosters small-group discussion ([Garrison and Kanuka 2004](#);  
50 [Akyol and Garrison 2011](#)). One aspect that is often absent in discussions is the potential to address  
51 underlying institutional constraints. ~~The~~ the current [rhetoric surrounding the UK Higher Education](#)  
52 landscape ~~is~~ with [the advent of the TEF, league tables and](#) students paying high fees ~~is~~ [has placed](#)  
53 increased attention ~~is being placed~~ on the support and provision students receive as [supposed](#)  
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3 educational consumers. However, institutions and staff alike need to meet these aspirations [and](#)  
4 [perceptions](#) in the face of a disjuncture in capital investment in teaching space and educational  
5 technology, [whilst seeking a pedagogy that seeks to place the student as an active participant in](#)  
6 [learning at the centre of practice \(Bovill et al 2011\)](#).  
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12 Improving student engagement with a subject is a familiar problem for lecturing staff, particularly  
13 when teaching a range of theoretical and conceptual ideas, which may at times appear disconnected  
14 from everyday experience. In a perfect world, students would act as independently motivated and  
15 engaged individuals, critically reflecting on, and applying a range of theoretical ideas and concepts  
16 themselves. However, experience has shown that students often need a range of support  
17 mechanisms to develop a deeper understanding of ideas, and provide confidence in their application  
18 [\(Brew and Manatai 2017; Healey 2005; Malcom 2014\)](#). This paper is structured as follows: a  
19 reflection upon the experience of introducing a 'blended lecture' structure to the teaching of  
20 Cultural Geographies to a cohort of year 2 students at a UK university as a response to timetable and  
21 room-booking constraints. It then outlines the methods of delivery and evaluates how this  
22 encourages deeper learning amongst students, whilst creating a feedback loop that allows for  
23 guided discussion and in-class debate. It will then evaluate the impact on student engagement and  
24 the influence on assessment outcomes. Finally, the paper reflects on the impacts of the changes in  
25 relation to staff teaching strategies, and how Blended Learning fits with calls for an increase in  
26 research intensive teaching.  
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#### 41 **Literature review**

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46 Blended learning has become a focus of much academic attention, as educational practitioners have  
47 explored new ways of engaging students and improving the quality of student performance  
48 (Hinterberger 2004). By combining traditional methods of delivery, such as face-to-face instruction  
49 with support from technological innovations - ranging from podcasts, through interactive online  
50 tests to online lectures and project work, new ways of facilitating student engagement, and  
51 challenging different pedagogical goals have been created. Often a mix of classroom work and self-  
52 guided study these approaches have been regarded as a way of fostering a culture of independent  
53 critical enquiry and peer-assisted learning amongst students (Hinterberger et al 2004; Moore and  
54 Gilmartin 2010). As new technology has developed over the past two decades, and universities have  
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3 invested in interactive electronic learning environments, technology-mediated learning support at a  
4 number of levels has become a norm for most courses.  
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9 Much has been written in recent years about the impact that blended learning has had on student  
10 performance, highlighting the benefits that more flexible approaches to delivery have on student  
11 satisfaction, and a perceived improvement in feedback (Collopy and Arnold 2009; Mitchell and Forer  
12 2010; Owston et al 2006; Owston et al 2013). However, one issue that needs further investigation,  
13 and is often underplayed in the literature, is the way in which blended approaches to learning can  
14 facilitate ways of overcoming institutional constraints caused by increased student numbers, such as  
15 congested timetabling and a desire to reduce repeat teaching, something alluded to recently by  
16 Martin et al (2017) in the context of teaching in Australia. Further, although attention has been paid  
17 to concerns over the investment in a robust IT infrastructure (Moskal et al 2013), the disjuncture  
18 between capital investment and the time needed to construct modern, flexible learning spaces,  
19 allied to wider sectoral demands to introduce more high-quality research-intensive teaching, means  
20 that blended teaching is becoming an ever more important part of the lecturer's repertoire.  
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31 In practical terms, blended delivery provides a mechanism by which teaching staff can overcome  
32 institutional constraints by 'creating' more space in the timetable and making more proactive use of  
33 the available teaching space. However, in the context of the case outlined in this paper, this meant  
34 that the course team needed to carefully consider the impact that this would have on both the  
35 content of the material delivered and the ways in which a change in delivery could alter the dynamic  
36 of how the material was received. The most important decision, and the one that formed the  
37 foundation of the changes was pedagogical rather than practical: how could we increase the level  
38 and quality of student engagement with the material, and improve their critical thinking skills?  
39 Rather than a merely practical response, there needed to be a clear educational rationale to all the  
40 changes made.  
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### 51 **Case Study: A year 2 Optional Module on Cultural Geography**

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56 The case study for this paper concerns the changes made to a long-standing second-year optional  
57 module in Cultural Geography, which aims to provide students with a theoretical and thematic  
58 grounding in the sub-discipline. This 10 credit worth of module forms part of a suite of year 2  
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3 optional modules open to students taking B.A. and B.Sc. degrees in Geography at a UK redbrick  
4 university. This module was originally delivered by a team of two experienced fulltime lecturers over  
5 an 11 week semester through a series of traditional, 2 hour lectures to a group of over 80 students.  
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7 It is assessed by examination, and the module had consistently scored well in student module  
8 feedback for content and delivery. However, for the 2015/16 session there was a need to  
9 reconfigure the module as part of wider, ongoing curriculum reforms and changes to module contact  
10 time implemented by the university. This afforded an opportunity to address both past student  
11 feedback requesting an increase in seminar-style interaction, and to provide wider opportunities for  
12 formative feedback. This presented, however, a challenge, not for purely pedagogical reasons, but  
13 also from a practical point of view.

23 Like many research-intensive institutions there are a wide range of constraints that the academic  
24 has to work with. Firstly, timetabling often restricts the amount of available time available for each  
25 module, meaning that contact time is particularly at a premium. Secondly, there is a finite amount  
26 of teaching space, which has not kept pace with the increase in students and increase of teaching  
27 contact hours. This space is often dated, initially constructed in the post-war era of university  
28 expansion, and not always suitable for small-group work, and the capital investment and the work  
29 needed to replace it is lengthy. This means that innovative ways of increasing contact needed to be  
30 sought. For the module under discussion it was decided to introduce 'blended lectures' to facilitate  
31 and reorient an increase in content. We define 'blended lectures' as a mix of pre-recorded lectures  
32 supported with PowerPoint slides, the guided reading of key papers, supported with in-class  
33 discussion and the use of a workshop session in which ideas and concepts are applied to a case  
34 study. In practice, this required module staff to pre-record  $n$  lectures/upload these lectures with  
35 new course seminar materials, etc., etc. This reorientation also presented the possibility to  
36 introduce new formative opportunities to challenge and evaluate student understanding.

50 The decision to pre-record the lecture material was primarily a practical response to the  
51 institutional time pressures the course team experienced, from multiple directions. The university  
52 has a finite number of teaching slots, and thus increasing 'in-the-room' time is not an option.  
53 Likewise, the combined time pressures of teaching, research and administration means that any  
54 increase in student contact needs to be balanced out against other work commitments. Pre-  
55 recording the lectures could be spread out over the summer teaching recess, reducing its initial time  
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3 impact. Once recorded this archived material could then be amended and altered as and when  
4 needed over future iterations of the module. It further allowed time for the team to prepare the  
5 material for the in-class sessions.  
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11 A key concern for the lecture team was managing the dynamics of small-group work in a large  
12 cohort and within the space of a traditional lecture room. In an ideal situation, there would be  
13 ample time to see the cohort in small groups, in a room that enabled students to work in clusters  
14 over numerous sessions. However, reality rarely meets the ideal, and so the situation requires  
15 careful management. At the risk of the sessions becoming stilted, as the lecturer moves between  
16 groups, a focus for each discussion is needed to keep the students engaged. Likewise, regular  
17 moments to pause, comment or feedback to the larger group are needed. As Healey *et al* (1996, p.  
18 168) note, 'simply putting students in groups and telling them to work together does not  
19 automatically lead to these benefits [higher achievement, positive student relationships]. The  
20 learning situations have to be carefully structured'.  
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31 This module teaches a range of topics in Cultural Geography, from the sub-discipline's  
32 historiography, through to issues of landscape, memory, power, time, gender and modernity.  
33 Lectures that had previously been delivered in a traditional lecture theatre setting, and later  
34 provided as an online podcast, were replaced and in places re-written. The taught components of  
35 the module were pre-recorded ahead of the classroom sessions, taking the form of the lecturer  
36 speaking to the [PowerPoint](#) slides. These were in the format of a traditional lecture, with a pause in  
37 content every 20 minutes. However, due to the lack of an audience feedback dynamic, these were  
38 on average a half hour shorter than a traditional 2 hour face-to-face session. The recordings and  
39 [PowerPoint](#) slides were posted on the institution's VLE, allowing the students to watch and re-watch  
40 the material in advance. The module team expected the students to watch the lectures at a time  
41 convenient to them and to reflect on key ideas before engaging with the seminar material. This  
42 flexibility of engagement would allow students of varying abilities to engage with the content at  
43 their own pace, and afford the opportunity to revisit material as many times as they like. More  
44 importantly, blended lectures would do more than simply mix traditional and online content, but  
45 would encourage students to develop independent deep learning strategies to reinforce their  
46 understanding of the subject (Hinterberger *et al* 2004; Moore and Gilmartin 2010; Kanard 2013,  
47 Graham *et al* 2017). By providing all study material a minimum of 5 days in advance of the session,  
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3 students were also afforded plenty of opportunity to engage with the module team during drop-in  
4 sessions if required.  
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10 In addition to the pre-recorded lectures, the students were also required to have read a related  
11 academic paper before the classroom session. The article provided the focus for a structured  
12 seminar replacing the conventional lecture with a 'flipped' format (Rowley and Green 2015). The  
13 first half of the seminar session required students, in small groups of 6 to 8 students, to consider a  
14 set of pre-set key questions raised by the paper. An informal discussion then followed with each  
15 group asked to report back to the wider cohort. This proved an effective delivery mechanism on a  
16 number of levels. Firstly, it allowed time for the lecturer to move between the groups to answer  
17 queries and ask questions to challenge student understanding, providing instantaneous formative  
18 feedback. Secondly, it provided an extra level of formative feedback as the groups listened and  
19 responded to the other group's points.  
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28 In the second half of the classroom session, the key themes and concepts identified in the first half  
29 were then utilised to interpret a chosen case study, often a piece of video, which illustrated the  
30 lecture themes, again with structured questions and discussion. This has the benefit of reinforcing  
31 the student's understanding, allowing them to try applying theoretical positions to real life examples  
32 and discuss the understandings they may generate.  
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38 Although the result is the doubling of content delivered in the module, the benefits are wider than  
39 merely an increase in academic material. This was also a pedagogic response to allow students more  
40 time to engage with the lecture material, and to allow the student to develop their critical thinking  
41 skills. However, as a teaching team we need to make a number of decisions in advance about the  
42 ways in which we are going to deliver the in-class workshop material. Central to this were the  
43 techniques needed to overcome the restrictions placed upon us by the allocated teaching space, and  
44 ways in which small-group work could be fostered without the dynamic in the room becoming  
45 forced or stilted. Although some of this could be planned, we needed to make sure that there was a  
46 certain amount of adaptability to cater for the nature of the students taught. In this case, we  
47 needed to adopt a delivery strategy that fostered small group work in a teaching space that was not  
48 spatially designed for such interaction. Although timetabling a space for a group of 80 students was  
49 not a problem, the quality and nature of the teaching spaces was an issue.  
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### Evaluation of the module: feedback forms; focus groups

To evaluate the impact of introducing a blended delivery format to the module and student's reactions to the work expectations three different ways we drew upon three different methods of feedback over two cycles of delivery:

- Firstly, we used the university's standard module feedback forms. This had been used in past iterations of the module before the delivery change and would provide a comparative to the module before the implementation of blended lectures.
- Secondly, we issued students with an additional bespoke form at the same time which asked specific questions about the students' experience of using pre-recorded lectures, preparative material and of attending the workshops.
- Finally, follow-up focus groups were held by a neutral party after the examination was taken. The cohort was invited to participate in focus group sessions to discuss the new delivery format. From the volunteers two groups were created – one that had attended 80%+ of workshops and one that had attended 20% or less- which were then invited to discuss whether they felt their engagement had influenced their exam preparation. Each session lasted an hour, and allowed students to reflect on the impact the blended format had had on their performance post exam.

By triangulating these different evaluations, we hoped to gain a greater depth of understanding about: how the students engaged with the change in delivery styles; the perceived increase in workload; the level of engagement with the wider course material. Further, the focus group aimed to provide a qualitative element to examine if there were any links between the level of engagement with the recordings, workshop attendance and exam performance.

In the first iteration of the revised module the allocated room was a traditional, single level lecture theatre with fixed benches and seating, which was full to capacity. This made putting students in to small groups difficult, and may well have discouraged students to attend all the sessions. As one respondent in the focus groups following the first iteration of delivery notes, '[the] setting was quite difficult with people sitting on tables and getting chairs, it was hard to write notes', whilst another

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3 commented that the room was, 'Timetabled for a lecture...' and as such '...was awful for discussion...  
4 needing space for flipcharts and a roundtable format.'

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9 In the second iteration of the module, the room allocated was an improvement, although again,  
10 had fixed desks, restricting the ability to easily put students in to small groups. This experience  
11 echoes that of Graham *et al* (2017), who reflecting upon lecture flipping at an Australian university  
12 argue that, '...teaching spaces appropriate to your class size, course materials and learners' needs is  
13 one of the most critical pragmatic considerations for a flipped classroom approach...', but are the  
14 hardest to obtain due a dominance in most institutions of traditional teaching spaces, and timetable  
15 competition to access the more flexible spaces available.  
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22 Pedagogically, whilst providing a structured depth of engagement with key concepts, the blended  
23 method of delivery importantly provided students with a safe, non-judgemental environment where  
24 they could try out ideas with their peers via face-to-face interaction in small groups, and more  
25 formally through presenting to the wider group. This allowed them to build confidence in their  
26 abilities, and as a consequence a number of students commented that they began to make  
27 connections between themes and topics across the module, producing a deep level of  
28 understanding. In the original lecture-based format for the module, students in-class performance  
29 was predominantly restricted to the group being asked to respond to questions from the lecturer  
30 during the lecture itself. This was either met with reticence, engaged with by a small cadre of  
31 confident students or relied on the lecturer selecting respondents at random - none of which was  
32 satisfactory. The blended format provided a less confrontational arena that allowed a more diverse  
33 range of students with different levels of confidence to discuss and debate ideas. In the first  
34 iteration of teaching we asked groups to present feedback to the rest of the group formally from the  
35 front of the room. This was unpopular, as one focus group respondent noted, 'some people didn't  
36 like it and felt thrust up to the front'. As the module developed a more informal system of groups  
37 feeding back from the floor developed, which garnered more positive reactions. Feedback from the  
38 second iteration highlighted how the '...discussion brought to light ideas that I previously would not  
39 have thought of', whilst another student noted that the sessions were '...extremely helpful both as  
40 motivation to engage in wider reading and a chance to discuss things to get different perspectives  
41 and a greater understanding'.  
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3 The change in dynamic that required students to prepare material in advance, rather than engage  
4 with it post-lecture meant that students became increasingly confident with the material. As the  
5 student feedback for the second iteration of teaching showed, 'The fact the lectures and reading had  
6 to be done in preparation for the workshop meant that the time within the workshop could be used  
7 to gain a broader understanding of the topic,' whilst another added that the format 'Gave a wider  
8 understanding of the topic and now feel more prepared for the exam, being able to draw upon  
9 wider material and ideas.' This supports Brook and Beauchamp's (2013, p. 20) assertion that  
10 blended learning, 'potentially offers many advantages for both students and lecturers as it provides  
11 greater flexibility and responsiveness, can overcome limitations of time and space, and can support  
12 novel ways to learn...'  
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### 23 **Aspiration**

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27 Following the insights of Kanard (2013), who provides a comprehensive overview of the use and  
28 impact of recorded lectures, it was hoped that use of a blended delivery would improve the cohort's  
29 overall exam performance, due to the students being more secure in their abilities to deploy their  
30 critical understanding of the subject matter. Notwithstanding, blended delivery also presented  
31 challenges and raised a number of pedagogical concerns. A key concern with making the lectures  
32 available in advance was an anticipated decline in attendance by those who did not perceive value in  
33 attending the seminar sessions or felt that the pre-recorded lectures could be viewed at a later date  
34 as part of exam preparation. All optional modules on this degree programme do not stipulate that  
35 attendance is compulsory, although there are a few points during the semester when all courses  
36 undertake compulsory attendance monitoring. Beyond this the module team believed that the  
37 students needed to take personal responsibility for their engagement with course sessions and  
38 materials. Even with this in mind, there was a concern that some students would over-rely on the  
39 recordings rather than engaging with the breadth of module material. These concerns were borne  
40 out at times by the level of attendance. In the first year of implementing blended delivery the  
41 module had 80 students registered, but the average attendance for the seminar sessions was in the  
42 mid-20s. In its second year of delivery, the cohort was again around 80, but the average attendance  
43 was around the mid-40s. Although, this could be in part explained by an unpopular early morning  
44 slot, on a day after a regular university student social evening, the level of attendance still surprised  
45 the module team, there were other reasons for non-attendance. However, this matches the  
46 experience of a number of studies, which recorded a decline in attendance compared to live sessions  
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3 (Brook and Beauchamp 2015; Kanard 2013). It does raise issues going forward about the nature of  
4 module evaluation at both a course level, and how this fits into the wider evaluation context of both  
5 the National Student Survey (NSS) and a subject level TEF, with a perceived tension between  
6 traditional lectures seen as 'value for money' and broadening of online material to support  
7 innovative delivery.  
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15 Redesigning course material to try to circumvent institutional constraints, however, can have  
16 unintended impacts elsewhere, especially around some of the 'softer', qualitative elements of  
17 teaching. A previously unconsidered issue that emerged after the first iteration of the redesigned  
18 module was a change in the delivery dynamics of the lectures. As the course material was prepared  
19 in advance of the session, by staff members talking to the [PowerPoint](#) slides in their offices, it was  
20 found that the vitality and performative qualities engendered by presenting to a room of students  
21 were diminished. A lack of spontaneity and immediate visual feedback when gauging understanding  
22 may have made the delivery seem dry to some. Although students were able to pause, rewind and  
23 revisit things that they may not have fully understood, this may have detracted from the student's  
24 engagement with the recordings and wider material.  
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35 Another impact, is the perceived increase in work from the student. This can be seen in both a  
36 positive and negative light in the feedback. For some, the need to prepare ahead of the workshop  
37 sessions provided an incentive to engage with the material in way that they may not have done in  
38 other, lecture-based modules. As one student noted the format, 'Forces us to engage with the  
39 reading outside of the lectures', whilst another noted that under a conventional lecture structure  
40 they would be '...be less motivated to carry out further reading and engage less with the course  
41 content.' A sentiment echoed in a number of responses. However, others found the level of work  
42 required in preparation a challenge, and a detriment to attendance. In one focus group, a student  
43 remarked that it was sometimes '...hard to get it all done (reading and listening to lectures)  
44 especially when expected to engage, so if you haven't done the work you are really unlikely to go.'  
45 This is echoed by another student who remarked that, 'If you haven't done reading no point being  
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**Is there a connection between engagement and performance?**

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3 It is always difficult to evaluate the impact of a teaching intervention after a short period of  
4 implementation. However, one clear measure of the impact of blended lectures can be seen in the  
5 metric examination of exam performance. The institutional VLE used allows the instructor to  
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7 examine a range of statistics as to who accesses the online lectures, when, how often they do so,  
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9 and for how long. It also enabled the team to observe engagement during the semester's teaching  
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11 period, and the two week period immediately before the exam to give a broad sense of when and  
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13 how students accessed the material (cf. Owston *et al.*, 2013). This was then compared with student  
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15 responses in a focus group and feedback form specifically designed to address the blended delivery.  
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### 20 Observations

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22 For both iterations of the delivery we identified the 20 students who engaged most fully with the  
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24 lecture videos by the number of minutes watched at the end of S2. Out of these students, those  
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26 that attended 80% or more of the seminar sessions were noted (12 out of 20 in year 1; 25 out of 50  
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28 in year 2). The exam performance of each cohort was then compared to attendance of the  
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30 workshop sessions.  
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35 More than two thirds of those that watched the pre-recorded lectures for the longest amount of  
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37 time, were also amongst the most regular attendees of the seminar sessions. For both iterations of  
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39 the module, nearly all these students scored 66% and above for each exam answer, with half the  
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41 students scoring marks greater than 70% on at least one question. This raises an issue that is  
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43 difficult to tease out from the data, whether this merely indicates that the more engaged students  
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45 are by their nature those that perform better, reinforcing their higher scores, and that those less  
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47 engaged are the opposite? This suggests that having time to engage with and reflect upon the  
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49 lecture, along with developing a deeper level of engagement through the readings, discussions and  
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51 worked examples gave the students greater opportunity to become more critically engaged in the  
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53 subject matter. In contrast to this, the outcomes for those that only engaged in watching the online  
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55 videos, and who attended 20% or less of seminars was very different. The average mark was 58%  
56  
57 for those in the first year of delivery. This reflects a lower depth of critical engagement with the  
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59 course material. For some, their engagement with the recorded material was in the three-week  
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61 period immediately before the exam. ~~This raises an issue that is difficult to tease out from the data, whether this merely indicates that the more engaged students are by their nature those that perform better, reinforcing their higher scores, and that those less engaged are the opposite?~~

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3 However, a rough metric evaluation matches the comments made by students made in the focus  
4 groups following the exam. For those that attended most sessions, they noted that, ‘...although it  
5 felt like a lot of work, it was worth it, and was a massive advantage going into the exam.’ One  
6 student observed that ‘it made it easier to move beyond the lecture material in the exam’ enabling  
7 them to engage with the exam questions in a more critical and reflective manner.  
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<i>Positive Comments</i>	<i>Negative Comments</i>
<b>How much of the course content did you engage with?</b>	
‘Did all the wider reading and watched the videos, but the seminars were a bit scary.’	‘I listened to all the lectures, but not all the way through.’
‘All of it and felt the seminars helped challenge your ideas.’	Hard to get it all done (reading and listening to language) especially when expected to engage so if haven’t done work you are really unlikely to go.
<b>How do the pre-recorded lectures rate against attending a live lecture?</b>	
‘Easier to make comprehensive notes’	‘I get easily distracted at home and often forgot to watch the lectures’
‘Panopto allowed you to focus, you could pause and make notes’	‘Less motivating’
<b>What aspects of the seminars did you like?</b>	
‘Makes you feel like you are discussing ideas properly’	‘The way people reported back was at times awkward and repetitive’
‘You had a better interaction with the staff and it forces you to engage with the ideas.’	
‘talking and hearing – wider sense of what’s being said – not just what’s being lectured.’	
<b>How Useful were the workshops for developing your understanding?</b>	
‘...it builds on the lecture material and due to talking about it... you remember it more.’	‘If you hadn’t done the work it was hard to engage’
‘It brings more purpose to the lecture...’	
‘alternative interpretations of ideas/readings	



could be explored'	
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Table 1: Examples of student responses and comments.

As seen in the comments outlined in table 1 the pre-recorded lectures do not necessarily fit with all students' ways of learning. For some the formality of a traditional lecture session allows them to focus and restricts distraction, finding that they lacked motivation or adequate time management skills to engage with the material sufficiently in their own time. However, for others watching the lectures at home, this had the opposite effect. Many appreciated the ability to stop, rewind or revisit elements of the lectures to reflect on key themes. For others, it had the positive effect of encouraging a higher level of engagement. A common view was as follows, 'I would have only come to the lectures and probably not done any reading.'

## Reflections on impact of blended delivery in the context of TEF.

Our observations over two years of using blended delivery on this module, along with student comments and feedback, show a set of positives can be taken from this approach to organising teaching. This must be tempered, however, with improvements in delivery and expectation management going forward. There is a certain level of disjuncture between students wanting an increase in content, whilst simultaneously not wanting an increase in personal workload. This is in part due to the perception of lectures as 'proper' contact, where material, which they are paying for with their fees, is delivered to them. By encouraging students to become pro-active participants in how they learn, and to reflect on their own learning strategies goes some way towards developing an ethos where students become increasingly involved in the creation and pedagogical development of content (for a wider discussion of student co-production and creation see Bovill et al 2011; Cook-Sather 2008a; 2008b; 2009; Cook-Sather and Des-Ogugua 2018). However, this is a culture that needs nurturing beyond the level of the individual module, and requires an engagement with students from the start of the degree programme to elucidate work expectations. Moving students away from feeling as though they are educational consumers, to develop a clear understanding of active learning practices, over time may help to build towards a curriculum that aligns itself more fully to the wider pedagogic ambitions of the TEF. More importantly it helps develop students who are best placed to take ownership of their own learning strategies.

With a wider range of pressures on student time, such as balancing study and work, students like the flexibility of access to the pre-recorded lectures on a VLE, allowing them to listen and make notes at their own pace. For those attending the seminars regularly, this enabled them to be proactive in targeting reading around the topic areas. A significant number, however, preferred the spontaneity of traditional face-to face lectures and only really engaged with the recordings as exams approached. As a theoretically driven course, the seminars encouraged the students to explore and debate ideas, and provided a context for them to apply these to practical examples. For those that regularly attended, this fostered debate and wider thought. However, for many the prospect of speaking in front of other students was onerous and even intimidating. This had the consequence of a number of students missing the chance to synthesise and apply ideas to a range of material. Debate and discussion in the flipped sessions allowed the students to reflect on the ideas of others

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3 and to receive constant feedback and challenge from staff. These deeper, critically develop and  
4 more nuanced understandings were those that we sought in the examinations.  
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## 10 **Conclusion**

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12 This study has shown that blended learning provides an opportunity for those currently working in  
13 fast-changing sector to create innovative responses to institutional constraints on space and time. In  
14 doing so, it can allow a change in pedagogic engagement which encourages students to proactively  
15 develop and hone their critical thinking skills in an applied way. However, underlying this is a  
16 tension between student's perceptions of contact and workload that requires a wider change in  
17 learning culture. A consideration of this may prove timely. In the UK University sector, as elsewhere  
18 in the HE world, the role and nature of teaching is increasingly becoming a focus of Government  
19 attention. On the back of the Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (2016), a  
20 greater emphasis is being placed on the need to link the impact of research to that of teaching,  
21 stressing the intertwined nature of the two processes. A key recommendation of the report is a call  
22 for universities to align the REF and the TEF, emphasising that '...research leading to major impacts  
23 on curricula and /or pedagogy within or across disciplines should be included' (2016, p. 23). As  
24 universities engage with the remit of the Teaching Excellence Framework, they are beginning a  
25 process of re-evaluating their pedagogical strategies in line with an increasing focus on Research  
26 Intensive Teaching. As a central tenet of the next iterations of the process (TEF 3 and 4) greater  
27 focus will be placed on individual academic departments to emphasise how they embed critical and  
28 reflective research-informed and research-based pedagogies as part of a wider strategy to develop  
29 Research Intensive Teaching focused curricula.  
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46 Pressure on developing increased points of Research Intensive Teaching, from an institutional point  
47 of view, means that staff need to adopt innovative methods to deliver high quality academic  
48 content. Staff and senior managers alike need to acknowledge the challenges this poses in the face  
49 of institutional lags regarding investment in, and the building or refurbishment of, suitable flexible  
50 spaces, the implementation of appropriate and robust teaching technologies and pressures on  
51 timetabling caused by both increased content and large groups at key stages of the curriculum. The  
52 ability of change how a module is delivered is a crucial component in meeting these new demands.  
53 This paper illustrates the pragmatism needed to meet these demands, whilst aiming to produce  
54 motivated, critically engaged learners, able to fulfil the role of undergraduate researchers. Blended  
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3 delivery applied and linked to research focused applications allows one way to do this. However,  
4 this comes with some caveats. Developing new delivery strategies takes additional time to create,  
5 and as our experience has shown, will take a number of iterations to identify best practice and  
6 resolve problems. Further, innovating across multiple modules needs careful thought at the  
7 curriculum level to maintain a coherent teaching and assessment strategy.  
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