

COVID-19: Thematic Guidance

**Securing Academic
Standards and Supporting
Student Achievement**

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Purpose of this document

Following on from our [Initial Guidance for Higher Education Providers on Standards and Quality](#), we are now releasing specific guidance looking in more depth at the biggest issues facing the sector during the COVID-19 crisis:

1. Securing academic standards and supporting student achievement (this guidance)
2. Work-based learning (to include placements/partnerships/apprenticeships/study abroad)
3. Accelerated degrees
4. Practice and laboratory-based assessment.

QAA has developed this guidance with our Members and sector bodies for the benefit of the UK higher education community. It is intended to support providers by sharing emerging practice now, as well as distilling practice we can learn from for the future. It is structured around a set of reflective questions and challenges with potential solutions, and sets out guiding principles that should help providers through the radical changes to delivery that the current situation demands.

This guidance is not regulatory and following it will not ensure compliance with the regulatory requirements in your part of the UK, nor does it constitute advice on how to comply with legal obligations issued by organisations such as the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and the Competition and Markets Authority. These organisations are themselves responding to COVID-19 disruptions and their own advice should be consulted. The Office for Students (OfS) has set out the approach that registered higher education providers in England should be taking during these exceptional circumstances. Providers and students in England should refer, in the first instance, to [guidance published by the OfS](#). Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should consult the guidance provided by their respective funding bodies.

Our guidance contains references to external resources. These are for your information. Their inclusion is not an automatic endorsement by QAA.

As we develop our suite of guidance, we would encourage you to share the practice in your own institution with us or request additional areas of guidance. Please email us at guidance@qaa.ac.uk or contact us through our [QAA Quality Discussion Forum](#). The accumulation of examples of practice will allow us, at a future date, to produce a thematic analysis which will support future contingency planning and share learning across the sector.

Introduction

We are making some assumptions about what the next few months might mean for higher education providers and students. Our initial guidance was written before the stricter social distancing conditions were imposed by the UK Government on 23 March, and some proposals for how the sector could solve issues relating to remote teaching and assessment were therefore superseded by the new measures in place. The new restrictions meant that most, if not all, UK higher education providers are now having to operate remotely. It is highly unlikely that 'normal' resumption of teaching, learning and assessment will occur before September 2020 and, even then, the current restrictions around physical access to campus provision across the UK will have significant ramifications into the next academic year and beyond. This will affect progression, award and graduation, especially for final-year students at FHEQ Level 6 and 7; SCQF Level 9 and 10.

The changes to pre-entry qualifications for higher education will also impact providers' admissions processes and students entering higher education for the first time.

These are significant disruptions to all aspects of a provider's systems and processes, including the more obvious ones such as learning, teaching, assessment and awards but also course monitoring, partnerships, validation, student support, estates, timetabling, facilities and resource allocation.

Guiding principles

There are a number of principles which apply across our guidance:

- Providers who have not already done so are advised to establish a set of principles which can act as a framework to support planning and to facilitate consistency of decision-making. It will also provide a record of the rationale underpinning key decisions.
- The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is based around outcomes and offers considerable freedom to providers to adapt their approaches while securing academic standards.
- Students should, wherever it is possible and is in the student's interest, be enabled to finish their intended studies for the current academic year.
- Providing clear communication and support for students who are facing changes to their modes of teaching, learning and assessment is vital in helping them to achieve successful outcomes. Students who already require specific support - such as reasonable adjustments made for students with disabilities - will require careful consideration to ensure the current changes do not present them with additional challenges. Alternative assessments and adjustments to online teaching also need to recognise the needs of other students with specific learning requirements, such as those with caring responsibilities, those for whom broadband and internet provision may be difficult to access and those students who are ill or may be needing to self-isolate.
- Awarding bodies remain responsible for the academic standards of their awards, including those delivered with or by partners.

The advice set out in this document follows the current, and sometimes rapidly changing, guidance issued by the governments in [England](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) in response to COVID-19. The advice is also linked to information from the [UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#) and the [Department for Education](#). Links to further resources are provided at the end of the document.

Academic regulations

Are emergency academic regulations needed?

1 Not all providers have emergency regulations in place, at least not covering disruptions on this scale, and we are aware that a number of providers are drafting these at the time of writing. Any changes to regulations will need to comply with existing approval procedures and may need to include revised arrangements for course and/or assessment boards, for example: adjustments to the quorum for boards to account for staff sickness; the communication platforms used to facilitate remote meetings; and confidentiality arrangements.

2 Some of these emergency arrangements may more appropriately be captured within guidance rather than regulations, and existing emergency provisions may cover the current disruptions, but it is important to double-check and to have changes properly documented (for example, retaining a record of the process of consideration and approval as well as the final regulations or guidance that is agreed).

3 Examples from providers across the sector include:

- Allowing 'global extenuating circumstances' where all students can claim extenuating circumstances and retake module assessments without penalty or reduction in grade. As well as seeking to support student achievement, this is also aimed at reducing the burden on the NHS which would be created by increased numbers of students seeking medical evidence of their ill health. This may be a suitable approach, but the additional assessment burden on providers should be carefully considered.
- Examination boards receiving 'module impact statements', developed by academic and quality teams which explain any changes made to teaching and assessment mechanisms. The statements can then be used in making progression and award decisions including those relating to extenuating circumstances, and aiding consideration of any anomalies in students' performance.

Communication and consultation with students

How are providers consulting with students on any changes?

4 All changes to learning and assessment approaches need to be clearly communicated to students as soon as possible. It is wise to avoid relying on a single communication medium - use multiple channels (such as the virtual learning environment and email) and consider using media that are different from your common practice (for example, WhatsApp or other forms of social media) and engage student representatives including the Students' Union/Association executive and course representatives.

5 However, it is valuable to provide clear, centralised information to students covering access to online learning and assessment. These may include video tutorials for specific types of activity including assessments.

6 Providers will wish to consider the particular communication needs of students on medical or healthcare courses who are moving into the NHS, or for those students whose lecturers are themselves being redeployed into the NHS.

7 Many providers have consulted extensively with their Students' Union (or equivalent) officers at President/Vice-President Education level. In some cases, providers have been able to draw on views offered by individual students as well as course representatives. Some providers have noted that student opinion is divided on the approach they should take, which requires a clear articulation to students of why decisions have been taken and how student views have been taken into account.

8 In one approach, where the provider was proposing to shorten and simplify assessment (while ensuring there is sufficient evidence upon which to make a judgment), the course leaders in each school have been engaging students in ensuring that subject norms and differences are taken into account.

9 It is important to remind students that the general advice concerning preparation for assessments still stands. For example, the importance of having a personal assessment timetable; scheduling revision; taking care of their health; working with others online.

Supporting student achievement

How is their location having an impact on students' ability to undertake online learning and assessment?

10 Students who have been advised to stay on campus may benefit from widespread wi-fi provision in a way that those who are studying off-campus may not. However, those remaining in provider accommodation are likely to be experiencing reduced campus services, including catering.

11 There can be difficulties for students seeking to collaborate on group projects at this time, for example, if the internet connection is unreliable or if a member of the student group falls ill. Extenuating circumstances procedures are likely to come under extreme pressure, and it is important that staff plan for, and are supported to meet, the increased demand.

12 Wherever they are located, there will be students who are not able to access the adjusted ways of learning and assessment; they may have caring responsibilities or be ill themselves. It is important to deal with each of these cases individually and with appropriate flexibility.

13 There can be particular challenges for students with limited access to the necessary technical equipment, a suitable broadband service, or even basic facilities such as a quiet room with a desk. Students with particular characteristics or specific needs may experience additional challenges and are likely to require additional support.

14 Providers with transnational education provision, or working with partners in countries outside the UK, are also advised to consider and communicate with in-country governments, regulators and accreditation bodies, as COVID-19 mitigation procedures, and impacts on their higher education sectors, will differ.

15 Examples of practice from providers:

- In order to assess student needs methodically, some providers are asking students to complete a 'local circumstances form' or a survey, so they have a way of expressing the constraints under which they are operating and which could be used

in mitigation of lower than expected academic performance. In many cases, providers are offering additional flexibility in the assessment opportunities.

- In a limited number of cases, providers are offering laptops to students - some, however, are not able to do this due to supply and lead-time difficulties.
- Another example is where a provider has established an emergency IT hardship loan fund for students who do not have a suitable computer and/or broadband connection to purchase a laptop and/or 3G/4G-enabled mobile data device.

What should happen where international students who have returned to their home countries cannot access online learning/assessment due to internet restrictions?

16 Providers' existing policies on extenuating circumstances may cover such situations, in the same way as other accessibility issues. Do not inadvertently pressure students who have returned home to restrictive jurisdictions to breach local censorship laws. Professional support services and academic teams need to be aware of these potential effects when considering solutions, which may include deferral, or 'trailing' modules/assessments (that is, postponing into the next academic year). Remedial or catch-up teaching could be an option for when the physical distancing measures begin to ease.

Credit volume and progression

Should providers consider adjusting the workload or academic credit within an academic session?

17 Any adjustments to the workload or volume of credit students are expected to complete in order to receive an award (or to progress) will need to account for the individual circumstances of providers and their students.

18 In some cases, the volume of teaching lost is not substantial, for example, in providers where teaching was due to finish at or around the end of April to allow for a two-week formal examination period (now replaced with online assessments). In these cases, students would be missing a small amount of direct teaching, particularly when the Easter break is taken into account. In such cases, workload (or credit volume) may be largely unaffected by the disruption.

19 In other cases, providers are making judgements about the evidence required to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes and are considering whether they are able to award credit where students have not completed all of the originally planned teaching, learning and assessments. This is likely to be different for different courses/modules and students.

20 The credit volumes associated with the various levels of qualifications set out in the UK Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications are expressed as 'typical' and awarding bodies have a certain amount of latitude in reaching these judgements. If providers are conferring awards with less than the 'typical' credit volume specified, they should consider whether this might disadvantage some students seeking further study or seeking funding to support that further study. Providers should also consider the potential impacts on

equivalence arrangements, for example, through the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Bologna Process.

Can the solution applied to completing students also be applied to continuing students?

21 Depending on the providers' regulations for progression, it may be possible to apply the same approach for continuing (progressing) students as for completing (graduating) students.

22 Examples of practice:

- Allowing students to progress by considering their average grades across the required credits to reach a pass of 40%.
- Applying mitigation to every student who fails or does not submit, enabling them to have a new first attempt without the requirement to provide evidence of exceptional circumstances.

23 We recommend that providers considering these approaches document their decision-making processes thoroughly, including their consideration of the need to ensure that no cohort of students has been overly advantaged by comparison to other cohorts.

Modes and timings of assessment

Should the mode of assessment be adjusted? And, if the form of assessment is simplified, will students still meet learning outcomes?

24 Providers are exercising care in ensuring that any changes to assessments are approved by the appropriate bodies (such as course/faculty boards) or individual officers. It is good practice to map the proposed changes to the original learning outcomes to assist decision-making and provide a clear record. Providers are also advised to consider the principles of validity, reliability and fairness, while recognising the needs of students with Learning Agreements, achievability by homeworking students, and how staff marking the work from home will assess the records of decisions made.

25 If the achievement of learning outcomes is not possible, providers could follow their procedures for making emergency minor amendments, for example, to enable students to progress and achieve the 'missing' learning outcomes at a later date.

26 Examples of practice from the sector:

- Ensuring that the alternative assessment formats used are familiar to the student cohorts even if the conditions under which the assessment is being taken are different, for example, essay questions moving from 'exam conditions' to 'open book'.
- Offering assessments over a 48-hour window to allow for students' local circumstances such as immediate surroundings, connectivity, and time zone differences. Even where assessments are not timed, some providers are specifying a recommended period for completion to help students know when they should stop, and to avoid the risk of their seeking perfection and 'burning out'. In this way,

providers are seeking to ensure they are not inadvertently increasing anxiety by setting timescales that may not be realistic.

- In cases where students have more than one item of assessment within a module, and it is not possible to complete them all, providers could calculate a final module grade on the basis of the completed assessment(s), provided it can be demonstrated that module learning outcomes had been achieved from the completed assessment(s).
- Requiring courses to produce a 'module impact statement' (see the earlier section on academic regulations).

Should submission dates be adjusted? What are the implications?

27 A number of providers are issuing 'blanket' extensions for coursework due in the current term/semester to the end of the Easter vacation, with the opportunity to apply for additional individual extensions where there are further special circumstances for which an adjustment would previously have been made. In some cases, this approach has required changes to the scheduling of coursework and assessments for the rest of the academic year.

28 At least one other provider has given all students the opportunity to defer some or all of their April/May assessments to early July (their normal reassessment period). They do not need to have evidence for extenuating circumstances to do this. This means there will be an additional reassessment period in August for those who fail first attempts in July. Final-year students are being given the opportunity to defer the submission of dissertations originally due at the end of April, either by two weeks or until July

29 For students who are self-isolating due to COVID-19, providers may need to adjust their extension and deferral processes and forms to allow for a self-certification period of 14 days.

30 In general, adjusting timings is likely to have knock-on effects for completing students in relation to graduate employment and the flow of graduates into professions, which there would be benefit in providers considering.

Grading

Should providers adopt a 'no detriment' or 'safety net' approach to grading?

31 Irrespective of the model providers' use for grading, they should focus on ensuring that the classifications students will ultimately be awarded are fair, valid and reliable. The arrangements put in place, including any adjustments made in response to the current circumstances, should be clearly documented and communicated to students.

32 There are different grading models being identified as offering 'no detriment', also referred to as 'safety net' policies, and no single agreed definition of the term. We are aware that many providers are under pressure from their student body to introduce such an approach.

33 We have taken 'no detriment' to mean that students will not be penalised for any dip in their academic performance relating to assessments undertaken during the COVID-19 mitigation arrangements. In many providers' cases, it means that students' final grades

(arising from assessments taken during the period of disruption) cannot fall below those for their academic performance to date. Several providers have added the caveat that this 'no detriment' applies *provided* the student achieves a pass in any assessments taken since the COVID-19 disruptions. At the same time, students will still be able to raise their grades if they improve their performance in the assessments taken during the disruptions.

34 In practice, there are many aspects to such a policy that can affect the outcomes for students including, but not limited to, alterations to algorithms and a reduction in the workload (or amount of credit) required for an award. We understand that some providers are concerned at the potential of such adjustments to impact on academic standards and their degree classification profile. However, others believe a 'no detriment' policy will not have an inflationary effect on outcomes overall. For providers with a progressive achievement profile - where students perform better in Year 3 than their Year 2 average - a no detriment policy may have a limited inflationary impact, but this is likely to be compensated by the challenging circumstances under which students are being assessed. As stated earlier, if providers are confident that the grades awarded are fair, valid and reliable, it follows that academic standards will be secure.

35 One provider indicated that they are not adopting a 'no detriment' approach but are seeking to ensure there is 'no disadvantage' for students. For them, this approach has three parts. First, reflecting on learning outcomes and modifications of assessment including, for example, mode, volume and whether the assessment will be graded or simply be expressed as pass/fail. Secondly, making adjustments to the extenuating circumstances to permit self-certification for longer periods than usual. Thirdly, where appropriate, assessment boards will take into account students' previous performance.

36 Academic standards are ultimately for the awarding body to secure, provided they meet the Expectations of the Quality Code for Higher Education and their regulatory requirements as they apply in each of the four UK nations. There is unlikely to be a single approach or solution to securing academic standards during this disruption that will fit all modules, courses or departments/schools/faculties. It is likely that some flexibility will be needed to ensure fairness to all students. However, providers should model their approach carefully to ensure that any shift in their grade profile is not an unforeseen consequence of mitigating action they take during this period.

External examiners

How should external examiners be engaged in assessment design, marking and moderation, and assessment boards?

37 Depending on the extent of the changes being made, and providers' policies and procedures, it may not be necessary to gain external examiner approval for all changes in teaching, learning and assessment. However, we are aware that providers are seeking to ensure external examiners are consulted, particularly over substantive changes, despite the challenges of contacting and involving colleagues who have unusually heavy workloads in their 'home' provider. Securing external examiner approval at such short notice has been highlighted as a particular challenge.

38 Moderation and assessment board attendance is not being identified as a major concern given the sector's embrace of online assessment and virtual meetings, respectively. However, where providers are adding additional assessment diets, there could be practical

challenges related to ensuring that externals can moderate each diet. Providers will wish to consider how this can be managed effectively.

Degree algorithms and classification profiles

Should providers change their degree algorithm(s)?

39 Not all providers have identified any need to amend their existing degree classification algorithms. Where providers are considering making changes to their algorithms, they should ensure such changes are reasonable and consider the implications for different student groups including those at different points in their studies.

What is the likely impact on degree classifications?

40 There are mixed views on the likely impact. As noted in the earlier section on 'no detriment' policies, some providers believe certain approaches could give rise to an increase in grades, while others believe this is unlikely. A number of providers have emphasised that the efforts being made to ensure the revised arrangements are just as valid and reliable as assessment practices in any other years, will mean there should be little, if any, impact to their classification profile. The work providers across the UK have been carrying out in relation to the degree classification Statement of Intent may be contributing to this confidence.

Resits and appeals

Will the provider's approach to academic appeals change?

41 Many providers are anticipating an increase in appeals. Considering the fairness to students in any changes should mitigate the risk of providing students with an evidentiary basis for appealing. Nonetheless, providers should ensure that the information they provide to students about how to lodge an appeal is up-to-date, well-publicised and accessible to students. It would also be wise to ensure that there are adequate staff trained in dealing with appeals to ensure that any increase in volume can still be dealt with in a timely fashion.

Will more students seek to take assessments at the resit diet?

42 This may be unavoidable, and plans should be considered for this eventuality. It is possible that the social distancing restrictions could still be in place at that time. For providers who assess mainly or entirely on coursework, there may be little or no impact.

Academic integrity

How can academic standards be kept secure when adjustments are required to ensure assessments are fair and equitable at this time?

43 Even under normal circumstances, it is extremely difficult for providers to ensure there are no students engaging in any form of academic misconduct. Nonetheless, providers can take action to make misconduct less likely, for example, reminding students of existing policies on academic integrity, and emphasising that these continue to apply in the current,

changed circumstances. Providers are advised to be aware that essay mills see this disruption as an opportunity to exploit students and they are increasing their promotional activity.

44 Providers are advising students that there will be random sampling of submissions to check the authenticity of their work and to check for any evidence of plagiarism, which they hope will discourage any students who might be tempted to cheat. Other steps, which are good practices to follow at any time, include:

- sampling a number of students after the exam has been uploaded for a brief online 'viva' to test understanding and authenticity of their submission
- considering performance in online assessment carefully against performance and achievement to date to ascertain whether this is in keeping with expectations.

Is online proctoring or invigilation a reliable way of assuring academic integrity in online assessments?

45 Some providers have highlighted challenges in adding online proctoring to their systems - including cost, capability and experience. An imminent joint report from Jisc and EmERGE Education on online assessment is expected to provide more detailed information on the available options. Providers will wish to balance consideration of the costs against the risks to academic integrity associated with the large-scale move to online assessment.

Degree certificates and transcripts

Will it be necessary to adjust degree certificates or transcripts?

46 Views are divided. Some in the sector consider that there should be an indication on certificates that awards were completed during the COVID-19 pandemic (with some parallels to the approach taken during World War II). Others think that any such marker would risk devaluing degrees for those graduating in 2020. If certificates or transcripts did include a marker, there are questions of whether it should be for one year only, given many providers include weighting from assessments taken prior to the final-year of study.

47 Arguably, the transcript is where any marker should go, rather than on the degree certificate. One argument to support this is that students achieving a change in their anticipated grades is more likely than achieving a different degree classification. One proposal is to have two forms of transcript - one simple and one more detailed - accuracy and fairness to the student are issues that need careful consideration here.

Graduation

What are the options for graduation ceremonies?

48 We would advise against cancelling graduation ceremonies altogether. Providers could consider ways of issuing awards virtually, and then having an 'in person' celebration event later in the year. Options might include using authority to award degrees in absentia prior to a celebration event or issuing all students with confirmation of their final award board

outcome which could be used as proof of achievement in advance of a delayed formal graduation.

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)

Some regulated or accredited professional courses are subject to external requirements that have implications for teaching, learning and assessment. How can providers work with PSRBs to address these?

49 There are over 250 PSRBs operating in the UK, with many deeply involved in accrediting higher education courses. Their position is not homogenous and is, like all organisations at the moment, constantly evolving. Their primary concerns, depending on the body's mission, are safety and the public interest, and maintaining educational standards is key to securing these. Many PSRBs are matching institutional pragmatism and discussing their requirements around assessment (particularly invigilation and closed-book assessments) or have agreed alternative approaches. Others are leaving the issue of assessment to providers and are asking for notification of changes rather than requiring prior approval. Their websites should be consulted for the latest position in the first instance.

50 If a PSRB's reluctance to accept a particular assessment format relates to whether or not a particular skill or competence can be accurately assessed through an online format, that is what will need to be explored, including alternative outcomes or mitigation.

51 There are some challenges regarding placements, particularly for health and related professions, where final-year students are being given a choice of whether to join a temporary register or continue their studies but with deferred placements. Generally, profession-related courses reinforce the importance of the provider recording and approving any changes to assessment approaches so that there is future accountability to the PSRB as well as accountability within the institution. For some placements (for example, social work and teaching), there may be little option but to defer.

52 For some PSRBs who require face-to-face assessment of competence and skills, providers have arranged an additional assessment period in late summer when they hope this can be completed. Other providers have suggested negotiating with PSRBs on the option of running a diagnostic/synoptic assessment as soon as possible to assure them of students' professional competence, and pointed to the General Medical Council's enabling of online teaching, learning and assessment in order to permit their students to have awards conferred and enter the profession.

53 For the hopefully rare situations where providers are unable to come to an agreed position with an individual PSRB, providers should take decisions in the immediate best interests of their students and work with the PSRB to agree any further mitigations that may need to be put in place once this crisis is resolved.

Sources of additional information

QAA's advice hub for COVID-19 support and guidance:

www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/support-and-guidance-covid-19

QAA (2017) Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education

www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education.pdf

QAA Scotland's resource hub has an extensive range of materials to support providers moving provision and assessment online. The hub is part of the Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning project and includes toolkits for staff and tips on engaging students, including supporting student mental health and wellbeing. The resources include practice from across the UK and internationally:

www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/technology-enhanced-learning

QQI guiding principles for alternative assessments in response to COVID-19 emergency restrictions:

www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Guiding%20Principles%20for%20Alternative%20Assessment%20%28COVID-19%29.pdf

Professor Michael Sankey, Griffith University, Australia, provides presentation and resources covering alternative options for exams, proctoring, alternatives to work integrated learning:

www.linkedin.com/posts/tillyhinton_covid19-coronavirus-switchingonline-activity-6649101105160695808-C3E5

Jisc's coronavirus online resources centre covers practical tips to ensure continuity, a supportive community space, and free online briefings. Jisc and EMERGE are also working on a report on digital assessment, publication of which is being brought forward in light of the current crisis. This should be helpful in aiding thinking around solutions for digital proctoring and invigilation, and with self-assessment:

www.jisc.ac.uk/coronavirus#online-content

Jisc guidance on transforming assessment and feedback with technology:

www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/transforming-assessment-and-feedback

The University of Glasgow's 'Glasgow Anywhere' site provides a one-stop shop for all the information people need to teach or learn remotely. It includes details on how to use technology such as Office 365, how to access files remotely, how to use different devices and collaborate with others. It is also planned to include information on remote assessment and feedback:

www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/anywhere

Heriot-Watt University's Rapid Response Toolkit to support student learning online in response to the pandemic:

<https://lta.hw.ac.uk/supporting-student-learning-online>

Sally Brown and Kay Sambell, Alternative assessment approaches:

<https://sally-brown.net>

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