



COVID-19: Initial Guidance for Higher Education Providers on Standards and Quality

23 March 2020

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis, and the world's response to it, is an extraordinary global situation, changing by the day. It affects all industries and areas of life, but the higher education sector faces a particular set of challenges. Your highest priorities, of course, are the health and wellbeing of your students and staff, and playing a part in reducing risks to wider society.

QAA's role is to support you to maintain academic standards and quality, while encouraging and highlighting some of the innovative solutions to what could be months of disruptions to the academic calendar.

This disruption poses significant challenges to the student experience, to staff and their delivery of programmes, and to a range of academic regulations and policies. We strongly recommend that providers consult with student representatives and partners when planning changes to policies, delivery of classes, assessment and progression.

For degree-awarding bodies, the responsibility to maintain standards remains yours. Governing bodies need to be satisfied that academic standards are being achieved no matter what adjustments you need to make to the learning and assessment strategies in light of COVID-19.

This guidance is intended to answer some potential questions that deal with credit, progression, assessment and graduation, with immediate impacts on areas covered by QAA's [advice and guidance](#) and the [UK Quality Code](#). It does not set out regulatory requirements. In England, the Office for Students (OfS) will publish further guidance shortly.

The guidance QAA is publishing in this document is not exhaustive, nor does it reflect different approaches to the issues that providers may be adopting. It incorporates suggestions, concentrating on quality and standards, from different areas of policy and regulation, and will be updated in line with government and regulatory advice as the situation develops.

We are making a number of assumptions: that 'normal' provision is not possible given the advice and restrictions we are all working under, and adjustments will be vital to ensure students are treated fairly; that while government, sector agencies and PSRBs are willing to assist the sector, their resources will be stretched to the limit; and that the disruption is likely to last at least a number of months.

Further guidance will be developed over the coming weeks to respond to the situation and emerging innovations, based around themes the sector needs us to address.

Key messages

- The OfS, HEFCW, SFC and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland are communicating directly with universities and colleges and will set out the regulatory requirements in place during this period.
- This document contains voluntary guidance that providers across the UK may find helpful - it does not constitute regulatory requirements.
- The Quality Code is phrased in terms of outcomes, rather than prescription around processes - use the flexibility provided by this approach.
- It's more important than ever to involve students as much as you can in any changes to your provision.
- Alternative learning and assessment approaches are essential.

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1 Learning and teaching

What changes do we need to make to learning and teaching? If we move to virtual methods, what factors should we consider to ensure quality doesn't suffer?

1 The need for social distancing has prompted the sector to adopt more online teaching and assessment. Depending on the subject, student cohorts can undertake some form(s) of study and be directed remotely during any period when campus facilities are not available. Here, the main point for providers to consider is the transition to different modes of learning and assessment and the impact this will have on students, academic and professional staff.

2 Many providers are experienced in delivering successful online and blended learning programmes, so we will not give detailed advice here. However, here are some points to consider.

- Online teaching and assessment are not simply a matter of placing classes and lectures onto a virtual learning environment (VLE) but learning activities need to be designed and structured with the same care as direct teaching.
- Be clear about the standards expected of students and align them appropriately to the programme learning outcomes.
- Do not take it for granted that all students have access to the equipment and broadband needed to fully engage with online learning and assessment. Under physical distancing, quarantine or lockdown precautions, students may well have limited quiet space of their own to work online.
- You may need to support students to access IT systems more than usual, and that includes checking whether they have access to broadband services if students are being asked to undertake online learning and assessment as an alternative. The Quality Code's Core practice for Quality states that providers should have 'sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience'. Be flexible - one-size solutions will not fit all.
- Online teaching is better suited to some types of subject and/or activities than others. Your academics may have to adjust their teaching styles to suit this different format. Some may be more comfortable doing so than others. Consider the support they will need.
- There are resources available explaining how to deliver learning using these methods that can be consulted - we have included a small number of examples at the end of this guidance.
- Some programmes with significant practical teaching methodologies and/or small cohort sizes will simply be impractical to continue for the time being - the focus should then be on how to minimise impacts on these students and return to normality as soon as is possible.
- Students with disabilities who may have special arrangements (for example, assistance in lectures) may not have their needs met by moving to wholly online provision - suitable alternative arrangements should be made for them.

3 **Clearly communicate to students what has changed**, what you feel the impacts may be and let students make an informed choice. This may include the offer of the chance to defer, but also to undertake more academic activities (more tutorials, drop in sessions, refresher lectures, and so on) when things are back to normal. But it is also important to be clear if you do not know what is going to happen in the near future, and offer access to appropriate support

services. It is more important than ever to ensure these services are adequately resourced, supported and prepared.

What about access to tutors? Feedback?

4 Consider alternative ways of enabling access to tutors in these times. Your VLEs should enable this, but you could also consider making use of teamworking applications such as Slack, Google Hangouts or Microsoft Teams. Be flexible and let staff and students choose the solution that works best for them.

5 In terms of feedback, you may have specific regulations setting a length of time between submission of assessed work and feedback. These may need to be adjusted in the light of campus closures, staff sickness and online assessment. You need to communicate any changes clearly to the student body and also discuss the implications with student representatives.

How do we ensure that if students have to repeat (part of) a year they're not given an unfair advantage over 'normal' cohorts because they've repeated teaching?

6 Any measures to cater for disruptions stemming from COVID-19 need to be proportionate. As we are a significant way through the academic calendar (in most cases), we recommend that years are not repeated where possible. If their studies are paused, there may be some teaching and learning activities that will require students to be 'refreshed' if there has been a significant amount of time between delivery and when that learning needs to be put into use or examined. So, consider supplementing this learning by refresher sessions, rather than a repeat of teaching.

7 January intake students may be in a different position. Depending on the end to the disruptions, students could be offered a September re-start.

2 Credit, progression and graduation

Must all 360 credits have been assessed in order for a Bachelor's degree with honours to awarded, or can a lower number of assessed credits (for example, 330 credits) be accepted if all learning outcomes have been achieved?

8 Providers will have learning outcomes for every course, unit and/or programme, describing the achievement students will normally be expected to demonstrate in order to be awarded credit or qualifications. Credit, on the other hand, typically describes volume of learning at particular levels of the [FHEQ/FQHEIS](#).

9 For awarding bodies, it is your responsibility to make sound judgements about the circumstances in which credit and qualifications may be awarded. In some circumstances it may be appropriate to make such awards even where students have not completed all planned learning and assessment. Awarding bodies will need to judge the extent to which there is sufficient evidence to determine that outcomes at the appropriate level have been achieved and this may be different for different courses and students. Where a decision is taken to award credit or qualifications to students who have not completed all planned assessment, the awarding body should record the basis for that decision.

10 In Scotland, all higher education institutions have agreed to use the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) as well as the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (which describes the amount of credit typically associated with qualifications) as a key reference point.

11 Whatever your solution, you will need to consult students before making decisions. The mechanisms for that consultation will of course need to take into account the current situation and the limitations on direct contact.

What should we record on transcripts?

12 There is no prescription in terms of what should be recorded on transcripts in normal circumstances. As long as they are accurate, you have freedom to include what you wish. You may want to clarify what adjustments have been made in the current crisis - for example, the location of study - but this should be balanced against creating a perception that this year's awards are in some way 'lesser' than other years.

How do you assure the quality of students' experience if they're unable to progress?

13 You may have provisions in your academic regulations that decide when and how students are to progress when studies are disrupted. When it is possible to do so, undertake an evaluation of the workload, for staff and students, involved in 'making up' lost time for teaching, learning and assessment where this is unavoidable. Students and staff should be made aware of the likely impact of this, and what their options are (some may wish to defer, for instance).

What is happening with courses leading or contributing to professional status?

14 Some programmes will require a set number of 'practice hours' or particular assessment mechanisms due to PSRB requirements. They may also require that certain

modules must be passed in order to complete the course, and under certain prescribed deadlines. As PSRB requirements tend to be set on a 'pass/fail' assessment, they may be easier to complete at later times when the campus is available. We advise talking to relevant PSRB's education teams as soon as possible to establish any flexibility. QAA would encourage PSRBs to consider their ability to be flexible in their requirements, given the scale of the problem the higher education sector is contending with.

3 Admissions

The Schools are now closed, and exams cancelled. As there's a cohort of students who can't take their exams in the summer, how do universities consider admissions?

15 Examination results will often only form part of the judgement for offering a place at a University. In Scotland, the Deputy First Minister informed the Scottish Parliament on 19 March that the 2020 exam diet cannot go ahead and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has been asked to develop an alternative certification model, further details of which will be announced by SQA as these become available.

16 In England, [the Secretary of State recently announced](#) that Ofqual and exam boards will work with teachers to provide grades to students whose exams have been cancelled this summer, with an option of an exam in the next academic year.

17 As providers across the UK accept both UK-wide and international students, providers will need to keep in mind a range of factors. So, consider the role that school exam results, foundation courses, language tests and access/entrance examinations have in determining who is offered a place, and if that is not a suitable criterion consider using other metrics to make the determination, such as a bespoke online test or exercise. Carefully consider the feasibility of such assessments in the current environment and the different needs of students, again giving special attention to internet access and the requirements of students with additional needs. Any changes to your admission processes would then need to be flagged to all applicants. You should also consider whether this requires a more in-depth appeals process.

18 Universities could also offer additional support/academic skills sessions, on arrival, for those students who perhaps did not achieve as expected in their school exams and had their previous study disrupted.

4 Assessment and feedback

If there are students on programmes who can't take their assessments and progress into the next year, or graduate, what are the quality implications for that?

19 Any changes to assessment touch upon many areas of quality - assessment design, regulations, appeals, communications and policy. Many of these areas will be self-evident, but it will be useful to bear these points in mind.

- Consider a flexible application of your policies and procedures and academic regulations to allow for mitigation or unforeseen circumstances.
- When developing alternative assessment methods, bear in mind that students will still need to meet the same learning outcomes where possible and practicable.
- Exercise flexibility in the submission dates and deadlines you have coming up. You may need to talk to relevant PSRBs if these deadlines are set by them.
- If your regulations or policies do not provide sufficient flexibility, you may need to consider revisiting the regulations themselves. Identify the policy staff within your organisation capable of writing suitable amendments, and your governance requirements. Consider emergency arrangements for approving regulatory amendments in the current restricted face-to-face environment, such as virtual committees and/or Chair's action.
- Consider how many units/modules have already been completed, whether there are only assessed elements left in modules/units, and how much work a student would need to undertake between now and next year. Focus on workload and ensure that, where the workload is 'reasonable', they allow students to trail results or examinations into the next academic period.
- Where practicable, consider substituting exams with online assessment, with appropriate safeguards including unique ID, same start times, same log-ons, tech support, remote proctoring solutions, and so on - but always with the ability and conditions of your students to do this uppermost in your minds.
- Please bear in mind potential vulnerability to misconduct when changing assessment methods – QAA's [guidance on contract cheating](#) may help. Be careful to remind students of the dangers of contract cheating, including potential exposure to fraud and extortion. We are seeing early signs of essay mills increasing advertising and seeking to exploit the current situation.
- Marking rubrics for exams taken remotely could be moderated to ensure that these cohorts have not been unduly disadvantaged.
- Consider the impact on students who have final assessments by way of exhibitions, shows or performances, clinical settings, laboratory work, viva voces, and workplace-based experience. Online assessment will not be suitable in all of these contexts. If they have not already had clarity over what the implications are for them, they will be anxious to know as soon as possible.
- If you are unable to assess work which is dependent on cohorts being in a specific time or place, or work which is performance or workplace-based, then every effort should be made to offer alternatives that meet the learning outcomes of the course/module.
- Access for students with disabilities is a crucial aspect of any adjustments you make - you should avoid inadvertently creating new barriers.
- You may choose to move the assessments to different times of the year, when campus space is more likely to be available. As we currently have no end-point to the

Government's COVID-19 measures, it will make any such strategies contingent on unknowns, so be cautious about creating expectations that you may not be able to deliver on.

- Consider amending elements of assessment strategies to facilitate students completing more coursework or project work up-front and moving the examination elements to later in the academic session, or even into subsequent years.
- Prepare your systems to accept the potential for increases in academic appeals and or complaints. This means ensuring that those accepting the appeals/complaints are fully trained and ensure that decisions made in relation to any of the issues that have arisen are being considered and judged fairly and consistently. Communications about appeals are also key.
- Your degree algorithm(s) may have to be changed, depending on your solutions to assessment and progression. Any changes may have a potential effect on classifications, and not just for final-year students.
- The sector is developing solutions to alternative assessment methods in response to the COVID-19 disruption. A small number of examples appear at the end of this document.

What about TNE? What do we do about ensuring the quality/standards of overseas qualifications this year, if other countries haven't been rigorous in ensuring assessment?

20 HE provision in other countries is going to be under particular stress at this time. Students may be caught up in attempts to leave other countries imposing travel restrictions - other may be unable to do so. Liaison with your partner institutions is crucial. We have published [specific guidance for providers on mitigating disruption for TNE students](#) due to COVID-19.

21 We are aware that countries where online provision has not always been recognised are now implementing online learning approaches.

22 Many of the points around flexibility in assessment approaches, progression and learning and teaching apply. It should be possible to rely on your partners' systems for the present and enhance the scrutiny when the situation returns to normal.

5 Engaging students, and external examiners

What should we do about external examiners?

23 External examiners are not just involved in reviewing work and attending assessment boards: procedures will also require external involvement in any changes to assessment. You may have to consider how to do this effectively within precautions around physical contact and also illness. External examiners themselves are likely to be pragmatic given their own institutions' issues. Changes to practice could potentially open up vulnerabilities in appeals and external examiner input can help mitigate this.

How will our normal student engagement efforts be affected?

24 We understand that events are moving at extreme pace, and many procedures which would normally require consultation with students are now requiring rapid decisions leaving fewer opportunities for the involvement of students. We would urge you to involve the relevant students' union officers as full members in your COVID-19 response planning groups. You should be thinking about fairness and how you will explain to students how you have acted in their best interests, and continuing to act in partnership is a way to navigate this.

25 You can also think about bringing senior course representatives, for example, faculty representatives, into relevant discussions of academic practice, making use of remote-working applications and consulting with the students' union where this is useful.

Resources

Open University free course: [Take your teaching online](#)

Sally Brown and Kay Sambell - Alternative assessment approaches: <https://sally-brown.net>

WONKHE articles on changes to [teaching](#) and [assessment](#)

THE article on [adjustments made in Singapore](#)

QAA Scotland is curating resources relating to online delivery as part of the [Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning](#) project. The website will continue to have materials added and an online event to share practice is scheduled for 1 April 2020.

Contact us

Our guidance around COVID-19 disruption responses is emerging and developing. If you have any questions that are not covered by this guidance, or the subsequent thematic guidance we are developing, please contact:

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