Technological change as a force for good: when the Jedi get working

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2021 The Authors

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
https://conference.eadtu.eu/previous-conferences

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
Technological change as a force for good: when the Jedi get working

Maria Kantirou
The Open University, UK
maria.kantirou@open.ac.uk

Klaus-Dieter Rossade
The Open University
klaus-dieter.rossade@open.ac.uk

Abstract
The implementation of a new digital assessment system at the Open University (OU) marked the start of an ambitious programme of work that put the student experience at the heart of its vision and structure. Assessment design, operations and policies, the user experience of students, markers, and the development of technology became key drivers for the design and structure of the programme, and a future operating model. UNiwise was chosen to provide the technical solution.

This paper discusses the work of the Exams and Assignment Implementation programme since January 2020. Changing the way we assess 175,000 students on 500 courses, with close to 750,000 assignments marked by over 4000 tutors in a year, is complex, and requires careful stakeholder engagement and sensitivity to established practices. Two further university-large-scale change programmes running simultaneously, and the Covid-19 pandemic, added to the challenges.

We share some of the obstacles and how we addressed them. We explain the vision, structure and communication strategy and their impact so far. We also discuss how we built partnerships with key stakeholders, while developing a ‘true’ partnership with our technology provider UNiwise to enhance the possibilities of the new system. This is likely to deliver win-win solutions within a multi-stakeholder context with students at the centre, and, in time, also new ways of assessment at the OU. In the process, we are creating communities of practice, starting with a group of “WISEflow-Jedis” who will, we hope, tap into the ‘force’ to make digital assessment a lasting success.

Keywords: assessment, digital innovation, educational technology, academic communities, change.

1. Introduction
In 2019 the Open University (OU) procured a new digital assessment system, WISEflow, provided by UNiwise. It would replace a well-established assignment submission system developed by the OU and used by students and staff since 2001. WISEflow would also replace a complex set of other systems used for the management and administration of assessment. A programme team was brought together, led by the authors of this paper in the roles of Programme Manager and Academic Lead to manage and deliver this significant change for one of the largest distance learning organisations in Europe. The programme was named ‘The Exams and Assignment Implementation’ (E&A) and formally started its work in January 2020, just weeks before the start of the pandemic and much of the world went into lockdown.

E&A was not the only institutional change programme happening in the OU at the time. The largest Information Technology (IT) systems change in the 52-year history of the OU was also in progress. The Core Systems Replacement (CSR) programme, as it is called, will introduce major changes to the OU’s technology
architecture by transforming the digital foundations of the whole University. Much change will happen at the
back end, but it will also visibly impact every single one of our 175,000 students and all staff at the OU.
WiseFlow therefore needs to integrate both technically and from a user experience perspective, and it needs
to do this with two systems for a time: the existing technology and the new CSR systems that are being explored
and implemented in parallel. A second large change programme in progress implements a new contract for
the OU’s 4,000 Associate Lecturers (AL) that tutor and support students. The new contract discontinues
discreet per teaching module remuneration and integrates the OU’s teaching workforce into one academic
community. The new AL contracts are permanent and have terms and conditions similar to other roles in the
OU, based on extensive negotiations with staff and unions over at least 10 years. This change is significant,
highly complex and also political, and the changes from the E&A programme will impact on this Associate
Lecturer staff group in their day-to-day practice.

In establishing ourselves as a new change programme, we encountered resistance that was not unfounded.
Many OU staff members were weary of further change, remembering previous strategic programmes of work
that had not delivered the expected benefits. For many colleagues, it was a narrative of ‘large-scale change
equals change for worse’ which is factually not true as there are several positive examples that could be
mentioned, but which nonetheless impacts people’s disposition. It was therefore important that we fostered
genuine, honest discussions about the change we were introducing and, more importantly, that we listened.
This paper tells the story of how we designed and established this change programme in an internally and
externally complex environment, in a university that covers the four nations of the UK.

2. Building a new programme
The new programme team inherited a set of objectives that focussed on the immediate delivery of technology.
We knew that our vision needed to be much more ambitious and pedagogically driven if it was to inspire the
support from staff and students and deliver the long term benefits of change. Without neglecting those initial
objectives, we focused on a message that could unite OU staff and students i.e. delivering a secure, robust and
flexible platform that improves the student experience. Figure 1 presents the vision at the centre and objectives
of the new programme, as communicated to the institution.
In developing sense checking the relevance of our vision we looked at our external environment, too. Digital assessment is a fast-developing area of interest for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK and across Europe. We also started seeing the impact of the pandemic. Our thinking was informed by studies on digital assessment, for example two JISC reports, one published in February 2020 proposing 5 principles and 5 targets for the future of digital assessment (JISC, 2020), and the other published in May 2021 focusing on how we can progress from quick fixes implemented in the pandemic to future transformation of assessment (Iosad et al., 2020). At that point we also started making connections with other HEIs in the UK that were implementing the same digital assessment system.

In developing our vision, we also reflected on what aspects of University work and life would be impacted. We understood that we had to use this change as an opportunity to re-think the way we did assessment (Skelton & Taylor, 2020), including our processes and ways of working. We identified the following key areas:

1. Assessment policy and operations
2. Teaching practices
3. IT systems and support
4. User and learner experience

Those four areas together with 'Communications' and 'Programme Management, Governance and Evaluation' formed the six main workstreams of the programme. Each workstream was assigned a lead and these leads,  

---

1 JISC is a United Kingdom not-for-profit company whose role is to support institutions of higher education and research, including post-16 education. It provides network and IT services, digital resources, relevant advice, and procurement consulting, while researching and developing new information technologies and modes of working. Jisc is funded by a combination of the UK further and higher education funding bodies, and individual higher education institutions ("JISC", 2021)
together with people who took on other support roles formed a ‘core’ programme team. It reflected a community of cross-unit roles that brought together diverse experiences, skills and behaviours and was one of the key assets of the programme. In this paper the pronoun ‘we’ is used to describe the collective thinking and activities of that diverse team that included experts in project management, assessment administration, communications, business change management, IT, digital student experience and other areas, led overall by the authors of this paper. Some ideas and actions were initiated by the two of us, but we always benefited from this group of exceptional professionals that came together as a team.

We focused on decision-making structures early on. We knew there would be challenging if not radical decisions that would affect embedded cultures of working. Our decisions needed to be informed by the grassroots and that we would not be able to go very far, if we did not have the support of our stakeholders, especially the colleagues and students that are directly affected by the implementation of the new system. We started by identifying key users of the new system e.g. students, markers, tutors and administrators. That initial mapping informed the membership of the two groups that formed the core decision-making structure. We kept the structure ‘light’ by working between two groups: Working Group and Steering Group. Our structure however acknowledged the fact that we needed to report or escalate issues to senior management as well as the fact that we needed to consult with other groups in the University depending on the nature of the decision (Figure 2). This internal structure remained stable and served us well up until now while the superstructures into which we report changed several times. Our internal structure could be said to have insulated the change work within the programme from the changes and challenges outside of it.

We also mapped and analysed our stakeholders across the University, an exercise that informed our extensive communications plan, working with experts from our Communications department. In this paper we use the term stakeholder as a proxy for a change project that is beyond multidisciplinary and affects a vast majority of teams and units across the institution and across the UK nations.
Many of these processes will sound familiar and are common across change programmes in any organisation. What made our work in E&A different is the way we used unusual, left-field and, at times, quirky ways of connecting our stakeholders to the programme. This included direct but playful use of the new system itself. We addressed known anxieties towards new technology head-on by looking to the future of assessment, scanning our external environment and planning for change that goes beyond the technical replacement of systems and processes. We used academic expertise from within the organisation to garner support from the academic community and, most importantly, to actually deliver the change. That last deliverable is still in the future, but we believe that key building blocks and ways of working are set to achieve this.

3. Anxieties about technology

As a distance learning organisation, the OU has had technology in place for teaching, communications, and other day to day academic and operational work for many years. The level of expertise in using technology in education is high, not least because of the pioneering work of the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) at the OU. We have used computer-mediated communication in teaching for over two decades and introduced an electronic submission, marking and feedback systems for our Tutor-marked assignments at around the same time. Across the university, we refer to this as the eTMA system but that is almost proxy for several system components working together to facilitate the desired process around submitting, marking and feedback of student assignments. OU staff members that were involved in the change from pen and paper assignments, processed via postal services, to this eTMA system in 2001 remember the resistance and anxieties from colleagues at the time. Those anxieties were soon replaced with new marking and feedback practices and new ways of working that surpassed the quality standards of the past and considerably reduced the operational complexity. Two decades later, we have all become experts in using the system and associated processes. One might assume that a change from one electronic system to another would be experienced as a change in degree rather than a change in category, from pen to digital, as was the case in 2001. It was clear to us, however, that this would not be the case. We encountered strong resistance, compounded by what we saw as genuine anxiety of the new technology and uncertainty about the change it would bring. The anxieties were about technical affordances, ease of use, and about the changes to established working practices. WISEflow will replace outdated systems that are also not flexible and stable enough for assessment innovation, the assessment of the future, including online exams. Considering objectively all the changes WISEflow can deliver to the operations of all stakeholders, on balance, the benefits outweigh any negatives by a large margin. This did however little to lessen the concerns that those directly involved in marking and feedback raised with us repeatedly. We decided to address that perception head-on and this influenced how we engaged with stakeholders right from the start.

We, the core programme team, familiarised ourselves with WISEflow early on. We found it easy to use, well structured, yet sufficiently flexible. We also found in UNIwise a supportive partner to work with: UNIwise colleagues working together with the Open University were keen to be involved in direct discussions, even difficult ones, with future users of the system. Following an extensive user/stakeholder mapping exercise, we decided almost from the beginning to give our key users and stakeholders the opportunity to experience and explore the system.

We started with our Associate Lecturers, who would work with the new system more than most. AIs mark assignments but more importantly they teach our students through extensive, personalised assignment feedback - this feedback is a hallmark of quality in supported distance learning. Marking and
providing feedback in a pre-configured online environment with a limited set of mark-up tools was a significant change from the previous norm where most AIs used Microsoft Word for their marking and feedback, and other software or applications for more specialist subject areas. This was a valid concern about the change in long established working practices. It also reminded us of the change from paper to electronic marking when the latter was seen to be less flexible than marking up a script with a pen. There were also myths and misconceptions about what the software solution could or could not do and these were spreading within the AL community and amplified in their social networks. All this, together with a general anxiety about the new technology led us to forge a close relationship with our partners and make the experience of the new exam and assignments solution our key strategy.

In March 2020, just weeks after we came together as a new team and just as the first lockdown started, we recruited 40 AIs and tasked them with exploring the system using ‘real’ student assignments from past courses. They used WISEflow to access, mark, provide feedback and return assignments in the new system within 3 weeks. We deliberately provided very limited training, just a one-hour familiarisation with both the programme’s objectives and the new system. We wanted to understand how intuitive the system was, what was missing in their first contact with the tool, and the extent and nature of training our AIs would require. AIs had to complete diary entries as they were working on the system and a questionnaire about their experience of using the new system. 18 participants were also invited to follow-up interviews. There was an important added benefit: engaging AIs early, actively and repeatedly at different stages of the programme we started building a community of practice within the AL community. Many of the ‘early adopter’ AIs soon became natural advocates of the system and the programme’s work - not because they were told so, but because they had experienced the benefits. Their initial contact with the programme had also developed their trust that future work of the programme and further developments of the tool would close any gaps between what was needed and what was currently available. They spoke out in favour of the new solutions in online meeting forums or social media despite widespread negativity and often open cynicism about yet another system change. Speaking out against something that feels wrong is courageous, but so is speaking out for something that feels right, especially when you must stand up against your peers.

Practical experience becomes more powerful when it captures the imagination. For this, we decided to make the Working and Steering Group tasks look like a standard OU assignment as it would normally be submitted via the existing eTMA system. We hypothesized that a visual experience as close as possible to a real assignment would help members to imagine the future with the new system and that they would share these impressions within their networks and balance out in some way the spread of myths, negativity and cynicism in forums and social media. We wrote learning outcomes as we would for any TMA, devised a marking scheme and used standard eTMA templates. We even set up deadlines and a process for members to ‘formally’ request an extension if they were struggling with time. Importantly, we kept the assignment short and set a low word limit to signal that we respect people’s time and workload. The questions were designed to offer the full range of practical experience in completing the task, uploading it to the system, receive email notifications and go back into the system to get the marks and the feedback. At the same time, the questions were designed to elicit comprehensive, rich feedback on key aspects of the programme, richer, more comprehensive and more inclusive than is possible at programme meetings. We set the following questions (word limits) for their task:

**Question 1**

(Word limit: 300 words)

Based on your current role in the OU, describe briefly what the E&A vision means for you.
1. What are the strengths of the vision in relation to your role (e.g. Academic, Curriculum Manager, Academic Services, Associate Dean)?

2. What is missing or could be improved?

Then take one aspect of the vision (e.g. enables delivery of OU assessment strategy vision) and explore its impact on your work or your team/unit. Be clear and explicit using carefully chosen examples where appropriate.

Question 2

(Word limit: 200 words)

What do you hope Assessment at the OU will look like in five years’ time? How could the E&A system support this vision?

The ‘mock’ assignments were marked by volunteers from the Steering Group who gave the ‘students’ a mark and some feedback. The mark itself was of little relevance but it provided real experience. The feedback provided an opportunity for a dialogue as is the case in real assignments, even if not as extensive as our real students usually get.

We extended this model of stakeholder engagement through participatory WISEflow tasks to the University’s senior management as concerns about the new system had started to escalate to senior leaders at the OU. Why should they not also experience the system first-hand, its limitations, and benefits? After all, this might be particularly informative for executive team members who had joined the OU from outside and had never experienced a TMA task. These WISEflow familiarisation sessions were aimed at the Vice Chancellor and his Deputy, the Faculty Executive Deans, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, the Directors of the UK Nations and senior leaders from the office of the University Secretary. Not everyone could find the time to engage with the task, but many did and showed great interest and enthusiasm. The assignment was tailored to their roles, with slightly different questions, but structurally the same as those for the Working and Steering Group. We focused their attention on our website and more specifically our vision. We also asked them to tell us what good assessment looks like and whether they buy into the benefits of digital assessment. We appreciated the level of engagement and the quality of feedback we received. More importantly, it demonstrated that senior management appreciated the hands-on experience and could be equally passionate about the future of digital assessment in the OU.

We continued using WISEflow as an engagement tool to dispel myths, gather feedback and help stakeholders familiarise themselves with the new system long before they had to use it. Over 400 ‘mock’ assignments were submitted in 10 TMA tasks. We did not stop there with our stakeholder engagement though. Setting up mock TMA tasks for everyone in the University was not operationally possible. We launched, in parallel, a series of briefing sessions for various groups of users and stakeholders. In the first 6-8 months we delivered over 60 briefing sessions for academic unit, professional services staff and the students association tapping into their own meetings and events. In these sessions we talked about our vision, structure, governance and our methodology for implementing the new system. Sessions for key user groups e.g. members of the AL community and the students’ association, included either hands-on tasks and either live or recorded demonstrations of WISEflow. In 18 months, we managed to achieve nearly 1500 contacts through our stakeholder engagement activities. Figure 3 is a slide developed by our communications experts to visualise the depth and breadth of our stakeholder engagement activities.
Our extensive communication activities across the university community, with the new system taking centre stage, meant that within a few months, E&A had started building a solid reputation of a programme of work that is well-structured, ambitious and reliable. There was little doubt that E&A would in time deliver the necessary change that would impact every single student in the University and most of our staff. By then, the new system and the programme had gathered momentum and many advocates across the University.

We also used technology other than WISEflow in our stakeholder engagement. Starting our work only weeks before the first lockdown meant that we had to deliver all our activities via Microsoft Teams and Skype. In our Working and Steering Group meetings, we used a combination of group activities, splitting colleagues into break out rooms and using tools such as Padlet or simply the chat function in Teams. All this gave us much feedback over time, and particularly from naturally more hesitant or quieter members of the two groups. The pandemic forced us to reassess, and in the process to find ways that are altogether more equitable between the few vocal stakeholders that often dominate discussions and the remaining group members. That seemed like the best way to address the challenge of vocal stakeholders dominating discussions. Figure 4 is just one example of the group activities we run with our Working Group.
Our Working Group involved representatives from a wide range of university roles. In some cases, the feedback we needed was role-focused, i.e., when we wanted to assess the extent and impact of specific changes in working practices for a particular user group; in other cases we needed the variety of roles reflected in each group, for example when we were taking stock of what we achieved as a group. By keeping the tasks varied and changing the composition of groups depending on the discussion item or activity, we turned routine meetings into more innovative, participatory opportunities for everyone.

4. The power of metaphors
The use of metaphors in change management is well established, as is the emotional impact they can have. While it has been suggested that they should not be taken literally, when used well they can "create effective messages and [help] to understand others' responses to change" (Smollon, 2014). Behind metaphors are stories and metaphors can therefore be seen as placeholders for stories from one context that are imprinted onto another context, thereby providing spaces for playful creativity. They can create shifts at the blink of a moment. A longstanding metaphor for the Open University and its supposed lack of agility for example is the container ship at sea - possible to turn around, but it takes a long time. The impact of a metaphor, how it catches on and energises people's imagination, depends on the story behind it. In technology change initiatives, 'digital champion' is a common metaphor for staff members who spread digital change across the university. The story of a champion is that of a person who is a proven and decorated top achiever, transferred to the digital expertise and the change this 'champion' is expected to instigate. 'Super user' is suggestive of the extraordinary abilities superheroes enact in their original context, transferred to the context of technology. An 'ambassador' for change grafts the diplomatic status, power, wisdom, mediation skills and much more onto another target context. The creative potential of a metaphor also depends on its freshness. All the common metaphors above, we felt, had been overused over time and become stale and perfunctory. We knew that the WISEFlow implementation out into the Faculties needed a metaphor that was fresh.
When we considered a community of practice around exams and assignments, we thought of intensive and targeted discussions about the implementation of the new system and the future of digital assessment in the faculties and other sub-units with the OU. Rather than bringing stakeholder representatives into our programme, we envisioned the programme work to be spread and developed locally across the university. We hoped for greater independence to generate solutions that meet the disciplines and faculty cultures, but that remained connected through an OU-wide community of practice, supported by the programme. In one of our conversations with UINwise, the idea of the 'WISEflow Jedi' emerged. Not everyone in the team was a fan or familiar with Star Wars but everybody could buy into the idea that a Jedi is someone that "aspired to attain a state of inner tranquility through calmness and meditation while avoiding emotions affiliated with the dark side of the Force" ("Jedi definition", 2023). It was another playful, quirky way of giving a unique identity to the academics that would volunteer to work with us in a challenging role. A few rejected the metaphor, but most welcomed the idea almost instantly.

To use academics time effectively, we made sure that the ‘exciting’ prospect of joining ‘the force’ was coupled with a detailed role description. A WISEflow Jedi will:

- help build an understanding of longer-term assessment vision and requirements for their discipline;
- identify the best ways of engaging their discipline and peers in exploring the new system;
- become first specialist users of WISEflow in their academic areas;
- start building an academic community of practice in their discipline and across the University.

We offered benefits, too:

- Opportunity to influence the future of digital assessment in the OU
- Opportunities for scholarship projects as well as professional development.

On a practical level, we managed to offer some back-fill resource for these roles. Having a concrete timeline in place to inform resource planning helped address the often-experienced obstacles to engaging academic staff with strategic change programmes.

After an initial induction session for the 25 Jedi that academic units had nominated, we engaged them, again, not through more meetings but through carefully designed hands-on tasks all delivered through WISEflow. They completed tasks both as students and markers/tutors using different workflows in the system, which offered them a flavour of how the system can be used for different types of assessment. Most of the Jedi became another group of advocates for the programme. Those not immediately persuaded by the possibilities offered at present, agreed to a different type of advocacy – to work with the programme and the system to get both right in the end. Their advocacy is one of shared confidence or hope in future capabilities and trust in the programme to deliver these.

5. Seeking out expertise - drawing in the academic voice

The Jedi and other initiatives gave academics a way to influence and steer our work. Much of the direction of work initially was from the inside out. Soon however we sought the flow from expertise and creative solutions from the outside in. The time and engagement from academics and other professionals and the influx of expertise was welcome and needed. After all, we were implementing a new piece of educational technology into an area of supported distance learning where the OU has great operational, teaching and research expertise. The more we could tap into this collective knowledge, especially the day-to-day experience of our Associate Lecturers and years of practice, but also over 50 years of operational experience in our professional
services units, the better this programme would steer in the right direction. As a programme, we engaged with many of the wide range of external professionals advising on project management, quality assurance, IT development etc. that were already supporting other projects at the OU. Our dedicated engagement with academic expertise and the voice of academics at the OU is perhaps an area where we took a slightly different path from a standard change programme approach; we approached and eventually worked with academics that specialised in the implementation of educational technology and in digital assessment from a teaching, research and operational perspective.

One way to tap into academic and professional expertise in assessment was to work the university's Assessment Programme which happened to be led by the academic lead for the E&A programme. The OU's Assessment Programme (AP) brings together a community of practice that seeks to improve and innovate every aspect of assessment that needs it. It involves both academic and professional services staff and we tapped into the expertise of these colleagues on many occasions. For example, we designed a workshop for the Assessment Programme where we invited academics from other institutions to talk to us about how the implementation of WISEflow had changed assessment in their institutions. That community offered a space for objective, constructive and forward-thinking debate on what we should be mindful of when implementing the new system. In effect, it transformed local scholarship and professional expertise in assessment and change management into a loose interuniversity network of HE assessment practitioners.

We also worked closely with academics from the OU’s Institute of Educational Technology (IET), which is internationally known for its research on teaching and learning technology. In our user experience evaluation activities (e.g. the exploratory work with ALS described in Section 3), we were keen to use academically sound methodologies for the gathering and analysis of evidence. IET provided that expertise and agreed to independently evaluate the early user experience. They used well established, peer-reviewed methodologies for evaluating the users’ attitude to the new technology and published their report independently. There had always been vocal opposition to the new system by some ALS, but IET’s evaluation overall showed that “user acceptance of the new system was positively related (significantly) with expectancy, attitudes, effort and self-efficacy and negatively related to anxiety” (Herodotou & Gillespie, 2020, p. 5-6). While challenges and missing features were identified and actioned to further product development, it was also hugely important to have such robust user experience evidence available early on in the programme. IET continue to work with the programme in ongoing evaluations and will continue to independently assess the success of the programme once the system is fully implemented.

Like any institutional change programme of this size and scope, we were regularly reviewed and audited from a financial and programme management perspective. However, we, the team, and many of our stakeholders on the Steering Group felt that such standard project management audit was necessary but insufficient for a programme with impact well beyond the technical implementation of a new software. We looked at our internal expertise, again, and approached an academic expert in learning technologies and social computing at the OU. She reviewed our programme management methodologies in-depth, including the process we were establishing for prioritising user requirements and working with our provider, UNiwise, to implement them. The outcomes of that review helped us establish robust processes for pedagogically-informed decisions about what we would like the system to look like in future. It also gave us evidence and a narrative for our negotiations with UNiwise, and it helped us justify financial investment decisions to the institution.
6. Discussion

Why does all this matter? Why bother doing all the extra work of creating mock-TMAs, provide hands on experiences, dream up new metaphors, foster communities of practice and seek expertise and programme checks that go beyond the standard project management processes? There so much else was going on at the OU and we all had to live through our individual and collective experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, all of which heightened a general feeling of physical and mental exhaustion? Why then invest all this time and energy? We all felt the exhaustion like everyone else, but as a core group, we also knew that leading change requires more that following established project management processes. It requires a change leadership approach that includes creativity, inspiration and preparedness to invest time. Above all, it was vital that we actively demonstrated that we really cared and listened.

"The thing is, caring takes time and energy. It takes time to ask how someone is and listen, really listen, to the answer. It takes time to help someone with a problem. It takes time to go to group events and take an interest in others’ work. In fact, caring looks so inefficient, it is vulnerable to being cut altogether when we imagine new ways of doing things." (Tappon, 2021)

We knew we needed to continue to listen and care. We knew that ‘work to rule’ for self-preservation was not an option. We also knew that adopting a system like WISEflow and further expanding the use of digital assessment was not an emergency stopgap (Barber, 2021) to manage our way through a pandemic. Widespread use of digital assessment is here to stay and at the Open University, it would be through the long-term partnership with UnWise.

As we were approaching nearly 18 months since the start of the programme and with a new, much clearer delivery plan only recently approved by the University, it was time to take stock: we decided to ask our Steering Group about what they felt had worked well in E&A. This time, no elaborate process, just a question in the Teams chat and everybody writes what comes to mind. What had we all achieved together while removing or circumventing obstacles and facing ever changing challenges? We had faced and dealt with change cynicism and at times challenging behaviours from stakeholders. How much had we managed to convert the existing, often negative change narrative into something more positive and forward looking? We thoroughly welcomed what our Steering Group had to say.

As for our joint achievements we heard that we had established a “much clearer idea of how the new system will work for our students and AlS in order to optimise the experiences and make it as simple and user-friendly as possible” and also a “really positive engagement with a range of stakeholders, with a focus on the student experience”. We also heard that we had introduced “a positive way of working, maybe ground-breaking” and more importantly that we “brought people along with us”.

When we asked members to choose one thing that had worked well for them in E&A, we heard the following:

"Meetings that finish on time!"

"Openness and transparency of the challenges and the opportunities"

"Teamwork, openness, vision"

"A broader understanding of the end-to-end journey of assessment and the amount of effort across all units put into delivering this service to our students"
"Shared sense of purpose across the programme even if we disagree sometimes on how to get there."

In a final question we asked Steering Group members about the next steps and the future of the programme. We heard that there is "trust in the programme team" and that there was now "a sense that we can change things in the university when we often tell ourselves that we can't". There was also a strong message about continuing to progress the implementation in a transparent, collaborative way and that "time is flashing by", so we need to keep our eye on the ball and continue delivering our milestones.
7. Conclusions

When we took on our roles as Programme Manager and Academic Lead for the Exams and Assignment Implementation Programme, we both intuitively mistrusted the word ‘implementation’. It seemed to signal that all the groundwork had already been done and all that was needed now was turning it into practice. Could that really be true?

We started our work with a list of requirements, a provider identified, contracts signed, and a minimum core programme team allocated. We decided to kick off our work with a joint Working and Steering Group meeting in a large room on campus in Milton Keynes, UK, with some 30 people in the room and another 10 joined remotely via Skype for Business. Getting everybody in the room and creating a baseline of a collective understanding of the vision and ways of working seemed like a promising idea. We had not prepared ourselves for technology almost totally failing us. We also did not anticipate the onslaught of comments displaying mistrust, cynicism and disbelief about this new end-to-end assignments and exams solution. It happened to be the last face-to-face meeting before lockdown. Following the change project management rule book was of course essential, but clearly, it would not be sufficient going forward.

This paper presented some of the steps we took to address the institutional obstacles and complexities at the Open University between January 2020 and July 2021. These included a strong vision and purpose that was communicated widely and reached over 1500 contacts. To address residual anxieties about using a new software application and more practical ways of engagement with it, we designed ‘mock TMA’ which delivered that hands-on experience and gave us valuable feedback in the process. We used the Jedi metaphor that was fresh, invited new ways of thinking and the development of a community of practice in Faculties and other units in a creative way. Finally, we ensured that the academic scholarship and professional expertise from OU staff contributed prominently to the work of a programme; a programme that, after all, is there to give students a much-improved assessment experience and therefore greatest potential for success. Doing all this, we may have indeed navigated around ‘emotions affiliated with the dark side of the Force’.

Most important in all this: while the paper was written by Maria [Programme Manager] and Klaus-Dieter (Academic Lead), the credit for the achievements must go to all who contributed to the creative energy present in regular programme meetings and the sometimes quirky and unusual ways of running and being in a Working and Steering Group. The commitment and generosity from everybody, and particularly from our partners at UNiwise who gave more than what might be expected from a technology provider, is the strongest evidence that change can be done, at the Open University and even during challenging times. Maybe we all became Jedi’s and called upon our ‘inner tranquility through calmness’ to tell ourselves that we can do change, and then tapped into the force for good to make it happen.

8. References


