Pearson

Distance Learning Course Design

Northumbria University

Improving student experience and perceived value for money

About course design

Our course design service helps universities to reach, attract and engage new and different students by enabling an alternative way of teaching and learning in an online or blended environment.

We understand that each institution is unique and that the resources, online learning expertise and budget within each one differs immensely. That's why our services are collaborative and adapt to your institution's needs. Every course we develop is firmly grounded in research-based, tried and tested learning design principles. We make design suggestions that promote your desired learner outcomes and track metrics so you can evaluate course success.

Introduction

Pearson and Northumbria University partnered in 2018 to redesign various courses by using the existing skills and academic expertise at Northumbria alongside Pearson's experience in developing, scaling and supporting online provision.

The redesign of their Distance Learning MSc in Surveying was followed by the complete redesign of further modules in this and other faculties. This successful Master's programme had been running for more than 10 years, is accredited by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and attracts around 150 students annually.

Already delivered fully online, the programme team and Pearson sought to 'refresh' their existing content by applying high-level learning design principles, ensuring students received the best possible experience through:

- a consistent module structure with a guided student journey
- the development of interactive learning content
- learning activities designed to promote student engagement and collaboration.

The timing of this provided a unique opportunity to make a direct comparison of student learning experiences pre- and post- the redesign. The desired outcomes central to this refresh were:

- Increasing student engagement with their learning.
- Improving levels of interactivity within a variety of learning opportunities.
- Ensuring that students consider the course activities worthwhile and of value to their learning.
- Improving student satisfaction.

The collaborative process made the most of the existing skills and academic expertise at Northumbria, alongside Pearson's varied experience and innovation in developing, scaling and supporting online provision.

Brief study overview

We undertook comparative, qualitative research comprising of two evaluation studies, comprising of one-to-one interviews[*] backed up by surveys, between January 2019 and April 2019[#].

The concept was simple: explore the change in experience, satisfaction and perception of the course after the collaborative redesign process with the committed project team at Northumbria.

We were able to do this because Module 1, which had been running successfully for a number of years with little to no changes in teaching, content or design, was delivered without any redesign, followed by redesigned Module 2, which students had completed before taking part in the second stage of the research.

At that point students had received their induction for the redesigned Module 3 and had virtually met their new tutors on a live webinar, but their ratings and comments were primarily based on their experiences of Module 2.

At the same time as the redesign, the university was moving from Blackboard to Blackboard Ultra, so the redesigned Module 2 also benefited from more up-to-date and user-friendly technology.

The timeline

Oct to Dec 2018	Module 1
Jan 2019	Students had been through programme application and enrolment processes and completed Module 1
	Research was conducted.
Jan to March 2019	Blackboard Ultra introduced
	Redesigned Module 2
April 2019	Students received their induction to Module 3 and three weeks of teaching.
	Research was conducted
April to June 2019	Redesigned Module 3

* 7 students were interviewed after Module 1 and 6 after Module 2.
# Initial findings and areas for further exploration were discussed at the *HE Advance Conference* in 2019.

Student Experience

Overall the student experience of the refreshed Module 2 was much more positive than for the unchanged Module 1 – they found many things had been improved and were supportive of their learning experience.

> ## *Student Comments*
>
> *I feel as if I have stopped with one course and starting a new course…there's a big difference between October [starting the MSc and Module 1] and now.*
>
> *The module [2] really is good. The way it's been developed it's really quite professional. I don't think they could do more to improve my learning experience.*
>
> *It's just a lot more interactive, a lot more chances to raise questions and have issues clarified…I would absolutely recommend it. I think especially now, following the improvements. I think it's really sleek and it's fantastic.*

When considering what was different and improved in the redesigned module, students talked a lot about the clarity of structure (enhanced by new technology), interactive learning materials, the benefits of contact with their tutor and how they had more confidence in their understanding of the assessment.

In the two sets of interviews, five key themes emerged which students valued in the design of the course when comparing the redesigned modules with Module 1:

- Clear induction
- A defined structure
- Contact with and support from academic staff
- Interactivity within the learning materials
- Specific assessment guidance

We'll take each in turn looking at both the surveys and interview findings. The university clearly acknowledged that there was a need to improve and change what already existed – hence choosing to use a course design service. Many of the categories that follow will show what the programme team already knew required improvement.

Clear induction

Module 1

Students felt a lack of proper introduction to the course and the Module 1 content.

85% of students surveyed had **accessed** the online induction materials. Of the students who commented on their usefulness:

- **35%** found them either lacking in key information or misleading, particularly around how the course would be structured.
- **30%** gave comments like 'very helpful' or 'very useful' but at the same time they noted that the materials were from the previous year and/or felt out of date.
- The rest of the comments were things like "fairly useful" or "reasonably useful".

Their interview comments also very clearly presented this:

"

Student Comments

Most of the [induction] material related to last year's course. I wasn't sure if it was relevant to what we were doing this year.

I found them briefly useful but perhaps outdated.

I felt that the induction materials gave a false impression of the structure and delivery of the course.

We believed we would be provided with more guidance...We felt like we were just being put in the deep end...with no help.

I think that bit of induction would have been good or even just more explicit instructions on how to use Blackboard.

I think the way you set something up makes a difference to the way that people perceive it.

"

Module 2

A new induction module was created for the programme, which provided up-to-date content regarding course structure and key information. In addition, it presented newly created content supporting students with both the skills needed to be effective online students and to develop their academic skills. Signposting to further support from Northumbria University was embedded throughout the materials to provide long-term support beyond the initial induction period.

Guidance for navigating Blackboard and its functionality further supported students to enhance their competence and confidence with their new Electronic Learning Platform (ELP).

The new induction followed the learning design for the taught modules, presenting content in the same Blackboard learning design that students would experience during the refreshed Modules 2 and 3. This offered students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the learning design, technologies employed and to practise navigating learning materials and interacting with the ELP tools; this is an important principle of an effective online induction.

"

Student Comments

I know where I'm going, I know what to do, and I know what's expected. It's very clear.

I think it's a good thing that they put another live seminar or recorded seminar at the beginning to introduce everyone on the module and how it's going to run.

"

A defined structure

Module 1

The students had a slightly better understanding of the *overall course structure* than the *Module 1 structure*.

- Overall course structure – **70%** Good or Excellent
- Module 1 structure – **58%** Good or Excellent

In interviews, students expressed that they found the lack of structure in Module 1 challenging. They weren't sure what content was relevant and whether it supported the assessment, and they often found the reading material was more useful than lectures.

66

Student Comments

The assignment should have linked to the learning materials more directly.

I think the lectures were too broad. … one of the lectures spoke about all of the history of the Kyoto Protocol and other environmental issues …but this l is not relevant for what we're doing.

I think some of the lectures were a bit longer than they really needed to be. …I don't know if it was relevant to the assessment so much.

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Module 2

Following the redesign, Module 2 was considered by the students to have a more clearly defined structure. While we *didn't* ask the "understanding of module structure" question specifically in the second survey, in their open-ended comments **50%** of students referenced this as a key improvement. They also talked about how the Blackboard Ultra ELP helped with organisation and ease of access to content.

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Student Comments

It's well planned, organized and structured. We are directed to the relevant topic rather than the whole book.

There's been a lot more structured content which has made it much easier to manage the workload.

The layout of Blackboard Ultra adds structure to the course content and you can actually see your progress. Using the updated layout was infinitely better.
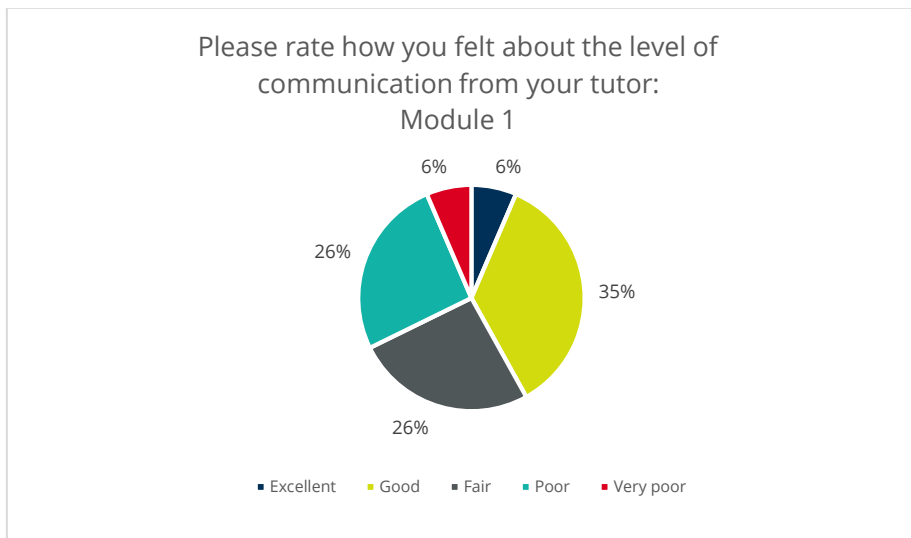
The new Ultra platform is much better, particularly the way the lecture content and learning tasks are structured into weeks.

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Contact with and support from academic staff

Module 1

Students often had no experience of HE other than an undergraduate degree, some of them at this university which was why they had returned. As we can see from the findings on **Induction**, many students were not clear on how the course would progress. With that in mind, they often felt that their relationship to a personal tutor was distant and inaccessible. A majority of **58%** rated their experience as *Fair*, *Poor* or *Very poor.*

Please rate how you felt about the level of communication from your tutor:
Module 1

6% 6% 26% 35% 26%

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Fair ■ Poor ■ Very poor

"

Student Comments

It seemed quite hands-off…There seemed to be quite a long period of time before you'd actually get a reply.

We didn't know [the tutor] as a person, as a face; we didn't have any live seminars. So, there was a lot of frustration from students based on that and lack of visibility.
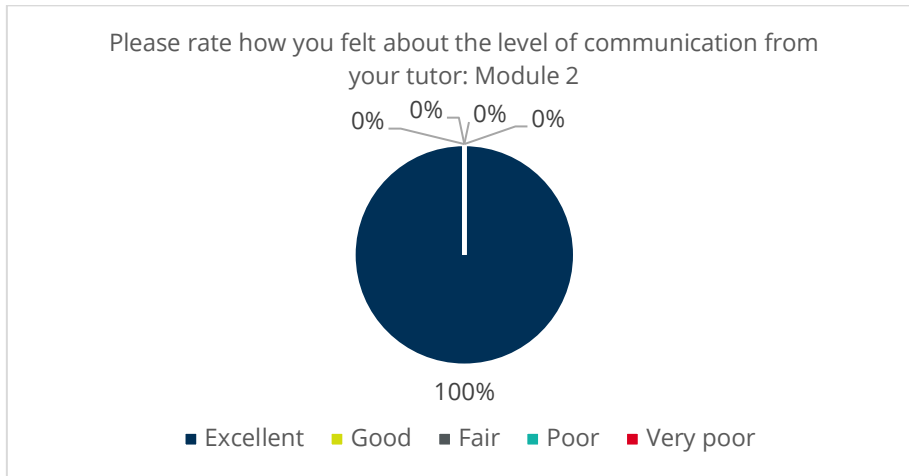
My very first question was, is there any chance to have a drop-in session, whether virtually or physically? And the answer was no.

"

Module 2

The improvement is evident when you look at the survey results for Module 2, with **100%** of students rating tutor communications as *Excellent*, compared to just 6% in Module 1.

Please rate how you felt about the level of communication from your tutor: Module 2

0% 0% 0% 0%

100%

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Fair ■ Poor ■ Very poor

Comments from the student interviews further reinforced the value they found in:

- live and recorded webinars
- the speed of feedback
- a greater connection to tutors through live, face-to-face sessions
- the sense of community that the discussion forums created.

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Student Comments

There's also a forum where you can ask questions to your module tutor and you get a response that's very, very quick and swift.

The fact that we have also a live seminar with a module tutor; that's really good.

There was a lot of work by the tutor to engage with students and to comment on their comments.

Definitely you felt more like you knew the people [the tutors] behind the computer screen.
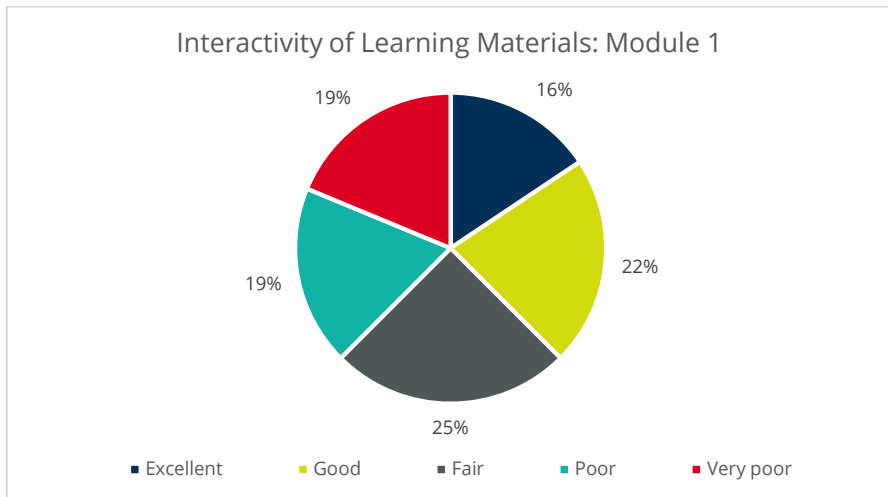
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Interactivity within the learning materials

Module 1

38% of students rated the interactivity of the learning materials, which consisted of PDFs and an asynchronous discussion board and relied on a self-directed study approach, as *Poor* or *Very poor*:

Interactivity of Learning Materials: Module 1

19%   16%   22%   19%   25%

■ Excellent   ■ Good   ■ Fair   ■ Poor   ■ Very poor

❝

Student Comments

Expecting a bit more interactivity...There wasn't really any of that. It was basically 'Here's the file that has a load of documents in. Read them. Here's your assignment.'

The only content we are given on Blackboard is reading materials ...at least there should be a recorded lecture...So it wasn't really a good delivery mechanism for the first module.

*It was just a lot of reading, no interactivity.*

❞

Module 2

This was an area of significant improvement, with students responding very positively to the **interactivity** of the redesigned learning materials. **88%** rated them as *Good* or *Excellent*, with no one rating them below *Fair*.

Interactive learning materials provided students with access to subject matter content in a variety of formats (audio, video, text) with embedded learning activities such as quizzes and reflective writing). This content would traditionally have been presented in a lecture, but as interactive content learners are encouraged to actively engage with it; to read, watch or listen and undertake a range of individual and collaborative learning activities in order to consolidate their learning.

Interactivity of Learning Materials: Module 2

0%
13%
25%
63%

■ Excellent   ■ Good   ■ Fair   ■ Poor   ■ Very poor
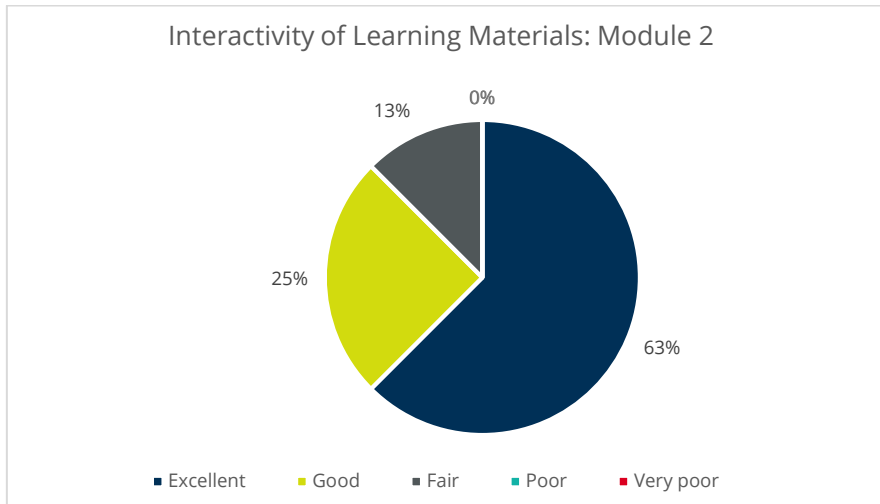
Student Comments

It felt a lot more interactive. ...because there's a lot more involvement and discussion on the discussion forums and things. So slightly more hands-on.

I really like how there's the interactive learning material where you can watch videos, follow the links to get the research articles and books, and do quizzes.

I like having the quizzes: it's a good check to see if you've actually been paying attention.

It asks you to apply your knowledge at different intervals throughout the learning, it actually makes you think.
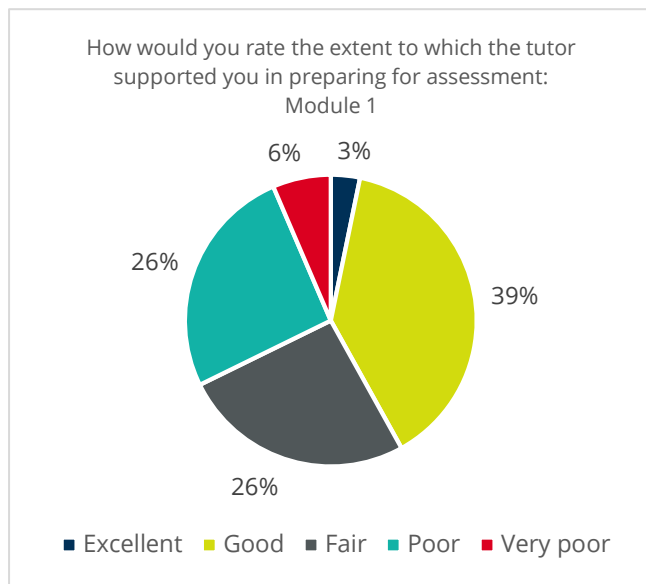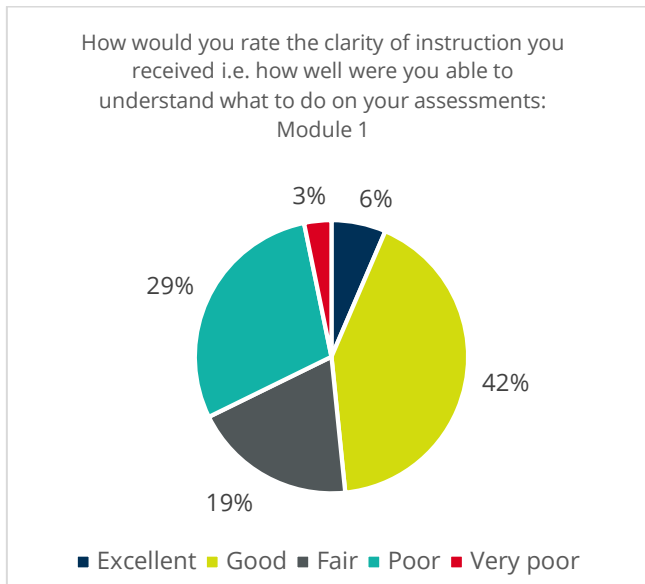
Specific assessment guidance

Module 1

Students were frustrated by a lack of guidance around the assessment, both in terms of the **instructions** and the **tutor support** when they had questions. Both the survey results and their comments show this.

How would you rate the clarity of instruction you received i.e. how well were you able to understand what to do on your assessments: Module 1

- Excellent: 6%
- Good: 42%
- Fair: 19%
- Poor: 29%
- Very poor: 3%

How would you rate the extent to which the tutor supported you in preparing for assessment: Module 1

- Excellent: 3%
- Good: 39%
- Fair: 26%
- Poor: 26%
- Very poor: 6%

Student Comments

The assignment was given, no explanation, no lecture notes, no specific lecture notes.

Most of the questions on the discussion board were people trying to work out what the assignment brief meant. And I think fundamentally if people can't understand the assignment brief there's something missing, which is the teaching aspect of it, I think really.
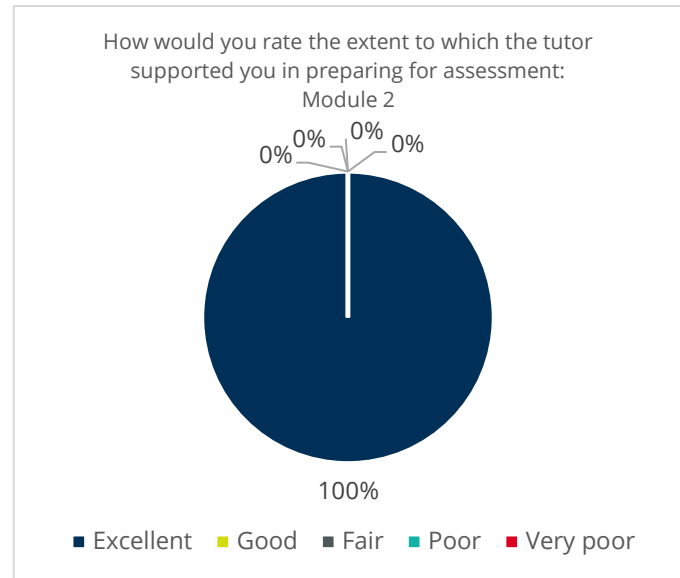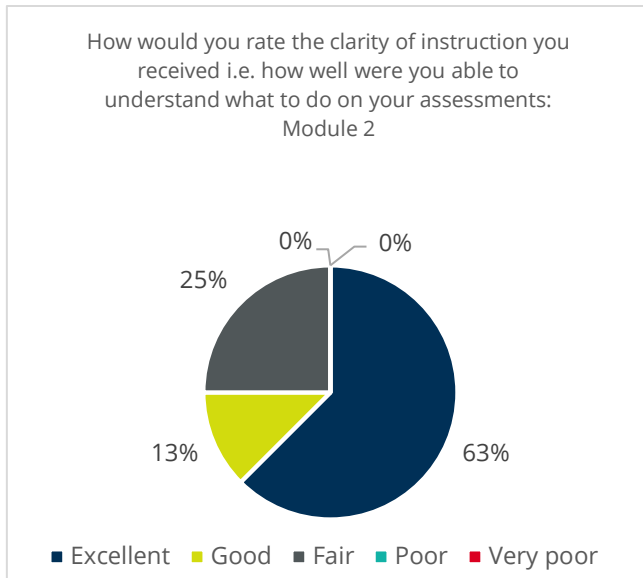
When things were being asked like 'should we approach it in this way?', I think they wanted a more explicit answer like yes rather than, 'well, you should do it how you feel you should do it'.

![Pearson logo]

Module 2

As part of the refresh of the programme we made extensive use of detailed instructional content which provided students with greater clarity and support throughout their learning journey, but most specifically in relation to assessment. This was supplemented with a dedicated webinar providing time for student and tutor discussion of the assessment process and criteria.

The students' evaluations of the assessment guidance improved significantly in Module 2.

How would you rate the clarity of instruction you received i.e. how well were you able to understand what to do on your assessments: Module 2

- Excellent: 63%
- Good: 13%
- Fair: 25%
- Poor: 0%
- Very poor: 0%

How would you rate the extent to which the tutor supported you in preparing for assessment: Module 2

- Excellent: 100%
- Good: 0%
- Fair: 0%
- Poor: 0%
- Very poor: 0%

The greater sense of understanding and clarity around the assessment and also how it was integrated fully into the structure of the module came through particularly strongly in the student comments.

❝

Student Comments

Yes, it [the assessment] was clear enough when explained. And we even had a live seminar, just focusing on the coursework.

That was quite cleverly done, in that every discussion forum you were doing was adding up to the assignment.

In the seminar the tutor did prior to the assessment, she articulated quite clearly what she was looking for ...So it gave you a lot more confidence.

❞

Conclusion

Our research showed that the students very much valued the refreshed Module 2: they identified and appreciated the key changes and found these to be supportive of their learning experience.

In the interviews, each student gave an **overall rating** for the module they had just completed on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 is *Terrible* and 10 is *Excellent*. Their ratings were significantly higher for Module 2.
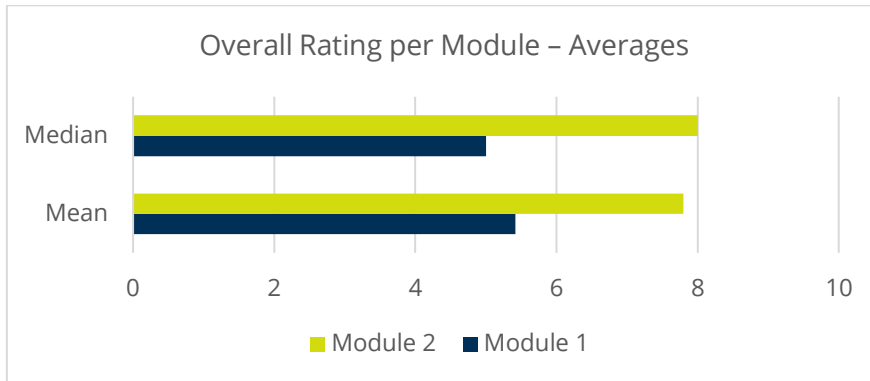
Here's a quick summary of what changed for students:

- The mean **overall rating** of Module 2 was 7.8 out of 10; a **44% increase** on the rating for Module 1.
- Students benefited from **extra clarity** through the redesigned induction.
- When asked in general to compare Module 2 to Module 1, **50%** of students surveyed cited the **defined structure** of Module 2 as a key improvement.
- Their satisfaction with the level of communication with the tutor in Module 2 was demonstrated with **100%** of students rating it as *Excellent* or *Good* (up from 41% in Module 1).
- The course material interactivity in Module 2 supported student engagement and helped them manage workload. **88%** of them rated this as *Excellent* or *Good*, compared to 38% for Module 1.
- For Module 2 **63%** of students rated assessment instructions as *Excellent* (compared to 6% for Module 1) and **100%** rated tutor guidance on the assessment as *Excellent* (compared to 3% for Module 1).

Student Comment

It's a massive step change ...it's been designed in order to make you learn. It's more interactive, it's more engaging, I feel like I'm getting a lot of value from this course now.