

# COVID-19 supporting resources

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## Advice for Higher Education Providers on the 2021 National Lockdown - Safety Net Policies

We are currently in a UK-wide lockdown which may be eased at different points in different parts of the UK, but is likely to continue in one form or another for a substantial part of the academic year. This has brought about renewed calls for providers to consider the possible introduction of 'safety nets' or other forms of special support for students.

We understand that the current lockdown measures come after many months of disruption and enormous efforts on the part of students and staff to create a viable and effective learning experience. The need for kindness, empathy and compassion for each other has rarely been greater.

### Principles

In our June 2020 publication - [Preserving Quality and Standards Through a Time of Rapid Change](#) - we set out four guiding principles which continue to apply to higher education providers across the UK:

- Principle 1: That any move to onsite activity is safe and secure for staff and students
- Principle 2: That degree-awarding bodies maintain quality and standards in the move to flexible provision
- Principle 3: That providers engage with students and staff in planning changes to delivery and assessment of teaching and learning
- Principle 4: That provider planning scenarios are flexible and responsive to students' needs

### Protecting standards

Higher education providers are responsible for upholding the academic standards of the awards they offer, which has a bearing on institutional reputation but, perhaps even more importantly, has a firm focus on the future prospects of graduates. Institutions serve students best when the qualifications they gain hold their value over time, including continuing to be valued by employers.

### Safety net

While some providers are continuing to apply 'no detriment' policies or other forms of 'safety net' arrangements established during 2019-20, many providers have decided not to continue those arrangements, or have adjusted them, for the current year. Reasons for this include the fact that it has been possible to plan for delivery during 2020-21 in a way that was not possible when the first lockdown happened in March 2020. This has made it more likely that all elements of courses are able to be delivered and assessed, albeit in a different manner compared to pre-pandemic. There are greater challenges related to practice-orientated

provision and to placements, for which we have produced separate short advice - [Ongoing Implications of the Pandemic for Placements and Practice-Based Courses](#) - to supplement our previous thematic guidance in this area.

## Fulfilling learning outcomes

As in our earlier guidance, we continue to encourage providers to ensure learning outcomes are delivered and assessed. This might involve considering course-level outcomes rather than individual module (or other course component) outcomes. It might also involve rationalising assessment practices such as synoptic assessment where two or more modules are assessed through a single assessment instrument. Further options include making planned adjustments to learning outcomes to account for changes in the mode of delivery and/or assessment or, with their agreement, moving students onto a related course, where this is in their interest, by helping them to progress and/or graduate.

Options for practice-based courses are outlined in our advice - [Ongoing Implications of the Pandemic for Placements and Practice-Based Courses](#) - which builds on our earlier [COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Practice and Lab-based Assessment](#). In brief, the options include enabling students to progress the theoretical elements of the course and potentially carrying out the practice-based elements at a later point - perhaps after graduation. For accredited courses, discussion with the relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) would continue to be required in line with pre-pandemic approaches.

## Supporting student achievement

Safety net or related practices for 2020-21 are less likely to have a focus on pegging student grades against their earlier performance and more likely to take a nuanced look at specific disruption or individual students' circumstances. This will depend on the nature of the 'no detriment' or related policies introduced in 2019-20. It is recognised that some elements of previous policies may still need to be applied for continuing students, for example, where the previous year's performance contributes towards final classification for students due to graduate in 2021.

While all students and staff are likely to be experiencing some form of disruption as a result of the pandemic, it is important that individual circumstances are recognised to ensure students are neither disadvantaged nor advantaged compared to their peers. This means that, although some cohort-wide considerations may need to be taken into account, more of a focus is likely to be placed on how students have been affected individually.

## Options for providers

- Cohort-wide considerations include identifying the nature and impact of any breaks or substantial changes to delivery in modules or across courses. Reports on the impact can then be provided to inform examination boards and institutional committees. Close comparison of student grades in the current year with previous performance for the module/course can help to determine whether any further action would be appropriate, such as rescaling or even adjusting the classification algorithm.
- Allowing greater flexibility around submission of coursework and reassessment opportunities including offering coursework extensions or adaptations and additional assessment attempts. For some providers, this is allowed across cohorts; for others, it may be offered as part of a response to individual mitigating circumstances.

- Increased flexibility in the nature and implementation of policies for mitigating circumstances. Practices include permitting more self-certification to accompany individual claims and broadening the range of circumstances which are eligible for mitigation, such as, taking into account particular issues which may be experienced by students with caring responsibilities or who are key workers. Technology failures may also be given greater consideration for mitigation than in pre-pandemic times.

These are illustrative examples and not an exhaustive list of potential approaches. Providers will continue to determine the practices which are reasonable and proportionate for their students given the particular circumstances of the institution, the nature of delivery and assessment experienced across courses, and the individual students' circumstances.

## What we are doing

As you will have seen from our news feed, on 12 January, we [convened a discussion](#) between the Minister for Universities in England, Michelle Donelan, senior representatives of 17 PSRBs and Universities UK (UUK).

We are continuing to work with PSRBs on behalf of our members to consider how students can be supported in achieving professional standards without compromise to public safety. Along with the Department for Education (DfE), UUK and PSRBs themselves, we are progressing a series of actions aimed at supporting students to complete their accredited awards and move into the workplace.

We are also continuing to work with all of our member providers to support them through guidance, exchange of good practice, and working with key organisations to enable the successful graduation of students without compromise to academic quality and standards. For example, we are developing a short digest of international approaches to remote proctoring in digital assessment, which will precede a fuller paper exploring principles which can underpin providers' considerations of solutions. Research into the outcomes of academic integrity investigations is progressing and will inform guidance for members to be published in the spring.

## Additional resources

QAA has produced and curated a substantial volume of guidance, advice and supporting resources, most of which are available on our [COVID-19 Support and Guidance webpage](#). In addition, we are engaged in a range of activity to support our members, including joint work with the DfE, UUK and PSRBs.

### Particular documents you might find helpful now

[Preserving Quality and Standards Through a Time of Rapid Change](#)

[Ongoing Implications of the Pandemic for Placements and Practice-Based Courses](#)

[How UK Higher Education Providers Managed the Shift to Digital Delivery During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Note: The Annex to this document provides a signpost to a selection of COVID-19 guidance and samples of practice, some of which are available for QAA Members only.

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