

Guidance

Preserving Quality and Standards Through a Time of Rapid Change: UK Higher Education in 2020-21



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Purpose of the document

The emergency pivot to virtual teaching and assessment by higher education providers in March 2020 was necessitated by governments across the UK bringing in lockdown restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with some institutions moving to virtual delivery ahead of formal government announcements. This move to virtual teaching and assessment was done quickly and under extreme pressure, requiring some degree-awarding bodies to enact emergency regulations to cover a range of contingencies to support staff and students through this period. From 23 March, 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.

As providers enacted and formalised a range of emergency regulations and policies focused on progressing and graduating students in the current academic year, so attention has turned to what happens next. This guidance is the result of a series of conversations and dialogue that we have undertaken with over 150 senior colleagues from a broad range of providers across the sector in April–May 2020. Our aim here is to highlight the challenges higher education faces in planning for the next academic year, while also pointing towards possible solutions that providers are already engaged in developing. Through our role as the UK's independent body for assuring quality and standards, we have been able to engage directly with universities, colleges, training providers, mission groups and students to build a picture of what the current planning for next year looks like and what innovative solutions will be required to meet those challenges.

The advice contained within the guidance does not interpret UK regulatory requirements; nor does it go into detail on what the public health authorities in each part of the UK are advocating as routes out of the lockdown, partly as this advice will be changing depending on what part of the UK you are based in, and what the rate of infection might be. What we aim to do is provide strategic approaches that will assist providers in planning for the next academic year, with a particular focus on quality and standards and the student experience. Providers should be aware of the need to interpret the guidance within their own context. Small specialist providers may feel that their particular context or circumstances allows them greater flexibility in many of the issues discussed below. At the same time, larger institutions may have more resources to devote to planning and developing solutions to these challenges – such as specialists in developing virtual learning – that smaller providers may not.

This guidance is divided into three sections: first, a series of principles to guide decision making; second, a more in-depth look at how physical-distancing guidance might affect the student experience, with examples from the sector; and third, the implications for the curriculum and quality processes. The second and third sections give answers to the kind of questions providers may ask of us, or themselves.

A note on terminology

While social distancing is the phrase in most common use in health advice, throughout this guidance we have referred to physical distancing to acknowledge that learning is, at least in part, a social experience and that collaboration and the formation of social learning networks will still be possible, and are very much to be encouraged. We have also preferred to use the term ‘virtual’ or the ‘virtual learning environment (VLE)’ in place of ‘online’, and ‘onsite’ in place of ‘campus’ to reflect that many providers will not necessarily have a typical campus location, and some have more than one.



Section 1: Guiding principles

Given public health advice, government rules on physical distancing and the need to plan for the future, the assumption is that higher education providers will be unable to return to pre-COVID models at the start of the academic year beginning September 2020. As noted in the Thematic 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, while also providing a record of the rationale underpinning that decision-making process that places the interests of students at the heart of decision making. Framing these principles around the institution's values will help to clarify what is important in the decision-making process. This section will set out guiding principles that providers can use to adapt and amend existing processes and ensure that they have the right decision-making systems in place.

Principle 1: That any move to onsite activity is safe and secure for staff and students

Working on the basis that this is first and foremost a public health crisis, providers should ensure that the safety of staff and students is paramount in any strategy that is agreed upon, including any move to physically-distanced learning. Existing obligations under health and safety legislation still apply, but the context has, obviously, significantly changed. The resumption of teaching, learning, assessment and research activity is predicated on the principle that it is safe to do so, especially if onsite provision forms part of that strategy. Following the latest devolved public health guidelines is crucial to maintaining confidence in safety for onsite activity, whether in a classroom, office, studio or research facility. In addition to being institutions of learning, universities, colleges and providers of higher education are also social and communal environments. Providers will need to consider the impact on all of the estate, including halls of residence, dining areas such as canteen or cafés, bars and sports facilities, and discuss any requirements in conjunction with relevant bodies such as student unions.

There may be geographical differences where some providers are able to open facilities under public health regulations sooner than others; providers that are rural, based outside of large population densities, or in infection 'cold spots' may fall into this category. Providers will also be identifying and prioritising facilities for student learning outside of class or studio space. Other decision making will focus on types of activity, such as studio, laboratory-based subjects or those involving fieldwork, and whether these can still be delivered with physical distancing in place. Regardless of how the return to physical provision in autumn 2020 is managed, providers should not be competing for students on the basis of the safety of their learning environment. Arrangements will also vary from country to country for validated, franchised or other sub-contracted provision delivered internationally.

Principle 2: That degree-awarding bodies maintain quality and standards in the move to flexible provision

While most, if not all providers, will need to deliver courses and modules through a mixed mode of delivery, with some virtual and (where practicable and safe) onsite teaching, degree-awarding bodies will need to assure themselves that the awards that result from this learning are secure and meet the Expectations of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code). The Quality Code is based on outcomes and offers considerable freedom to providers to adapt their approaches while securing academic standards through appropriate assessment. Consideration should also be given to partnership arrangements where the degree-awarding body has validated, franchised or other sub-contracted provision delivered elsewhere, with clear expectations and guidance given to the partner provider so they can also plan and prepare for delivery of mixed or blended provision.

Principle 3: That providers engage with students and staff in planning changes to delivery and assessment of teaching and learning

In previous guidance, we emphasised the need for providers to engage with student representatives when planning to move teaching and assessment to virtual platforms. Given how quickly the change to virtual provision needed to be made in March 2020, this engagement may not always have been possible. We also recognise the challenges in engaging students given the time of year. However, as providers develop steering groups and strategies for the next academic year, by including student bodies or representative groups in planning will ensure that those voices and positions are accounted for and that decision making is taken with the student interest at its core. It is important that both prospective and current students feel they can make informed choices about their educational experience as it changes from what they expect or have experienced. Examples from providers include students attending senate meetings, committees and steering groups that are planning for the next academic year. Seeking input from academic, professional, technical and support staff will also support the planning and delivery processes. Consideration will also need to be made of the impact of any decisions on students with protected characteristics, who may have caring responsibilities or have disabilities. Providers should look at how equality and diversity impact statements can be used to ensure that any changes do not unduly create barriers to achievement.

Principle 4: That provider planning scenarios are flexible and responsive to students' needs

Given the current uncertainty of what the autumn term will mean for lockdown restrictions, providers are having to plan for a range of different contingencies, detailed in sections 2 and 3 of this guidance. Designing different responses to potential scenarios, with detailed plans as to how to carry them out, will ensure a measure of flexibility that can mitigate risk and offer students confidence that their interests are protected. It may also be useful to view this as a sector problem that can only be solved by greater collaboration and working in partnership with each other, with suggestions that providers could share facilities such as libraries and other learning resources for students who are unable to commute or reside at their chosen institution. Changes to delivery modes and new ways of interacting between staff and students also need to take in strategic plans beyond the next academic year - what might the move to blended pedagogy mean for higher education over the next 10 years? For example, we understand that some professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are proposing that accredited providers prepare an interactive practical/laboratory session, to share with everyone else in the sector.



Section 2: What will physical distancing mean for staff and students?

Planning the return to onsite provision

There are many variables at play when providers frame their responses to the pandemic and, in particular, their planned return to teaching. These variables interact in complex ways and are, themselves, operating in a context of uncertainty, determined by evolving medical and regulatory advice as the pandemic follows its course. Many providers have established a COVID-19 steering group (alternative titles include ‘management group’, ‘task force’ and ‘nerve centre’) to drive plans for the return to onsite provision. Providers taking this step have generally also determined a set of principles, similar to those described in section 1, to guide the steering group as it seeks to manage competing priorities amid the uncertainties of moving towards the ‘new normal’.

Do we need a steering group?

While providers’ management structures typically devolve responsibilities to departments, schools, faculties, research centres and support services, there is general agreement that decisions about responding to an incident as major as a pandemic – planning how and when to return and deciding what to do in the meantime – need to be taken at an institutional level both to manage complexity and for reasons of consistency and control.

Typically, therefore, these steering groups have both a representative and executive function, reaching down into faculties and support services and reporting up to the Vice-Chancellor’s or another executive group. Some providers ascribe particular importance to the representative function which they see as the best guarantor of impartial decision making internally, while others see value in externality by taking bearings beyond institutional walls, being alert to the behaviour of other providers, and using the connectedness of the higher education sector to best effect. As noted in principle 3, membership of the steering group should include representatives of the student body.

The steering group also has a crucial role to play in achieving consistency and control in the area of communications. Given advice from higher education regulatory bodies, [the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education](#) and the [Competition and Markets Authority](#), the accuracy of information sent to applicants, offer-holders and returning students about when and on what basis teaching will commence, is an absolute priority so it is advisable for communications to be authorised by the steering group and not left to schools, faculties or departments, unless by specific agreement.

Small, specialist institutions may feel that their faculty population is too small to warrant a formal steering group but should nonetheless consider all the above described functions (representative, executive and communication) in their planning. Steering groups are generally guided by a set of principles such as those outlined in section 1, which align with the institution’s values and aid decision making.

What's the purpose of scenario planning?

Scenarios can be planned in different ways and in different order, and they have to do with strategic decisions, rather than with operational matters. Most providers are considering a range of contingencies and developing scenarios involving the shape and start date of the 2020–21 academic year, the interdependent issues of models of attendance and modes of learning and teaching, and the challenge of physical distancing. The latter of course features heavily in planning an eventual staged return and is itself subject to the uncertainty of any further tightening and relaxation of lockdown restrictions.

When should the academic year start?

It is worth noting that in a normal year there would be a considerable spread of start dates across UK providers, ranging from early September to early October. Initially, there seemed to be some interest among providers for a 'wait and see' approach to deciding the start date for the next academic year, with the option of short deferrals if required, or staggered starts. Providers who already have multiple start points for home and/or international students typically in September, January and April – took a degree of confidence from flexibility they already possessed. However, more recently an increasing number of providers have stated their intention to adhere to their usual start days for the academic year.

A range of factors may have contributed to this, including the profile of a provider's student body or its normal delivery modes. There may also be other reasons such as the potential complexity of managing staggered starts, and the fact that the standard academic year already provides opportunities to change the order in which modules are taken (where pre and co-requisites can be accommodated or revised) so that in principle, laboratory and studio-intensive modules can be moved to later in the academic year when physical distancing may have eased. Or it may simply be that an increasing number of providers have judged that their quality assurance, and teaching and learning functions would be able to approve courses and modules for virtual delivery, wholly or in part, by the autumn so that there would always be a fallback position if the return was delayed.

What are the main models of attendance?

Models of attendance are closely bound with the approach providers elect to take in relation to learning and teaching, as well as capacity in residence for those offering a residential experience. Equally, providers with substantial numbers of commuter students are conscious of the impact of public transport restrictions. Globally, as well as from the UK perspective, providers are planning for three main scenarios linking the two during the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, these are:

Scenario 1: 100% virtual in some form, with zero attendance

Scenario 2: part-virtual, part-physical attendance, known variously as 'mixed-mode' or 'blended'

Scenario 3: 100% physical attendance.

Most providers take the view that Scenario 3 is the most unlikely since it assumes an end to physical distancing and in effect a return to near-normal. Scenario 1 may initially have been the most likely scenario for many providers, perhaps for the first term or semester in the hope that Scenario 2 would become possible after the New Year break, and it remains a vital fallback position if a staged student return is not possible in autumn, or if it is but a subsequent COVID-19 spike requires withdrawal. At the time of writing, Scenario 1 has the disadvantage of apparently being the least favoured scenario among applicants, with recent straw poll surveys suggesting that the deferral rate of this year's applicants to higher education is likely to increase if providers opt for virtual-only delivery. Applicants are still committed to an onsite experience of some kind, though this may of course change if the progress of the pandemic makes Scenario 1 the only safe option.

Through our conversations with the sector, we believe that most providers will be offering some form of Scenario 2, with the ability to scale up or down on the element of physical presence onsite versus virtual delivery. It seems that large lectures will, for the foreseeable future, be delivered primarily virtually and all other teaching and learning will be managed onsite in some degree.

How will physical distancing affect the return to onsite provision?

Some return to onsite provision should be possible in autumn 2020, such as that proposed in the Scottish Government's route map for moving out of lockdown, provided that UK-wide lockdown is not in operation and travel is possible. However, occupancy will be significantly reduced, hence the interest in phased returns, staggered starts and making better use of facilities' downtime. The impact of physical distancing on occupancy seems to vary from provider to provider, perhaps because of size and subject mix, the nature of the estate and the variations in the formulae used to calculate it, and may change in the future due to governments' physical-distancing advice, but early sector-wide studies suggest that incorporating an approved physical-distancing requirement per student reduces **useable** capacity to 10-20% of **actual** space.

While some providers may not be affected to this extent, the reduction in available space applies equally to general resources such as lecture theatres, libraries, computer rooms and social spaces, and to specialist facilities such as science laboratories, language laboratories, art and design studios, and music and performing arts studios. All these facilities could continue to be used with small groups, but might require the introduction of, for example, wearing personal protective equipment, perspex screens, signage, floor marking and controlled movement. Healthcare and medical courses will provide particular challenges.

The very substantial reduction in onsite teaching and learning capacity caused by physical distancing introduces another variable into Scenario 2 and 3 – the two models involving teaching. If, for example, timetabling normally allocates around 20 students to each seminar group and places each group in a room with a capacity of 25 students, then the introduction of physical-distancing requirements would require the creation of 3-4 additional seminar groups where previously there was one, which would have a significant staffing implication for providers. This could potentially be balanced by the conversion of large onsite lectures to virtual lectures, freeing up larger lecture rooms for face-to-face activities such as tutorials and seminars to take place as planned. The timetable might also need to incorporate ‘buffers’ to avoid queues building up one-way corridors and to enable one class to vacate a room fully and disperse before another class arrives outside, as well as factoring in the possibility of each teaching room and equipment needing cleaning between sessions.

Some providers are modelling the extent to which the loss of useable space can be compensated, at least in part, by increasing the intensity of its use. It may be useful to model whether relatively simple measures such as changing or moving furniture can increase the capacity of some learning spaces, then extend the modelling to include lengthening the working day for timetabling purposes to permit the scheduling of more seminars and other taught classes. Large providers are also looking at more complex approaches to smoothing the number of students who are present onsite at any one time by, for example, staggering the academic year.

Planning the return to onsite activity for staff and students

How should the return of onsite activity be managed if physical-distancing restrictions are still in force? Many providers are working on a staged return for staff initially, followed by students at a later date. With regard to non-academic staff, decisions will be taken about which services are to be available onsite, which categories of staff are needed to provide them, and whether staff rotas should be introduced to comply with physical distancing. Some categories of administrative and support services staff may be able to continue working from home, thereby keeping the number of returners low in the earliest stages of reoccupation. Academic staff might continue working from home for those parts of their teaching suitable for virtual delivery, only returning for types of teaching requiring the use of specialised equipment or entailing very specific types of engagement with students.

With regard to students, steering groups will need to determine the order in which return is to take place. One approach might be to identify and prioritise for an early return those students who would be most disadvantaged by virtual learning. This could include students on practice-based courses and courses requiring specialised equipment or learning spaces which are only available onsite, but the order of return will vary legitimately from provider to provider.

Planning will also need to take into account the needs of vulnerable staff and students, who may need to continue to work or study from home. However, providers also need to acknowledge the mental, physical and financial costs to staff and students of continued working/studying from home - this model is widely seen as a positive, but it is not necessarily so for everyone. Rotas for being on campus need to be about wellbeing as well as access to facilities/sessions.



Section 3: How will changes to planning and delivery for 2020-21 affect quality and standards?

This section is intended to apply to all providers, but small specialist providers may want to adapt this guidance as is appropriate to their particular situation.

What strategic approaches should we adopt for next year?

As outlined in section 2, providers are rethinking the design of curricula alongside how their spaces are utilised in the upcoming academic year, to take account of current physical distancing advice. It will be wise to plan for any possible spikes or further waves of infections and lockdown restrictions – local as well as national – which may be reimposed in response. Curricula and assessment approaches may have to change not just in preparation for, but also during, the upcoming academic year – and be flexible enough to respond to a changing context.

Providers should aim to develop strategies for different teaching models that are designed to mitigate risk and also ensure that the student experience remains meaningful, with satisfaction of learning outcomes at the forefront of any redesigned methods. As discussed in section 2, we recommend that providers set up steering groups (or similar) and tasking them to evaluate how learning outcomes can be assessed through these different models. The disruption to tried and tested pedagogical models has led to bold steps in reappraising teaching and learning environments, such as remotely operating engineering equipment in an offsite lab through a browser, or developing virtual overseas placements. Other providers have used this crisis to accelerate strategic change that was already in the planning stages pre COVID-19, from updating algorithms to modularising year-long learning blocks.

As with models of attendance, curriculum planning needs to take account of a range of factors, as well as the public health requirements in operation at any given time. For example, it may be the case that UK students may be able to start some face-to-face activities in September; international students may not be able to do so due to quarantining requirements. Providers may need to consider whether or not to recruit international students onto courses which only traditionally recruit in small numbers. This may also mean that for courses that recruit large numbers of international students, a delayed start may make more sense.

With flexibility as the underpinning aim, a potential starting point in strategic planning is establishing what is possible. Consider the extent to which providers can use ‘normal’ assessment processes and regulations, and ‘emergency’ regulations that were developed in the short-term to deal with the crisis as it emerged this year. Listen to what academic staff, examination boards, exam administrators, externals and, crucially, students think about the assessment approaches adopted for this semester, and work this feedback into future planning.

Providers are considering their specific remote assessment strategies or policies, and some already have discrete documents; consider developing them if you do not have them or they are not articulated in existing teaching, learning and assessments strategies. Examples of such strategies we have seen, set out in a clear manner what qualifies as distance assessment and what does not. These remote assessment strategies can then be used to assess whether the provider is well placed to cope with ongoing disruption, such as future lockdowns, or staff and students being asked to self-isolate for 14 days through track and trace. In England, the Office for Students have advised providers to consider students with particular barriers, to engage with an alternative approach to teaching or assessment, such as lack of access to digital resources, or specific learning difficulties, so this could also be included.

Hybrid, dual or blended?

Providers are considering a range of pedagogical methods to take account of the changes in interaction between students and lecturers. Multiple terms are in use to explain these methods, and we are undertaking research to better define them, and how they may impact on the existing understanding of terms like ‘contact hours’. These approaches are often referred to as either a ‘blended’ approach, usually defined as a combination of virtual and onsite learning; a ‘hybrid’ approach, where the student has more agency in defining what mode works best for them; and ‘dual’ learning, where the two modes of delivery are offered in parallel and students can move between them as needed.

The ‘blended’ model can operate in either synchronous or asynchronous modes, where teaching can be delivered to groups of students in ‘real time’ or be recorded or documented on a VLE for students to access in their own time. Approaches will differ on a course-by-course basis, factoring in the amount of practical work needed.

Contingencies allowing students to alternate between onsite or virtual learning, dependent on public health guidelines, are also being factored into planning, as detailed in section 2 of this guidance.

Providers may wish to remodel curriculum delivery in concert with resource and space allocation, as reducing class size and density of numbers for teaching will affect both timetabling and staffing. Providers are considering a range of options to deliver ‘blended’ provision within physical-distancing guidelines, including using remote demonstrations for laboratory work, extending opening times for specialist facilities such as studios, allowing students requiring complex software to access remote servers from home and investing in more digital resources such as e-books. Any switch to these blended models will also require a gap analysis of needs so that any issues for students accessing VLE or software can be addressed at an early stage.

Regulations, processes and policies for assuring quality and standards

Institutional policies and procedures that assure quality and standards will need to be reviewed to ensure that they are sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes in circumstances that will occur over the next year, and possibly beyond. For some providers, temporary arrangements for alternative assessments (for example, to replace exams) will remain in 2020–21, and regulations will need to reflect those arrangements. Providers have moved quickly to deliver teaching and learning virtually, ensuring that lecture/seminar/tutorial materials were available through a VLE and that students could virtually attend sessions. They have also had to assure the quality of the move to virtual delivery, often implementing ‘emergency’ or ‘exceptional’ academic regulations to do so. The challenge providers are now facing is how to ensure that those regulations are not a barrier to making reasonable changes while ensuring that quality is not adversely affected.

Considering the principles when assuring quality and standards

During this period, providers have developed sets of clear principles as they rapidly adapt their provision to the world in which we find ourselves. Our suggested principles in section 1 can equally apply to the quality processes providers use to amend and approve changes to course content and teaching provision.

Any quality processes required to make decisions about changes to provision needs to be flexible enough to be undertaken virtually as well as physically. Consider quoracy requirements, the availability of key decision makers, and suitable substitutes. Think about how student and staff views can be safely and quickly gathered, in lieu of traditional engagement methods.

Make sure that any processes facilitate decision making, and do not block changes that are proportionate and flexible enough to meet the challenges for 2020–21. Key decision-making teams (such as steering groups) meeting more regularly than normal decision-making bodies, can take responsibility for ensuring that quality and standards are being assured while changes are being implemented.

What does a proportionate way to assure quality and standards look like?

Pre-2020, most changes made to a programme or module/unit of study could typically go through multiple levels of approval (for example, programme, department/school, quality assurance team, institution, sign-off by responsible officer). This approach ensures the avoidance of as much risk as possible, at the point of approval, by involving the broadest possible range of people at each stage in the process, and by providing significant time for consideration of proposed changes. This, in turn, ensures consistency in decision making and significantly reduces the risk that any change made would negatively impact on quality and standards. In the current circumstances, this multi-layered approach to initial decision making may no longer be fit-for-purpose.

Providers may now need to accept a greater degree of risk in their initial decision making and focus on identifying and mitigating that risk over time, rather than writing it out at the approval stage. To do this, providers may consider if the number of people (and the number of approval points in a quality assurance process) are appropriate. It is arguable that the right mix of fewer people could make these decisions in a consistent, low risk way. For example, if several courses are undergoing the same, or similar, changes a provider could reasonably judge the risk to be quite low (at the initial decision-making stage) if they chose to consider the changes together, rather than individually.

No matter how flexible the quality assurance process is, clear records of decision making need to be kept, helping providers implement new ways of managing risk. A flexible approach to dealing with risk needs appropriate documentation to ensure that where risks have been identified, they have been discussed; clear decisions on how to deal with that risk are made; and that mitigations against the risk are undertaken. Where providers accept a greater degree of risk at the decision-making stage, they need to be confident that the mitigations over time will be implemented and, when appropriate, further decisions taken. This will then help providers to ensure that the overall risk to the student's ability to achieve the relevant outcomes changes little, despite the potentially considerable changes made to the way providers manage that risk.

Good records may also help providers if any missteps are made while implementing different ways of managing risk. It should allow providers the opportunity to review and revise those decisions which did not achieve the aim of minimising the risk of students not being able to reach the appropriate outcomes.

Even working at volume or pace, it is important for providers to gain external viewpoints on changes. However, given the circumstances, providers should consider ways of gaining these views safely and proportionately. It may be appropriate to extend the period of appointment for external examiners to limit the need to spend time training new recruits, to provide continuity and familiarity with existing courses and strategies, and to consider changes that courses may be facing within those contexts. Providers could consider asking external experts to consider a number of changes at the same time, where those changes are similar and/or replicated across a number of courses. Providers may also seek to engage students' unions or other representative bodies to act as the student 'voice' when considering changes, in lieu of being able to invite individuals to comment.

What risks should be considered when considering change?

A proportionate system of approving changes that is flexible enough to deal with a wide variety of risks can ensure that, where decisions are judged to be low risk, they can be taken quickly and efficiently. It follows that where risks are judged to be higher, more time is provided in the process to consider the decision including identifying and instigating monitoring processes for any risks that cannot be eliminated. Often providers have used terms such as 'major' or 'minor' to identify how change is considered through the relevant regulations and processes. To ensure that the processes are flexible enough, providers might need to adopt a more nuanced approach given the types and volumes of change that they may need to implement.

Providers may need to consider change on the basis of priority as well the degree of change involved. By doing this, providers may be in a position to more easily make decisions about the risk posed by 'groups' of changes (for example, urgent, modest changes versus non-urgent, significant changes) enabling a significant volume of changes to be dealt with consistently and proportionately.

The main risk providers may take into consideration, when changes are being approved, is how the Quality Code continues to be met to ensure that students can achieve the outcomes set for them. As highlighted above, the Quality Code is based on student outcomes and offers considerable freedom to providers to adapt their approaches while securing academic standards. The Quality Code is designed to guide providers in delivering a standard of education which ensures that their students can meet the relevant learning outcomes and then demonstrate they meet those outcomes through appropriate assessment.

How will virtual or blended assessment models impact on quality and standards?

Focus on learning outcomes

To maintain standards, expediency should not triumph over rigour. Parity, between virtual and onsite assessment approaches, is crucial. A focus on learning outcomes can help to ensure that virtual-mode students get an equal experience to previous cohorts, and that which they would otherwise have had, and standards continue to be maintained.

Providers may need to look afresh at existing course-level learning outcomes and how they are met. Our earlier guidance suggests a heightened focus on course-level outcomes over traditional metrics like credit volume. Some learning outcomes can sometimes be better suited to virtual assessment than providers might have previously thought, and it may even help to remove assessing course outcomes repeatedly via different modules.

Much within assessment will depend on whether course learning outcomes are changed for the upcoming year. If learning outcomes are not affected, light-touch changes to assessments may be appropriate. However, if the learning outcomes are affected, then providers will need to think more deeply about how assessment is managed.

It may help to ask some basic questions. Where will students be? Will placements be able to operate, domestically or overseas? Where deferrals have been unavoidable this year, will those 'additional' students impact on assessment capability next year? In terms of location and placements, we have recently issued guidance on [domestic placements](#) and [international placements](#), which may help to inform considerations of satisfying learning outcomes where such placements may not be available.

In terms of timing, providers are considering whether assessments can be staggered throughout the year. This will have advantages and may mitigate against unpredictable restrictions in future, but this should be balanced against the students' exit velocity and the final year's ultimate purpose as a culmination of a multi-year learning experience for those students completing in 2020-21.

Rethinking assessment approaches

Providers might want to look at this situation as disruptive change – an opportunity to fully rethink assessment – once the recent emergency alterations are dealt with. The volume of assessment may be pared-back, and synoptic assessment, combining two or more modules of study into a single assessment, may be considered. It will be up to providers to determine the extent to which fundamental rethinking of assessment is feasible in the time between now and when amendments to 2020–21 provision need to be approved. While students and institutions alike have had to adjust to a quick move to virtual provision, there may be value in retaining a blended or flexible approach to assessment beyond the short term.

Academic integrity

There has been a lot of attention paid to how a move to offsite, ‘open book’ exams could expose courses to cheating, impersonation and may bring providers into conflict with PSRB requirements. Through our work on contract cheating, we have tried to stress the importance of strategic, provider-level approaches to cheating; learning from, rather than relying on, local disciplinary or school-level approaches. We stress that again now. In our earlier [COVID-19 guidance on academic standards](#), we recommended that providers should enter into dialogue with PSRBs to allay their concerns and adjust assessment approaches to ensure greater security. Providers have reported some intransigence over certain models of assessments they see as more valid or secure, but also many have worked closely with providers and supported them in their efforts.

There are authentication approaches providers can consider, including remotely-supervised activities, password-protected or voice-recognition software, online or telephone questioning, or third-party verification (employers).

Performance-based and practical courses

One of the challenges providers faced when moving to virtual assessment in March 2020 was assessing creative and practice-based subjects, when assessment would take the form of live performance or 3-D models and artefacts. Providers may want to consider replacing performance assessments with written assignments, if course learning outcomes can be satisfied through this alternative method. But this will not be the case universally. QAA’s guidance on [assessing practice and laboratory-based assessments](#) offers examples of how alternative arrangements may work. This may include recorded performances, photographing art pieces, and remotely-operated laboratory equipment. Onsite solutions, with strict physical distancing and hygiene precautions, may still be possible.

Access to virtual assessments

Where learning outcomes cannot be assessed by blended methods for access reasons, providers may wish to consider lending out laptops or providing access to hardship funds, and coordinating with local authorities to identify digital poverty gaps. It may be possible to prepare banks of computers for students. The starting point should be asking prospective students what they need.

For some courses – games design or engineering for example – there will be issues around the processing and graphics capability of student-owned hardware, and the capacity to run industry-standard software. Remote access to provider's servers or software via browsers may be feasible solutions. As mentioned earlier, at least one provider has developed applications where students offsite can control engineering equipment in a laboratory setting via their browsers.

However, there is more at play than digital poverty; there are geographic issues around quality broadband access which loans may not be able to address. Transitional courses to upskill students in technology and virtual assessment methods may be needed.



References and further resources

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Improving the Student Experience in Higher Education (ItSE) proposal and support materials for a staggered start: www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/essential-information/useful-resources

Anewspring, guide to blended learning for training: www.anewspring.com/solutions/learning-methods/blended-learning

Jisc, Developing blended learning content approaches guidance: www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/creating-blended-learning-content

McKinsey & Company, Coronavirus and the campus: How can US higher education organize to respond? www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/coronavirus-and-the-campus-how-can-us-higher-education-organize-to-respond

Education Space Consultancy:

- The impact of social distancing on teaching delivery
<https://educationspaceconsultancy.com/the-impact-of-social-distancing-on-teaching-delivery>
- The impact of social distancing on Student Contact Hours
<https://educationspaceconsultancy.com/the-impact-of-social-distancing-on-student-onsite-contact-hours>
- Planning a Safe Return to the Workplace
<https://educationspaceconsultancy.com/planning-a-safe-return-to-the-workplace>

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