

Guidance

Questions to Inform a Toolkit for Enhancing Quality in a Digital Environment



Introduction

Since March 2020, when QAA published its [initial guidance on maintaining quality and standards](#) in the crisis, through to a series of [thematic guidance and supporting resources](#), our intention has been to support the sector in developing solutions to the unique demands that the COVID-19 scenario has placed on providers and the sector at large. QAA is now beginning to look beyond the immediate crisis, to develop guidance with the sector and support providers in planning for 2020-21 and beyond. Our first publication in this third stage of guidance - [Preserving Quality and Standards Through a Time of Rapid Change: UK Higher Education in 2020-21](#) - was published on 2 June 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made higher education providers quickly pivot to digital teaching and assessment. In some instances, this has led to degree-awarding bodies enacting emergency regulations to cover a range of contingencies and support for staff and students throughout this period.

Attention has turned to the next academic year and what will constitute the 'new normal'. Providers are beginning to release statements regarding their intent to either retain a wholly digital approach, return to onsite provision or offer a blend of both. The digital environment will remain a crucial aspect of this 'new normal' and how quality is maintained is an important discussion.

This paper is the result of collaboration with QAA Members in our recent 'Maintaining Quality in an Online Learning Environment' webinar. It offers a series of considerations, prompts and reflective questions intended to help providers develop their own toolkits for maintaining the quality of digital learning approaches.

Higher education providers are diverse in size and curriculum offer, as well as approaches and institutional experience of digital methods of teaching and learning. **Therefore, some of the considerations may be more applicable to some providers than others, and some of them may not be applicable at all.** However, in considering the following reflective questions, it is hoped that all providers - regardless of size or offer - can establish where their strengths lie and where there may be scope for further enhancement.

Key considerations for maintaining quality in a digital environment

1 A strategic focus

In building a toolkit, it is suggested that coordinated strategic focus and ownership is likely to be useful in driving and maintaining the quality of digital teaching and learning. It is highly likely that a broad range of departments will be involved, and this will need strategic management and focused goal setting to ensure smooth development.

Considerations

- Which institutional strategies specifically accommodate digital teaching and learning? Do they align and support each other? Are there synergies if digital learning is included in more than one institutional strategy?
- How is the quality of digital teaching and learning conceptualised within strategies? How is this conveyed to staff and students to drive curriculum design, development and review?
- Are educational objectives and/or pedagogical theory/models driving the focus of digital teaching and learning at a strategic level?

- How much do strategies focus on the tools and technologies of digital teaching (for example, virtual learning environment, hardware, software, accessibility), versus teaching and learning quality? Is the focus on each appropriate?
- How are students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) accommodated within digital teaching and learning approaches? How is this enabled at a strategic level?
- Has there been full and coordinated budgetary consideration for the planning, design and development, delivery, maintenance and overheads of digital teaching and learning to enable quality provision?
- How well do the digital tools and technologies support the pedagogies used across the provider and within individual programmes? Do the digital tools and technologies have sufficient capacity to support increased volume and presence of users? Are there particular peak times that can be envisaged?
- Who is responsible for collecting evidence, interpreting research and evaluating the impact of digital teaching and learning at an institutional level? How does this inform institutional strategies and how are results disseminated to staff and students?
- Regarding learner analytics, is there a clear ethics policy for use of data and have students been made aware of how their data will be used?
- Is there a fail-safe technology development plan that addresses electronic security measures (for example, password protection, encryption, back-up systems) and the building and maintenance of the infrastructure for digital education?
- Has there been full and coordinated consideration about the storage, delivery and access to digital learning materials and activities?

2 Programme design, approval and management

Digital learning provision often involves a broad range of staff, such as learning technologists, IT departments, educational designers and academics among others. Therefore, the planning and coordination of digital approaches to learning have the potential to take longer and be more complex than those based onsite. Typically, digital delivery demands greater preparation time, associated with the development and design of digital teaching materials and activities. Strong project management will support timely delivery of digital provision and will ensure that staff involved in the planning and design stages have the capacity to deliver in specified timescales.

There can be a temptation to focus on technologies and the tools of digital delivery, sometimes at the expense of digital pedagogy. It is suggested that pedagogical approaches should also be considered and thinking on this issue could embrace the signature pedagogies of different disciplines; there is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Considerations

- How do you identify whether teaching staff have considered the best pedagogical approach for teaching students digitally and in a specific context, taking into account pedagogical practice, innovation and the learning outcomes of the programme?
- Is there a strong pedagogic rationale for whether sessions will be synchronous (learning together at the same time) or asynchronous (on-demand content)? How do synchronous and asynchronous activities interact to enhance learning?

- Has timetabling been considered? How will timetabling impact positively or negatively on the student experience? Have you ensured that students are not timetabled for digital lectures for the whole day?
- How will academic staff help foster a sense of digital community among students, that has traditionally been associated with onsite provision?
- Will learning technologists be involved with the design and implementation of digital materials for academic staff? If yes, have they been fully involved with programme/lecture design discussions and do they fully understand the pedagogic rationale and needs of the programme and/or lecture to which their materials will contribute?
- Given that designing learning episodes for digital learning is likely to take more preparation time, has this been scheduled into balance of duties, with enough lead-in time scheduled for academic and support staff?
- Have academic support staff been involved with discussions, as appropriate, and are they able to accommodate any requests on their time or resource?
- Does the pedagogical approach work for the number of students on each course and allow for sufficient support for those students?
- How have learner analytics and learner feedback been used to inform and enhance programme/session design?
- What is the institutional policy covering data protection and privacy and are academic teams and students fully aware of the content and implications?
- Has consideration been given to on-demand content (asynchronous) which can be accessed at a time that is suitable to students? How does this content interact with synchronous digital and interactive sessions?
- How will students encounter content across modules/programmes? Digital materials may be designed to serve the needs of several modules/programmes and therefore mapping of content and when sessions are delivered may help reduce the potential of students experiencing the same content at the same time, across several modules.
- Is there opportunity for student self-assessment of knowledge/progress towards learning outcomes?
- As the volume of broadcast, asynchronous resources increases, who will curate and inventory these resources? How will they be managed, and who will manage them? Will they be made available to other departments/faculties/colleges/partners who may be able to utilise them within their teaching?
- How has unconscious bias within a digital environment been addressed with staff and students?
- Have contributions from pedagogic research units (if applicable) and pedagogic research publications been utilised in the design and evaluation of digital teaching and learning?
- Are communities of practice and peer support available for staff to share good practice? How are existing governance structures used to develop relevant

communities of practice and support a culture of teaching excellence? Who leads the communities of practice and how will responsibility be devolved, managed and sustained? Will there be protected time for development and enhancement activities?

- How are staff supported and encouraged to experiment and innovate within their teaching?
- Are there effective mechanisms in place to ensure a clean break when switching from one cohort to the next - both in terms of protecting user data and the administrative work involved in setting up each new cohort? Have learning technologists (where applicable) been involved to support analysis and best practice in this activity?
- How will you try to ensure learner authentication and work authorship for digital assessments?
- Can formative assessment contribute towards learner authentication and work authorship?

3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Most students studying digitally have extensive experience of the use of other digital services such as digital banking, shopping, apps and downloads, and are therefore likely to have high expectations of availability and ease of use of asynchronous materials. It is suggested that managing and responding to students' expectations will be vital as they progress through their studies. To facilitate student-centred learning, many higher education providers have encouraged the co-creation of learning materials between academics and students. Co-creation can help create an engaging digital experience and place students at the heart of their own learning.

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment is built upon the foundations of honest and open communication between staff and students which will essentially inform all aspects of curricula.

Considerations

- How will the curriculum and digital learning stimulate and engage students in their learning?
- How has best practice regarding digital teaching and learning, informed the design of sessions?
- How are peer-to-peer interactions encouraged?
- Has co-creation of teaching and learning resources between academics and students been considered? If so, how is this enabled and facilitated?
- How does student feedback inform future iterations of programmes, modules and sessions?
- Is it clear when students can speak with academic staff? Is there a clear system of doing so, such as booking meetings?
- Are there guidelines/a code of conduct for staff and students regarding digital behaviour ('netiquette')?

- What processes are in place if someone breaches the 'netiquette' guidelines/code of conduct? How do you ensure that any breaches do not negatively impact students' ability to fully engage with their learning moving forwards?
- How will digital sessions and materials support and encourage independent study and flexibility in time and place of study?
- Who will moderate student discussion areas, ensuring that appropriate levels of digital etiquette prevail?
- Is there opportunity for students to personalise their learning experience, working at their own pace, accessing and revisiting, bite-size asynchronous materials?
- If students transition between courses and modules, will they have a continuity of experience? If that continuity isn't there, is there a clear pedagogic rationale for that and has it been made explicit?

4 Teaching staff

Teaching staff are the cornerstone of maintaining the quality of digital teaching and learning. Underpinning a quality student experience will be the ability of staff to engage students with their learning, encourage independent study and utilise a range of appropriate digital technologies to facilitate learning.

Considerations

- Is there a platform/means by which staff can engage with each other and share experiences and good practice?
- Has a skills audit and/or training needs analysis of academic staff been conducted? How are the training needs of staff identified in relation to the pedagogy of digital teaching and learning, student engagement and assessment, as well as the ability to fully utilise digital technologies and digital assessment methods?
- Have new staff or staff on short term contracts, conducted a training needs analysis and do they have the same access to professional development and training as established full-time contracted staff?
- Do staff have access to appropriate IT equipment to enable digital teaching and learning delivery, either in the workplace or if working from home?
- In developing digital learning materials, have conversations with all staff involved with this process been fully coordinated?
- Is there adequate IT support available for staff and is this available at the times they need it, taking into account their different working patterns and time zones?
- How will staff continuously develop their knowledge and keep ahead of developments in digital teaching and learning technologies and pedagogy? How will the institution enable and facilitate this?
- Has there been discussion regarding what is classed as appropriate and inappropriate academic conduct when liaising in digital environments? For example, an academic member of staff sharing their personal contact details/telephone number to participate in a class WhatsApp group.

- How are staff directed and advised regarding appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, not only in more formal digital teaching and learning environments, but also in more informal digital communities?
- How will academic staff help foster a sense of digital community among students, that has traditionally been associated with onsite provision?
- How has unconscious bias within a digital environment been addressed with staff and students?
- Are communities of practice and peer support available for staff to share good practice? How are these managed and accessed by staff?
- How can the management information system (MIS) and learner analytics help teaching staff with the design, management and delivery of sessions?
- How are staff supported in the analysis, interpretation and use of data from a range of sources (MIS and learner analytics - among others) to inform the design, management and delivery of sessions?
- Are there mechanisms to recognise and reward staff who have made substantial effort to engage and educate students digitally?

5 Learning resources and student support

Digital learning may require students to acquire new skills or adopt new learning techniques and they may need support in developing and applying these. Students may also need support in developing new approaches to their learning. For example, to foster objectives of student-centred learning, students may need introducing to ideas of self-regulated, active and collaborative learning. Higher education providers are likely to have well-developed support systems for students with SpLD which will also need accommodating within a digital environment.

Considerations

- Digital student support may require flexibility regarding the time and platform for delivery - how will this be accommodated?
- Have any alternative digital assessment requirements for students with SpLD been discussed and accommodated?
- Does the technical infrastructure ensure the accessibility of learning materials and assessment systems by students with SpLD?
- Have specialist virtual environments been integrated and accommodated where appropriate, for example, digital labs? Have students been shown how to access and use any specialist technologies? Do students have access to hardware appropriate to the course and any specialist software they might need?
- Can digital learning materials be equally accessed across a range of devices such as smartphones, tablets, PCs and Macs?
- Can students access support for developing digital skills?
- Have students received guidelines and training in the use of the infrastructure and digital technologies that they will need to access during their studies, including the

virtual learning environment, e-library and other more specialist digital technologies?

- Are the hours of IT and other support transparent and do they suit the needs of the students? For example, have periods of peak demand (for instance, evenings, weekends, holidays) been considered?
- Is it clear to students how they access student support? Can they access student support and support services via the student's homepage and/or entry route to the virtual learning environment?
- Have students been given specific information about learning resources and student support available to them, some of which may be programme specific? Was this information provided before their studies, with regular reminders during?
- Social media has boosted the expectation of almost immediate response. How will the institution/staff manage this expectation and ensure staff workloads are manageable, while offering appropriate levels of student support?

Resources

QAA Scotland

Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning Resource Hub

A wealth of resource full of practice and tips on using technology in learning and teaching. This includes resources from across the sector and around the world. Divided into key areas of interest, such as Getting Your Teaching Online, Lecture Recording and Student Participation in Co-creation, the Resource Hub provides timely support on the transition from physical to digital learning, as well as guidance on other topical issues in technology enhanced learning.

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

Toolkit: Developing a sense of belonging in online distance learning

Tutors can use the toolkit to make informed decisions about the type of interventions that might benefit their students. It contains practical suggestions for digital tutors about how to develop a sense of belonging, opportunities to learn from others, a tool to help with evaluating and reflecting and a short synthesis of relevant literature.

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/student-engagement-and-demographics/distance-and-sense-of-belonging

Guide for Tutors: Supporting student transitions into and through online learning

This is a guide about how to use a set of resources covering four areas: Being an Effective Learner; Working with Others Online; Learning Effectively with Technology; and Being a Responsible Online Learner. Tutors can use the resources with students in further or higher education at any level who are starting or continuing a digital learning experience.

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/student-transitions/tutor-guide---supporting-student-transitions-into-and-through-online-learningc8b49abe03dc611ba4caff000043ed24.pdf

Collaborative Cluster: Widening participation with lecture recording

The aim of the cluster is to develop best practice guidelines for how institutions can use lecture capture/recording to support widening access students - by allowing greater learning flexibility - and how students themselves can use it to support their diverse pathway into, and journey through, higher education. The cluster is being led by the University of Edinburgh in collaboration with the University of Glasgow and the University of Aberdeen.

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/student-engagement-and-demographics/widening-participation-with-lecture-recording

Responding to the student voice

This link includes a resource pack based on a set of cards that sets out a series of interrelated principles of practice. Staff and students worked in partnership to design and shape the cards, aimed at improving policies, processes and practices around responding to student voice.

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/student-engagement-and-demographics/responding-to-student-voice

Learning from Disruption: Exploring what counts in higher education

Post-conference resources including session recordings, papers and toolkits

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/news-events/conference-june-2020/live-session-recordings-and-resources

Jisc

COVID-19 organisational response review checklist

Supporting universities and colleges as they pause to reflect on early responses to COVID-19 and start to plan their next steps, we've created an organisational review checklist.

www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/ensuring-continuity-of-learning-during-enforced-absence/checklist

Teaching in Microsoft Teams (Responding to Coronavirus)

Teams is primarily designed as a collaborative workspace, but if you are delivering webinars, workshops or training sessions, you can use many of the functions to create live interactions. Esther Barrett shares some tools and techniques for making teaching in Teams more interactive and engaging.

<https://coronavirus.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2020/06/08/teaching-in-microsoft-teams>

Live online learning - is this the future? (Responding to Coronavirus)

As more learning providers deliver live digital learning, Esther Barrett reflects on past experiences and future considerations when we are planning to invest in a platform for webinars, training and classes.

<https://coronavirus.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2020/05/29/live-online-learning-is-this-the-future>

After the emergency: what happens after lockdown ends? (Responding to Coronavirus)

How can we make sure people can recover, that lessons are learned and planning for the future can begin?

<https://coronavirus.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2020/04/16/after-lockdown-ends>

Is "mixed participation" in learning our future reality? (Responding to Coronavirus)

As universities and colleges contend with the pressures of wanting to open up their physical estate with the need to keep staff and students safe, Chris Thomson asks what we can learn from courses that have used a mixed participation model of digital and in-person engagement simultaneously.

<https://coronavirus.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2020/05/20/mixed-participation>

Lost in translation (eLearning Stuff)

Looking at the challenges in delivering teaching remotely during this crisis period, James Clay has been reflecting on how teaching staff can translate their existing practice into new models of delivery that could result in better learning, but also have less of detrimental impact on staff and students.

<https://elearningstuff.net/lost-in-translation>

Hybrid (eLearning Stuff)

It's an uncertain future and one that means courses will need to reflect that uncertainty. Designing hybrid courses which reflect the possibilities of that future but are responsive enough to respond to changes are probably one way of ensuring that the student experience is meeting the demands of students in a challenging landscape.

<https://elearningstuff.net/2020/05/21/hybrid>

MOOCs

The Online Educator: People and Pedagogy

www.futurelearn.com/courses/the-online-educator

How To Teach Online: Providing Continuity for Students

www.futurelearn.com/courses/teach-online

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