

COVID-19 supporting resources

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Admissions and Transitions into Higher Education

Introduction

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition into higher education has never been more challenging. The experience of this year's applicants has already been marked by the closure of schools and colleges, and the suspension of national examinations. Their higher education experience will be shaped by the transitions higher education providers are having to consider in a very short time frame. This paper identifies the transitions providers are making and relates them to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and its accompanying Advice and Guidance. It outlines ways in which providers can support students and builds on the advice given in QAA's [initial guidance on standards and quality](#). For providers in England, the paper also relates transitions' activity to the evolving regulatory framework.

This paper was informed by discussions with directors of admissions from a number of higher education providers, and by the views of a panel of experts drawn from the school and higher education sectors. It is accompanied by a [signpost to additional resources](#). In addition, QAA Member institutions are able to access the recording of the expert panel discussion.

How has the pandemic affected the transition into higher education?

Transitions lie at the heart of much of our educational experience. School education consists of a series of transitions: from year to year, from primary school to secondary school, and from one examination level to the next. Higher education involves similar transitions: from one year to the next, from directed to autonomous learning and, eventually, from higher education to employment or to further study.

The secondary and higher education cycles are linked by a lengthy admissions process during which providers generally keep in touch with applicants through a range of activities such as offer-holder days, news sheets and peer-to-peer buddying activities. For many students, this is where the transition from school to higher education starts to become a reality. Once they have arrived at their chosen provider, students spend much of their first two weeks in higher education navigating a range of registration, induction and social events designed to help their transition to a new academic culture that is likely to differ substantially from the one they were accustomed to at school, not least because for many it will involve

living away from home for the first time. The new culture brings different approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, and different expectations for student engagement.

All these transitions have been affected to a greater or lesser extent by COVID-19. This academic year, social distancing measures have disrupted studies and led to the cancellation of national examinations in schools across the UK. Students who have just experienced the sudden curtailment of their school or college experience are likely to be unclear about what awaits them in higher education, while providers are preparing for the next academic year amid great uncertainty about the impact of social distancing on just about every aspect of academic life.

How can we acknowledge the impact of the early closure of schools and the cancellation of national examinations?

For pupils in their final year, school ended when the UK entered a period of tight social restriction or 'lockdown' in March. While schools and colleges may have continued to structure home learning for students in earlier years, this was not the case for those in their final school year. Education is a devolved matter and, while the precise arrangements were not identical in the different parts of the UK, all nations took the decision to cancel national examinations. Furthermore, practice varied so that some schools had completed the curriculum earlier in the year and had moved into a period of recap and revision by March, and others were continuing to deliver the curriculum at the point of lockdown being enforced. Consequently, all pupils in their final year will have missed some learning, although the nature and size of the subject deficit will vary. In England, the Office for Students (OfS) has warned that some new students 'may struggle academically in their first term or beyond' and that students from underrepresented groups may be particularly affected.¹
Higher education providers should consider how to identify and address subject deficits - or other educational gaps - in their teaching and academic support plans for September 2020 entrants.

With the decision to cancel national examinations, the awarding bodies and/or governments in the different parts of the UK issued information about the processes by which students due to sit exams would be awarded grades ([Ofqual](#), [SQA](#), [Northern Ireland Department of Education](#), and [Welsh Government](#)). The detail of the approaches differ, given the different structure and approaches in place in the different parts of the UK, but they have in common the intention to provide grades without the pupils having sat their formal examinations - a decision necessitated by the pandemic. However robust the methods of calculation, issuing grades on this basis gives rise to two main challenges of which higher education providers need to be aware. First, individual students often perform better in examinations than their predicted grades suggest but, this year, the opportunity to do so will be denied them. Second, it means there will have been a long gap since this cohort last had direct experience of sitting formal examinations, meaning they have been denied the revision guidance and practice in stress management and examination technique at which many schools and colleges excel. **Higher education providers who assess using traditional examinations should consider how they build practice in revision and examination technique into their teaching and academic support plans for September 2020 entrants.**

We should also recognise the psychological impact that abrupt school closures and cancelled examinations may have had on school and college students. The suddenness of closures has provoked a feeling of 'unfinished business' for some, exemplified socially by the

¹ OfS: [Supporting student mental health](#) 22.04.20

absence of proms, celebrations and formal farewells, and academically by the cancellation of final shows and performances, and a general feeling of anti-climax and peak performance potentially going unnoticed. Cancelled examinations elicit a range of responses. While some individuals will be content with the changed grading arrangements, others feel they could have done better in examinations.² For some students, their self-worth may have suffered a blow because they were unable to validate their achievement and prove their ability through examination success. **It will be helpful for providers to brief academic and support staff about the likely range of new students' feelings concerning the truncation of their secondary experience and the cancellation of examinations.**

How has the admissions process been affected by COVID-19?

Discussions with a sample of heads of admissions services in late April and the expert panel session held on 15 May, confirm that the routine admissions processes are largely unaffected by COVID-19, other than working to revised dates issued by UCAS. Many offers were made before 'lockdown' commenced in March, and the subsequent shift to home working by admissions staff has operated successfully since then. Many providers are conducting offer holder days and open days online, as opposed to in person, but are otherwise continuing these events according to their usual schedule during the recruitment cycle.

Those providers sampled tend to interview prospective students by exception only and, where interviews are required because of professional, statutory or regulatory body, or subject requirements, it has been possible to conduct them using video-conferencing software. The scrutiny of art portfolios or auditions for performing arts courses has generally proved less difficult than anticipated because many students in these areas now routinely place their work on digital platforms.

All English providers sampled had ceased making unconditional offers in line with the moratorium introduced by the OfS, although some had concerns that this may have unintended adverse consequences for late and widening participation applicants. Some providers are also concerned about the provision of calculated grades for the estimated 20,000 applicants who are not affiliated to a school, college or examination centre, for example, those who are home-educated. There are similar concerns in respect of international applicants whose countries of origin are continuing to assess by national examination where the examinations have been rescheduled too late for marks to be awarded in time for September 2020 entry. This has been exacerbated by the closure of British Council offices worldwide due to the pandemic which has brought secure English language testing to a halt and led some providers to look for online solutions.

The process of offer-making appears to have proceeded relatively normally, to the extent that several providers described it as 'business as usual', although there are concerns that IT networks may be unable to cope with the volume of digital communication if the scale of confirmation, clearing and adjustment exceeds that of previous years, particularly in rural areas. At the time of writing, providers intend to approach confirmation, clearing and adjustment in the usual way. Admissions services are accustomed to predicted grades being disproportionately low for some categories of students and, this year, have picked up a general concern from applicants (and in some cases directly from schools) about the inability of calculated grades to capture exit velocity. While the careful moderation and standardisation of calculated grades may return national outcomes in line with those of previous years, some applicants feel that this cannot be guaranteed at the level of the

² [My uncertain future as a GCSE-A-Level student](#) 30.03.20

individual. Admissions teams recognise this and intend to exercise flexibility and discretion where there is variance between calculated and offer grades. **The use of contextual information in admissions is likely to be at least as important, if not more important, this year compared to previous years.**

Providers are carefully monitoring the number of applicants considering deferring entry until 2021-22 because of the pandemic. At the time of writing, admissions services reported the number of deferrals as relatively low but were concerned that the number could increase significantly if it becomes clear that online delivery will be the norm. An early survey of applicant attitudes³ suggests that this is a real concern.

The OfS has commented on the need for providers in England to provide 'clear communication' to students,⁴ and to keep them informed of any proposed changes to the curriculum or its delivery. This advice applies equally to admissions, induction and in-course communications. Admissions services confirmed that they keep communication channels open with applicants during the application cycle through a range of publications and activities including subject updates, newsletters, buddying, peer guides and virtual offer-holder days. They have picked up general concerns from applicants about what to expect at the beginning of the academic year, and specific questions about start dates, modes of delivery, accommodation and campus life. Admissions services understand that **the provision of clear and timely information to applicants is of critical importance** but point out the difficulty of doing this at a time of intense deliberation and activity within providers who are having to make mission-critical decisions as quickly as possible against a background of great uncertainty. Admissions teams are acutely aware of the need to work within the guidance provided by the Competition and Markets Authority, and other bodies relevant to their part of the UK (such as the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Department for Education in Northern Ireland, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, and the Office for Students) and are communicating options to applicants as they become available.

How can we support students entering higher education in autumn 2020?

Support for students begins during the application process, as indicated above. Some admissions services offer additional support over the summer period, and focused support as registration approaches, particularly for specific student groups such as vulnerable and international students. Providers are currently scenario-planning the provision of online replacements for the types of face-to-face support activities they have traditionally used during induction week, and student services are scoping virtual drop-in sessions allowing students to talk to student services staff, peer guides or academic staff in their subject disciplines.

It seems unlikely that induction will involve the large-scale activities of previous years. While it will be relatively easy to replace information-giving induction activities with online video presentations, the same cannot be said of the departmental socials, clubs and societies' fairs and other social activities which are so important in enabling new students to overcome the challenge of leaving home, meeting staff and mixing with other students both within and beyond their academic discipline. **In designing online induction activities, it will be particularly important to work with student unions, both because of their positioning between providers and student bodies - which enables them to identify student**

³ [London Economics survey of 516 undergraduate applicants](#), 20.05.20

⁴ OfS: [Regulatory requirements during the coronavirus \(COVID19\) pandemic](#), 25.03.20

concerns and the extent to which they are being addressed; and because they have important messages to convey to new students about the independent support they provide, about student rights and responsibilities, and about the importance of student engagement and representation.

It is recognised that some student groups are likely to need increased levels of pastoral care to support their wellbeing and mental health. The OfS stressed this for providers in England in some of its earliest guidance⁵ in March, which was reinforced in its April guidance on supporting student mental health⁶ during the pandemic. The latter identifies six categories of students most at risk of experiencing mental health and wellbeing problems, including students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.⁷ In Scotland, support for student mental wellbeing is promoted through a collaborative cluster in the current [Enhancement Theme](#).

In some cases, the need for support may be different but no less urgent. Students who are unable to afford computers or fast broadband connections may experience exacerbated digital poverty if teaching provision moves online while libraries, open learning facilities and computer rooms remain closed, or access to them is limited by social distancing. A number of providers described steps they were taking to address this through hardship funds and by factoring IT needs into their existing support packages. The many students who rely on part-time employment to support their studies are likely to struggle finding work due to the economic consequences of the pandemic. The list of potential needs is a lengthy one, and the OfS recommends that providers in England should adapt existing early intervention systems to pick up early signs of mental health concerns or disengagement from study.

With regard to academic support, where programmes are delivered partly or wholly online, virtual learning environments (VLEs) are likely to play an important role in monitoring student activity (including attendance, use of learning materials and academic progress) and therefore show signs of disengagement or of learning deficits resulting from students' interrupted school experience. As with mental health and wellbeing, there is a need for early intervention. **Personal tutors, module and course tutors and, where they are in place, student success advisers (who are often recent graduates) are likely to play a key role in supporting the academic engagement of new students. Modelling this in a digital context and designing communications policies and processes capable of ensuring fast and efficient communication between students and staff is a key priority for providers.**

All the guidance from the various regulatory bodies stresses the importance of maintaining regular communication with students. This very obviously applies to consultation about the big questions such as campus use, start dates and modes of delivery, but it is likely to apply equally to students' daily interactions with academic, administrative and support staff. Relationships are as important in virtual academic communities as they are in physical learning spaces, and students need to be clear about how they can contact staff so they can get to know them and build relationships of trust with them. In its guidance to providers in England and Wales about possible complaints scenarios, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) notes that 'Uncertainty can be a significant cause of anxiety. Clear, regular

⁵ OfS: [Update from the Office for Students on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) 17.03.20

⁶ OfS: [Supporting student mental health](#) 30.04.20

⁷ Wonkhe: [COVID-19 does discriminate - so we should tackle its impact on BAME students](#) 03.05.20

and frequent communication is therefore key, even when there isn't much to say that is new.⁸

What should providers take into account when planning for 2020-21?

There is considerable activity across providers planning for the next academic year. While there is a strong desire to provide as much information as possible to applicants and continuing students, higher education providers are operating in a context of uncertainty about future restrictions or requirements arising from the pandemic. They need to balance the likelihood of at least some restrictions on mobility continuing with the desire expressed by many students for a campus (or other 'in person') experience. As a consequence, **there is a need for providers to plan for a range of possibilities and ensure that applicants and continuing students understand both what is intended and the parameters within which any of those intentions can operate.**⁹

Collaboration is a distinctive feature and particular strength of the higher education sector and efforts to maintain the benefits of this are evident. For example, directors of estates across the sector are sharing knowledge and advice and there is clear evidence that, irrespective of the type of campus, similar issues are being faced, including challenges relating to establishing one-way systems (and associated accessibility), use of specialist facilities and implications of social distancing requirements on other learning and teaching spaces.¹⁰ There are also opportunities for the higher education sector to benefit from the experience of businesses that have either continued through the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic or are now returning as restrictions begin to lift in some parts of the UK.

This does provide some knowns, even at this stage, and can begin to reduce the uncertainty for applicants and continuing students. Lectures as a feature of learning and teaching are one of the most obvious examples. To preserve current social distancing requirements, a 400-seat lecture theatre will only be able to accommodate around 20 people at any one time. Under these conditions, lectures will probably be unsupportable: there simply is not the space, human resource or time in the week (even with significantly extended hours) to deliver them. Given the likelihood of restrictions on personal interactions either continuing or being reintroduced during 2020-21 - plus the findings of research on the effectiveness of traditional lectures relative to other methods of learning and teaching - it seems sensible to confirm early that there will be an alternative to traditional, physical lectures.¹¹ Providers could instead concentrate efforts on resolving the challenges around other modes of delivery and managing requirements for specialist facilities.

Understandably, some concerns of the sector centre around providers' obligations under consumer law. Applicants holding offers will already have a contract in place with providers and continuing students are even more firmly embedded in institutions having made choices based on information that was provided to them some time previously.

⁸ OIA: [Complaints arising from Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) disruption](#)

⁹ These tensions were explored in a [meeting of the Commons Education Committee](#) that took place on 18 May 2020 and reported in a number of places, including by the [BBC](#), [WonkHE](#) and [Tes](#). The Committee raised with senior representatives of the Office for Students some of the implications for higher education providers in England.

¹⁰ Estimates agree that, with the anticipated social distancing requirements in place, campuses will be operating at 10-15% of capacity.

¹¹ The findings of research into this area are not without their critics and counterarguments, but examples include studies published by [PNAS](#) and [Science Direct](#).

Anecdotal evidence and surveys carried out so far¹² indicate a general sense of goodwill from students regarding the efforts made by providers to continue to deliver the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year, albeit not in a way originally intended. Nonetheless, many institutions will be preparing for an increase in complaints and appeals this academic year and the OIA published a briefing note on 18 March which includes possible complaint scenarios.¹³ Although the OIA applies to providers in England and Wales, the scenarios apply to higher education more widely and therefore are likely to be useful to providers across the UK.

It is possible that student views may change, particularly as the perception may be that providers do now have an opportunity to plan and prepare and are no longer dealing with an unforeseen crisis. Providers will need to be clear with applicants and continuing students about what is and is not within their control, and also to communicate the steps they are taking to mitigate the challenges that their students are facing. In other words, providers need to demonstrate that they are doing everything they reasonably can to address the matters that are within their control.¹⁴ This may particularly apply in cases where students are more likely to perceive a lack of parity, for example, where need for and management of specialist facilities results in some students appearing to be prioritised for on-campus delivery.

In outlining possible options for 2020-21, providers will need to communicate unambiguously, effectively and efficiently with their applicants and students. An important aspect of this is coherence of communication. **Communication might most effectively come from a single source even where multiple channels and media are used for dissemination.** Well-established practices within higher education of consulting with students should continue, and the opportunities for applicants and students to provide their thoughts and suggestions should also be clear.

How can we continue to protect quality and standards at a time of rapid change?

Inevitably, the higher education sector has had to respond very quickly as the advice and requirements of governments have evolved to address the impact of COVID-19 on society and the healthcare service. In the first instance, higher education providers had to make significant changes for the end of the 2019-20 academic year. This has included adjustments to assessment and related processes, with implications for managing external examining, continuing to meet PSRB requirements, and ensuring that mitigating circumstances take account of the unusual circumstances.¹⁵

While providers have sought to maintain standards, they have also remained cognisant of the need to be fair, recognising that **protecting student interests and protecting**

¹² One example is [a poll carried out by the Higher Education Policy Institute](#), published on 7 April 2020, in which 49% of students indicated they were satisfied with the online learning put in place, a further 29% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 23% were dissatisfied

¹³ It is worth noting that, although the OIA is specific to providers in Wales and England, [the briefing note](#) contains points that are relevant to higher education per se, so has relevance for all four jurisdictions.

¹⁴ Again, the OIA's published [case summaries](#) may be useful here for providers, irrespective of which jurisdiction they are under. In particular, see those published under the heading of 'Consumer Rights'.

¹⁵ For QAA's work with PSRBs in this period, see COVID-19 Response - Adapting Assessment for Professional Qualifications [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) (access QAA Members only). Other material relating to Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement can be found [on the COVID-19 guidance pages on the QAA website](#).

academic standards are not mutually exclusive. This might mean continuing as far as possible with established processes but exercising judgement over reasonable adjustments to those processes. For example, in usual circumstances, most higher education providers will explicitly exclude IT failures from their lists of acceptable grounds for mitigating circumstances, but flexibility around this is necessary when students have no alternative and many are working in areas or circumstances where provision is poor, unstable or non-existent.

Maintaining transparency around decision-making, particularly when it differs from the provider's usual practices, is critical both now, for providing reassurance to students around the robustness of planning for their experience, and in the future, to be able to demonstrate that there has been no compromise to quality and standards. **A decision made swiftly is not by definition a bad decision but it needs to be defensible in terms of how it was reached and the evidence used to inform the decision.**

The Quality Code for Higher Education is concerned with principles and is not prescriptive about how those principles are met. This means there are opportunities to consider how emergency activity to address the short-term challenges could also provide assurances related to quality and standards that are normally met through other activity. For example, where providers have reviewed their approach to delivering and assessing courses as part of the immediate COVID-19 mitigations, the process and outcomes of that scrutiny (such as mapping intended learning outcomes to assessment instruments) can be used to inform future quality evaluation activity, such as annual monitoring or periodic institution-led review.

Effective student engagement is key to the successful management of quality and standards. The early days of delivering a course provide an important period for relationship building between staff and students in any normal year but, in 2020-21, the higher education environment will be operating differently and many aspects of this will be a new experience for everyone, not only the new arrivals. **These students will, however, have no reference points against which they can measure the extent of change.** Providers needs to be mindful of this, encouraging constructive feedback over what is and is not working and ensuring students understand what is and is not possible to support swift resolution and strong partnership working.

Reflective questions

The following reflective questions can be used by providers to evaluate their responses and practices around admissions and transitions during the pandemic.

- 1 How are you checking for - and accommodating - any difficulties that students might be facing as a consequence of a lengthy and forced break from formal learning?
- 2 What additional support will be necessary to address less experience and/or confidence in formal assessment than is usual in many students?
- 3 How are your own observations and data around predicted grades, entry qualifications and subsequent performance from previous admissions cycles informing contextual decisions in admissions?
- 4 How are you working with your students' union or equivalent to prepare for induction activity, manage potential complaints, and ensure an effective student representation system?

- 5 What adjustments to a personal tutor system (or equivalent) would enable effective communication and support for an online or blended experience?
- 6 How are you consulting with applicants about changes to programmes ahead of and during their first year, taking into account the fact that there may be a need to make changes rapidly and repeatedly?
- 7 How is your communication strategy to applicants/students supporting dialogue in both directions, building relationships of trust, and achieving coherence and coverage?
- 8 Where there are uncertainties, are you clear on the circumstances that will govern decisions and what will limit your ability to offer a particular experience or opportunity?
- 9 How are you evidencing decision-making, both in terms of process and the basis on which those decisions are being made?
- 10 Are there ways in which the approaches you have adopted to move delivery and assessment online rapidly could be used to inform future quality assurance or evaluative activity?

Acknowledgements

QAA is very grateful to the many staff and students who have contributed to the work reflected in this paper. In particular, we would like to thank:

Matt Adie	Chair, QAA Student Strategic Advisory Committee
Michael Bates	Heriot-Watt University
Alison Blackburn	University of Salford
Bob Cozens	University of Bedfordshire
Jo Hamilton	University of Exeter
Susie King	Anglia Ruskin University
Justin Lynas	Birkbeck, University of London
Julie Mason	Birmingham City University
Jacqui McCary	Anglia Ruskin University (International Admissions)
David Moyle	Aberystwyth University
Frazer Thomas	Bath Spa University
Thomas Thorpe	Shoeburyness High School, Southend
Professor Alyson Tobin	Edinburgh Napier University
Emma Williams	Aberystwyth University

Published - 28 May 2020

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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