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**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

**Decent Work
and Productivity
Research Centre**

Graduates for a Greater Manchester: Student perspectives

**Report 3: Student Perspectives
On RISE Digital Activities
(OFS Local Challenge Fund Project)
July 2021**

Prepared By The Decent Work And Productivity Research
Centre Research And Evaluation Team

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Graduates for a Greater Manchester



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**



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Executive Summary

This report contributes to an evaluation of the sustained impact of the RISE digital projects at Manchester Metropolitan University that focus on developing students' digital skills, awareness and confidence (part of the OFS funded 'Graduates for a Greater Manchester' project).

It draws on focus groups and interviews conducted (in March 2021) with students who participated (in summer 2020) in a selection of the development opportunities that were offered as part of the project. The main conclusions from the research are as follows,

- The RISE digital projects, and the RISE programme more generally, are filling an important gap for students who may struggle to obtain quality work-related experience, and students value engagement with external organisations
- Although feedback in relation to specific aspects of projects varied, there was positive feedback on the impact of the short, intensive, experiences that RISE digital was providing
- There was positive recognition among students of the benefits RISE digital provided during the period of lockdown restrictions in keeping them engaged and connected
- Students reported considerable improvements in their feelings of career self-efficacy
- Students reported improvements in specific digital skills, but recognized that these were limited by the time-scales of the project - however they reported growing confidence and awareness, which was reported to be important regardless of students' future plans in relation to digital careers
- More digitally oriented students found the projects to be a valuable stepping stone in building their skill set and stimulating further interest in training and development. Although less digitally focused students found value in the programme, there was limited evidence

that it had nudged them towards changing direction to specific 'digital' careers (such as programming).

- Students often had limited understanding of the nature and range of digital skills and of opportunities for digital careers locally – though many students expressed a wish to start their careers in the City region.
- There was evidence that when students had done more than one RISE project (digital, and non-digital) there had been a positive cumulative effect on learning and confidence.

Based on the conclusions, in developing the offering, the project team might consider,

- Continuing to communicate the benefits to students, including 'non-cognate' students, of engaging with RISE digital, and in general of engaging with more than one RISE project
- Continue to offer short, intensive, experiences for students, as there is good evidence for their impact both for academically and professionally
- Exploring ways of raising students' level of understanding of the range and nature of 'digital skills' required in the modern workplace
- Raising awareness of digital opportunities in the local labour market, raising an understanding of those digital skills that are in demand amongst local employers
- Explore ways to work with and influence relevant partners/stakeholders in the development of a long-term and more elaborate plan to address skills shortages in advanced digital skills.

1. Introduction and Rationale

This is the third report in a series which supports the OFS-funded (Local Challenge Fund) Graduates for a Greater Manchester project. The first two reports provided an overview of the context for the project in relation to the labour market, skills, and employment trends¹. This third report summarises evaluative qualitative research (focus groups and interviews) conducted with students who participated in RISE (formerly Third/Term) projects which address digital skills (in a variety of ways).

In this report for the Project Steering Group, we (the DW&P Evaluation team) were asked to address the project's success criterion regarding the sustained impact of students' experiences upon their attitudes to digital skills and related future careers. Although this was our primary focus, we were also open to discovering other findings which add to the evidence base about the impact of the RISE digital programme and knowledge regarding its wider inputs/activities/outputs, especially as the activities took place at the height of national lockdown in England due to Covid-19. This meant that the RISE programme team had to rapidly pivot activities to short intensives and projects that were conducted virtually. Our approach to evaluation is to seek to add to wider knowledge about such activities and not adopt an instrumental or justificatory approach.

Specifically, the DW&P Evaluation team were asked to address the following success criterion:

SC7: Measure student's attitude to working in the T&CD sector/roles via focus group activity with a sample of students each year.

In addition, our focus groups and interviews were able to illuminate wider aspects of the impact of RISE around the following areas of interest for the programme:

Evidence of: Increased student engagement in the third term programme (T+CD)

Evidence of: Better skilled, oriented, and connected students

¹ Christie, F., Lupton, B. (2020) REPORT 1: 'TECH AND CREATIVE DIGITAL': LABOUR MARKET TRENDS AND GRADUATE SKILLS IN GREATER MANCHESTER. Manchester Metropolitan University
Ball, C., Christie, F., Lupton, B. (2020) Report 2: 'TECH AND CREATIVE DIGITAL': PATTERNS OF GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT IN GREATER MANCHESTER. Manchester Metropolitan University

Students who had taken part in three projects, i.e., Sharp Futures, Digital Eagles and Vlogging participated in the evaluation in March 2021. This was approximately nine months after they had engaged with RISE in the summer of 2020 at the height of the national lockdown in England (May/June), a period that highlighted the role of digital and tech skills throughout society. In Greater Manchester this continued for an extended period. The full list of OFS/T&CD related Third Term activities from 19/20 are as follows: (N.B. **Bold** highlights activities that the student participants in research evaluation took part in). We recommend that students from other projects are involved in evaluative research in future years.

1. App Design and Development
2. Design Thinking for Social Good
3. Digital Comms and Creative Practice
4. Game Design
5. Get Confident in Coding
6. Managing Social Media
7. Podcasting and Vlogging
8. Print and Digital News Journalism
9. Cultural Events Management and Production @ Big People Music
10. **Sharp Futures**²
11. **Vlogging MMU**³
12. Future Economies Analytics Internship
13. **Digital Eagles**⁴

In exploring digital skills, the research team were guided by a definition of digital skills used in a recent EU report (Pabollet, 2019⁵). This definition is an expansive and useful one:

Digital competence involves the confident, critical, and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking.

2 Digital marketing project run over one week by Sharp Futures (Social enterprise); students learn about key elements of planning a digital marketing campaign.

3 Intensive run by Freshrb CIC (Social Enterprise); students learn skills on how to tell engaging stories in a vlogging format, which is transferable to other video production techniques and projects. Students acquire the basic knowledge of the pre-production, production and post production stages of making a vlog video.

4 Part of national Barclays Digital Eagles project addressing digital inclusion; students support members of the community who need help with using digital skills for very practical purposes..

5 Pabollet, E., Bacigalupo, M., Biagi, F., Cabrera Giraldez, M., et al., The changing nature of work and skills in the digital age, EUR 29823 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-76-09207-0, doi:10.2760/373892, JRC117505. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC117505>

2. Methods

The engagement of an additional internal evaluator from DW&P to produce insights over and above what is done by the RISE team contributes to the rigour of the Graduates for a Greater Manchester project evaluation. To add something new to existing evaluation tools already planned (e.g., quantitative data about participation, CRAC student survey⁶), the DW&P Research and Evaluation team decided to use qualitative methods. Focus groups were planned, however, due to the timing of availability of participants, some students were interviewed. The value of doing qualitative research is to be open to new discoveries about what engagement in the project meant for students over and above what is reported upon for in the project's success criteria.

In total, eighteen students who had taken place in a RISE project participated in the research evaluation (twenty-seven volunteered but nine did not follow through). Three focus groups (n14) and four interviews (n4) were conducted by two researchers. University of Manchester students were also invited to take part, but recruitment was not good enough to formally report upon here⁷. Due to the small number of volunteers, findings cannot claim generisability, however, valuable themes emerged that have value for the development of such activities in the future.

Volunteers for this research were from a mixture of subjects and levels of study. Table 1 gives details of volunteers. Notably, there are both students from what could be considered both aligned and non-aligned (to tech and digital). In this report, we cannot comment on increased engagement from non-aligned subjects which was one of the project's objectives. However, we were able to explore how a variety of students experienced the programme. Data about participation from different subject groupings is available from the quantitative reporting done by the RISE team itself.

6 CRAC survey - 47 RISE students responded to this in late 2020. In that survey students were asked to consider change from the start of the degree so there will be a number of factors that will have influenced that movement, potentially including their engagement in a RISE digital project.

7 Re. University of Manchester project – two students responded to the call so not possible to report on here although project leaders have been informed of students' reflections.

Table 1 – Evaluation volunteers – subjects and levels of study

BA (Hons) Multimedia Journalism	Year 2
BA (Hons) Integrated Health and Social Care	Year 1
BSc (Hons) Psychology	Year 4
BA (Hons) Tourism Management	Year 2
BA (Hons) Criminology and Sociology	Foundation year
BA (Hons) Tesol and Linguistics	Year 3
LLB (Hons)	Year 2
BA (Hons) English and Creative Writing	Year 3
BSc (Hons) Psychology	Year 1
BENG (Hons) Mechanical Engineering	Year 1
Combined Honours - Philosophy/Sociology	Year 3
BA (Hons) Photography	Year 3
BSc (Hons) Nutritional Sciences	Year 3
BA (Hons) Animation	Year 2
BA (Hons) Filmmaking	Year 1
BA (Hons) Accounting & Finance	Year 1
PhD Engineering	Year 4 (PT)
BA (Hons) Fashion Business and Management	Year 3

Volunteers were reassured of the confidentiality of the process and that the research had undertaken ethical clearance. Each volunteer was sent a £20 digital voucher.

Focus groups and interviews took place virtually due to ongoing social distancing rules. Questions asked related to overall impressions and views of the project, the impact of Covid-19 on their learning, awareness of digital skills, confidence with digital skills, awareness of tech and creative digital sector opportunities, career confidence and attitudes to Greater Manchester (See appendix 1 for questions). The questions were designed to be appropriate to both Manchester Met Uni RISE students and University of Manchester students.

3. Findings

The following findings distil key points gleaned from the focus groups and interviews. We have organised these in a number of sections: general perspectives on RISE; the impact of Covid-19; reflections on digital skills development; sustained engagement in learning; growing confidence in use of digital skills; awareness and interest in tech and creative digital roles; career confidence and attitudes to Greater Manchester.

3.1 General perspectives on the RISE programme

The majority of participants expressed positive attitudes towards RISE. Numerous students stated that they could not see how the project they participated in could have been any better especially in light of the adaptation due to Covid-19. The following capture the varied aspects appreciated by students.

Students valued working with others who share similar motivation and engagement.

IV4: So I think that's most exciting to work with people who genuinely want to carry out a certain task or do something. So you're not fed up with people who may not be giving their 100%. So I would say that's really exciting about the RISE programme. You are meeting likeminded individuals....

IV1: But I think it worked really well. The engagement we had with the other students was excellent and because you were put in the same team for that whole time, you really got to know the other students and kind of everyone came from their different backgrounds but it helped in a way because everyone was good at a different thing. ... I really enjoyed it personally so I don't really have anything negative to say about it.

There was awareness of having optionally engaged in the projects and that other students don't engage. The following student observed that many of her peers don't take advantage of what is on offer and was conscious of being a relatively motivated group.

FG1, P2: I think and I don't know if everyone else will agree. I think it's almost it is a mindset thing. I think it goes back to what are you here for, why would you come to uni and what do you want to get out of it? Like I think the fact everyone... and also engaged in the programmes that were provided shows that they're students who want to get more out of it than just their bit of paper at the end of it.

Some had done numerous projects and advocated RISE very positively on cumulative benefits. For example, across 2020 and 2021, one student had done three projects - Sharp Futures, Online Assessment Centre, and British Sign Language. The confidence the experience gave her had contributed to her putting herself forward for a student union sabbatical election.

FG2, P3: and I really want to engage myself to different activities because all this can really develop my professional development and of course will enhance my CV as well.... And then like you know I don't have any previous formal qualification from UK and English is not my first language and of course like you know before accepting to my degree course I was really like you know underestimating myself... But then like you know this is first time like you know I nominated myself for a wellbeing officer... you know I never knew that like at some stage I will be nominating for such a position. But now I feel like you know, the unconscious which I've been doing throughout like you know these four years, it has like you know, it has added credit on my profile.

Students really valued the interaction with external organisations as part of projects – diverse organisations were involved in the three projects. Positive comments were made re external engagement of project leaders.

FG1, P6: So I think for my vlogging project, I think it was really good because they treated us like we were all on the same level. So nobody was assumed to have more knowledge than another person in terms of editing sort of video footage and stuff. So we were kind of taught from scratch and there was a lot of support... It wasn't rushed or it didn't feel like I had less time. And also the organisation they got in touch with was like a small business... So I think that was really good that the university reached out to a small sort of group and you know kind of give them a bit of promotion as well.

Comments were made that more students should do RISE and that personal tutors and others should encourage students to do projects.

FG2, P2: But I think sometimes you just like in some people you just need a small push. So if it's a small push, you know you never know it'll make a lot of difference. So I think in future I think if the personal tutors...say to their students, oh look there's an opportunity, maybe you guys you know like you know take a part. Or maybe sometimes the personal tutor thinks, okay he's got the ability to do so but he might be shy so maybe like a small encouragement like you know maybe saying, you know what, you could do it, just give it a go.

One student observed that more students and even staff should do RISE projects.

IV3: ... And not only students, staff actually I would say you know, it's really important to learn to be adaptable and just be, take on different challenges. It's nice to learn something different. You never know what you might like if you don't do something different and I think it's really important in today's society.

Some logistical issues emerged for participants – eg., some said that the project had taken more hours than anticipated, and that some external providers didn't reply quickly. For some, promotional material had under-estimated how long the project would take, while others said that projects were too short and would like them to be longer

FG1, P1: So I think the programme was really good in engaging us in working in a practical way. However I think that we had only one week to prepare for the pitch and it was a good time but it would have been nice to extend the programme so we could learn more things as well.

FG2, P1: you can't expect someone that's running a community centre to be sat looking at his laptop because that's not feasible...I think that I was meant to do ten hours of volunteering and I must have spent about 30 hours doing it because I was doing a bit and then I was like, oh no I can't go further. So I think yeah that's literally the only thing I would say.

One student thought RISE places could be increased as some projects over-subscribed.

FG2, P3: on some of the courses which are very popular, they just got booked really quickly and then you know we have to wait for when they publish them next time. But then again there is like limited seats and the waiting list so it would be good to increase, this opportunity

One student argued that ideally all degree programmes should allow credits for participation, as she reported not gaining this for her degree.

FG1, P6: I was just going to say like, some of the Third Term programmes have credits for programmes but not for others. So psychology wasn't accepted on one of the things so we didn't really get our sort of efforts reflected on our transcripts. I wish that was uniform throughout university programmes. Like some people can have it on their transcript and some people can't. So I wish we had that recognition in psychology.

3.2 Impact of Covid-19

For all students, Covid-19 highlighted the importance of digital skills. Many comments were made about how projects had to alter due to Covid-19 but they were very tolerant of this. For many the development of digital skills in conducting the project (virtually) trumped the specific content and skills taught in the project. The RISE digital projects switch to virtual delivery and a focus on digital skills/capabilities proved very timely for students. Virtual delivery contributed a lot to what students had to say about digital skills and how digital tools and techniques can transform lots of activities. Students were concerned about the future job market but happy that participation in RISE was on their CVs at a time when many conventional employability experiences had been put on hold due to lockdown.

Many students were very grateful that the RISE project gave them something to do at a time when it was so difficult to do anything else.

FG1, P6: A lot of people had to change jobs that they were in because of COVID and I feel like the more you update your skills is never enough. And I think doing these little courses at home now that you've got more time kind of makes more sense. So yeah I agree that I took part in more now that I'm at home than if I was going out to work or volunteering.

Another student reported doing multiple RISE projects and being grateful of activities during Covid lockdown, indicating she had perhaps engaged more in additional learning because of this disruption.

IV1: But it's been, especially through COVID and lockdown I know that a lot of people felt like they have no purpose really apart from their degree. And I know that students have felt quite kind of, a bit unmotivated. And for me kind of doing those additional projects, it's just kind of motivated me more to do more in a sense. I've done like the sign language course. I'm working on the Podcast course as well so there are so many things on there that kind of will fit into different degrees and different job sectors and kind of just focusing on like different things that you wouldn't usually do... But I've really enjoyed kind of taking part in loads of different things and the RISE project, so yeah.

One participant describes job-hunting in pandemic (graduated in 2020). She was glad to have been able to do online courses (including RISE) to add to her CV.

FG 1, P3: I feel like for me obviously because I'm a graduate, very hard. It's very tough writing your dissertation, not having obviously that contact with like your supervisor for example or having that kind of, that support after graduation. I think kind of dampened a lot of people's moods...I think you know a lot of people are still looking for jobs. It's very very hard. It's, you know especially once you're out of university like the job advertisements that are on LinkedIn, it's showing entry level jobs, you need four years experience... But it's like, this is entry level, like how do you expect me, I've just graduated from university, we're in a pandemic, I can't really get much experience apart from obviously doing online courses and stuff.

3.3 Reflections on developing digital skills

Students often struggled to define digital skills and capabilities. When asked directly they sometimes initially default to assuming digital skills are about knowing how to use certain software. The EU definition (Pabollet, 2019⁸) is much wider and this more nuanced definition of digital did emerge in student responses, especially when prompted and probed. In some cases they take for granted the role of digital skills which may mean they struggle to articulate something that just seems obvious to them. The following quotes illustrate themes that emerged, when we asked them about how they defined and reflected upon digital skills and capabilities.

A number of students commented upon the fundamental importance of having and developing digital skills for their generation.

IV1: Yeah I think you know 100% like, especially I think my generation's going to be graduating and going into work. Pretty much every job entails some form of digital skills now you know, everything's put onto the computer at the end of the day. So I do think it is important that everyone has at least a basic kind of understanding of these skills.

FG1, P2: I think in terms of how I see the importance of digital skills, I think that's something our generation are widely aware of it. *Knowledge and proficiency with digital equipment is something that employers are going to expect*, but it was nice to have a like a nice foundation provided by the uni cos that's sometimes you might not otherwise get, you might have to find out yourselves... So I think it is something that everyone knows they need and it's nice to have a foundation.

Several students commented on how digital skills developed rapidly via the project's delivery mode (ie., virtually).

IV4: I think I would say, you know in relation to the situation I'm just going to define digital skills just in relation to this internship I would say is the ability to work as a team virtually. That is a skill in itself you know to co-ordinate between the five or six of you that are there and to just be on top of things so in terms of for instance I did find maybe a certain team member and I was like you know, maybe we could go a little more into this.

FG2, P3: So having first hand experience to work like you know the digital world which was a completely different feel from my current study... But once you jump into the pond then you start swimming and then you start to explore, then you know like you know, you have the capabilities like but you just need to like a little polishing skills so how you can use those skills. So it works like that.

Notably, participation in Digital Eagles led to an awareness of social issues associated with digital inequalities.

FG2, P1: I think having digital skills and digital capabilities is all about being able to navigate sort of a computer, navigate the internet, understand how to do sort of certain things like applications and stuff and I think that's what was so clear when we did the Digital Eagles that for us a lot of things that because we've done at uni and we're quite competent in, it does not necessarily mean that everyone is... I was like brought up around computers... Whereas like I think so many people don't necessarily have that privilege or experience or that way of life

8 Arregui Pabollet, E., Bacigalupo, M., Biagi, F., Cabrera Giraldez, M., et al., The changing nature of work and skills in the digital age, EUR 29823 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-76-09207-0, doi:10.2760/373892, JRC117505. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC117505>

Some students describe specific technologies as examples of what digital skills are, especially those developed during their RISE project. Examples below include video editing, using google for digital marketing, but there were numerous other examples mentioned by students.

FG3 P1: I'd say just using different digital technologies like you set the camera and then the softwares as well so as was mentioned before, like the Premiere Pro..., also how to communicate ideas across different digital technologies like just making the vlog to start with and then also using Slack and Video editing...

IV4: it's really nice to learn something new, especially when you're doing a work experience type of setting like this one... You're creating your own actual tour on Google maps and then you can present that in a visually aspect manner as well. So that was something that I really enjoyed doing as well even though like it was something super simple.

Students do not tend to reflect on digital skills as a standalone and often integrate them with wider general personal and professional skills.

FG1, P1: During the programme we didn't really focus only on digital skills. So we learnt other skills like project management, communication, leadership. However after the experience we were able to reflect on what we did and we created a portfolio and in that moment that we learnt how to present our work in a creative way using story telling techniques and other tools that are used to present your work in a creative way where it was introduced to us through the RISE programme. Such as using Adobe Spark for example to create video illustration or other products or other marketing materials.

In some cases, there was recognition that the programme assisted in developing interpersonal and social skills that are not directly related to digital competencies. The quotes below demonstrate this point:

FG1, P4: I learnt as well transferable skills because as I am a multimedia journalism student I'm already accustomed to using cameras and editing and so, well what I learnt with the internship is groupwork, teamwork, especially with people that I'd never met because I'm a person that likes to work by herself instead of with other people. So working with people, with strangers was a challenge for me but it was a really good experience and it was a really positive thing for me to overcome.

IV4: ...it was beneficial in terms of as I said, you know working with the group that you don't know, having to manage and just you know make sure, I feel like working together as a whole group, that's something that I learnt more than the skills, than the digital skills or the software skills in general....

Some students didn't think the project really developed their specific digital skills, due to its short duration. One comments on lack of time to develop new skills.

IV4: ... but if the aim of the internship was to really develop digital skills, then I think there could be more focus on that. You know maybe the certain use of software, of programmes. I know they did mention to us the use of Trello which is a good marketing tool, or a planning and management tool. So Trello was advised to us by Sharp Futures.

However, others said the opposite and gave specific examples (variety of starting points of students with regard to skills is significant). There are very varied responses which largely relate to what their original discipline was and how engagement in RISE had added to their skills, eg., positive examples included a film student using excel, a PhD student using film editing, a tourism student getting better understanding of digital marketing. The following is an example of a student who describes making rapid progress with the use of spreadsheets.

IV1: I think the main digital skill for me coming from a non-business background was kind of doing the spreadsheets and admin. That's never been something that I've been very good at or interested in doing. So we had, I think it was one of the founders of the Sharp Project come in and she talked us through how to lay out the spreadsheet and all the different formulas we'd need. So I think that was my main digital skill. But also learning a bit more about branding. I know that so many people have social media now and anyone can market a certain product but it was kind of how you'd get it out to your specific target audience, which is also really useful for my degree kind of, you know when it comes to pitching in the future. But also digital presentations, I've never done one over a call before.

3.4 A desire to learn more: sustained impact

There was some clear evidence of sustained impact as students felt more confident to continue learning digital skills. Examples of this included doing Future learn courses, the IDEA award, and using LinkedIn learning to get badges as a result. It appears that such short experiences can introduce topics and spark interest and confidence to do more. The following are examples of what students say they have done subsequent to participation in the RISE digital project. One describes the RISE project as a 'stepping stone'.

Some students describe being motivated to learn more.

FG1, P3: I personally, so I started doing my own courses, so like Google doc courses. Then you've got platforms such as Futurelearn and HobSport and like kind of it enabled me to want to gain more knowledge, gain more insight. So I think it was kind of like a nice stepping stone and so that's what I did.

FG1, P1: ... it was more that the internship aroused my interests and want-, and made me want to explore more about the different tools that are out there. After the internship I engaged in different courses like LinkedIn learning on Canva and I also took the iDEA Award. So it's kind of made me want to learn more, yeah definitely.

Others describe becoming more confident in using digital skills in other parts of their lives.

FG2, P1: ... yeah once again I'd go back to the confidence side of things in saying that they've continued to develop through my confidence to attempt to try new things and to attempt to sort of immerse myself in the different apps and the different like technical side of things if that makes sense.

IV1: ...but it made me more confident when taking on various roles in my degree. So obviously I mentioned before the producing aspect. It's always something I've been interested in doing but it's daunting when you see all these budget sheets and schedules pop up and not know how to approach them. So I think doing the Sharp Futures programme really helped me kind of gain the confidence... I'm not an expert but it did definitely help with my confidence with budgeting and everything like that. So I think that's the main point really.

One student uses the word 'adaptable' a number of times in describing how the project has prompted her to learn new digital skills now and in the future.

IV3: Yes I think it's really important and I think it's important to be adaptable because I won't always be doing my PhD research... I think it's important to kind of enhance your digital skills especially today. You need to be kind of current and adaptable. I think it goes hand in hand with the research as well. It's nice to kind of get your research out there and I've never really kind of done that and I know of quite a few people that do blogs for their research and I think that's a really good idea.

3.5 Growing confidence in use of digital skills

The majority of the participants referred to the benefits they received from the programme with confidence recurring as top of their list. Most evidently, the ability to interact with other people and not be afraid to expose themselves to new situations seemed to help grow confidence in varied ways. Confidence with digital interacted with wider personal confidence, e.g., communication and working with new people and in teams on digital projects. Some also expressed the view that if faced with new tech in a job, they would have greater confidence to deal with it. Digital confidence appeared to be growing though often couched in measured terms due to the short nature of the RISE projects.

One student describes enhanced knowledge of tech as useful for job interviews in digital marketing.

FG1, P3: ... obviously I've got a career in the marketing and advertising sector now. So like it's kind of helped me to gain beginner's insight into all of this as opposed to I guess getting more like...hard skills... So I feel like that kind of helped in terms of using in interviews just having that knowledge, that insight and just that bit of experience even though it was only a week.

Others have greater confidence though not to the extent of applying for tech jobs.

FG3, P4: In terms of the confidence with the digital skills I would give it a six {out of ten} just because I feel like I have basic skills but I don't feel confident say going into a technology industry. I feel like I'd just be competing against like people who have done like a degree or have greater qualifications in like a digital subject... I would give it maybe like an eight {out of ten} for being able to communicate with people using digital technology and being able to like convey a message.

Others describe greater confidence gained in using basic digital skills in practical ways. This links to a readiness to take on new challenges.

FG3, P1: ... I'm still not an expert basically as a result of the project but in terms of like speaking in front of a camera or like being able to express or communicate with people, like through video then it would definitely be like a nine or a ten {out of ten}.

FG3, P2: my experience was quite limited prior to the project so I felt like it improved quite a lot... I feel like I would only feel confident in using the softwares that I chose to use, whereas if someone asked me to use a different editing software then I wouldn't be so sure about using it because I hadn't experienced it before.

FG2, P1: And I think it gives you a level of competence and ability to sort of navigate through these apps and stuff and I think, yeah once again I'd go back to the confidence side of things in saying that they've continued to develop through my confidence to attempt to try new things and to attempt to sort of immerse myself in the different apps and the different like technical side of things if that makes sense.

The theme of integration of digital confidence with other types of confidence emerges for the following student who describes using camera skills and communicating on camera too.

FG3, P3: Yeah like I said I was already, I felt pretty confident in some of the software already and the skills that that took. Following it yeah I think my confidence has improved a lot. I feel very confident... I freaked out a little bit when he actually went into detail about what we would be doing. I didn't think we were going to be on camera so I was a bit like, oh God what have I done. But after it, yeah I'm definitely more confident if it was ever to come up again where I had to make a vlog. How to put it together and actually talking to a camera and engaging with the audience is definitely a-, I'm a lot more confident now.

Similar personal confidence has developed for the following student as he describes sharing his digital skills expertise with the Digital Eagles project members.

FG2, P2: So like I say in terms of digital skills I'd probably say there are two main things that I've learnt is the fact that confidence and as well have the patience. Like you know not everybody will be same pace as you. Somebody might take up like what you say quickly... Like in terms of like making, like accounts and stuff, other stuff, that's for me really easy but for someone else it might be a big thing... Well to be honest, before doing what I did last year was the fact that I was quite shy, like I didn't know I would have the skills in me but I would not like come forward and help them. But since I've gone into that I actually have kind of confidence...

Another student comments on how her digital skills developed during her Sharp Futures engagement, complement her need to use digital technologies more in her studies.

FG2, P2: But now this is like you know, digitalised, we have 24 hour exams. So I have transferred my skills like you know like efficiently using these digital channels. Like I have to make sure that we do not have a smooth internet connection and then like with these, ... So of course you know all these skills like you know the research and entering the data and all these skills and choosing the correct option, so all these like it's a complete package, so like you know everything is in one ball. So like you know I'm using like accordingly according to the scenario, so it is improving day by day.

3.6 Awareness and interest in Tech & Creative Digital (T&CD) work opportunities

In this section, we explore student attitudes to working in roles within or related to tech and creative digital. This was an ambitious aim expressed in the project's success criteria. Movement in student attitudes was nuanced depending very much on subject discipline. Our qualitative work with students allowed us to delve further into questions about labour market awareness and perceptions of career options. Participants from creative digital and technical degrees were positive about working in such roles and industries. However, there were numerous students studying Business-related disciplines who expressed a greater awareness and interest in digital roles, e.g., digital marketing which is buoyant in Manchester.

The following quotes illustrates some specific examples. The first is a Tourism student who indicated that the Sharp Futures project had opened her eyes to the potential role of digital in her industry, which she saw as especially important due to the need to pivot to the implications of the pandemic. The project also made her aware of alternative career opportunities if Tourism career opportunities are reduced.

FG1, P1: Yeah so I think that the programme made me wanted to work more from the digital sector. I realise that it's a quite interesting sector to work for and it's quite creative and it allows you to work in a dynamic environment since it's a sector that is constantly evolving. I also learnt how to combine my knowledge, the knowledge that I already have gained through tourism... and I realise that I could have a potential career in the future in a digital company. So it made me realise me more about what is out there in the digital sector and how it's related to my degree as well and to see the connection between things that I learnt.

One student wanted to move into Education for her career, but had a positive perception of Manchester as a digital hub, and this contributing positively to the city region as a work place more generally.

FG1, P6: Yes so I think Manchester is like the next digital hub if that makes sense. It's such a diverse like culturally rich city to work in. There's a lot of opportunity in different industries. I feel like if I was living in another city I wouldn't have the same opportunities. I feel like uni gives us a lot of opportunities as well. So yeah a lot of resources have been put into our sort of economy, local economy and yeah I think I would stay here if I was teaching. And I want to teach at MMU as well in the future hopefully, so [LAUGH].

Realistically, it appears that such short intensives are unlikely to be able to plug certain skills shortages (e.g. for software developers in the city region) in the short term. However, there was considerable evidence in student responses that the project had raised awareness of the role of digital

skills in a wide range of jobs. There were hints that a shift in attitude to areas such as digital marketing could improve the pipeline of graduates moving into that field in the city. However, certainly the majority of students expressed more confidence in using digital skills in jobs across the wider economy, whether this be in education, healthcare and law. Short experiences do appear to have the potential to accelerate and spark interest in different ways, though in a more nuanced way than the project's success criteria may state.

We asked students a question about future careers and use of digital skills. Here were some of the responses, which are broadly positive about using digital skills/capabilities.

I: Would any of you consider going into jobs where you would need a high level of tech and digital skills in the future?

Some students responded very emphatically in the affirmative.

FG1, P3: One hundred percent. I think particularly in a creative design agency... So obviously they create packaging for like brands that you see in supermarkets. So definitely, although like it's not something I won't be needing every digital skill but it is good to have some...

IV4: One hundred percent. Nowadays at the workplace that's the minimum bare requirement I would say... I think it's just so digital and we rely on technology every minute of the day. And I think it's just the role of the students to be aware and just know, if they are not like proficient in a software, it's very important to know the basic understanding of the software, so really just carry out daily tasks, even the most basic.

Others are more measured in their responses but show a positive willingness to be 'trained up'.

FG1, P6: Yeah I think a lot of companies are going to get you trained up and I think that's the main thing. I think of course if they did want to train me up to work in a highly digital skilled job I think I would be open to it but if I was thrown in at the deep end I don't think I'd be open to it as much. But yeah I think a lot of companies are going to get you trained up for it when you're working with specialists software and stuff, so yeah I think I would consider it.

FG2, P1: I dunno, if I had a job and my boss was like, do you think you'd be able to fill out these things online for me, I wouldn't feel quite as apprehensive to say yes or give it a shot as I would have before I did the Digital Eagles if that makes sense.... I'm doing a bit of editing and publishing for a publishers now and it's really interesting. It's actually like so much like, so many like formatting things which I think are like quite tech based things that I've never really done before and I think I can see that it's going to be a really key part of the job...

3.7 Career confidence

We found that answers about career confidence were more straightforward for students than some of the complexity generated by questions about digital skills. In general, participants were confident that their RISE experience has helped build stronger CVs and networks. Although differences were found between participants (related to their different subjects of study), many commented on the positive impact of their experiences of their RISE digital project alongside other RISE projects that some of them had done (suggestive of a particularly positive cumulative effect for those who participated in multiple projects) in terms of future applications and interviews.

What we noticed is that many participants obtained a sense of opportunity the programme gave for those who can't get work experience especially during the pandemic lockdown. For some students RISE gave them the opportunity to gain experiences that had previously been unavailable to them due to rejections for regular work experiences.

FG2, P3: And it gives me confidence like, it was like previously no matter wherever I apply, like it's always a rejection, always. So [LAUGHS] I, of course you know it intimidates you as well maybe, like you know you don't have the skills or what's wrong with your application or stuff. But then again like you know in taking part in these you know internships, so everything is ending up on to your CV. You can, it is giving you confidence like you can refer back to those experiences too, evidence your engagement. So of course it is and it will be helpful for you know future employability chances.

Additionally, the actual possibility for adding a work-related experience and the competitive advantage this offered was mentioned as a positive element of the RISE digital project. There was also awareness that being able to add extra skills and experiences to a CV would help in competing with others for future job roles (especially at the time of Covid-19).

FG4, P1: So I would say I was slightly more confident in like general in terms of my career just because, so like say if you were going for a job interview and you were like quite level with a couple of other candidates but then you just had these extra digital skills, I think it's really sort of beneficial in society at the minute because of COVID... I feel like I will be more confident in getting that job just because of those extra digital skills that I've got that might be above someone else. And then in terms of COVID I think I could use the experience as like evidence that I can work on a project fully remotely without meeting up with anyone else and I can interact with people in an online setting. I can use different platforms like Slack.

Students quoted examples of how the project had built the confidence in approaching new people, in having examples to use in job interviews and making them feel they had a more impressive CV.

FG 1, P4 I became more confident in approaching people that I've not met from all walks of life. Because like I said, I'm very reserved and I tend to work by myself but by interacting with people I became more confident in myself and now I can work better.

FG1, P3: ... it's just more kind of confidence and stuff and just even when you are in interviews and just being able to say, I've done this and talk about it and just kind of what you've done. It was a really good opportunity particularly in a time now where it is hard to be able to get opportunities like these, particularly like to work as a team.

FG1, P6: ...taking part in this project might have given me a bit more advantage over candidates looking for a job. It's that little bit extra that you've taken part in that is different from what you would usually do. So yeah I think it's something extra and something good to put on your CV.

Some participants gave explicit examples of having gained opportunities for obtaining references for a job or enhancing networking for advice from project organisers and their peers:

FG1, P3: I didn't like connect with anyone but I did, so there was this lady, she was kind of running it and she was overseeing that everything went well. But I actually used her just like as a reference for my new job. So that's kind of like the only contact I guess I made from there.

FG2, P3: ...by engaging with Sharp Futures, so that team members who I worked with, of course I got their LinkedIn contact and then you know when I have to create my Law firm poster I was in touch with them and then you know I got the you know more guidance... You got the chance to use them so it's never ever wasted whatever learning and contacts you have in your life.

IV4: Yeah 100%, yeah. That definitely, I think it gives a good, a shot at work experience and it's good to put in your CV as well... I would say definitely gained, yeah career confidence...I really valued just meeting new people and connecting with people, again like I said, likeminded people. So it's always good to expand your network especially from you know work experiences like these. So it was really, yeah it did add to creating a larger network.

Other students gave specific examples of how their expanded confidence had led them to consider types of work and tasks in existing work roles that they would not have done before or without the experience the RISE project gave them.

FG2, P2: To be honest, now before like these kind of activities that I did last year, before I was looking somewhere like you know somewhere very quiet, somewhere where I wouldn't interact with many people, but since now the confidence that I have I would just like you know, I want to go somewhere where like you know I have more interaction. Or if there was more interaction like you know with other people, I wouldn't mind it now because the fact that I have got the confidence in me, specially knowing the fact that like everybody works in different ways.

FG3, P1: Yeah I was going to say the same thing cos like kind of quickly after I completed this project and then I started volunteering with like an organisation, like they don't do vlogging or anything but it just came up that like one of the tasks that I was tasked with was kind of sitting in front of a camera and talking about something. And when I, like before maybe a year ago I would not have applied for something like that but since doing that I feel so much more comfortable. So, I think if I was to be looking for a job and they mentioned some sort of like video element, I'd be all right with it.

3.8 Attitudes to Greater Manchester

Students expressed very positive views about Greater Manchester. There was a recurring sense that the city had many opportunities and offered both good opportunities for work but also for lifestyle. Many students were already from the city region and wanted to stay. Others had come to study in the city from small towns or rural locations and saw Manchester as offering much more than their home location.

FG1, P3: I'm originally from Manchester so I stayed at home for uni and obviously my new job is in Manchester, well it's in Altrincham but I class that as Manchester. I personally think Manchester's obviously growing, you know it's growing the digital sector. You know I would say one of the fast-moving kind of cities in the UK for creative industries... I guess sometimes London is everybody's big dream. But I think obviously compared to London, like whereas there might be more of your bigger companies, Manchester has more of that community feel in which I feel London doesn't because it's so fast paced.

IV1: ... But I really love Manchester as a city cos it's not too big but it's not too small. And I think there's more a sense of community around Manchester than any other big city I know of. Cos there's everything, you know there's every industry is here that there is in London but it's kind of a tight knit community. I know that when we create projects and we send them off to film festivals, everyone kind of knows each other within that network. I just think, I dunno it is just a really great place to live because you know you've got so much to do with marketing and film and TV around here that there's, like the hustle and bustle I guess. There's constantly something exciting going on especially in the centre.

There were a few that anticipated leaving as they didn't not want an urban lifestyle, and a small number who viewed other locations (e.g., London) as better for the role they wanted to work in. One student comments that there are more opportunities in London for what she wants to do and the values she holds (in fashion business).

IV4: So maybe London specially because of the companies that I'm looking for me as well. For me it's not just the job but it's also very much as I said you know, the company is most important. I don't mind bending the rule, but the company needs to have certain values, the beliefs, the growth opportunity with that company. There's a lot of factors that go into you know going for a job after graduation specially after having to experience a really good placement.

In contrast others recognise the strengths of the Manchester economy, especially in creative digital.

FG3, P2: ... I know Manchester is a great place for creatives so anything like digital art or games design and like there's loads of like businesses there. But I think in recent years I think fashion has also started moving up north. So, like a lot of fashion houses, designers and even like the, like online boutiques like Pretty Little Thing and Boohoo, they're all based here. So, I think Manchester is growing in that term.

FG3, P3: So yeah and the media side such as television with the Media City being one when it all moved, a lot of it moved from London up north because it was cheaper... It was a lot cheaper up here than it is where they were thinking about doing it down south. But that's the only thing that I'm aware of that's growing is the television and media industry here.

4. Conclusions

Our first conclusion relates to the wider RISE programme of which the specific RISE digital projects are a part. There is a powerful testimony from our participants to indicate that RISE is plugging a valuable gap for many students who may find it harder to get quality experiences. Student responses on the specific aspects were varied, but there is clear evidence that short intensives generate positive feedback and can have high impact. There were positive perceptions of the programme's value in helping students remaining active and learning through participation in activities during the pandemic, which helped reduce social isolation and made a considerable contribution to career self-efficacy.

Turning to the digital projects specifically, although students were aware that the shortness of the programme limited the scope to make transformational improvements to their digital skills, they did report a positive impact on their wider social and employability skills and personal competencies, including confidence. They also highlighted the positive impact in terms of growing confidence in the use of digital skills/capabilities and significant small steps made in their skills development. The more digitally-skilled and oriented students saw the programme as an important additional step (among others) within their own learning journey, towards building a skillset appropriate for their chosen occupation. However, those who were less digitally focussed were satisfied with a more basic level of skills development which would help them in the future, rather than re-orienting their career direction to more digital jobs. Several students reported that the RISE digital project had spurred them to engage in additional online learning, especially during the period of the pandemic lockdown, indicating a sustained impact of the programme. Students sometimes struggled to define digital skills and capabilities perhaps because these are skills they take for granted, so there are implications that educators could do more to make explicit how these are defined so that students understand the range of skills (from basic to advanced) that are demanded by employers, and will be beneficial for their own development. A more long-term and elaborate plan bringing together relevant partners (e.g., universities, GMCA, employers, sector bodies) would be desirable in

addressing more advanced digital skills and the labour market shortages of these.

The majority of students that we spoke to in focus groups and interviews were local and there is a strong appetite to stay in the city, although there were some exceptions. Students were very positive about the opportunities to stay local if they could. However, students had a patchy understanding of opportunities in the local labour market. Making accessible more local labour market information to students would be a valuable activity which could help focus students' awareness of what opportunities really exist locally, especially for those committed to staying local. It might also act to motivate some to further enhance tech and creative digital skills for jobs for which there are skills shortages.

In general, participants were confident that their RISE experience has helped build stronger CVs and networks. Although differences were found between participants (related to their different subjects of study), many commented on the positive impact of their experiences of their RISE digital project alongside other RISE projects that some of them had done in terms of future applications and interviews. This is a suggestive of a positive cumulative effect for those who participated in multiple projects.

We recognise that the depth and range of our conclusions is limited by the scope of the evaluation that we have been able to conduct. In particular, we are not able to draw conclusion as the motivations and circumstances of students who did not engage with the three RISE digital projects being evaluated in this report. However, the overall direction of travel illustrated from student comments is a positive one and affirms the value and importance of RISE digital projects. Our evaluation also gives insight as to how students from non-aligned courses may benefit, but also how even those from more digitally-oriented courses also make important gains through participation in RISE. We note that student gains are often more nuanced than implied by the success criteria statements written for OFS, and related ambitions that focus on how universities should produce graduates that will plug certain gaps in the labour market. Students can be exposed to potential opportunities but ultimately will make their own choices.

Appendix 1

Focus group/interview questions

1. Introduction – student understandings of what they did and why?

Potential questions

- What project/activity did you participate in last year? What did this involve?
- Talk us through what happened and what you did?
- Do you have any comments on how the programme you engaged with could be improved? Were there any challenges for you in participating and was there anything that didn't work well for you?
- How did Covid-19 impact on your participation in the project and what you gained from it?

2. Digital Skills awareness

Potential questions

- What is your understanding of what is meant by digital skills and capabilities? What are 'digital skills'?
- What digital skills did you develop during the activity/project you participated in in 2020?
- Has participation in the project influenced how you view the importance of digital skills for future work?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you think the project has helped increase your digital skills? (1 for very low and 10 for expert), *Scaling question like this in group may bring out differences between participants. N.B distance travelled may be different depending on starting points*
- How do you feel your digital skills have continued to develop since last year when you completed the activity?

3. Digital Skills confidence

Potential questions

- On a scale of 1-10 (1 for very low and 10 for expert), how confident are you in using digital skills in future working roles as a result of participating in the project? *Please expand upon this. Ask for specific examples of things that they are more confident about doing digitally.*

4. T &CD Sector awareness of opportunities

Potential questions

- Which employment sector or role do you think you are you most likely to work in when you graduate?
- Would you consider going into jobs that need a high level of T&CD skills in the future? What is your view of what jobs need a lot of tech and digital skills?
- Are you more comfortable about the prospect of using digital skills in the career you are considering as a result of the project, even if this is not a role that does not need a high level of tech and digital skills?

5. Career confidence

Potential questions

- Has participation in the project helped you feel more made you feel better prepared for making applications and going for interviews etc? In what ways?
- Has participation in the project helped you feel more prepared for career planning and making career decisions? In what ways?
- Has participation in the project made you more confident about building your network and making useful contacts for the future? In what ways?
- Has participation in the project helped you feel more confident about your future career generally. N.B *Need to acknowledge how COVID has impacted this.*

6. Attitudes to Greater Manchester

Potential questions

- Do you want to live and work in Greater Manchester when you graduate? If so, why?
- Do you have a sense of what jobs and sectors may be more buoyant in this region or not? How might this be different from other regions?