

Student Engagement with Reading Lists

Focus Group and Survey Findings Report



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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a student survey and focus groups exploring perceptions, use, and engagement with module reading lists. Whilst experiences varied across disciplines and levels of study, students recognised reading lists can be an important component of their learning. But their engagement with reading lists was mixed, and influenced less by the availability of the reading lists and learning materials and more by how effectively reading lists were integrated into teaching, assessment, and the wider learning experience.

A central finding was that students primarily viewed reading lists as practical tools for achieving specific academic outcomes. The strongest driver of engagement was assessment relevance. Students were significantly more likely to engage with readings when academic staff explicitly linked them to assessed work, classroom activities, or module learning outcomes. Conversely, where reading lists were rarely mentioned or weakly integrated into teaching, students often delayed engagement until assignment deadlines approached or ignored them altogether.

The findings indicate that students engage with reading lists strategically rather than comprehensively. Most students reported consulting reading lists weekly, but relatively few engaged with all recommended reading. Time pressures, competing academic demands, demands outside of university, and lengthy reading lists led students to prioritise resources they considered most relevant, accessible, and likely to contribute directly to academic success. Rather than reading everything provided, students adopted selective approaches that included skim reading, note-taking, reviewing specific chapters, discussing readings with peers, and using digital tools (largely AI) to identify key information.

The study also highlights the growing role of generative artificial intelligence within students' reading practices. Participants reported using tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini to summarise texts, extract key concepts, and support their understanding of complex readings. Students described these tools as helping them manage large volumes of information and identify areas of particular relevance, suggesting that generative AI is becoming an increasingly common part of students' approaches to academic reading.

Reading list design emerged as a significant factor shaping engagement. Students expressed a clear preference for shorter, more focused reading lists that clearly distinguished between essential and optional resources. They valued annotations, chapter-level recommendations, and explanations that clarified how individual resources supported learning and assessment. Inconsistencies between modules, unclear expectations, and reading recommendations dispersed across multiple locations created confusion and made it difficult for students to identify priorities.

A recurring theme across both the survey and focus groups was the challenge of managing academic workload. Students frequently reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of recommended reading and struggled to find sufficient time not only to complete readings but also to understand, reflect upon, and apply what they had learned. The findings suggest that the issue is often not access to resources but the student's capacity to engage meaningfully with large volumes of learning material alongside other academic and non-academic commitments.

Students also encountered barriers relating to access and usability. Although reading lists were generally accessible through Moodle, many participants felt they were not sufficiently visible within the VLE. Friction arose from multiple logins, authentication requirements, broken links, unfamiliar platforms, and inconsistent user experiences, which reduced motivation and sometimes led students to seek alternative sources of information on their own, bypassing their reading lists altogether. Mobile devices were rarely preferred for sustained academic reading, with students favouring laptops and desktop computers that better supported multitasking and navigation between multiple resources.

The findings further demonstrate that students value flexibility in the formats of learning materials provided through reading lists. While traditional academic resources such as journal articles, books, and book chapters remained important, students expressed strong preferences for shorter and more accessible content. Videos, interactive resources, and multimedia formats were viewed particularly positively because they supported engagement, provided concise introductions to topics, and accommodated different learning preferences. Students emphasised the importance of clearly signposted content that could be navigated efficiently and integrated easily into their study routines.

Students generally supported the inclusion of diverse authors, perspectives, and experiences within reading lists. Many respondents identified opportunities for greater representation of different cultural, socio-economic, racial, and ethnic perspectives and valued resources that challenge dominant narratives. However, the findings suggest that diversity alone does not drive engagement. Inclusive content is most likely to have an impact when students actively use reading lists and when diverse resources are clearly visible, contextualised, and embedded within teaching activities.

Overall, the evidence indicates that students do not reject reading lists but engage with them selectively and strategically. Effective reading lists are characterised by clear structure, manageable scope, explicit links to learning and assessment, and integration within teaching practice. The findings suggest that improving student engagement is less a question of increasing access to resources and more a matter of enhancing relevance, usability, guidance, and integration into teaching and the curriculum.

Findings

Why students use reading lists

A recurring theme across the survey and focus groups was the expectation that reading list materials should be clearly linked to assessment. For many students, assessment requirements were the primary reason of engagement, with 66% of respondents (162 students) reporting that they use reading lists to prepare for assignments and assessments. Other common reasons for using reading lists included finding sources for further research (32%, 78 students), preparing for seminars, lectures or tutorials (30%, 73 students), and following up on topics discussed in class (30%, 72 students).

These findings suggest that students primarily view reading lists as a practical, task-oriented resource that support immediate academic goals rather than as opportunities for broader exploration. However, focus group discussions indicated that students did not hold a uniform understanding of the role of reading lists, with different perceptions shaping how and when they engaged with recommended readings.

Students held differing views about the purpose of reading lists. Some viewed them as optional background reading that provided additional context, while others saw them as essential for understanding key concepts and succeeding on their course.

Engagement also appeared to be influenced by academic staff, with students reporting varying levels of encouragement to use recommended readings:

“I think my research methods workshop had like a requirement that we had to do the reading list. So it was definitely encouraged that we need to do it before class so that we can have a like a good discussion and put in some points and discuss so that it could help the assignment. But yeah, it was not that strict that it was like a compassion you could skip like a week or two, something like that.” [FG2-02]

“But on the other hand, I have modules where they don't even really mention the reading list, so it doesn't really encourage you to engage with it if they don't place an emphasis on it. In that case I do often look towards the end when I'm doing my assignment.” [FG2-01]

“...I think the actual purpose is like - sometimes people don't really use it, but it is supposed to be like background knowledge like when you go to lectures. So sometimes lectures, if you go to lectures, it can be like very confusing. But the background knowledge is supposed to help.” [FG5-02]

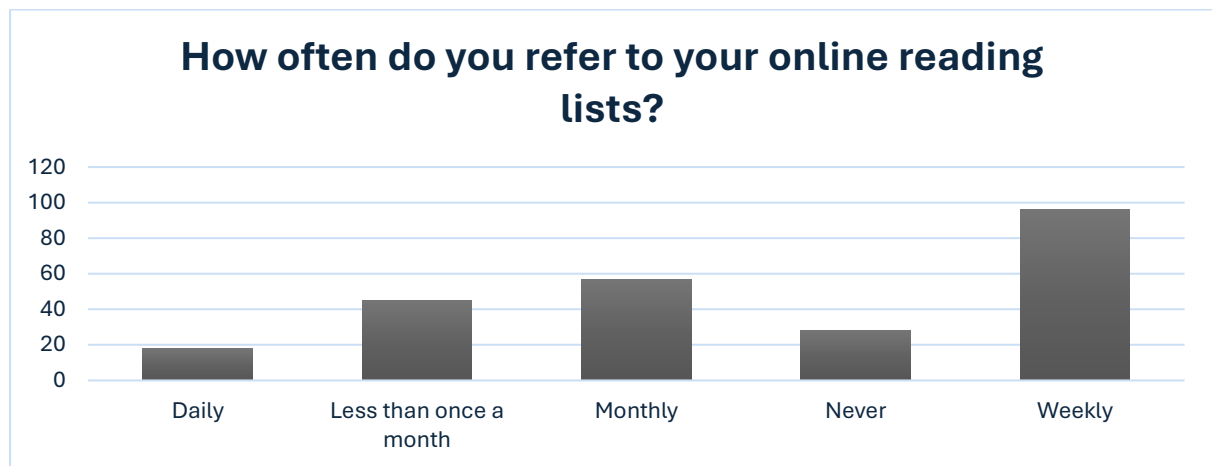
While assessment relevance was an important driver of engagement, not all participants relied on reading lists when completing assignments. This was particularly common among students undertaking practical assessments, developing their own

research topics, or studying subjects where rapidly changing knowledge made independently identifying current sources feel more valuable:

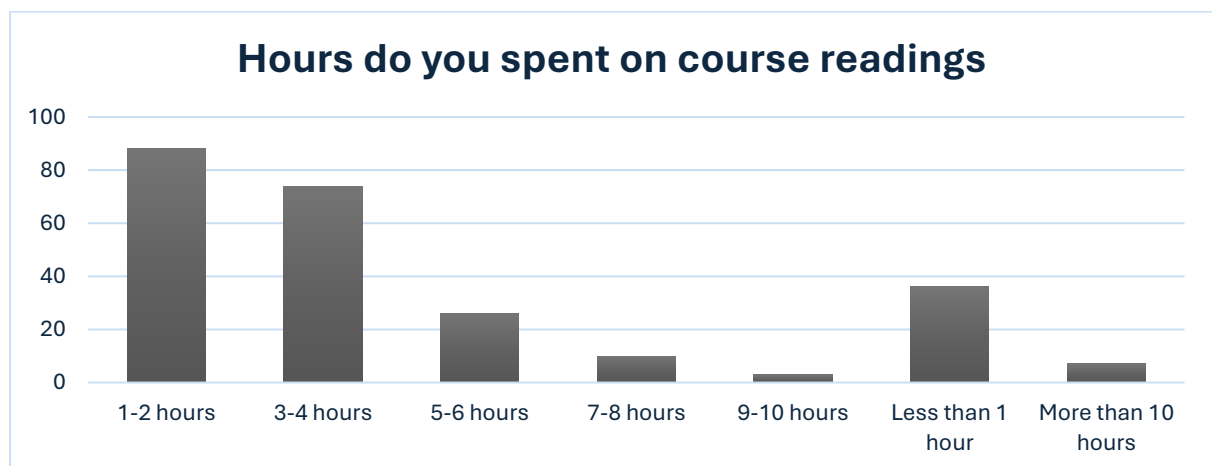
“To be fair, most of my assignments are coursework based and like. You know, we’re working on making some code or something like that, and usually the best and newest sources for information on that is going to be the person who made whatever you’re working in and it’s going to be on that website.” [FG1-02]

1. How students engage with reading lists

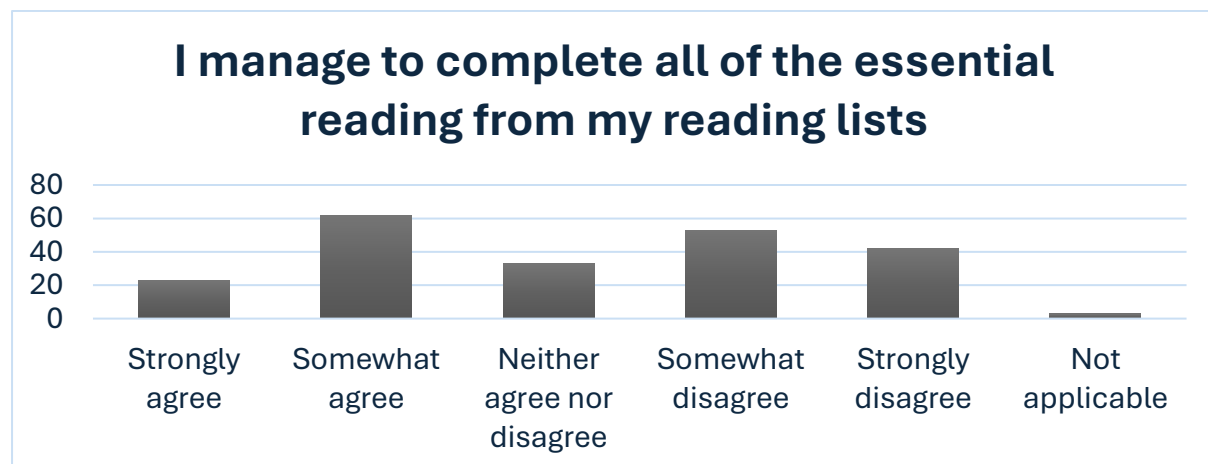
Student engagement with reading lists was generally low to moderate but varied considerably. The most common pattern of use was weekly engagement, reported by 39% of students (96 respondents), while 23% (57) referred to their reading lists monthly and 18% (45) less than once a month. Only 7% (18) reported using their reading lists daily, and 11% (28) said they never used them.



In terms of time spent engaging with course readings and other learning materials, most students reported relatively low levels of weekly study. Around 67% (162 students) spent between 1 and 4 hours per week on readings and learning materials, while only 8% (20 students) spent more than seven hours.

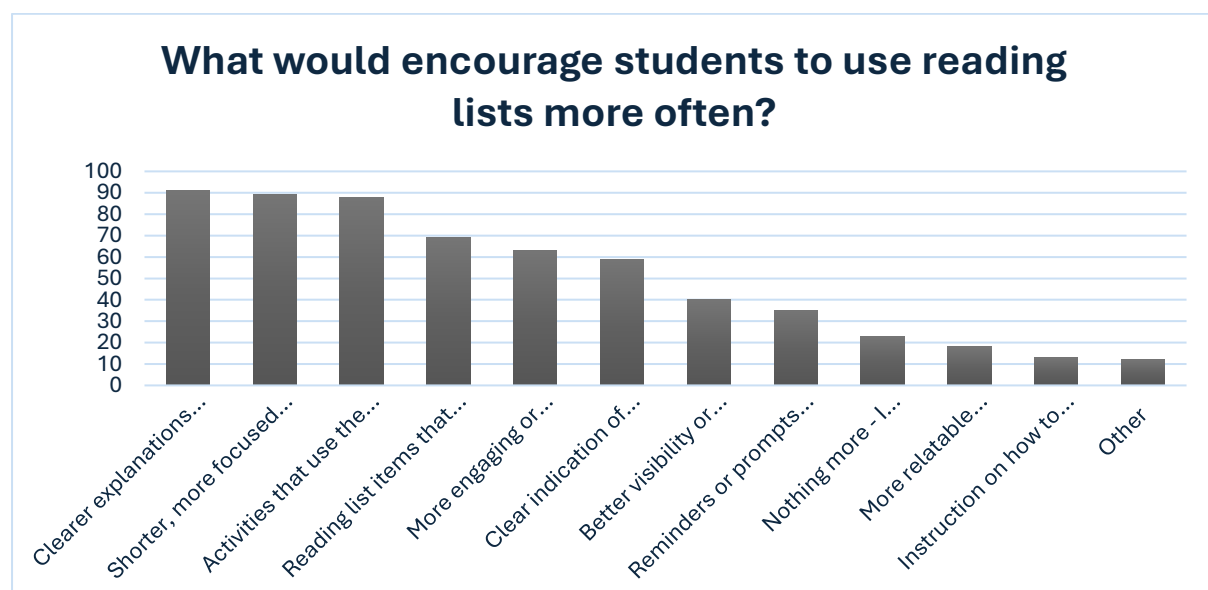


These findings suggest that while most students engage with reading lists at least occasionally, engagement is often selective and constrained by time.



The findings indicate a disconnect between the amount of essential reading provided and students' capacity to complete it. With more students disagreeing than agreeing that they complete all essential reading, engagement appears to be constrained by factors such as workload, time availability, and the length of reading lists.

Students identified several factors that would encourage them to engage more frequently with their reading lists. The strongest motivator was a clearer explanation of how reading list materials support learning (91 students), closely followed by shorter, more focused reading lists (89 students) and activities that make use of the reading list, such as quizzes, discussions, or guided tasks (88 students). Students also expressed a desire for stronger links between reading materials and assessed work (69 students), suggesting that engagement is often driven by perceived academic value.



Students described adopting a strategic approach to reading, often prioritising resources they considered most relevant or essential. To manage their workload, they employed a range of techniques, including skim reading, note-taking, highlighting, re-reading key sections, using text-to-speech tools, and drawing on generative AI to identify and summarise important information. Some students also discussed readings with peers and shared useful sources. These approaches suggest that students are not necessarily reading less but are instead selectively engaging with materials in ways that help them balance academic demands and make efficient use of their time.

“I like to use OneNote and then you get an page with OneNote and make a mind map with all the different topics and stuff, right. They'll make lots of diagrams and stuff. That's how I usually like to take notes for things. And then it's all the little sections on the OneNote page until it's goes forever, you can keep scrolling.”
[FG1-02]

“What I tend to do is, uh, if I don't find it on Google as well, I kind of take that to the, uh, either ChatGPT or Gemini and I kind of extract the context of it and, uh, ask it to read for me and kind of point out the important pointers that would help me.” [FG2-01]

Reading typically took place at home, in the library, or in social study spaces such as coffee shops. Laptops and computers were strongly preferred over mobile devices, as larger screens made it easier to navigate library resources and work across multiple sources simultaneously:

“I think usually I read, uh, sort of reading list books at home on my laptop. Umm, I've tried to do it on my phone, but it's not, I don't find the interface. It's more like the reader rather than the book itself can just be, uh, really annoying to work with. Or usually, I might go to a coffee shop and get a coffee on my laptop down and and read there.” [FG5-01]

Students often described having multiple tabs and documents open simultaneously while they studied, moving between reading list and learning materials, library databases, lecture notes, and assignment documents. This multitasking approach was considered much easier on laptops and desktop computers, where larger screens enabled students to compare sources, take notes, and manage several resources at once. In contrast, mobile devices were viewed as less suitable for sustained academic reading because of their smaller screens, limitations in displaying multiple documents, and the challenges of navigating e-book platforms and library systems efficiently – they noted that some platforms were poorly optimised for smaller screens. As a result, students tended to reserve smartphones for quick reference or casual reading, relying on laptops for more focused and intensive academic work.

These findings suggest that students engage with reading strategically, selecting tools, formats and study environments that help them manage competing demands on their time.

2. Barriers to engagement

Participants identified several barriers to engaging with reading lists and recommended readings. These barriers extended beyond access to resources and included how reading was integrated into courses, the volume of material provided, and limited time for meaningful engagement.

For students on practical or lab-based programmes, reading lists often played a less central role than hands-on learning, making them feel intimidating or overwhelming when required:

“Yeah I mean it does freak me out when I first see it because obviously my course is a lot more practical, hands on stuff...” [FG4-02]

Participants also reported confusion arising from reading recommendations being distributed across multiple sources, including reading lists, lecture slides, handouts and verbal guidance, making it difficult to identify which materials to prioritise:

“No, they're not the same, but they're different. So it's like very hard, like what do we do? Like, uh, we should study below the lecture slides or, uh, in the reading list.” [FG3-02]

Time was a significant constraint. Many students struggled to balance reading with competing academic demands and often viewed reading as an additional task rather than an integrated part of learning. Concerns about keeping up with coursework were common, and participants emphasised that the challenge was not simply finding time to read, but finding time to understand, reflect on and apply what they had read:

“I mean, I usually. If it's set on for the Week 2 lecture, read this chapter, I'd usually do that, but in the middle of a term it can get a bit muddled. You know you're busy, maybe you miss a week or two, so I'd have to go back over it.” [FG5-01]

“Sometimes it's like, OK, more stuff to learn, more stuff to memorise. At least if I don't know something, I just go straight to that. But like half the time it's like, oh great, I've got to fit this in this now.” [FG5-02]

In response, students adopted selective reading strategies, prioritising material according to relevance, publication date, assessment requirements and perceived value. Overall, engagement with reading lists was shaped by both structural and individual factors, leading students to prioritise resources they considered most useful, accessible and relevant to their immediate learning needs.

3. Reading list design and organisation

Only one focus group participant reported experience of a structured reading list, and this was viewed positively:

“I remember when I first opened up a reading list and I thought, wow, it’s really well organised. I like how it’s all layed out and it’s really easy to use. That was my first impression of it.” [FG1-02]

Students expressed frustration with inconsistencies in reading list design and expectations across modules:

“Yeah, but then sometimes, like when they point out, oh, read this on the reading list, they also tell you all what chapter they’re meant to read, whatever. But then some of them don’t. So it’s just like you have to find it on your own.” [FG1-01]

Students agreed that clearer, more consistent structures would encourage engagement.

Participants valued annotations, notes and chapter-level recommendations, which helped them identify relevant content and navigate large volumes of material:

“I mean having the chapters mentioned is good as well so you can read the whole text. I think in lecturers they do sometimes they put it on the on the last slide. So you kind of know what what to read.” [FG5-02]

However, guidance was often provided through lecture slides, Moodle or verbal instructions rather than within the reading list itself, requiring students to consult multiple sources.

These findings suggest that students are more likely to engage with reading lists that are clearly structured, consistently presented, and provide sufficient guidance to support the efficient identification of relevant content.

4. Access and user experience

Most participants could access reading lists through Moodle, but felt the system was hidden and not well integrated into their learning environment. Views on additional guidance were nuanced. One participant expressed a willingness to use a guide when navigating unfamiliar features, noting that they would trust guidance created by those that had already worked out the process:

“I probably would, yeah, 'cause I’d be like they’ve figured it out first. But if there was a guide then I could go there.” [FG1-02]

However, the same participant also suggested that having to consult instructions could make the system feel overly complicated and discourage engagement.

“I think it’s just like longing the process. I’m like, I’ll just go find something else. Yeah, rather than, you know, I need to get somewhere and then, oh, I need to open a guide. I’m not doing that.” [FG1-02]

This highlights a tension between valuing support when needed, but expecting core functions to be sufficiently intuitive so that additional guidance is unnecessary.

Participants also encountered challenges when accessing linked resources on external platforms. Differences in interfaces, navigation and document formats were often confusing:

“There was an ebook, they didn’t have the page numbers like normal. They was changing depending on the screen size. It’s like why, why? Why would you do this? And then I tried to figure out how to change it. It took me ages because I wasn’t familiar with the platform.” [FG1-02]

“There is one where we it’s just not possible to download the PDF I can’t remember the name of the website though, it’s a dreadful one, you can’t access the material, it just loads and loads.” [FG4-01]

However, many students became more confident through repeated use.

Technical issues such as broken links, repeated logins and multi-factor authentication created additional barriers, sometimes leading students to search for materials elsewhere or abandon their search altogether:

“I did encounter some broken links when I wanted to access. But yeah, thankfully I found the resources elsewhere...” [FG2-02]

“Yeah, because I don’t get every time I log into Outlook, it’s like put this number and do this, do that and then put your phone password in. I think it’s really long. I guess security, whatever. No, you don’t want data breaches and stuff, but I think that it’s really annoying, like if I’m trying to get to an article like or whatever, and then I tell them you log in like lots of times... I don’t know, I am used to all of this. I feel like it’s annoying and like demotivates me trying to get to it.” [FG1-01]

Although students were generally able to access reading lists and resources, their experiences were often hindered by small but cumulative points of friction that disrupted engagement and encouraged the use of alternative information sources.

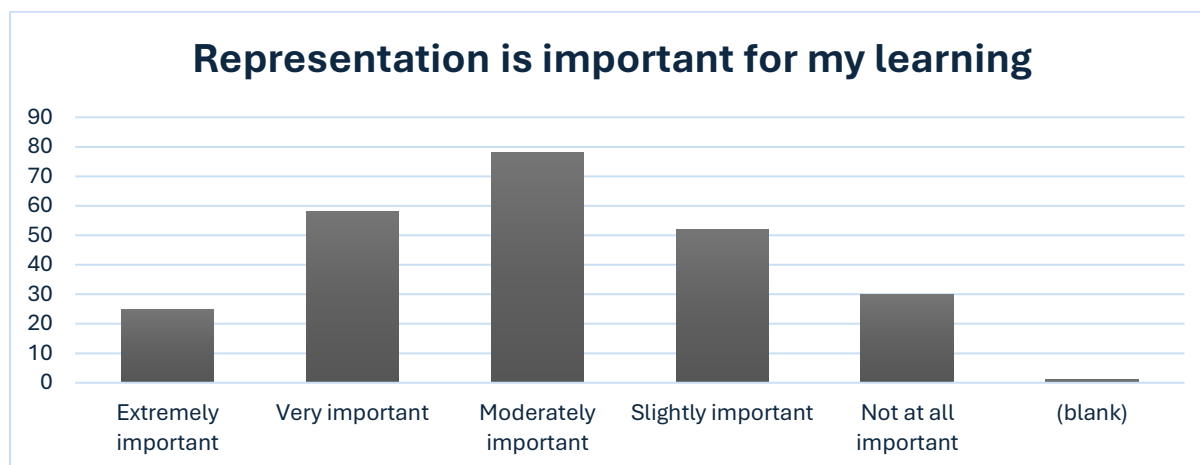
5. Content preferences

Diversity and Representation

Students generally recognised the value of representation and diversity within reading lists, although expertise and subject credibility were typically considered more important when evaluating recommended authors:

“I have the feeling that most students wouldn't really care where the theories are from as long as they're like accepted business theories within academia, I think. I think most students wouldn't really care.” [FG5-01]

This reflects the survey findings.



The findings suggest that representation is an important aspect of reading lists for many students, although it is not the primary factor influencing engagement. Students most commonly identified gaps in cultural perspectives (110 responses) and socio-economic (class) representation (93 responses), followed by racial and ethnic diversity (63 responses). Many students also felt that learning materials should challenge dominant narratives and include alternative perspectives, with 125 students rating this as either very or extremely important. These findings indicate that students value reading lists that expose them to a wider range of experiences, viewpoints and voices.

Most students reported feeling represented in the authors and perspectives included in their learning materials, with 145 respondents expressing agreement and 34 expressing disagreement. However, the significance attached to representation varied across different student groups. Black, Asian and minoritised students were more likely both to view representation as an important aspect of their learning experience and to identify gaps in the diversity of reading list content, highlighting the differing ways in which students experience and engage with the curriculum.

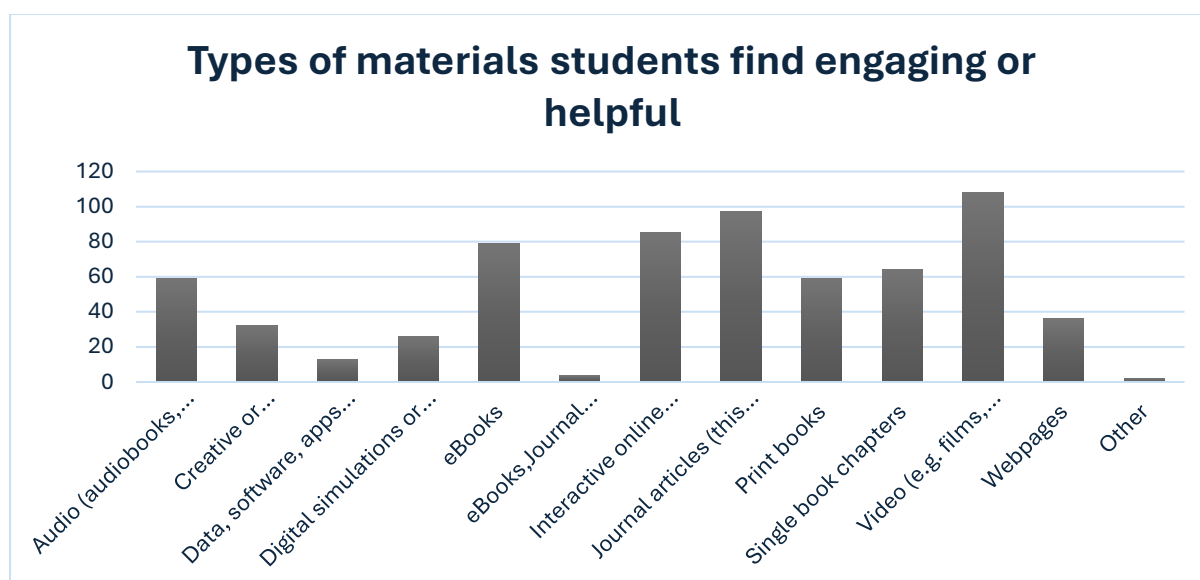
However, the data also suggest that inclusivity alone does not drive engagement. Students care about inclusivity, but it doesn't compensate for poor reading list design or weak integration into teaching. Where reading lists do offer greater diversity there is a risk of hidden inclusivity – diverse content may exist on reading lists but go unnoticed or unrecognised (and unused) due to a lack of engagement, visibility, clear signposting.

The student's own confidence in discussing representation with academic staff varied, however, with many viewing academics as the authoritative experts in their discipline and therefore feeling reluctant to question reading list content or suggest alternative resources.

Preferred Resource Formats

Format preferences depended on purpose: print was preferred for in-depth reading and annotation, while online resources were valued for quick searching and information retrieval.

Participants also valued having access to a range of resource types to support different learning preferences, but there was a clear preference for concise and manageable content.



The survey findings suggest that students favour reading lists that provide a diverse range of resource types rather than relying solely on traditional academic texts. While journal articles (97 responses) and eBooks (79) remained popular, videos were the most frequently selected format (108), followed by interactive content (85). This indicates a demand for learning materials that are both academically relevant and accessible, enabling students to engage with content in ways that suit their learning needs.

Journal articles, short videos, and specific book chapters were often favoured over lengthy texts, which could feel overwhelming alongside other academic commitments:

“I try, but I prefer reading something that's shorter because already the reading list is too long for me. So yeah, something like newspaper articles or journals or something like that which are shorter.” [FG2-02]

Multimedia resources, particularly videos, were viewed positively because they combined visual and verbal explanations, making complex concepts easier to understand and engage with:

“I mean I would prefer videos 'cause I just think I'm more engaged with them in that way yeah obviously you can get long videos but it tends to give like a really good summary and you get visuals to go with it so you know what they're talking

about so I prefer that. And just having someone say out loud to you is different when you're reading it yourself.” [FG4-02]

Students felt that videos enabled them to absorb information more quickly than lengthy texts, although shorter videos were strongly preferred over long recordings or lectures:

“It’s just like my attention span. It probably goes same way with everybody like if you see like a 40 minute video over like a 15 minute video I’ve going to choose to click on the 15 minute video over the 40 minute ‘cause I can still pick out enough information in that 15 minutes that will guide me with my stuff.” [FG4-02]

There was a strong feeling that videos and other multimedia should be easy to work through or watch, with chapters and transcripts, so that they could jump ahead to the relevant section of the video.

Students appreciated being directed towards relevant chapters or sections rather than entire books and were more likely to select materials by familiar authors or those referenced in lectures:

“Uh, so usually some of the reading lists are like, you know, the authors already. So I would prefer reading the ones which I know first, the authors whom I know first. And then, uh, whenever we have any lectures, if there, if there are any authors or anything that’s mentioned from the reading list or something that’s cited in the lectures and slides and everything. I would prefer reading them first and then maybe going on to the next.” [FG2-02]

For many participants, reading an entire book was simply not realistic:

“No one’s got time to read an entire book.” [FG5-02]

For some participants, particularly those with prior experience of the subject, university-level reading was expected to provide greater depth and intellectual challenge than previous study. While many recognised an increase in complexity, others felt this progression was less pronounced than anticipated:

“Yeah, and in, in a way it’s kind of like, you know, I’m, I’m at uni, I’d want a higher level of theories and depth for some of the modules.” [FG5-01]

These findings indicate that students value reading list content that is credible, current, clearly signposted and manageable in scope, with formats that support efficient engagement alongside competing academic demands.

Recommendations

The survey and focus group findings identified several principles that should inform the design of effective reading lists.

Reading List Design

- Use clear weekly or thematic structures.
- Distinguish essential and optional readings.
- Specify relevant chapters, sections and pages.
- Provide annotations explaining relevance.

Curriculum Integration

- Explicitly connect readings to learning outcomes and assessments.
- Make use of readings in seminars, quizzes and discussions.
- Reference reading list content during teaching sessions.
- Provide students with clear guidance on the purpose of essential and further readings to support prioritisation and workload management.

Student Workload

- Reduce excessive list length.
- Focus on quality and relevance rather than volume.
- Curate smaller sets of priority readings.

User Experience

- Improve visibility within Moodle through embedding reading lists and signposting.

Resource Formats

- Incorporate videos, interactive content and multimedia alongside traditional texts.
- Provide chapter markers, annotations and transcripts for audiovisual materials.

Academic Staff Development

- The findings from this project should be incorporated into the existing *Enhancing Student Learning through Reading Lists* workshop. Although the workshop already draws on evidence from the wider higher education sector, this research provides an important local perspective. To reflect this expanded evidence base and greater emphasis on practical design principles, the workshop should be revised and retitled *Designing Reading Lists for Effective Learning*.

Institutional and service recommendations

Several complementary actions are recommended to support the effective design, promotion and use of reading lists across the student learning journey. These recommendations address staff development, reading practices, curriculum design, Moodle integration, and the growing use of generative AI in academic study:

- Produce a concise summary version of this report to support dissemination amongst academic colleagues and other stakeholders. Sharing these findings will help ensure that future guidance and support for reading list design is grounded in evidence from Manchester Met students. Develop guidance for academic staff on explaining the purpose and value of recommended readings, not simply providing them.
- Share examples of effective practice from modules where reading lists are well-integrated into teaching and assessment.
- Encourage programme teams to discuss reading list expectations collectively to improve consistency across modules – and then make these expectations known and obvious to students.
- Include reading list design and engagement within curriculum design – not just which texts or resources will support a module, but how they will be used and added to a reading list.
- Develop guidance for students on effective approaches to academic reading and managing extensive reading workloads, potentially working with Study Skills.
- Create guidance on the responsible use of generative AI tools for supporting reading - potentially a new tutorial or add to the Finding Information using AI tutorial.
- Incorporate reading list use into library welcome (not just what it is and where it is, but how to engage with it) and information skills provision.
- Increase visibility of reading lists within Moodle and module spaces - work with Digital, LEED and others to examine if there is a better way to make reading lists more visible on Moodle, especially in the right-hand block.
- Ensure reading lists are introduced consistently at the start of modules and revisited throughout delivery.
- Encourage teaching staff to demonstrate how they use reading lists during lectures and seminars.
- Encourage the selection of resources that support a range of learning preferences and study approaches.
- Support academics to make diversity and representation more visible through annotations and contextual information, as well as encourage academics to explicitly discuss why particular perspectives have been included.

- Explore approaches for addressing ‘hidden inclusivity’, where diverse content exists but is not recognised or engaged with by students.
- Integrate findings into Reading List Framework based on the evidence presented in this report.