

**HIBERNIA  
COLLEGE**

## **Can a Mobile App Help Create Virtual Learning Spaces and Communities of Practice for Students and Tutors?**

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**Janet Benson**

**Learnovate @ Trinity College Dublin**

# **Can a Mobile App Help Create Virtual Learning Spaces and Communities of Practice for Students and Tutors?**

**Irene O'Dowd  
Hibernia College**



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COLLEGE**

# Background

- Postgraduate Master of Education programmes delivered via blended learning
- Challenge of **facilitating real collaboration online**
- Introduced Cohort app to students and faculty
- Leverages ubiquitous mobile technology
- Workspaces and features for communication and collaboration



# Background

More than **200 groups** have been created since the launch of the platform

Teachers only, students only, and a **mixture** of teachers and students:

- **Academic writing** support
- **Regional groups** for students
- Research **supervision**
- School **placement** tutor groups
- **Subject** groups
- Student **representative** groups
- Community of learner groups for students and staff to **share experiences** and help each other
- **Departmental** groups





## Research Aims

- Measure the extent to which students and faculty have used the Cohort app, and their **experiences** doing so
- Explore factors that contributed to or inhibited **uptake** of the app
- Explore the **impact** of the app on students' and teachers' collaborative learning practices, including potential for virtual Communities of Practice (vCoPs)
- Explore whether use of the app has **changed** over time
- Study is being conducted by **Hibernia College** in partnership with **Learnovate @Trinity College**



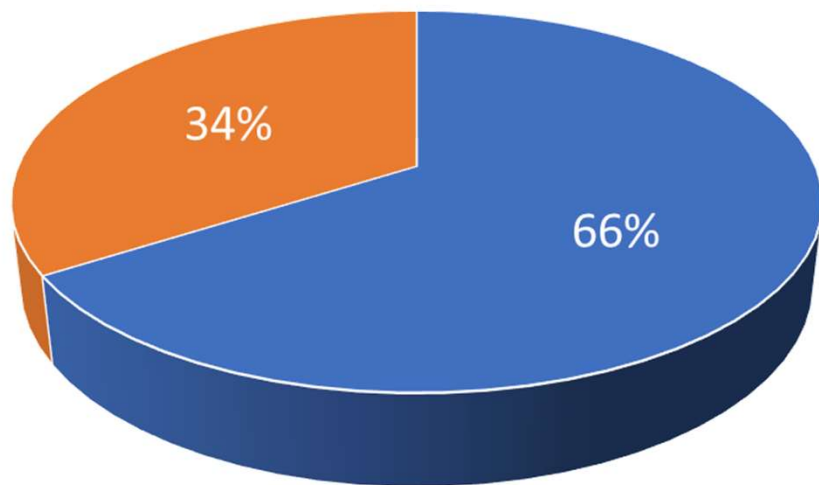
# Methodology

- Mixed-method study
- Stage 1:
  - Surveys followed by focus group interviews
  - 2021 cohorts, data gathered 2021-2022
  - Students and faculty introduced to Cohort mid-way through their programme
- Stage 2 (in progress):
  - Surveys followed by focus group interviews
  - 2022 cohorts, data gathering (current) 2023
  - Students and faculty using Cohort from the beginning of their programme

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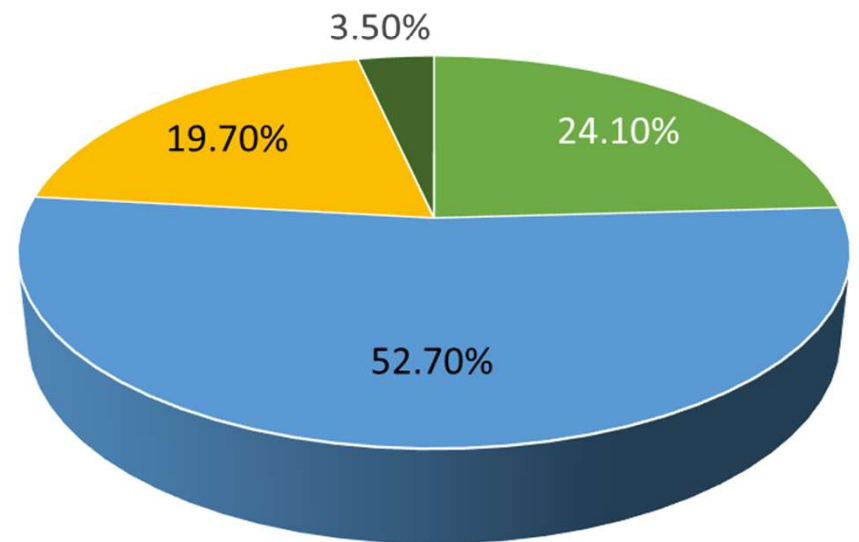
# **Stage 1: Student Survey Findings**

**Did you attend an introductory workshop?**



**■ Yes ■ No**

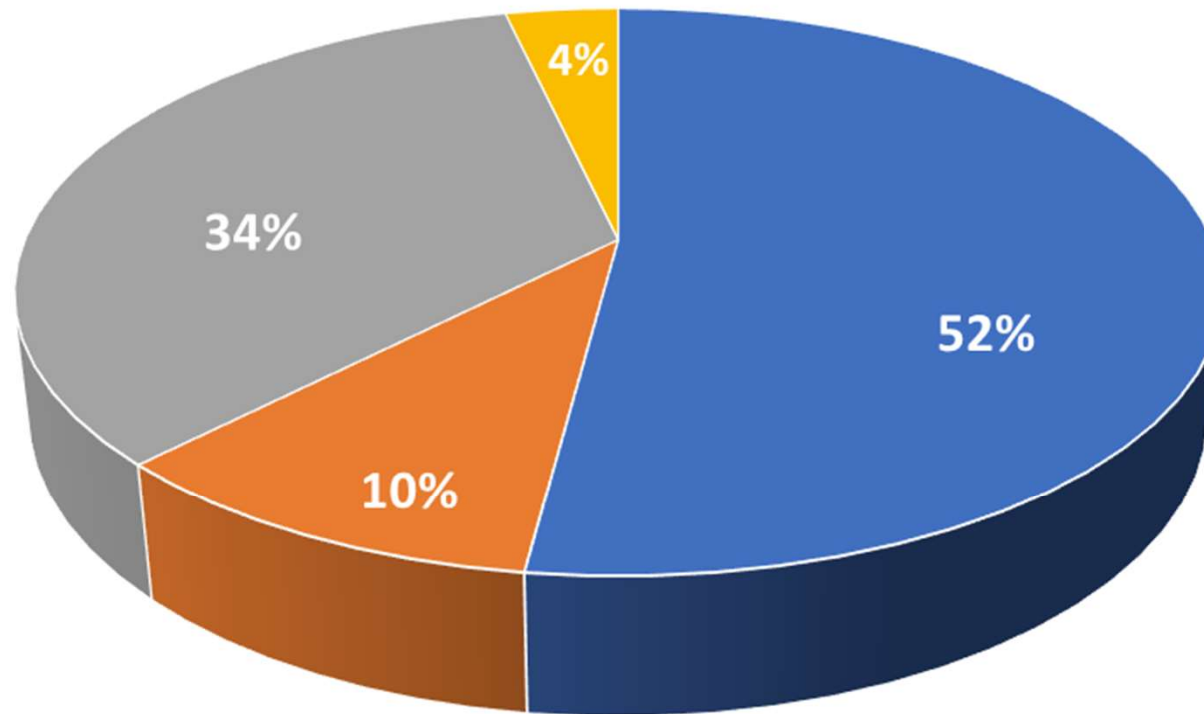
**At the time did you think the app would be useful to your studies?**



**■ Very useful  
■ Useful  
■ Not very useful  
■ No use**



## During/after the workshop, did you think it likely that you would use the app?



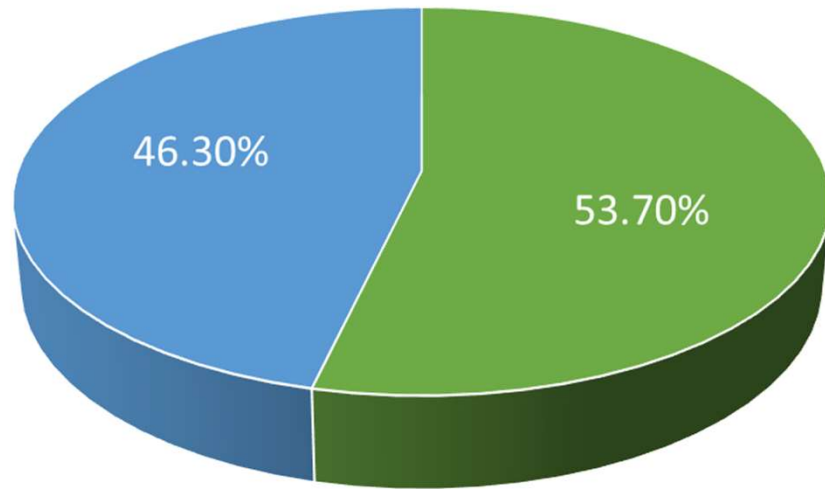
■ Likely   ■ Unlikely   ■ Very likely   ■ Very unlikely

## Can you tell us briefly why you held this view at the time?

“It is a good way to communicate with other students in a more **controlled and professional** way... [it] enables a **boundary between work and private life** and also enables you to reach everyone in your cohort.”

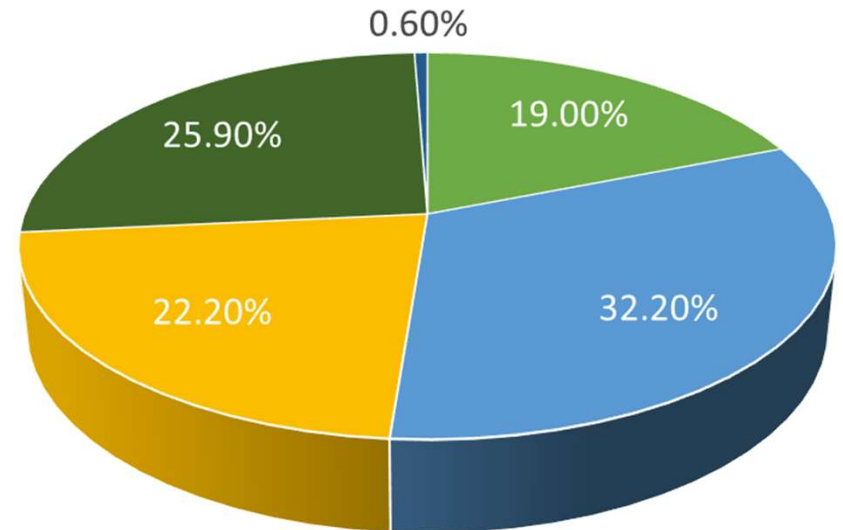
“**Collaborative** and all in one place. I can access it on my phone which means I can **quickly check my upcoming lectures easily**. I also like the forums where the tutors and students **share advice**. This has been helpful, particularly in **covid times** when we don't have face to face days”

### Have you used the Cohort app in your studies?



■ Yes ■ No

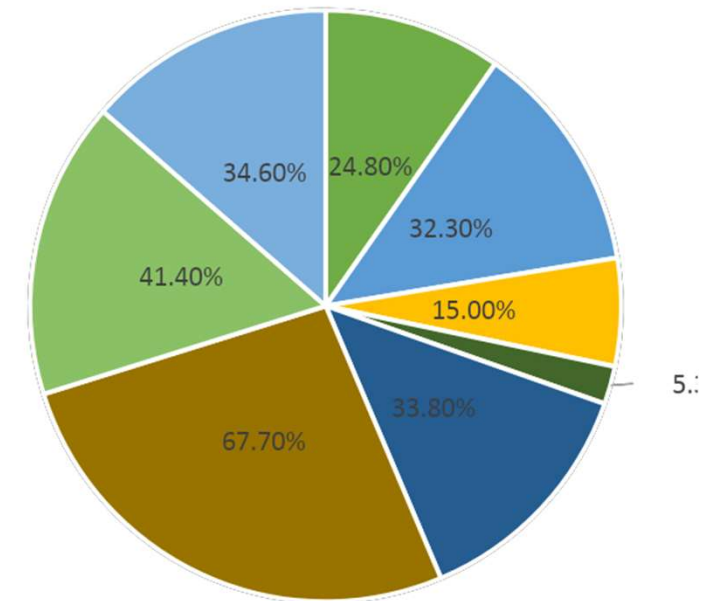
### How often have you used the Cohort app for your studies?



■ Daily ■ Weekly  
■ Monthly ■ Infrequently  
■ Never

## Please indicate why you have not used the Cohort App

<b>a. I did not attend the Introductory Workshop</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>24.8%</b>
<b>b. I have not had time and have been busy</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>32.3%</b>
<b>c. I don't think I fully understand how it works</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15.0%</b>
<b>d. I was not sure about how to access and use it</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5.3%</b>
<b>e. I am not sure there is a reason for doing so</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>33.8%</b>
<b>f. I am happy with the other ways I communicate and undertake teamwork for my studies</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>67.7%</b>
<b>g. None of my peers seem interested in using it</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>41.4%</b>
<b>h. I am not sure what it will add to my studies/work</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>34.6%</b>



a b c d e f g h

"I have truly loved the app and the web page version of Cohort - it's **simple to use** and everything is clearly laid out (no secret buttons or tricky to navigate features). It works perfectly on both **the browser and the app** meaning you don't lose out on any features or its effectiveness moving between both. I love being able to access messages on my phone, it allows me to **keep in touch** when I am away from the laptop!"

"Some of the materials or links the **lecturers and guest speakers** share with us, are not always relevant to us currently, but they would be in the future, because we have so many releases each week from MyHELMS it could be a good idea to **share these extra resources** and website links here. So, we can find them at a later date **when we need them.**"

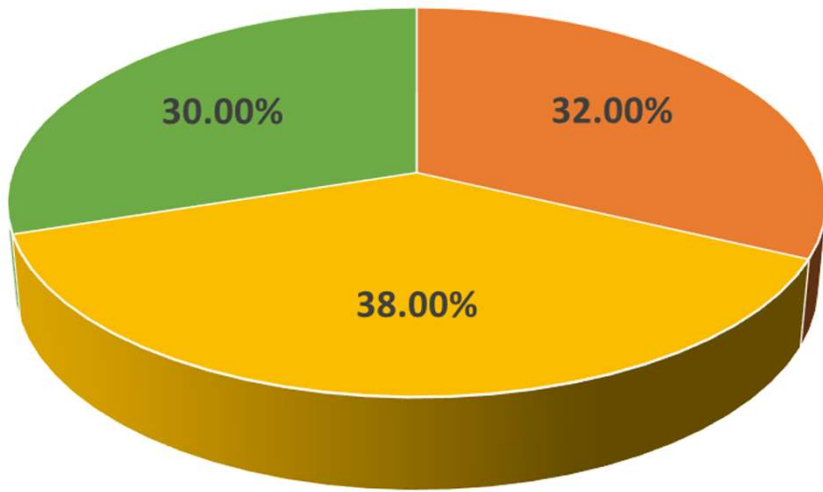
"I think it is fantastic - it has added a **brand-new element to online learning**, and really improves connection between peers, feels **less isolated!**"

"I think the app is a concrete idea and will be beneficial for future cohorts once **developed further...**"



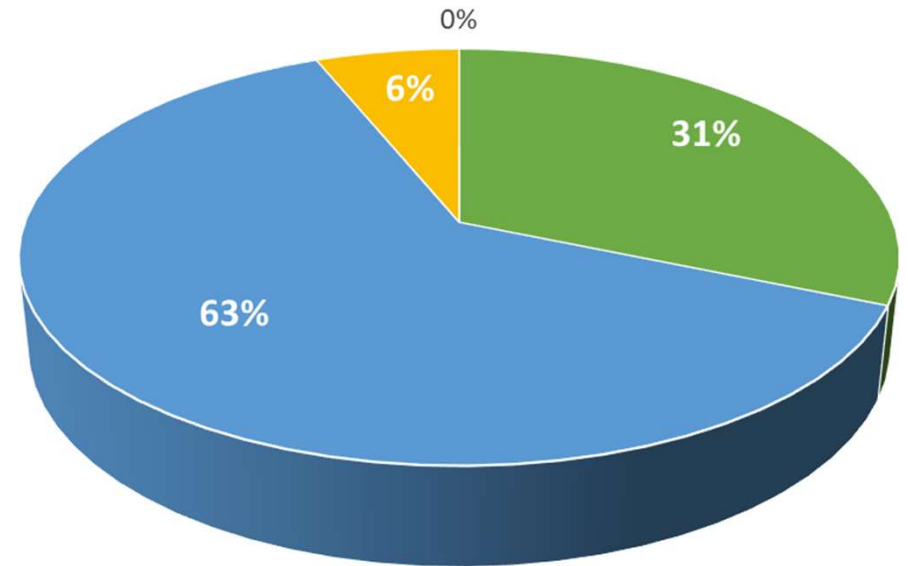
# **Stage 1: Faculty Survey Findings**

### Have you received training in using the Cohort App?



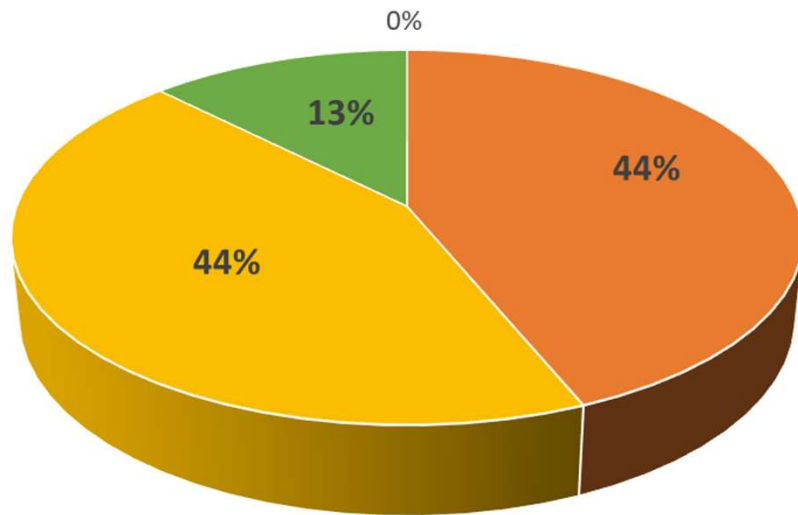
Yes No Would like training

### At the time, did you think that the training you received gave you adequate information about how to use the app in your role at Hibernia College?



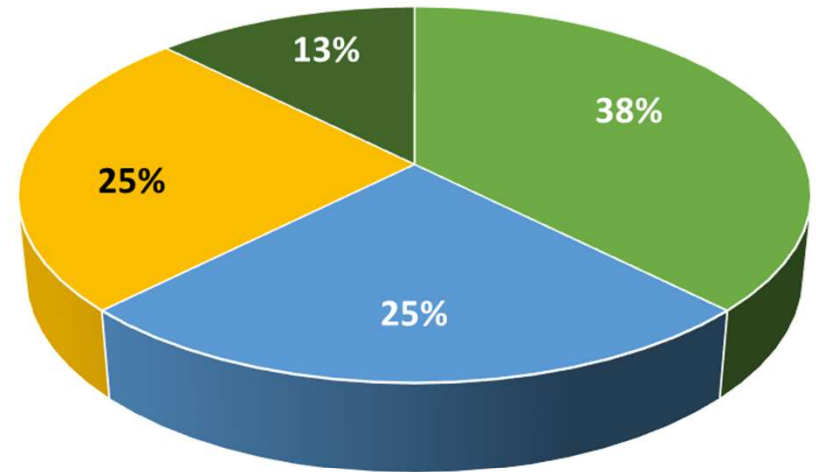
More than adequate Adequate  
Added upon Inadequate

**Based on the information you received, at the time did you feel that there would be ways you could use this app to support teaching and learning?**



- Definitely
- Some Ways
- Uncertain
- Unlikely

**Since you received the training, how often have you used the app to support elements of your teaching and student learning?**



- Frequently
- On occasion
- Infrequently
- Have not used it



**Based on the information you received, at the time did you feel that there would be ways you could use this app to support teaching and learning?**

‘I felt cohort could be used as a **reflective tool** where students can share new learning and understanding with fellow students. Students could also be encouraged to **start conversations** on app on a variety of topics they engage with during on-demand sessions’.

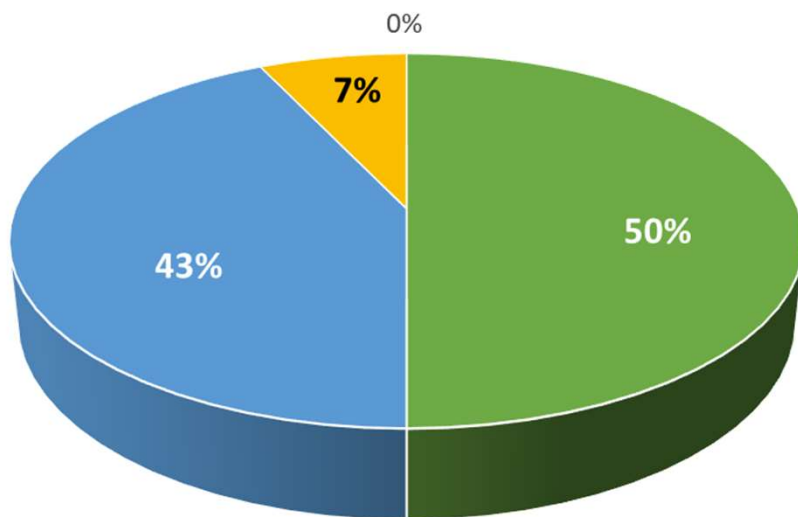
‘As part of **school placement**, we use the app for a collaborative Community of learner's forum. The responses posted by the students during their SEN observation week in particular were extremely insightful and wide-ranging in terms of experience and learning. The ability to **share new learning** allowed the students to **gather and store a great repository of resources**. The app is intuitive which also facilitates the ease of use’.

**Please describe how you have used the app to support teaching and learning referring to the particular nature of use, the module/s concerned, the number of students in the specific programme, etc.**

**'...shared documentation** relating to approaches to planning, differentiation, and indeed all assessed areas of **placement** were situationally relevant and guided my approach'.

**'Communicating with SP tutors Monitoring students' reflections** on Community of learner groups. These are set up for each regional group, so it becomes a **community** as they know each other. This should be enhanced once we return to real life F2F days'.

In your experience to date, to what degree do you think using the app has contributed to the college's 'Community of Learning' collaborative approach?



■ Significant ■ Some  
■ Minor ■ None

'The app has allowed students and tutors to share resources and ideas while also to work collaboratively'.

'It has given a forum for adjunct faculty to ask questions, discuss matters which may be of interest to the whole group'.

'I feel that commentary is contemporaneous, inclusive and promotes a sense of shared collegiality and identification with a worthy value system'.



# **Stage 1: Focus Group Findings**



# Students

- Some groups used it only for a short time and then **reverted to WhatsApp groups**
- However, some groups used the app more **consistently**
- Some concerns around **privacy** and who in College could see posts
- Would be keen to create own **private groups** and receive training in how to do this
- Would like to use app to create **societies** within the College for students
- Suggestions for the College re. how to **embed the app** in academic modules



# Faculty

- Positive experience using Cohort, particularly for **research support**
- App facilitated collegiality and **resource sharing** (student-student, student-staff, staff-staff)
- App enabled **collaboration** and knowledge sharing
- Awareness of app related to use and non-use; College should do more **promotion** of app
- Some felt **overwhelmed** by prospect of dealing with one more communication channel
- More **support and training** needed in use of app, particularly definition of use protocols
- Potential for research e.g., decrease **isolation**, share resources
- **Nature** of some research means some would be reluctant to share on app
- Clear benefits for **School Placement** use

# Stage 1 Conclusions

'...use of the Cohort App has mostly received positive feedback... While some glitches have been noted, in general the app appears to be working well for most students and will only be used more in future for collaborative activities and in relation to assignment work' (O'Keeffe & Benson, Learnovate)

The majority of faculty had not received at the time of the survey what they identified as training in the app but many indicated that they would welcome this in the future.

A suggestion of communication overload (e-mails, forum, the Cohort app) for faculty being introduced to the app at an especially challenging time with the pandemic and extremely busy professional schedules.

Generally positive response to the app and an interest in exploring how they might develop its use in the future for teaching and learning.

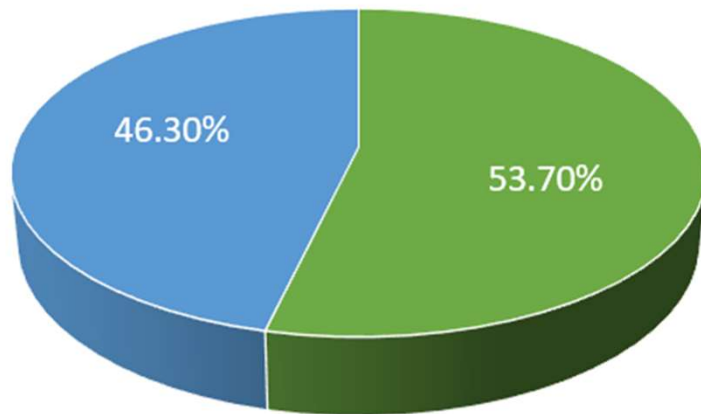


**Stage 2: Survey  
Findings – so far**



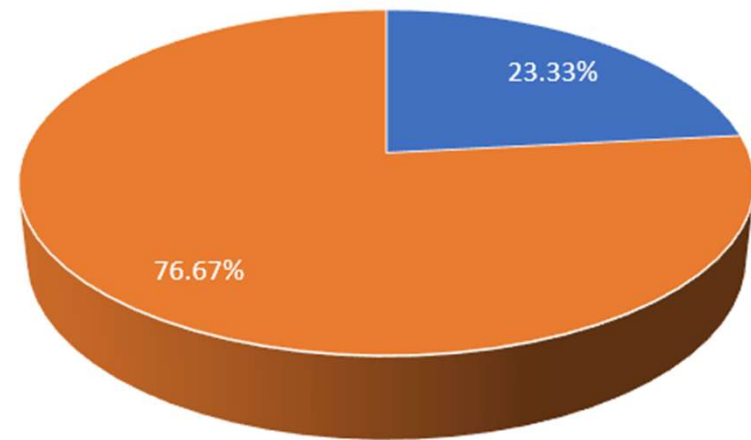
# Student survey highlights - comparison

Have you used the Cohort app in your studies?



■ Yes ■ No

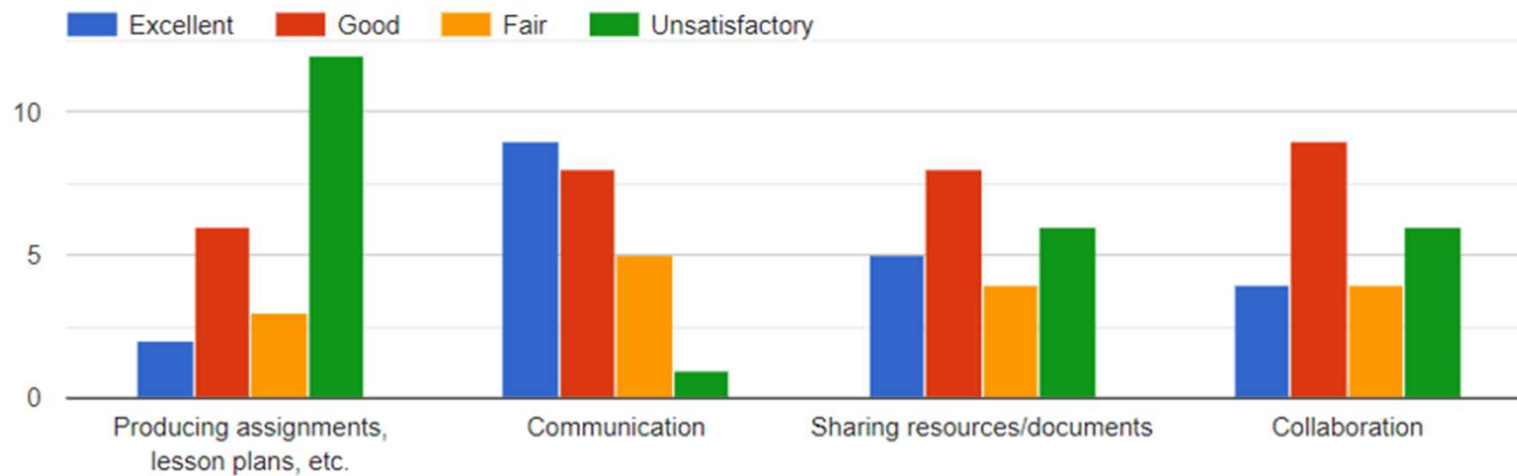
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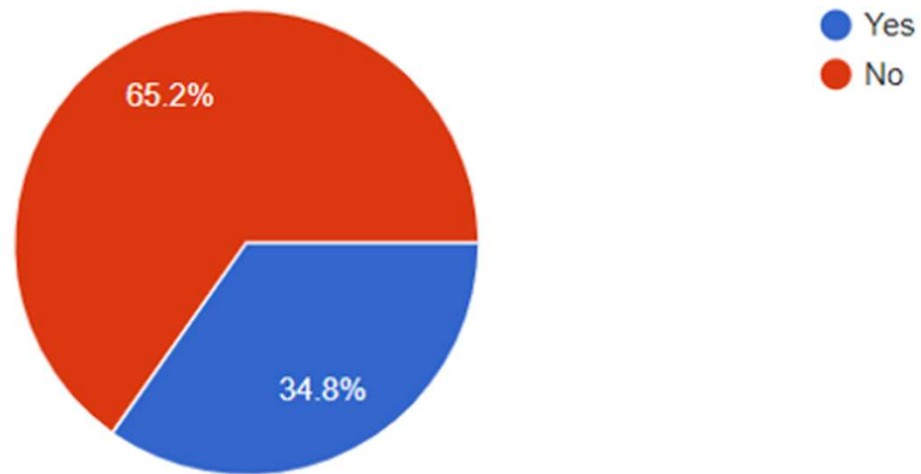
# Student survey highlights

In your experience using the Cohort App, how would you describe the accessibility and/or ease of using the app for producing Assignments, Lesson Plans, etc. in your PME programme?



# Student survey highlights

Have you created one or more private groups on the Cohort app?



## Stage 2 Next steps

- Complete surveys and analyse data
- Comparative analysis with Stage 1 data
- Conduct student and faculty focus groups
- Analyse and compare focus group data
- Report Phase 2 findings
- Feed findings back into Cohort development





**Thank you!**

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