Co-creating ‘Map My Assessment’: a strategic tool for programme assessment planning and student success

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Abstract

‘Map My Assessment’ (MMA) is a visualisation tool designed to support programme teaching teams in mapping out assessment plans across an entire programme. By providing a clear overview of assessments, MMA helps students to manage their time and workload more effectively, avoiding the issue of clustered deadlines, and also helps programme leaders to plan the assessment effectively. The development of MMA was a collaborative effort, featuring a student-staff partnership that proved mutually beneficial. The student consultant played a key role, gaining valuable project management and technical skills, while staff contributed their expertise and also benefited from the student's unique perspective. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive – teaching staff appreciated the holistic view MMA offers for strategic assessment planning and the student consultant valued the employability and skills enhancement gained through this hands-on experience. Ultimately, MMA evolved into a cost-effective and accessible alternative to a discontinued custom app, further demonstrating the value of co-creation in educational innovation.

Keywords: Co-creation, student-staff partnerships, assessment design, employability

Introduction

This case study focuses on the development of 'Map My Assessment' (MMA), a learning and teaching enhancement tool designed collaboratively by the authors, staff in the Academic and Learning Enhancement team (ALE) and an undergraduate student consultant at the University of Greenwich (UoG).

Map My Assessment was originally developed by UoG staff in 2018 as a tool to support the TESTA project (Anon, 2015). It was set up as an online platform that allowed staff and students to visualise the overall assessment strategy of a programme. The visualisation comprised all assessments across a given academic year, including deadlines, weighting and types of assignments. These would appear in different shapes, be colour-coded on a single table and arranged in chronological order (*e.g.*, an exam would correspond to a blue dot and an oral presentation a red one, and their size would depend on the weight of the assignment within their module).

The visualisation facilitated planning and helped students with time and workload management, while it allowed programme leaders (and teaching teams) to have an overview of the overall assessment pattern across a given programme; consequently, it enabled strategies to align and differentiate assessment types and to avoid bunching deadlines for the benefit of both students and markers. The original MMA platform was phased out in 2023, as part of general move towards new online systems of curriculum management.

As members of the ALE team, we (the authors) work closely with colleagues in faculties and the Quality Assurance (QA) team through the design of and approval for new programmes and the review of existing ones. One of the key areas of such work is a principled reflection on assessment at programme level, as a way to guide and enhance learning and to provide opportunities for feedback, feedforward, engagement and practice-based approaches (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). By shifting the focus from assessment at module level to assessment at programme level, a more consistent and accessible learning experience can be scaffolded for students (Hartley and Ruth, 2013; Whitfield and Hartley, 2019).

Against this backdrop, we identified in MMA a highly valuable tool for encouraging colleagues to unpick and revisit critically their assessment practice beyond the requirements of individual modules. As we were approaching a transitional 'void' while moving to a new online system, we agreed that maintaining access to the visualisation that MMA allowed was indeed beneficial, as the tool was broadly used by colleagues across the university and was familiar and user-friendly. We therefore decided to develop a new, low-production version of MMA that could be accessed seamlessly by programme teams and temporarily replace the old platform. The main difference from the original version would be that a student would co-design the new tool.

Project background

As Carey (2013, p.259) highlights "an engagement culture needs to happen inside, as well as outside, the classroom. In this way, it extends beyond design and into the living curriculum to become a distinguishing feature of the learning and assessment strategy". In the scoping phase of the project, we considered how the involvement of students could contribute to the

creation of an inclusive and empowering tool for staff that could be informed by students' perspectives too.

It was clear that to collaborate with a student consultant on the project would provide an ideal opportunity to embed a more comprehensive approach, by shifting the role of students from curriculum receivers to curriculum co-designers. It has been largely discussed that student-staff collaborations lead to strong student engagement, stronger and more productive relationships between students and staff and enhancements in learning and teaching (Bovill, 2020).

The University of Greenwich had already significant examples of student-staff partnerships across faculties and disciplines (Getti *et al*., 2021; Owusu-Kwarteng, 2019), but what represented an element of innovation in the case study we are discussing was the collaboration between a student and a central unit in realising a tool supporting curriculum design and development. The project created a space for students to familiarise themselves with and understand better the 'mechanics' of curriculum beyond their lived experience of learning and assessment. It would embed their perspectives and needs in an area often not explored in student-staff partnerships, namely the crossroads between assessment, policy and administrative regulations and the 'praxis' of academia (Mahon *et al*., 2020).

We applied for funding via the Student Success Sub-Strategy. We recognised that student research and consultancy work should be deemed academic labour in terms of time and effort expended and therefore paid accordingly (Johnston and Ryan, 2022). Although sustainability at scale for paying students for contributing work is still debated (Lowe, 2023), we kept the project small-scale and 'low-production' and we managed to secure funding for fifty hours of student work, to be distributed over several weeks.

The essentials for the new MMA version were: to keep it as similar as possible to the original; to increase the variety of assessment types to include practice-based and authentic tasks; to ensure it would be accessible and easy to use by having a variety of colleagues working on it in different capacities (*e.g*., programme leaders, administrators); to make it flexible enough to be slightly customisable by programme teams; to keep the costs of production and maintenance to a minimum, as we were aware this would be a 'bridging' tool in preparation for a new curriculum management system. Having considered different options, we agreed that a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, customised and tailored to our needs, could replicate the functionalities and advantages of MMA without requiring any additional training or the creation of multiple accounts for staff.

Technical specifications of the project

The new MMA is an Excel-based solution for visual display of the academic year's full range and types of assessment, so that programme leaders and teaching teams may improve the student learning experience by even distribution of assessments to prevent work overload.

On the basis of the previous MMA platform design, we gathered and organised on an Excel spreadsheet the data for all assessment types and their scheduling across the programme, with columns for assessment types (*e.g*., exams, written coursework, oral assessment, simulation of professional practice), scheduled deadline weeks and assessment weights. The

format both enabled consistent input of new data and streamlined data management, each type of assessment having been assigned a unique label for easy filtering and sorting.

Conditional formatting significantly improved readability and ease of use, with distinct colours and shapes representing each assessment type (*e.g.*, exams, red rectangles; written coursework, blue circles; professional practice simulations, navy squares) and varying size for the shapes to indicate respective assessment weights.

We designed a spreadsheet (figure 1) to aggregate and categorise data by assessment type and deadline within each week. After evaluating and testing various data types and chart options, including pivot tables and bubble charts, we – and specifically Nicoleta, the student consultant – determined that a scatter chart was the most suitable choice. Consistency with the previous MMA platform's key features, usability, user digital literacy and visual clarity of assessment types, weights and deadline weeks all dictated this choice. The scatter chart thus offers a dynamic, at-a-glance summary of assessment distribution over the term, so highlighting any possible periods of overlap/clustering. Programme teams can manually input assessment details into a designated data entry area (figure 2), whereupon the scatter chart (figure 3) updates automatically to provide an immediate, customised visualisation.

Excel has proved to be a practical, low-cost, sustainable alternative that has most of the original app's functionality. Though that app may have offered automated data analysis, the Excel solution is readily available, intuitive and adaptable by anyone with basic spreadsheet skills.

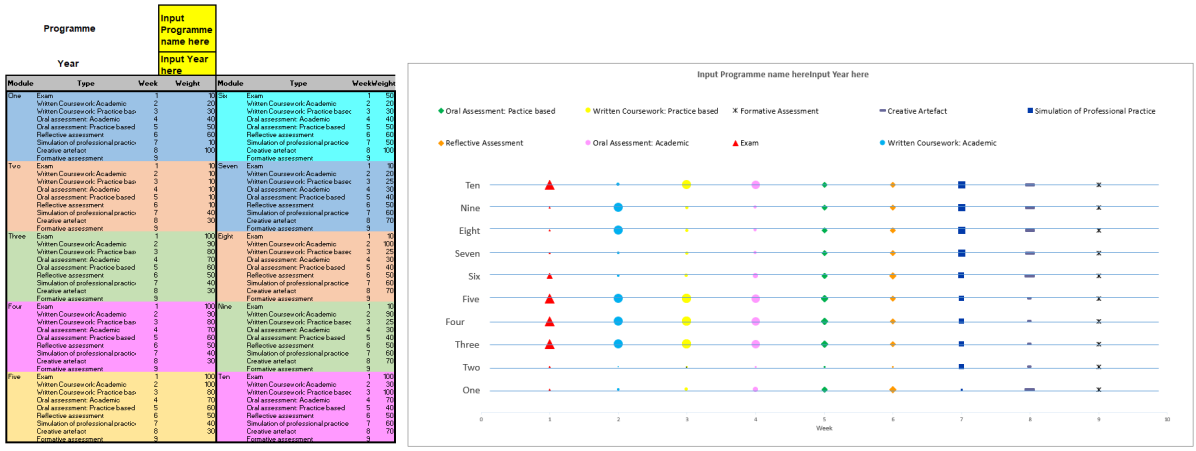

Figure 1. MMA spreadsheet overview

Programme	Input Programme name here
Year	Input Year here

Module	Type	Week	Weight	Module	Type	Week	Weight
One	Exam	1	10	Six	Exam	1	50
	Written Coursework: Academic	2	20		Written Coursework: Academic	2	20
	Written Coursework: Practice bas	3	30		Written Coursework: Practice basec	3	30
	Oral assessment: Academic	4	40		Oral assessment: Academic	4	40
	Oral assessment: Practice based	5	50		Oral assessment: Practice based	5	50
	Reflective assessment	6	60		Reflective assessment	6	60
	Simulation of professional practic	7	10		Simulation of professional practice	7	50
	Creative artefact	8	100		Creative artefact	8	100
	Formative assessment	9			Formative assessment	9	
Two	Exam	1	10	Seven	Exam	1	10
	Written Coursework: Academic	2	10		Written Coursework: Academic	2	20
	Written Coursework: Practice bas	3	10		Written Coursework: Practice basec	3	25
	Oral assessment: Academic	4	10		Oral assessment: Academic	4	30
	Oral assessment: Practice based	5	10		Oral assessment: Practice based	5	40
	Reflective assessment	6	10		Reflective assessment	6	50
	Simulation of professional practic	7	40		Simulation of professional practice	7	60
	Creative artefact	8	30		Creative artefact	8	70
	Formative assessment	9			Formative assessment	9	
Three	Exam	1	100	Eight	Exam	1	10
	Written Coursework: Academic	2	90		Written Coursework: Academic	2	100
	Written Coursework: Practice bas	3	80		Written Coursework: Practice basec	3	25
	Oral assessment: Academic	4	70		Oral assessment: Academic	4	30
	Oral assessment: Practice based	5	60		Oral assessment: Practice based	5	40
	Reflective assessment	6	50		Reflective assessment	6	50
	Simulation of professional practic	7	40		Simulation of professional practice	7	60
	Creative artefact	8	30		Creative artefact	8	70
	Formative assessment	9			Formative assessment	9	
Four	Exam	1	100	Nine	Exam	1	10
	Written Coursework: Academic	2	90		Written Coursework: Academic	2	90
	Written Coursework: Practice bas	3	80		Written Coursework: Practice basec	3	25
	Oral assessment: Academic	4	70		Oral assessment: Academic	4	30
	Oral assessment: Practice based	5	60		Oral assessment: Practice based	5	40
	Reflective assessment	6	50		Reflective assessment	6	50
	Simulation of professional practic	7	40		Simulation of professional practice	7	60
	Creative artefact	8	30		Creative artefact	8	70
	Formative assessment	9			Formative assessment	9	
Five	Exam	1	100	Ten	Exam	1	100
	Written Coursework: Academic	2	100		Written Coursework: Academic	2	30
	Written Coursework: Practice bas	3	80		Written Coursework: Practice basec	3	100
	Oral assessment: Academic	4	70		Oral assessment: Academic	4	70
	Oral assessment: Practice based	5	60		Oral assessment: Practice based	5	40
	Reflective assessment	6	50		Reflective assessment	6	50
	Simulation of professional practic	7	40		Simulation of professional practice	7	60
	Creative artefact	8	30		Creative artefact	8	70
	Formative assessment	9			Formative assessment	9	

Figure 2. MMA spreadsheet data input area

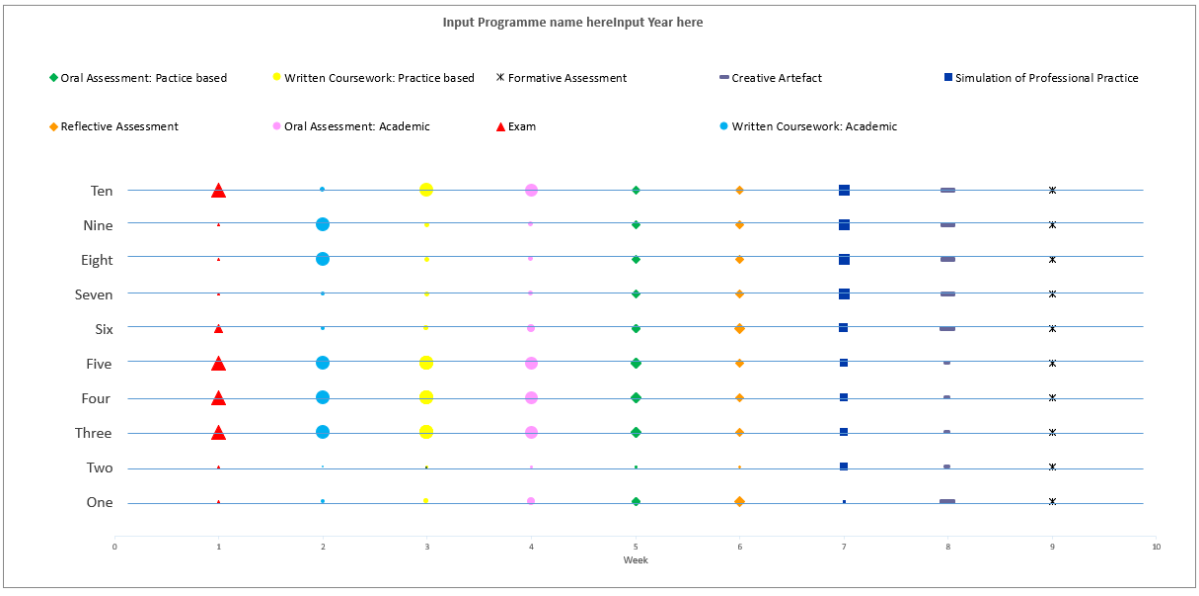

Figure 3. MMA data visualisation chart

Student-staff collaborations, practice-based learning and employability

Practice-based learning is an educational approach where students gain knowledge and skills through real-world, practical experience. It combines theoretical learning with hands-on practice, allowing learners to apply concepts in authentic contexts (Billett, 2015). One aspect we wanted to stress when collaborating on the project was the authentic challenge we had to overcome in designing a complex tool, modelled on a previous more sophisticated one, with minimal resources and limited time.

Nicoleta was actively involved in the project from its early stages. Her contribution, particularly in this section, brings a valuable student perspective that complements the academic discussion. Including the student voice in this way is an intentional act of co-creation, reflecting our commitment to collaborative research and shared authorship. In this section, the student consultant's insights are presented in the first person to preserve the authenticity of her experience and role within the project.

The MMA became for all of us, and particularly for Nicoleta, a hands-on, problem-solving experience that could put into action elements of the practice-based learning and group simulation work she was experiencing in her own curriculum. Our student-staff co-constructed artefact was the ideal vehicle for this.

We understand that student-staff partnerships are considered to be a catalyst for academic success, inclusivity and transformation of learning spaces, as they recognise the right of students to drive actively their educational experience. Integral to their success is a collaborative approach that deconstructs traditional hierarchies within higher education and forms a sustainable way of developing student engagement, pedagogical practice, and learning communities (Bovill, 2019). Collaborative working manifests itself through complementary expertise: staff have significant expertise (*e.g.*, discipline, pedagogy, research) in their area and, in this case, in assessment strategy development; students have expertise in what it is like to be student learners and therefore well understand how their experiences at the university might be enhanced (Boyle *et al*., 2024; Matthews *et al*., 2019). Working together in this way builds relationships that enhance student learning, retention, and graduate outcomes (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019; Crawford, 2012).

Moreover, driving factors like the marketisation of education and the evolving demands of the labour market have recently raised the importance of employability in higher education (Kornelakis and Petrakaki, 2020). Though there is no single definition of 'employability', it is generally understood as the set of skills, knowledge and attributes that enable graduates to secure employment and succeed in it. This includes not only technical skills specific to a field of study, but also transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking and teamwork (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). The increasing influence of digitalisation has created a demand for new skills and necessitates continuing reskilling and upskilling (Kornelakis and Petrakaki, 2020). Hence, employability is not a static concept, but rather a dynamic and evolving set of attributes that respond to changing labour market needs. As staff and co-creators of this project, we found working with Nicoleta to be a rewarding and enriching experience. Her expertise in Excel and strong commitment to the project were truly impressive. Throughout the development of the MMA tool, we faced several bottlenecks, but continuing dialogue and mutual learning with Nicoleta helped us to navigate these challenges effectively. This collaborative process deepened our understanding of co-creation in practice and

significantly enhanced the quality of the final output; we found the experience both effective and highly satisfying.

By involving students in the co-construction process, as in this case study, we can tap into their understanding of their own needs and goals and we can ensure that employability initiatives align with their needs and the realities of the job market. Furthermore, student-staff co-construction may promote students' ownership and engagement. When students are actively involved in shaping their own employability development, they are more likely to be invested in the process and take responsibility for their own learning (Cheng *et al*., 2022). Nicoleta reflected on her experience, providing valuable insights into how this co-creation process helped her enhance her skills, learning and employability:

As a student and co-creator of this project, working on the development of the MMA tool helped me build practical skills in data analysis, project coordination and collaborative problem-solving. This experience also gave me a deeper insight into the dynamics of academic co-creation and its value in real-world contexts. As a student and co-creator of this project, I had the opportunity to develop key skills in communication, collaboration and problem-solving, all of which have strengthened my employability. Working on a tool that would be used directly within our university came with the responsibility of ensuring its reliability and efficiency. This was particularly challenging, owing to the number of variables and dynamic elements involved. However, through collaboration, idea-sharing and continuous testing, we were able to overcome these obstacles. The part I enjoyed most was testing the final version – and seeing it tested – because it not only helped identify bottlenecks more efficiently, but also brought a strong sense of satisfaction when improvements were made. I felt genuinely proud of what we had achieved. Ultimately, this project gave me the chance to approach a complex challenge from multiple perspectives and consider a range of deliverables. It was fun, demanding and extremely rewarding.

As Boyle *et al*. (2024) suggest, for students to be a success, the nature and extent of their involvement must be decided alongside staff in the planning stages of developing a timeline and project plan for curriculum development. The MMA project placed the student at the very heart of the university ‘backstage’ work (meaning the administrative and regulatory aspects of teaching and learning) that are usually unseen by students, but of great importance to shaping their experience and outcomes (Khan and Hemsley-Brown, 2024). The choice of a low-production medium, a highly customised Excel spreadsheet, was also key in determining the success of the partnership as it allowed us to approach the project from a problem-solving perspective (Bender-Salazar, 2023) rather than from the perspective of disciplinary or technical expertise. This provided scope for experimentation and circular feedback between all of us participants. As the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) framework has specified, employability skills including information technology (IT), teamwork, communication and problem-solving (Kornelakis and Petrakaki, 2020), can be developed through experiential learning in collaborative projects such as ours. We all contributed as equal players in the development of MMA, by discussing its functionalities and purpose within the limitations of what the spreadsheet could offer. Nicoleta reflected on the project’s usefulness:

> *This was an authentic task leading to the completion of a tangible artefact and allowed me, as a student and co-creator of this project, to make connections between the muddy and often pragmatic nature of much of university work (Dean and Geertsema, 2023).*

Implementation and evaluation

The MMA Spreadsheet has been designed to be incredibly user-friendly. The only action required by users is to input their data. The spreadsheet simplifies the process of managing and analysing data, making it accessible even to those not highly conversant with Excel. During the development process, we also invited staff with varying levels of digital literacy to participate in usability testing, helping us adjust the tool to be more intuitive. To support staff in using the tool, we developed tutorials in both document and video formats, offering step-by-step guidance. These resources, along with regular communications, are hosted on our website and Moodle resource site for easy access and updates. The assessment types selected for the spreadsheet also informed the development of our new assessment and feedback framework, where they have been used to exemplify assessment types encouraged for use across programmes.

The complexity of evaluating impact in academic development work has been thoroughly discussed (Jones *et al*., 2017; Miller-Young and Poth, 2022), as has determining the success of student engagement initiatives (Austen and Donnelly, 2023). In the case of MMA, the metrics and evidence used to determine how the tool is being used and what impact it is having are also multilayered. Until November 6th, 2024, ten users have accessed our Moodle tutorial and viewed the asynchronous resources on the MMA spreadsheet over 400 times, and positive comments have been received from colleagues in faculties using it.

The tool is linked to the quality assurance documentation staff are asked to complete in preparation for programme approval and review and routinely used as part of programme design workshops (six delivered at the time of writing the article across all the university faculties). This suggests that it is recognised as a valid tool for supporting planning; it also stands scrutiny from a regulatory perspective. However, as it was designed to support staff over the transition to a new curriculum management tool, the use of MMA has not been strictly monitored as a requirement for programme review and approval. MMA has been promoted in continuous professional development (CPD) sessions relating to assessment design and planning assessment at programme level (four delivered at the time of writing this article, and attended by over 100 members of staff), but it was decided not to make its use compulsory. A more comprehensive evaluation will be carried out when the new curriculum management tool will be implemented (from the autumn of 2025) as the key principles of assessment design in the tool have been developed to mirror the same categories of MMA.

Limitations

While the tool developed for this research received positive feedback from both collaborative students and users, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

- The tool was designed using Excel rather than a dedicated software application, which may limit its scalability and functionality. Excel, though versatile and cost-effective for this project, may not support advanced features or integrations that could enhance user experience and functionality in later versions.
- The choice of Excel could affect usability for users unfamiliar with spreadsheet-based tools, potentially limiting broader accessibility. Future iterations of the tool might

benefit from more specialised software to support enhanced functionality and user interface improvements.

- We examine a collaborative project involving a single student – one of the authors – to explore the impact of co-construction on employability skills development. While the project provided valuable insights into the student's engagement and skills' enhancement, the limited sample size prevents us from drawing generalisable conclusions regarding its effectiveness in improving employability outcomes. The absence of comparative data from a larger group means that findings are specific to this individual's experience. Consequently, this study serves as an exploratory example, highlighting potential benefits of co-construction for student development rather than offering definitive evidence of broader employability impact. Future research with larger participant cohorts is recommended to investigate further the implications of co-constructed projects on employability skills. This limitation underscores the importance of context and individual variability in educational research, particularly in studies examining single-case examples.

Conclusion

In developing the MMA tool, the three authors – two members of staff and a student – co-created an evolving opportunity to hone project management and technical skills relevant to employability. According to the student consultant's reflection, this hands-on involvement allowed her to contribute meaningfully to the project while enhancing her practical skills, making it a valuable experience both academically and professionally. This approach replaced a discontinued custom app with a cost-effective, accessible solution that supports strategic assessment planning.

Furthermore, providing Nicoleta with opportunities to work alongside professionals and apply her skills in real-world contexts through a collaborative project significantly enhanced her graduate employability (Abelha *et al*., 2020). In this project, Nicoleta reflected:

> *As a student and co-creator with an engineering background, I worked closely with staff to design and implement an assessment tool, gaining hands-on experience in data visualisation, project management and problem-solving. This collaborative setting helped me develop key workplace skills including communication, adaptability and technical proficiency in Excel. By translating staff requirements into a functional tool, I not only strengthened my technical abilities, but also gained insight into project dynamics, client expectations and iterative development processes.*

As staff and co-creators, this project also offered us a valuable opportunity to explore meaningful student-staff collaboration in practice. The co-creation process fostered a shared sense of ownership and revealed how student involvement can enrich tool development with fresh perspectives and agile problem-solving. The success of this project highlights its potential to inform similar initiatives in other higher education institutions, particularly those seeking to promote student engagement and authentic learning. From a policy perspective, embedding structured opportunities for student-staff co-creation could support employability agendas and curriculum enhancement. Future research could explore the broader effects of

such co-created tools on learning outcomes, institutional practices and long-term student development.

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