

# Preparing for the module's first synchronous session.

It is important that both staff and students are prepared for what to expect from their first blended learning session, whichever mode of delivery is used. The following guidance is provided to help make that first session run smoothly, to lay the foundation for further successful blended sessions.

## 1. Familiarise yourself and your students with the technology.

Whatever technology you plan to use to support the session (e.g., live streaming the session; asking students to engage through a Padlet; asking them to undertake some pre-session viewing of video content; etc), it is important that teaching staff are familiar with the platform and how it will be used.

Staff who have never (or seldom) used the technology before should undertake appropriate training workshops provided by LTE – full details of these can be found on the [Learning and Development Guide](#) provided by Human Resources and Organisational Development. Alternatively, staff can contact their school's Digital Academic Developer who can help to organise appropriate training for individuals, modules teams or course teams.

Students should be introduced to the technology ahead of the session. A short, narrated screencast video introduction is often the best way to start this, guiding students click by click through the site as they will see it with clear instructions on how to access the technology. Such guides are available via the Student sections of the [Blackboard Help Tab](#). Signpost this and any other appropriate technical help and support to your students ahead of the session. Give students as much time as possible to engage with this – as a rule of thumb, try and provide access to technology one teaching week (five working days) ahead of its first introduction in-session.

Encourage students attending on-site to bring appropriate devices (e.g., laptops, tablets) so each they can engage with the platforms used in-class, and if groupwork activities are to be undertaken this will also make sure each group has suitable devices to engage between them, and, in a Hyflex class, with their digital group members.

## 2. Manage expectations

Teaching staff should manage both their own expectations and those of their students going into the first session.

Keep the stakes low and only start with as much as is necessary. Take time to make sure all the students can engage. Were the students all able to access the pre-session materials? Can the students that are attending the Hyflex session digitally actually see and hear what is going on? Has everyone managed to successfully log into Padlet?

Set the ground rules for the session (both the current session and all subsequent ones). Make it clear what is expected of the students before, during and after the session. E.g., Viewing pre-session content ahead of a Flipped Classroom session is essential; students attending a Hyflex session digitally are expected to use the "Raise Hand" function and wait to be addressed before turning on their microphone; post-session collaboration is expected via the Padlet activity set during class. Students need to understand what is expected of them, but also why this is expected. Sharing (some of) the teaching structure of the module ahead of the first session can help students to understand how their learning will be developed and why the ground rules discussed are important.

## 3. Structure the session

As with any purely on-site face-to-face session, it is important that the blended session is properly structured to keep students engaged in whichever mode they are attending. Outline the session structure at the beginning so the students know what to expect.

If students are attending digitally, be mindful that they may have been sitting in front of a screen through several sessions before yours, so make sure that appropriate breaks are included to give digital and on-site face-to-face

students suitable opportunities to move around, but make sure students are clear on the length of break (“I will be starting again promptly at twenty-five-past”).

Remember that not everything that can be done in the physical room will easily translate for students attending digitally. For example, when writing on the whiteboard in the classroom, can the digital students view this properly? Can you replace this with the Blackboard Collaborate whiteboard or a screen share of a OneNote page instead?

In the first Flipped session, it is likely that many students will not have undertaken the pre-session activity, so prepare some time to go over that activity with the class if necessary (allow them time to read the case study or watch the video; or perhaps have a pre-made summary available to avoid a lengthy detour from the session structure). Make sure that the students are clearly instructed that this will not be repeated for future sessions and that the pre-session work is necessary if they are to engage in future synchronous sessions.

When setting a task, confirm with the students that they fully understand what they are supposed to do, and how, before they begin. A lack of understanding of either the task or the tool used to undertake it can usually be overcome at the start of the task.

Schedule time for feedback on a given activity – not just on the content of the activity but on the activity itself. How did the students find the activity? Did it make sense? Did the technology work? Were there hurdles that they struggled to overcome? Understanding how the students engaged with the activity can help in planning for future sessions, as well as giving staff another opportunity to signpost any support services or materials that may help students.

Provide time at the end of the session to clearly summarise the session’s objectives and key points, and signpost students to what they need to do next in terms of independent learning and preparation for subsequent synchronous sessions.

#### **4. Be inclusive in your approach.**

Make sure all session materials (Word, PowerPoint, PDF documents particularly) meet accessibility standards. The Check Accessibility tool in Word & PowerPoint can highlight accessibility issues while writing the document, and Blackboard Ally will highlight any additional accessibility issues when uploaded into Blackboard. Make sure these are addressed ahead of the materials being released to students so that all students can access the resources equitably.

Make sure that any session materials (pre-session content, session slides & handouts etc) are made available to all students ahead of time.

Pre-session materials should be provided a few days in advance of the session to give students flexibility to engage with them at a suitable time during their independent study.

In-session materials should be provided at least one working day in advance of the session, to give students the opportunity to download content, log into relevant systems etc.

As previously mentioned, when introducing a new technology, try and give students five working days prior to the session to connect to the technology, familiarise themselves with it and sort out any technical issues they have with the help of IT services.

Record sessions wherever appropriate, and upload recordings to ReCap to allow for them to be auto captioned. This will allow students to replay the session, providing suitable captioning for those who need it, and allows those students who were unable to attend to catch-up with anything they have missed.

#### **5. Engaging students**

Keep an eye on the level of engagement from each student. Not all students will engage immediately, and it is important to gently encourage engagement while not placing too much pressure too quickly on those who are finding it difficult to engage.

In Hyflex classes, pay particular attention to the students who are attending digitally – it is often easier to notice lack of engagement in physically attending students than in those attending digitally, so it can be important to show those students that you are paying attention and that their input is just as important as those in the classroom. Make sure you ask for answers equitably between the digital and on-site face-to-face students. Consider how platform notifications (e.g., alerts when a digital student raises their hand) will impact upon class time – will regular “pings” direct your attention to digital student activity, or will it become annoying for those in the room – and make sure you balance out your approach (e.g. turn off notifications for students entering/exiting the room, but keep them on for hand raises).

In Flipped classes, keep note of those students who have not undertaken the pre-session activities. During the first session, many students may not have engaged with this for a variety of reasons, and encouragement to undertake these can be important. Most students should quickly fall into good study habits to prepare for their synchronous sessions but keeping track of those who repeatedly come to class unprepared can allow for interventions to support the student – it may not be a lack of willingness to engage but other reasons (understanding, personal circumstances, workload etc). Picking this up early can help to keep the student engaging with their studies and provide them any necessary support from the course team or the various support services across the university.

Use of engagement technologies like Padlet and Mentimeter can provide an easy and enjoyable way to have students (both on-site face-to-face and digital) interacting across the whole session and can help to foster interest in the content and understanding of it, as well as beginning to build a sense of community between students attending in different modes.

## 6. Create a sense of community.

When running a blended module, not all students may be able to attend synchronous sessions together. Students may be split between different modes of attendance or different iterations of the class, so it is important to develop the sense of community within the module.

Set short digital icebreaker activities ahead of class, where possible making these relevant to the first session so the students will understand the need to engage with them. This can facilitate cross-session and/or cross-mode interaction, allowing the students to feel more included with their peers.

In a Hyflex session, make sure you allow for interaction between on-site face-to-face and digitally-attending students. Ask a student in the class to respond to a question from a digital student (remember to make sure that the students attending digitally can hear the response!), and vice versa. Don't rely on the students in the physical classroom to provide all the questions and/or responses. If you are setting groupwork activities, where possible mix the groups between the digital and physically attending students.

Where a session is being recording or broadcast, a video of the lecturer should be included where possible, although be aware of digitally-attending students who may be suffering from bandwidth issues, and turn the camera off to assist in those cases. This can provide a greater level of human presence which can be important to help students to remain engaged. (Note that cameras are not currently available in every classroom.)

Running a competitive Mentimeter quiz can be a good way to finish off a session, allowing students to not only assess their understanding of the session's content, but to [engage one another in a friendly competition](#).