

# ACADEMIC STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON AN INSTITUTION-WIDE SHIFT TO ACTIVE BLENDED LEARNING

## *PROSPETTIVE DELLO STAFF ACCADEMICO NEL PASSAGGIO ALL'APPRENDIMENTO ATTIVO E BLENDED DI UNA INTERA ISTITUZIONE UNIVERSITARIA*

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**ABSTRACT** This study identified barriers and enablers of a university-wide pedagogic shift to Active Blended Learning (ABL). ABL is an approach to learning and teaching that promotes student centredness through teaching in small groups, with a focus on sense-making activities and interactions in and outside the physical or virtual learning space. Data gathered through a survey of academic staff, followed by in-depth interviews, were analysed using thematic analysis. The normalisation and effective embedding of digital technology and small group teaching were two major enablers of pedagogic transformation to ABL. Inconsistent teaching practices and the lack of student engagement with learning activities emerged as two of the main barriers. An in-depth understanding of effective, student-focused higher education teaching is a cornerstone of large-scale pedagogic change processes.

Recommendations are put forward for higher education institutions considering changes to their learning and teaching strategies.

**KEYWORDS** Active Blended Learning; Student Engagement; Institutional Change; Innovative Pedagogy; Digital Transformation.

**SOMMARIO** Questo studio identifica barriere e fattori facilitanti rispetto al passaggio all'apprendimento attivo e blended (Active Blended Learning, ABL) di una intera istituzione universitaria. L'ABL è un approccio didattico che mette al centro dei processi di apprendimento gli studenti grazie all'adozione di una didattica in piccoli gruppi, con il fuoco su attività mirate alla costruzione collaborativa di significati attraverso interazioni che avvengono all'interno o all'esterno di ambienti fisici o virtuali. I dati raccolti attraverso una indagine rivolta al personale accademico coinvolto nella trasformazione, seguita da interviste in profondità, sono stati analizzati con metodologie di analisi tematica. I principali fattori facilitanti della trasformazione della didattica universitaria a favore del metodo ABL sono risultati essere la "normalizzazione"<sup>1</sup> e l'integrazione efficace delle tecnologie e di metodi didattici in piccoli gruppi. Le pratiche didattiche poco coerenti con l'approccio ABL e le difficoltà nel coinvolgere gli studenti nelle attività di apprendimento sono invece risultate essere le principali barriere. Di conseguenza, la pietra miliare di una trasformazione su larga scala a favore dell'ABL è una comprensione profonda, da parte dei docenti, dei principi base dell'approccio adottato e dei principi che consentono la realizzazione di un approccio didattico centrato sullo studente. L'articolo formula anche alcune raccomandazioni rivolte ad altre istituzioni universitarie che intendano prendere in considerazione analoghe trasformazioni delle loro pratiche didattiche.

**PAROLE CHIAVE** Apprendimento Attivo Blended; Coinvolgimento degli Studenti; Cambiamenti Istituzionali; Pedagogia Innovativa; Trasformazione Digitale.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on the University of Northampton (UoN) academic staff perceptions on a university wide shift to Active Blended Learning (ABL). The University of Northampton (UoN) is a teaching and employability focused Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the United Kingdom. A significant part of the effort needed to realize this institutional shift focused on facilitating small group teaching. It is for this reason that the University's new campus, which opened in August 2018, has no lecture theatres. The new campus has a strong technological infrastructure, facilitating blended practices which can be said to facilitate a student-centred approach to teaching practices (Crawford, 2017; Matzen & Edmunds, 2007). Class size is seen as an important factor, as large numbers can negatively impact student satisfaction with teaching (Monks & Schmidt, 2011; Sapelli & Illanes, 2016), learning (e.g. Arias &

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1 Integrazione a regime (ndt).

Walker, 2004; Bandiera, Larcinese, & Rasul, 2010; Camfield, McFall, & Land, 2016) and academic success (Partridge, Ponting, & McCay, 2011), affecting particularly low ability students (De Paola, Ponzio, & Scoppa, 2013). It has also been argued that active learning is more prominent and successful in smaller groups (e.g. Monks & Schmidt, 2011; Wright, Bergom, & Bartholomew, 2017).

Student engagement is a significant area of interest for both practitioners and those developing institutional policies in Education. While defining student engagement can be challenging due to its complexity (e.g. Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Ben-Eliyahu, Moore, Dorph, & Schunn, 2018), most definitions relate it to the actions students take in their learning experiences (Appleton et al., 2008; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Kuh, 2009; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Considering the sector-wide concern with student engagement (e.g. Masika & Jones, 2016; Thomas, 2012), Active Blended Learning (ABL) is the institution's pedagogic approach to promote engagement, defined by the University's strategy<sup>2</sup> as:

*"[...] a pedagogical approach that combines sense-making activities with focused interactions (with content, peers and tutors) in appropriate learning settings – in and outside the classroom. ABL focuses on engaging students in knowledge construction, reflection and critique, on the development of learner autonomy and of course, on the achievement of learning outcomes"*.

ABL means that students learn through activities that develop their subject knowledge and confidence in applying professional skills through small group teaching in close interaction with tutors. They are given opportunities to discuss ideas, experiment, work in teams and receive feedback, as well as develop digital fluency. In doing so, students engage in activities that reflect the workplace and benefit from flexibility in relation to time, place and pace.

This pedagogic approach has been progressively adopted by UoN since 2013. This article reports on the perceptions of academic staff on this large-scale pedagogic transformation. The findings are discussed to identify key enabling forces and barriers as well as recommendations to the effective implementation of ABL.

## **2. STATE OF THE ART**

This section first considers key issues in contemporary higher education (HE) learning and teaching, with a focus on how organisational change unfolds in universities. It first describes the context within which this institutional pedagogic shift took place. It then explores relevant literature on active learning and blended learning, before presenting ABL as flexible, multidimensional construct and pedagogic approach.

### **2.1. Higher Education in a Digital World**

Large organisations tend to resist change (e.g. Dubois, Bentein, Mansour, Gilbert, & Bedard, 2014; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004) as do many educators in HE when the change, such as the incorporation of new technologies (Johnson,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/ilt/current-projects/defining-abl/>

Wisniewski, Kuhlemeyer, Isaacs, & Krzykowski, 2012) is likely to affect their teaching methods (Partridge et al., 2011). Digital technology is frequently used, arguably uncritically at times, in an attempt to enhance teaching quality (Orton-Johnson, 2009; Adams Becker et al., 2017) and to prepare graduates for the workplace (Ornellas, Falkner, & Stalbrandt, 2019). Over the past two decades there has been an increased focus on the student digital experience and associated practices, based on research into learners' experiences of elearning (Sharpe, Beetham, Benfield, DeCicci, & Lessner, 2009; Sharpe, Beetham, & De Freitas, 2010; Beetham & Sharpe, 2019). Research and guidance on enhancing digital capability within HEIs have also proved important (e.g. Jisc, 2018), including shifts from using virtual learning environments primarily as content repositories to more student-centred and pedagogically integrated practices (Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini, 2021).

The perspectives of academic staff on an institution-wide pedagogic shift to active blended learning (e.g. Armellini & Padilla Rodriguez, 2021; Teixeira Antunes, Armellini, & Howe, 2021) is the focal point of this article. Part of the discussion is on how digital technologies, which play a central role in this shift, are perceived as a barrier by some and as an enabler by others. Those perceptions influence how participants respond to and engage with this institutional shift.

## **2.2. Active Learning**

Active learning was defined by Bonwell and Eison (1991) as learning through activities that involve '*students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing*' (p. 19). Freeman et al. (2014) add that this involvement is "[...] *opposed to passively listening to an expert*" and link it with higher-order thinking. Collaborative approaches are becoming increasingly more prominent, as the student is recognised as having an active role in the learning and teaching experience (Andres, 2019), despite most HEIs still relying on lecturing as a primary *delivery* approach (e.g. Schmidt, Cohen-Schotanus, & Van der Molen, 2010; Schmidt, Wagener, Smeets, Keemink, & van der Molen, 2015). Lecturing may be adequate to convey information to large groups of students (Bligh, 2000) but seems inadequate to fulfil goals such as promoting broader skills and deeper levels of learning (Entwistle, 2009; Karagiannopoulou & Entwistle, 2013; Karagiannopoulou & Milienos, 2015; Marton & Saljo, 1976). Small group teaching has been linked to the enhancement of learning (e.g. Arias & Walker, 2004; Bandiera et al., 2010; Camfield et al., 2016), and promoting deeper learning (e.g. Hew & Cheung, 2011), partly because it facilitates active learning (e.g. Monks & Schmidt, 2011; Wright, Bergom, & Bartholomew, 2017). In active learning environments students feel more engaged (Zepke & Leach, 2010) and have more opportunities to take part in varied collaborative strategies (Palmer, Lomer, & Bashliyska, 2017; Prince, 2004). Harden and Crosby (2000) note that the focus of learning is on "*what students do to achieve this [learning]*" (p. 335), which suggests that the student is expected to play an active part in the learning experience. To ensure success in a student-centred approach (O'Sullivan, 2004; Weimer, 2002) students may be given the opportunity to lead on the learning and teaching process. From a constructivist perspective, the learner's active engagement, exploration and discovery, as well as the ability to operate independently, are key to effective learning (Carlile & Jordan, 2005).

A major component of staffs' perceptions is their knowledge, understanding and practice of active learning within a digitally-rich higher education environment. Pedagogically appropriate blends of teaching methods and technologies

can be deployed to deliver an enhanced learning experience. This article explores the perspectives of academic staff on an institutional shift to a pedagogic approach that places interactive student learning at its heart.

### **2.3. Blended Learning**

Blended learning (BL) is a difficult concept to define (Smith & Hill, 2019). Many practitioners use Garrison and Vaughn's (2008) definition, which portrays BL as learning that includes face-to-face and online elements. Some interpret that definition simply as providing online access to activities and resources used in face to face sessions (Laurillard & Ljubojevic, 2011). However, the concept of BL is arguably more complex and multi-layered (Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini, 2021). The interpretations of BL vary in relation to:

- 1) the ratio of face-to-face to online elements (Allen, Seaman & Garrett, 2007; Bernard et al., 2014; Sener, 2015);
- 2) the activities incorporated (e.g. Bernard, Borokhovski, Schmid, Tamim, & Abrami, 2014);
- 3) level of guidance and tutor support provided (Borup, Graham & Drysdale, 2014; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010; Tomkin & Charlevoix, 2014; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010);
- 4) how technology is used and its quality or ease of use (Gan, Menkhoof, & Smith, 2015; Heirdsfield, Walker, Tambyah, & Beutel, 2011); and
- 5) how assessment is integrated into the blend (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Kaia, & Jones, 2010; Vaughn, 2014).

Other authors suggest the complexity of the concept merits the use of alternative terms such as *blended pedagogies* (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). However, the concept continues to be very loosely defined, arguably in rather simplistic, unidimensional terms, often revolving around a continuum from classroom-based activity to learning taking place in the online domain.

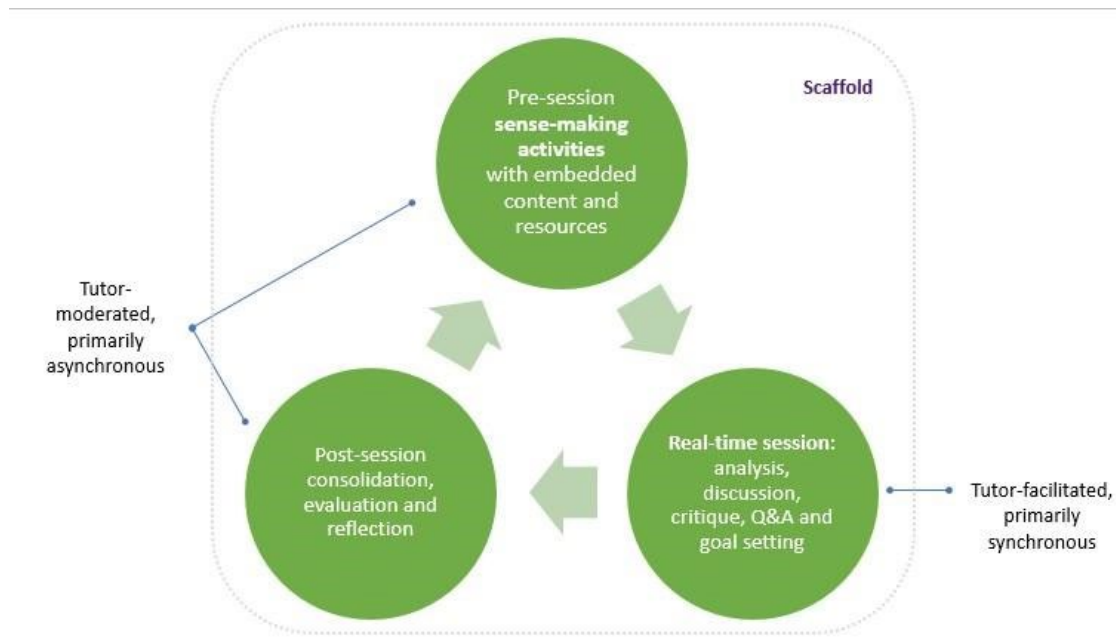
Regardless of the definition adopted, BL should facilitate learning experiences which would not be possible without digital resources (Adams Becker et al., 2017). Such experiences have the potential to have a positive impact on student retention and academic achievement (e.g. Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003; Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011; Potter, 2015), as well as on student engagement (Dringus & Seagull, 2013; Halverson, Graham, Spring, Drysdale, & Henrie, 2014; Kaleta, Skibba, K., & Joosten, 2007; Reynard, 2007).

Some research suggests that 'the future is blended' (Lawton et al., 2013, p. 8; p. 31). Applications of BL are prevalent in contemporary HE (Adams Becker et al., 2017; Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, Norberg, & Sicilia, 2018). BL is often seen as an approach that can promote a more student-centred approach to teaching practices (Crawford, 2017; Matzen & Edmunds, 2007). As is the case with active learning, the analysis of staff views on a large-scale pedagogic shift to ABL is deeply influenced by their understanding and experience of BL (Teixeira Antunes et al., 2021).

### **2.4. Active Blended Learning (ABL) within an Institutional Context**

ABL is an interactive approach to learning and teaching in HE that applies learning theory within a digitally-rich higher education learning environment, in line with contemporary workplace requirements. ABL prioritises higher

order thinking, learner autonomy, ownership of the learning process, as well as a reflective view of learning and teaching (Armellini & Padilla Rodriguez, 2021). The ABL model does not intend to be prescriptive or advocate pedagogic practices in any fixed order. Figure 1 illustrates the ABL process.



**Figure 1.** The ABL process (Armellini & Padilla Rodriguez. 2021).

The institutional focus on employability implies that providing learning and teaching experiences supported by sense-making tasks and real-life examples (Mikalayeva, 2016) is consistent with the aim to develop social skills (Adams Becker et al., 2017), critical thinking (Shin, Sok, Hyun, & Kim, 2014) and problem-solving skills (Hake, 1998). A blended approach allows for the development of digital capability, which in turn promotes employability prospects, as well as students' potential to generate social impact, in line with the institution's overall strategy Transforming Lives, Inspiring change<sup>3</sup>. Between 2014 and 2018, the entire academic portfolio was redesigned for ABL. All modules and programmes went through a structured redesign process that resulted in new documentation, including aims, learning outcomes and assessment, in line with the principles of ABL. A team approach to learning design based on the Carpe Diem model (Armellini & Jones, 2008; Armellini, Salmon & Hawkrige, 2009) was adapted, applied and scaled up. The University's version of Carpe Diem is called CAIeRO (Creating Aligned Interactive Educational Resource Opportunities) (Farmer & Usher, 2018; Usher, MacNeill and Creanor, 2018). Over 560 CAIeRO workshops involving over 3000 staff attendees were facilitated during this period (note that some staff attended more than one

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/about-us/governance-and-management/management/office-of-the-vice-chancellor/transforming-lives-inspiring-change/>

event). Additional staff development in the areas of course design and teaching practice aligned to ABL was offered to all academic staff.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study investigated staff perspectives on the move to ABL through three research questions:

- 1) How are teaching practices developed and implemented within the ABL framework?
- 2) How can tutors' attitudes regarding the implementation of ABL be characterised?
- 3) What are the perceived enablers and barriers to the implementation of teaching practices within the ABL framework?

#### ***3.1. Ethical consent was provided by the Library and Learning Services Ethics Committee of the researchers' institution.***

This study was structured into two stages. Stage 1 consisted of an electronic survey sent to academic staff via email and institutional forums. Forty-six participants completed the survey. This was a tailored instrument, informed by findings from prior research into barriers to student engagement with ABL (Palmer et al., 2017), as well as an institutional need to evaluate the transition process to ABL. The survey<sup>4</sup> included items in Likert scale and rating ranges which were considered as quantitative data and subject to descriptive analysis; as well as open-ended items providing qualitative data subject to thematic analysis. The survey was piloted on eight members of staff and subsequently adjusted in accordance with the feedback to ensure readability as well as fit with institutional evaluation purposes. All eight members of staff had different roles in relation to the implementation of ABL and suggested areas that would benefit institutional understanding of the impact of implementing ABL. The final version covered the following areas:

- 1) transition from teaching larger to smaller groups;
- 2) activities embedded in current pedagogic practices;
- 3) characterisation of own teaching practice, for example, 'teacher-led, highly focused on content' or 'highly active, student-centred, delivered as a blend';
- 4) understanding and positioning of own practice within the ABL framework;
- 5) beliefs and attitudes towards ABL;
- 6) perception of support available and engagement in professional development.

Stage 2 consisted of semi-structured interviews with 10 academics, in which in-depth qualitative data was collected. A summary of their background, teaching experience and faculty affiliation (Faculty of Health, Education and Society, FHES, or Faculty of Business and Law, FBL) is presented in table 1.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://blogs.northampton.ac.uk/learntech/teaching-practices-survey/>

<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>FACULTY</b>	<b>BACKGROUND</b>
<b>M</b>	10-15	FHES	Further Education
<b>H</b>	5-10	FBL	Professional
<b>K</b>	20+	FBL	Academia
<b>S</b>	5-10	FBL	Professional
<b>A</b>	10-15	FBL	Further Education
<b>F</b>	10-15	FHES	Professional
<b>C</b>	5-10	FHES	Academia
<b>SA</b>	20+	FHES	Academia
<b>G</b>	10-15	FBL	Professional
<b>MJ</b>	10-15	FHES	Academia

**Table 1.** Participants' experience, faculty affiliation and background.

The interviews were informed by prior research (e.g. Palmer et al., 2017), feedback from staff involved in the pilot tests and qualitative data collected in the electronic survey. They were conducted to explore the following aspects:

- 1) past and current views on own and others' teaching practices at the institution;
- 2) own understanding of ABL;
- 3) staff perception of students' satisfaction with teaching practices;
- 4) the effect of rolling out ABL on own teaching practices, as well as on others' teaching practices;
- 5) staff perception of students' outcomes following the implementation of ABL;
- 6) the wider impact of ABL on the University in terms of institutional reputation and credibility.

The number of participants was purposefully limited to allow for deeper analysis of data and provide space and time for participants to have in-depth discussions with the interviewer.



### **3.2. Data analysis**

The survey was developed on the basis of consultation and input from academic staff, learning designers and learning technologists.

The survey items were defined by the researcher and then piloted with a diverse range of colleagues to ensure it was fit for purpose and appropriate to the target respondents.

Quantitative data was analysed through descriptive analysis as the purpose of this stage was to highlight areas of interest to explore in more depth via interviews. The sample size was not sufficient for robust inferential analysis.

NVivo was then used to conduct thematic analysis on the qualitative data collected both in the open-ended items in the survey and interview data. The analysis, carried out by the primary researcher, was then reviewed by an external researcher and discussed with the two other researchers in the project to identify potential inconsistencies.

Thematic data analysis is a suitable methodology to analyse rich, in-depth data from diverse participants (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In the context of the heterogeneity of staff at the University, who have a wide range of teaching and professional backgrounds and deploy a variety of approaches to teaching, this methodology seemed appropriate. The analysis allowed data to guide the analysis instead of constraining it into pre-set themes. The dataset was subsequently narrowed down to highlight the most prevalent themes.

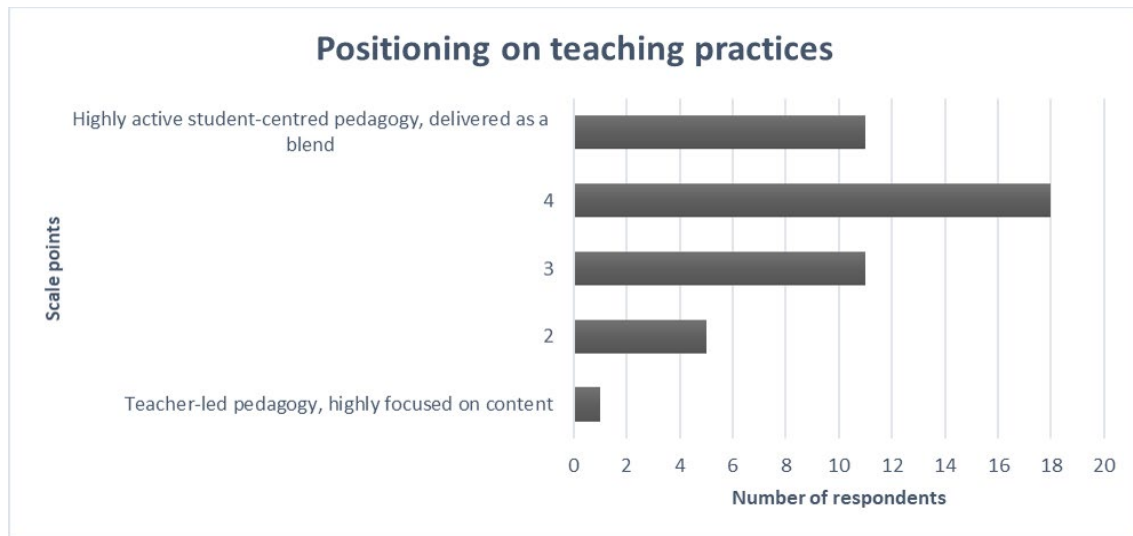
## **4. FINDINGS**

This section discusses the perspectives and experiences of academic staff, based on the data collected from both the survey (N=46) and the interviews (N=10). Each overarching theme raised several relevant sub-themes and areas of focus.

### **4.1. Theme 1 - Pedagogy and Teaching Practices**

#### **4.1.1. Beliefs on ABL**

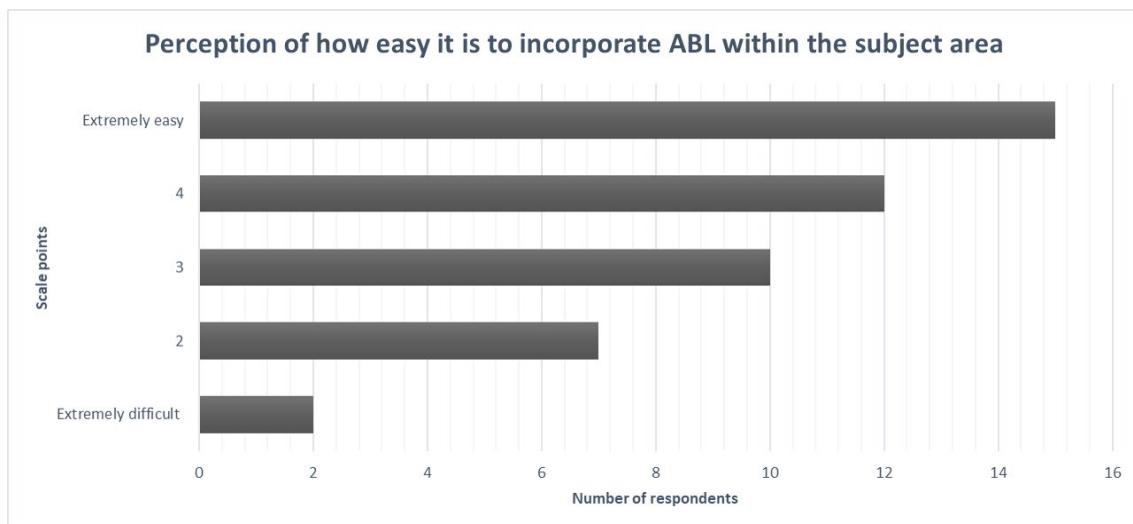
In the survey, academic staff were asked to position their teaching practice on a pedagogic continuum (Figure 2) between a 'Teacher-led pedagogy, highly focused on content' (1) and a 'Highly active student-centred pedagogy, delivered as a blend' (5).



**Figure 2.** Positioning of academic staff on a pedagogic continuum.

While most staff located their practice closer to a student-centred approach, some acknowledge their practice to be more teacher-led and focused on content. Interview data suggests that the concept of ABL is not perceived by all similarly, as some feel ABL is ‘just a label’, while others are concerned about clarifying the meaning of the term.

The survey asked participants to consider how easy it was to implement ABL in the context of their subject. While 15 found it ‘extremely easy’, two still noted it as ‘extremely difficult’ (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Perception of easiness in incorporating ABL within their subject area.

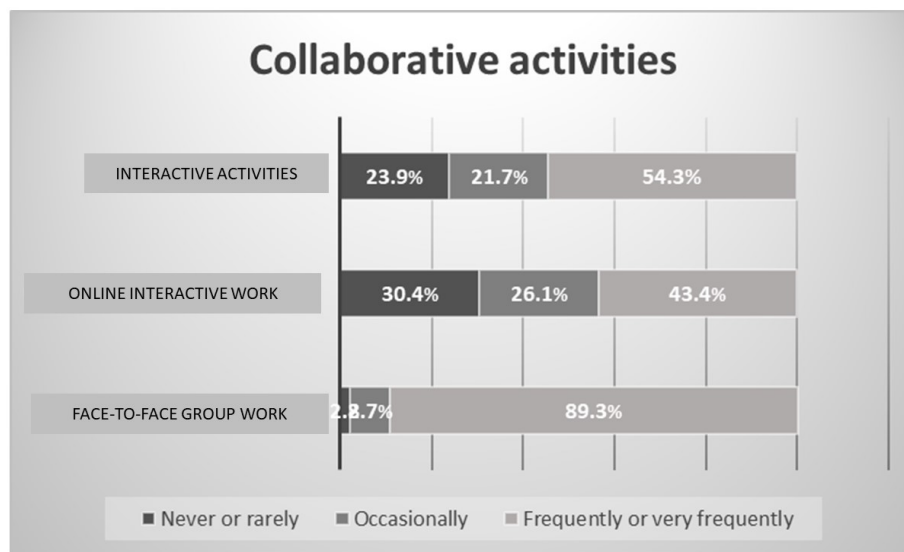
Difficulties in incorporating ABL within subject areas are attributed to students’ lack of subject specific knowledge, particularly in very technical subjects, where academics perceive students as unable to develop independent learning without sufficient staff input:

“[...] very technical knowledge, it isn't something that students can learn by themselves and build on existing knowledge [...]” (Participant K).

Teaching practices are affected by beliefs (Fives & Gill, 2015; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). The view of some participants that ABL is not suitable to their subject areas suggests a form of resistance consistent with negative beliefs about the approach.

### 4.1.2. Teaching Practices

Survey data suggests that the activity most frequently used is group work, which is corroborated by interview data. Group activities are facilitated by small group teaching, which is seen as enhancing relationships. Figure 4 presents the frequency of use of a number of collaborative activities, that is to say, activities designed to foster interactivity. Group work is frequently used; collaborative work through online platforms much less so. The data therefore points to interactivity in non-face-to-face activities as being less valued, which is consistent with interview data, where only three participants mention the issue directly.



**Figure 4.** Collaborative activities used in practice by frequency.

Problem-based activities and case studies are also prevalent in teaching practice, in line with a view to link theory to practice and better prepare students for the workplace. A key finding from the survey data is that many academics identified ‘presenting content’ as an activity used frequently, which suggests a view of teaching as ‘knowledge transmission’. This stance is corroborated by interview data where four participants note the move away from lecturing with a degree of sadness and in one case with a sense of loss of professional identity: “I miss delivering a lecture. I am a lecturer, that is my title, so I miss delivering a proper lecture. (Participant MJ)”. On the other hand, when comparing current practice within an ABL framework with traditional lecturing, the evidence is mixed (Table 2). Some participants acknowledge that lecturing does not promote reflective knowledge building.

However, they do not always see lecturing itself as an issue and feel that it does not need to be replaced as a methodology. Instead, some interviewees suggest that the focus should be on improving teaching skills, which are seen as independent from teaching methodology, raising the view that good teaching is effective regardless of the method. Notions of what a ‘good teacher’ is are diverse, including being engaging even in passive learning settings and involving students in the learning process. For some respondents the teacher is still presented as a broadcaster of information, and although there is recognition of the involvement of the student, this seems secondary:

*“Well, we need to be better at our job and better at transmitting information, better at learning from students, better at involving them”* (Participant G).

	AREAS OF FOCUS
<b>Beliefs about lectures</b>  (mentioned by 7 participants)	Lectures do not provide an opportunity for students to absorb knowledge
	Lecturing can enable effective learning. The focus should be on the quality of delivery
	Virtual lectures are inadequate, not interactive and hindered by IT issues
	Small group teaching enhances engagement and interactivity
	Students may experience an expectation gap as they expect traditional lectures in HE

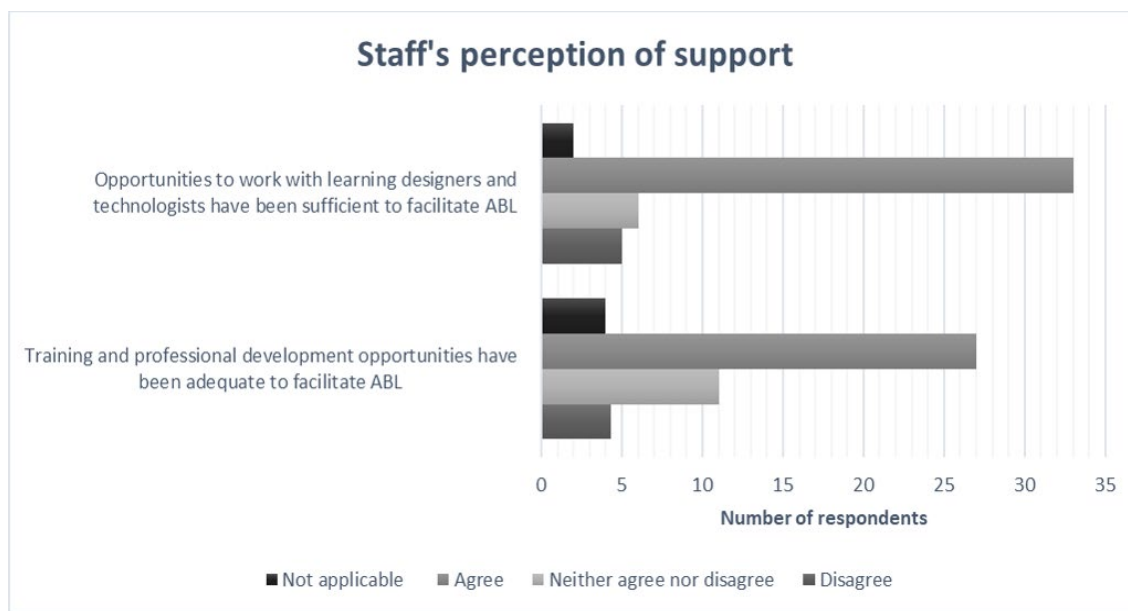
**Table 2.** Areas of focus in interview data coded as ‘Beliefs about lectures’.

The code also includes views concerning the unsuitability of virtual lectures, which are seen as not promoting interactivity and being negatively affected by IT issues.

Participants also raise a concern about students who hold a traditional view of HE. These students might expect lectures to be a core component of teaching practice and may experience a degree of disappointment when taught in an ABL environment. It is also suggested that effective upfront communication is key to overcoming this issue. Respondents argue that communication and social relationships can be enhanced through small group teaching, which is seen as promoting engagement and interactivity.

#### **4.2. Theme 2 - Support for Staff**

Most survey respondents agree that professional development opportunities have been adequate to facilitate ABL (Figure 5). The continuous support provision in the form of a team of centrally-funded learning designers and learning technologists is also seen as a valuable resource. Over three quarters of survey respondents (78%) report having engaged in the CAIeRO learning design process (see section Active Blended Learning (ABL) within an institutional context), which is normally facilitated by a team of learning designers.



**Figure 5.** Support available to implement ABL.

Perspectives on professional development opportunities and support were further explored in the interviews (Table 3).

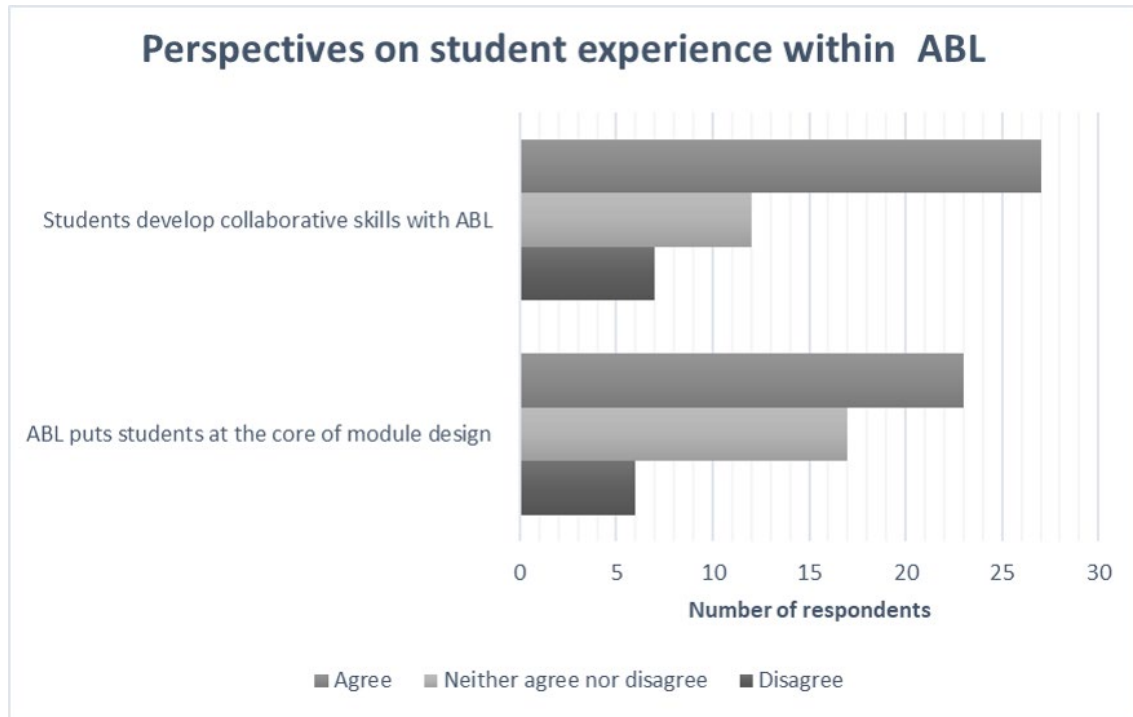
	<b>AREAS OF FOCUS</b>
<b>Professional development and support for staff</b>  (noted by 7 interviewees)	Investment should focus on enhancing teaching practice rather than on implementing a new teaching method
	Workload increased due to multiple teaching limits the range of modules taught, which is seen as a barrier for professional development
	Staff report lack of time to engage with and reflect on professional development opportunities
	Development opportunities do not address staff with very low digital skills
	ABL represents an opportunity to engage with technology more than staff used to do before the implementation of ABL

**Table 3.** Areas of focus in interview data coded as ‘Professional development and support’.

Participants consider that the development of teaching skills provides a better focus than implementing a new methodology. Teaching smaller groups has led to ‘repeat teaching’. With this increased workload, tutors teach a reduced range of modules, which they see as limiting their professional development. Lack of time affects the availability to engage with staff development opportunities. Some participants also feel that continuous development available to them is aimed at intermediate digital users and fails to reach those with low digital skills. A suggestion is made about adjusting staff development provision to suit a broader range of needs. Redesigning modules within an ABL framework provided an opportunity for academic staff to engage with learning technology, sharing experiences and knowledge, and effectively learning from one another.

### 4.3. Theme 3 - Student Experience

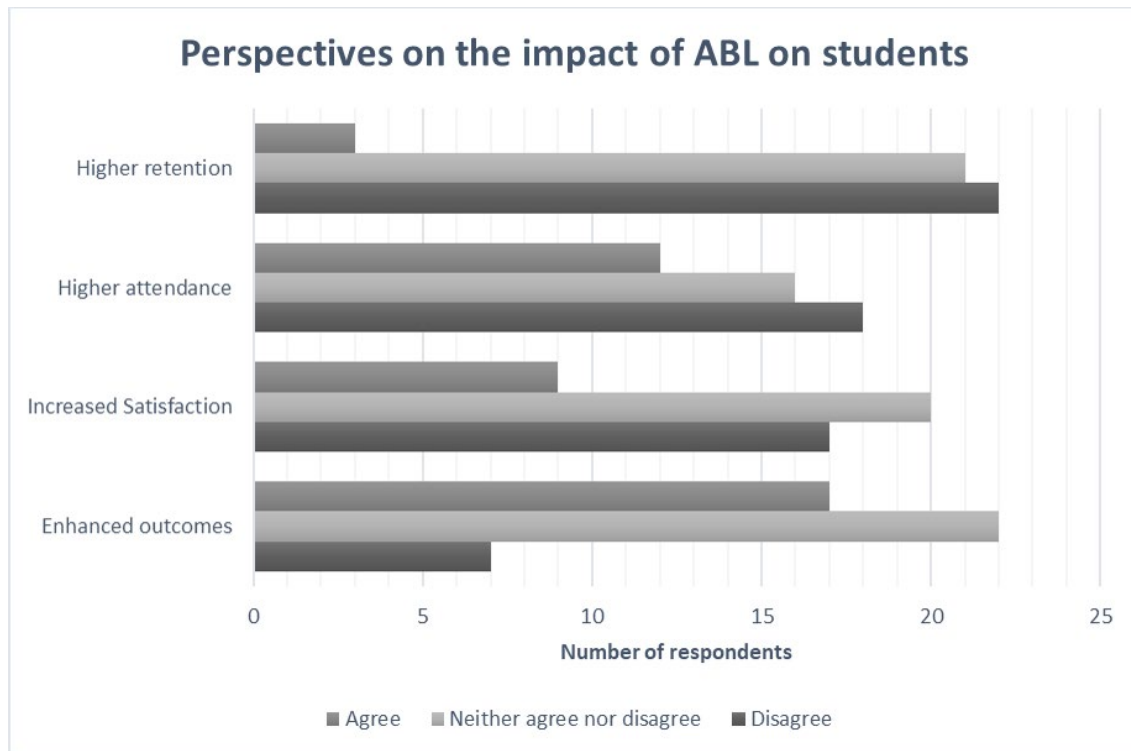
Survey data identified a range of beliefs of staff regarding the student experience. Most participants considered ‘designing and implementing the course with the students at the core’ as very important (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Perspectives on student experience in the context of ABL.

Beliefs about the value of student-centred teaching were consistent, although practices may not always be aligned with these beliefs. There was also a high level of agreement that ABL fosters an environment in which students develop collaboration skills. Small group teaching and a focus on meaningful interactions were perceived as conducive to the development of social skills relevant for employability.

Student satisfaction is one of the areas where participants vary most significantly in their views on ABL (Figure 7). This is an area that was further explored in the interviews.



**Figure 7.** Perspectives on the impact of ABL on students.

Interview data (Table 4) suggests that small group teaching is seen as enhancing interaction and social relationships between academic staff and students and among students themselves, leading to higher student satisfaction.

*“So yeah, from the perception of students' satisfaction, the ones that turn up, I think is quite good. But they're the ones that turn up and are fully committed [...]”* (Participant A).

Although staff report that students do not always appear to understand the concept of ABL, or if it represents a pedagogic shift, participants overall agree that current practices are impacting positively on satisfaction. However, as some participants acknowledge their practice is not framed within ABL, it is not possible to link this satisfaction to the institutional shift to ABL.

	AREAS OF FOCUS
<b>Student satisfaction</b> (noted by 10 interviewees)	Students who are more engaged express higher satisfaction
	Academics' inconsistency in practice affects student satisfaction
	Enhanced social relationships and interactions increase satisfaction
	Current teaching practices are seen as enhancing satisfaction

**Table 4.** Areas of focus in interview data coded as 'student satisfaction'.

All participants showed significant concern about student engagement with learning, particularly in online activities. This concern is consistent with Lomer and Palmer's (2021) research, which notes students are less likely to complete asynchronous than synchronous activities. The study also highlights the importance of designing meaningful and interactive tasks, well integrated with face-to-face provision, to enhance participation.

#### 4.4. Theme 4 - Experience of Academic Staff

The survey explored beliefs about ABL and the influence of this approach on the experiences of academic staff (Figure 8).

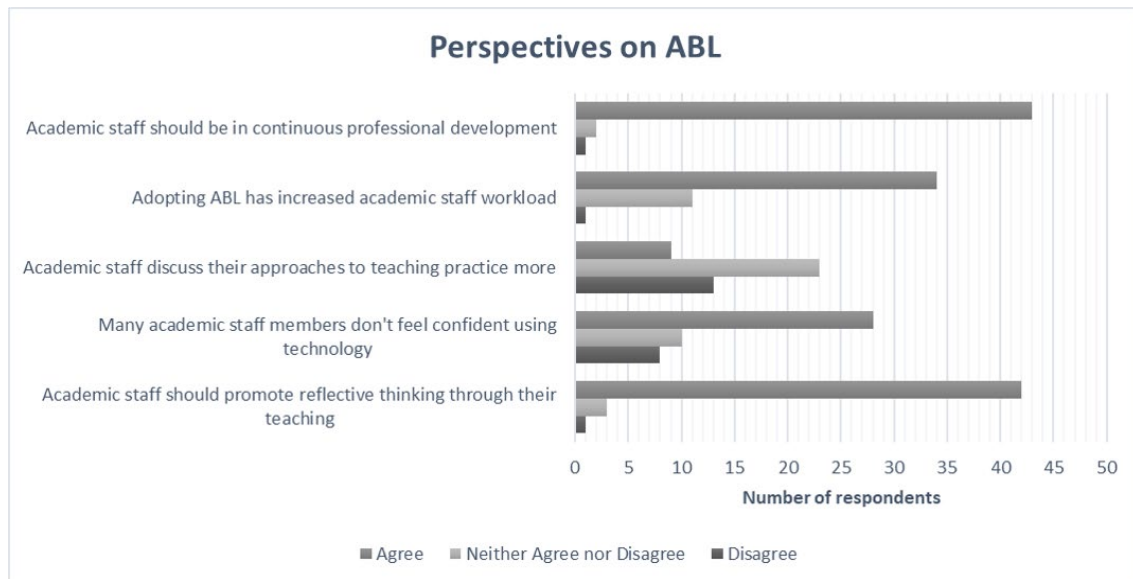


Figure 8. Perspectives on ABL.

Staff understand the importance of continuous professional development, in areas such as digital capability, but state that they often fail to engage due to high workloads, which has a negative impact on teaching practice within the ABL framework.

The understanding of ABL by staff is not always consistent with the institutional definition<sup>5</sup>, which may be linked to inconsistent practices. This inconsistency generates different student experiences, influencing student satisfaction, as students tend to make comparisons between their tutors:

*"[...] they're more satisfied with mine because I speak to them more and I don't just talk for two hours"* (Participant R).

The main hurdle identified by staff in relation to ABL focuses on the blended element (Table 5).

Academics seem to require additional effort to engage with and adjust to blended learning, while the active learning aspect is mainly considered a part of standard teaching practices:

*"We've always done active learning. It's never passive, because the students are always in class, involved in working on problems, working on scenarios, [...] That's what we do. So it's always been active"* (Participant K).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/ilt/current-projects/defining-abl/>



	AREAS OF FOCUS
Blended learning (noted by 7 interviewees)	The concept of blended is understood as meaning 'online'
	The blended element is considered the 'novel' aspect of ABL
	Concern about the lack of student engagement with independent learning activities
	Online resources are seen as insufficient for technical subjects

**Table 5.** Areas of focus in interview data coded as 'blended learning'.

Some staff have indicated that the blended element of ABL has been misinterpreted as an institutional move to distance learning:

*“What everybody thinks it is, is this is online. But it's not. [sic]*

*But once you get into the swing of it, you realise it's not. But a lot of tutors don't understand that still”* (Participant MJ).

This focus on the blended element explains some tutors' resistance to ABL, illustrated by their view that ABL is inadequate for their modules because there are insufficient online resources for their subjects. This is particularly mentioned by those teaching modules that are strongly technical in nature and may reflect a gap in their understanding of how to most effectively implement blended learning tasks.

Staff also report that students often fail to engage with learning activities designed to be completed outside the classroom. These activities include pre-session tasks. As a result, tutors adjust their face-to-face teaching to ensure all students can engage with activities, regardless of whether they have completed the pre-session tasks. This approach ensures that the face-to-face session can run smoothly, but partly defeats the purpose of setting such preparatory activities.

**4.5. Theme 5 - Impact on the Institution**

Survey data suggests that most respondents (N=24) are unsure if ABL has enhanced the University's reputation. Staff expressed mixed views on the impact of ABL (Table 6) on the University, with some considering ABL as a unique selling point making the University a market leader. Others question that view, by arguing that the University has other, equally valuable qualities to offer.

	AREAS OF FOCUS
Impact of ABL on the institution (noted by 8 interviewees)	Focusing on ABL as the unique selling point might detract from other valuable qualities
	Implementing ABL has made the institution a market leader in this pedagogy
	Implementing ABL on a university-wide basis may be a high-risk strategy
	The blended element of ABL is seen as most different from other HEIs
	Extensive and sustained interest in the institution by external stakeholders and institutions suggest positive impact of ABL on the University's reputation

**Table 6.** Areas of focus in interview data coded as 'Impact of ABL on the institution'.

Staff perceive ABL as a dramatic pedagogic shift, deviating significantly from learning and teaching strategies at other HEIs. In particular, blended learning is seen as the most divergent component of ABL. Moving away from what staff see as the norm within the sector, i.e., the traditional lecture-seminar model (Baepler, Walker, & Driessen, 2014; Hake, 1998), is considered by some as a high-risk strategy. This level of integration of an institution-wide approach to learning and teaching into all aspects of pedagogic practice and the University's academic quality processes (e.g. validation, change of approval, periodic review, etc.) is seen as substantially distinct in the sector.

Participants acknowledge that as the concept of ABL embeds further and is more widely applied in practice, the stakeholders' understanding of it will also mature. The very high frequency of academic visits to the Institution is seen as a sign of interest by other HEIs, which benefits the University's reputation and credibility in the sector.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This article addresses the views of staff on the implementation of an institution-wide pedagogic shift. Prior published work explores how tutors' attitudes and beliefs towards ABL influence engagement with the pedagogic framework (Teixeira Antunes et al., 2021) while other work expands on students' experiences and perspectives of learning experiences within ABL (Armellini, Teixeira Antunes, & Howe, 2021). Findings suggest that perspectives on ABL are still dichotomous, often focusing on active learning or blended learning as separate entities.

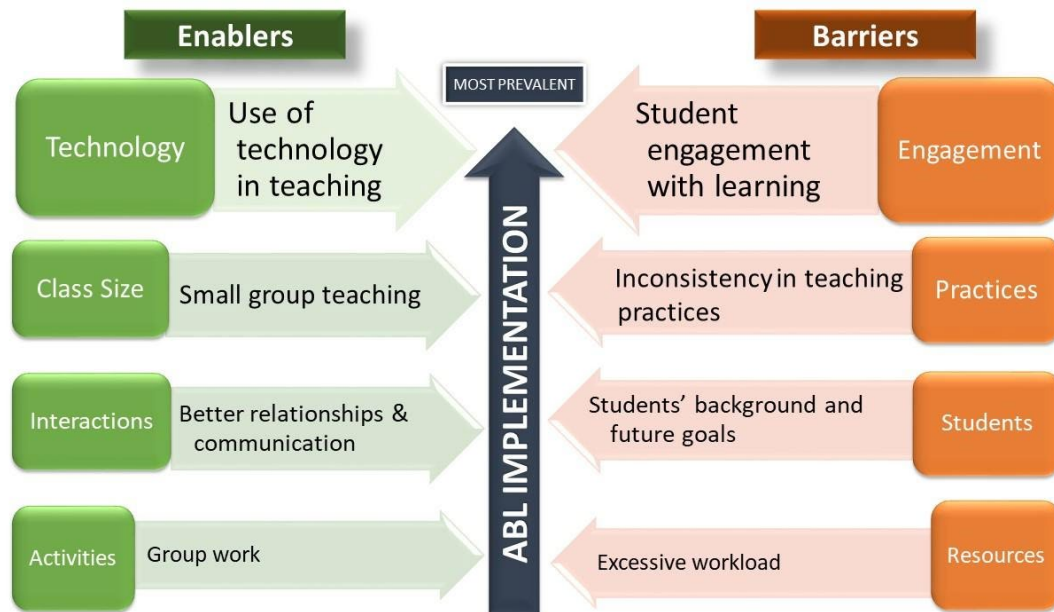
The blended component appears to demand adjustments to practice, while active learning is largely perceived as an established and integral part of teaching practice. The concept of ABL goes beyond the combination of active and blended learning and integrates key aspects such as student-centeredness, collaborative work, interactions, time on task, critique, learner autonomy, skills development and knowledge construction<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/ilt/current-projects/defining-abl/>

ABL continues to undergo a process of normalisation across the institution (Teixeira Antunes et al., 2021). Many academics have taken ownership of the term, but others have not yet fully grasped its meaning or implications for pedagogic design or teaching practice.

The data highlights several barriers and enabling forces to the ABL implementation process, as illustrated in Figure 9. The size and order of the arrows represent the prevalence of the themes in the dataset.



**Figure 9.** Enabling forces and barriers to the implementation of ABL.

### **5.1. Barriers to the Implementation of ABL**

Student engagement in general is a key barrier raised by all interviewees, often understood by tutors as whether students take part in tasks and activities. Some participants note that lack of engagement is most prevalent in pre-session tasks. Participants suggest that enhanced personal relationships between academics and students can strengthen engagement. The concern with student non-engagement has been raised in previous studies conducted within the institution (e.g. Agyeman, 2019; Eboka, 2019; Lomer & Palmer, 2021; Naumov, 2019; Read, 2019) as well as in the wider HE literature (e.g. Bryson & Hand, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008; Masika & Jones, 2016; Thomas, 2012; Vinson et al., 2010). Prior published work on students' perspectives (Armellini et al., 2021; Lomer & Palmer, 2021) strengthens the view that social and personal interactions are key to student engagement and a sense of belonging. Findings suggest that crucial factors to promote engagement are: a) enhanced communication and interactions with peers and tutors (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Eboka, 2019; Read, 2019), fostering a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012; Masika & Jones, 2016); b) linking tasks to assessment (Naumov, 2019; Agyeman, 2019); c) scaffolding learning (Lomer & Palmer, 2021); d) ensuring consistency across programmes (Lomer & Palmer, 2021); and e) ensuring students are clear on what is expected from them in their learning experience, which is particularly

relevant for students who hold culturally diverse expectations for learning and teaching experiences (Eboka, 2019; Read, 2019).

Another relevant barrier relates to inconsistency in teaching practices, which impacts on student satisfaction. Staff need opportunities and support to develop skills and raise their confidence to engage with ABL more consistently. Lack of institutional support and resources is a core challenge for implementation of innovative practices such as blended learning (Partridge et al., 2011). Promoting professional development and opportunities to share practices with colleagues is essential. To this effect, a team of centrally-funded learning technologists and designers support ABL module design. Resources and flexible academic staff development opportunities are available. Promoting peer support and access to 'success stories' further enhances staff engagement.

Student backgrounds and future goals can be significant factors influencing the effectiveness of ABL. Participants feel that students from different educational backgrounds engage differently with ABL. Engagement is seen as stronger when students are aware of their future professional goals and can understand the benefits of ABL in developing their autonomy and skills. Making the link clear between learning experiences, the development of subject specific as well as broader skills, and the relevance of these skills for future employability appears to be key to enhancing student engagement with learning experiences. The diversity in student profiles highlights the importance of building appropriate, context-sensitive scaffolding (Figure 1) as part of the learning design process.

Excessive workload was also identified as a barrier to the implementation of ABL. Other large-scale cross-institutional projects were running simultaneously, each with major demands on staff time. 'Change fatigue' and its workload implications resulted in low engagement with professional development opportunities. These opportunities are essential to ensure that ABL, as a concept and guide for practice, is embraced by academic staff.

## ***5.2. Enablers to the Implementation of ABL***

The enabler mentioned most frequently and in most interviews is the use of digital technology in teaching. It is encouraging that all participants report using some type of technology to enhance their teaching practices. The use of technology seems to be normalised in most teaching practices, even by those who argue against pedagogic change. Although there are variations in how and to what extent technology is used, overall, technology is well embedded in teaching practices.

The University's move to small group teaching, in line with the student-centred ethos of ABL, emerged as another key enabler. In the context of ABL, effective and focused interactions (learner-learner, learner-tutor, learner-content) (e.g. Anderson, 2003; McGee & Reis, 2012; Monteiro & Morrison, 2014) should occur in and outside the classroom. The prevalence of group work in the data suggests that students are encouraged to work collaboratively and learn from each other, promoting stronger relationships. The combination of small group teaching and structured group work may lead to enhanced communication and better relationships between students and tutors. Fostering a sense of belonging is crucial to promoting learner engagement, as shown in previous research into barriers to student engagement with ABL (Lomer & Palmer, 2021; Palmer, Lomer, & Bashliyska, 2017).

The shift to ABL as the institutional approach to learning and teaching has been felt by many academics as a substantial, large-scale transformation process with multiple implications. The enabling forces identified in this study

provide a starting point to review the factors that must be harnessed to promote stronger staff engagement with and enhancement of ABL. The barriers signal aspects that should be further explored and consulted on to develop effective strategies aimed at continuing to enhance the learner experience.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This article presents findings from one of the stages of a process of evaluation of an institution-wide pedagogic shift to active blended learning. Prior studies (Armellini et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2017; Lomer & Palmer, 2021) focused on enablers and barriers to student engagement in ABL. In particular, Børte, Nesje and Lillejord, (2020) identified three key areas that enable student engagement with active learning in higher education: better alignment between research and teaching practices, a supporting infrastructure for research and teaching, and staff professional development and learning designs. In this article, the focus is on academic staff perspectives and experiences. Its conclusions are:

- 1) The concept of ABL is not clear to all: ABL is not unanimously understood by academic staff. Most consider the blended element (often viewed merely as the 'online' component) as predominant. Few understand the complexity of ABL as a concept, especially the active element of the term, and how it can inform quality teaching practices.
- 2) Limited understanding of ABL is a factor that contributes to inconsistency in teaching practices: inconsistent teaching practices are common in HE. Academic staff often have diverse backgrounds, experience in industry and mixed levels of expertise in pedagogy. Limited understanding of ABL further highlights differences in pedagogic practice, leading to inconsistent learner experiences even within the same subject area.
- 3) Lack of student engagement can be a barrier to the overall learning experience: students not engaging in activities in and outside face-to-face sessions represents a barrier to effective experiences. Student demographics and previous learning experiences may influence the effectiveness of ABL and student outcomes. In particular, students whose prior educational experiences involved a significant volume of passive learning may struggle to engage with active approaches, such as ABL.
- 4) Multiple demands on staff time interfere with engagement with pedagogic innovation and staff development opportunities: engaging in institutional transformation, particularly when several large-scale change processes occur concurrently (as was the case at this institution), impacts on stress and workload levels of staff. The evidence suggests that stress and workload were key barriers to engaging with the implementation of ABL and with professional development opportunities.
- 5) The use of digital technologies to support teaching practice is variable: staff deploy a variety of strategies in the use of technology in their teaching. However, they often lack the confidence to incorporate technology into their practice in pedagogically sound, creative and student-centred ways. When a digital tool fails, or when a staff member lacks the competences to make the tool work, there

is a tendency to revert to earlier practices and express frustration with the approach to learning and teaching as a whole.

- 6) Small group teaching promotes meaningful interactions: small group teaching has enhanced student-tutor interactions, promoting student engagement with learning activities in and outside face-to-face sessions. The value of small group teaching, a key aspect of ABL, is acknowledged by all.
- 7) Promoting interactions (learner-learner, learner-tutor, learner-content) is key: positive interactions with peers, staff and content are essential to promote engagement with active, student-centred approaches such as ABL. Creating an environment conducive to the development of a sense of belonging to the HEI, the programme and peer group enhances students' engagement in their learning experience. Participants, in line with prior research (Armellini et al., 2021; Lomer & Palmer, 2021; Palmer et al., 2017), suggest that meaningful tasks that foster such interactions in and outside the classroom are key.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Higher Education Institutions experiencing and promoting change in learning and teaching practices may benefit from the following recommendations:

- 1) Technology adoption may be fostered through a culture of openness and appropriate support,
- 2) ABL implementation may be supported through pedagogic research and opportunities for staff involvement,
- 3) Staff should be provided with time and training to implement new initiatives.

The discussions with staff noted that new concepts, such as ABL, can be normalised through open consultation, inclusion in institutional media, and focused staff development. Change processes should include longitudinal evaluation with a view to proposing further improvements over time.

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