

Introduction

We are now well-practiced in saying that COVID-19 brought unparalleled changes to the higher education sector. However, one aspect of a year-long crisis is that we are currently better prepared than ever to make rapid adjustments to the way students are taught and assessed. As we emerge from lockdown, but with considerable uncertainty remaining, this document combines forward-looking advice with overviews of previous materials to look at some of the distinct issues the professions face when it comes to educating and developing their newest generations. It has been compiled from the [broad range of guidance](#) we have offered to higher education providers over the last 14 months and is relevant to the academic year 2021-22 and beyond.

The higher education sector was not alone in making immediate and fundamental changes to the ways in which its services were delivered; training in, and for, the workplace also faced unique challenges. Emergency adjustments to learning and assessment approaches attempted to give some measure of continuity for students, at the same time as maintaining the high standards of new professionals entering industries. Innovation had to walk hand-in-hand with pragmatism.

Now, as we move from one academic year into the next, governments across the UK are easing lockdown restrictions and providers have been permitted to bring their students back on campus. Providers are running events to welcome learners back into the onsite higher education experience, and are thinking carefully about how to continue to support students through this adjustment. COVID-19 restrictions still apply, however, and governments continue to monitor the impact of the virus. A full return to pre-pandemic modes of delivering teaching and assessing learning cannot be assumed. It is also the case that the sector has learned much from the experience of greater digital delivery and there will be practices from the lockdown period that providers will wish to embed in their future learning, teaching and assessment strategies.

A word on terminology

Academic standards were, and continue to be, a key focus for providers throughout the pandemic disruptions. Providers remain committed to securing these standards, and have worked extremely hard to do so. It may help professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to be aware of some of the distinctions around terminology as 'standards' are often used in different ways in the higher education sphere.

'Academic standards' are set by providers using national reference points, such as the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#), the threshold standards within the [Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications](#), and relevant [Subject Benchmark Statements](#). Degree-awarding bodies are always responsible for the academic standards of their courses.

'Threshold academic standards' are the knowledge, skills and attributes that students need to demonstrate in order to graduate from a course.

Professional standards, set by PSRBs, focus on the particular competences required for registration. Many of those competences, if not all, are assessed through higher education courses and may be nested within a course's threshold academic standards which allows this to happen.

Academic standards

Forward-looking advice

There would have been disruptions to graduation for accredited courses without considerable flexibility on the part of the higher education providers (HEPs) and PSRBs, given the challenges with ensuring students could have enough practical skills-related experience during lockdown. The need for this flexibility may be diminishing as the lockdown eases, but PSRBs should remain aware of the sector's approaches to reopening. Some continued agility around approaches to securing standards may yet be required.

Providers continue to be cautious around managing student returns to campuses and are required to follow government advice, which is subject to change at short notice. This means providers may continue to offer some activity digitally, such as assessments, given that exam schedules were set some time ago. Identifying learning outcomes and aligning assessment with them will continue to be one of the main ways HEPs assure themselves that the academic standards of courses are maintained.

Overview of previous guidance to HEPs on standards

In our [thematic guidance on academic standards](#) (April 2020), we looked at how providers could work with PSRBs to address the implications of external requirements for teaching, learning and assessment.

During the pandemic, and as the situation changed, higher education providers have been keeping abreast of the latest positions in relation to COVID-19 restrictions and accreditation requirements. We encouraged them to explore assessment formats with their accrediting PSRBs where they were concerned about whether particular skills or competences could be accurately assessed online. We also reiterated the importance of recording and approving any changes to assessment approaches so that there would be future accountability to the PSRB and within the institution.

In January 2021, the higher education regulator for England - the Office for Students - wrote to providers to say that [lockdown should not lead to lost learning](#). They suggested that providers should consider offering extra lectures or moving course content later in the year. The actions the regulator asked providers to take included a self-review of their compliance with consumer protection law; the intention being to ensure undergraduate and postgraduate students received the teaching and assessment they were promised.

We recognised that some PSRBs were concerned at the impact that 'safety net' or 'no detriment' policies might have on academic standards. These policies aimed to ensure that students' final grades were not adversely affected due to the pandemic. Although 'no detriment' policies differed from provider to provider, we found some [common features](#) in a number of these policies. While there was considerable flexibility around the ways that learning outcomes could be met, providers were able to satisfy themselves that academic standards continued to be secured. Many of these policies are due to expire at the end of the academic year 2020-21, and while we are not aware of any plans to reinstate them, the

implications of having had 'no detriment' policies last year will continue until those students graduate.

Example

The University of Law revised its [No Detriment Policy](#) in March 2021 in light of the continued disruption that COVID-19 was having on assessment. The policy, which required all students to achieve the minimum pass mark required for each assessment in order to pass a module, operated two algorithms to ensure the final average mark was as fair to the individual as possible.

The major change in March, was the extension of the period for which the policy was in place - the remainder of the 2020-21 academic year, after which time the University would begin a phased return to normal working practices. This applied to all assessments sat up to and including 31 July 2021. They are also allowing students to opt-in to regularly timetabled online classes until 30 August 2021.

Work-based learning and contingency planning for placements

Forward-looking advice

We recommend that PSRBs should have a plan or strategy to cater for future disruptions to placements and assessments if a third wave occurs, and accompanying lockdown restrictions once again become necessary, whether national or local. This may only involve providers notifying you of changes rather than seeking approval under accreditation agreements, but it will be good practice to clarify with the appropriate contact(s) at the provider what they need to tell you and when. The key elements are flexibility, and ensuring higher education providers are clear about your expectations of them.

We encourage providers and PSRBs to work closely together to reach agreement around any adjustments that the current changing context might require. You will want to work with your providers to respond to developments as they happen, and it is also good practice to have a strategy in place to cater for any new lockdown restrictions or any backlogs in placement opportunities that may have occurred due to deferrals earlier in the academic year.

A focus on meeting learning outcomes has been helpful for higher education providers in demonstrating the security of academic standards. A similar approach may be helpful in relation to meeting professional competencies, rather than concentrating on the amount of time students are able to spend in particular environments.

Changes must not present people who already need specific support - such as reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities - with additional challenges. So, some form of risk assessment which considers issues like this in concert with national COVID-19 safety information, may be needed.

Overview of previous guidance to HEPs on work-based learning and placements

We highlighted some of the key challenges in this area in [Ongoing Implications for the Pandemic for Placements and Practice-Based Courses, including Field Work](#) (first published January 2021, updated April 2021) and offered some practical examples in [Contingency](#)

[Planning for Placement Provision: Case Studies \(May 2020\)](#). We also supported HEPs when [reaching decisions about whether placements could continue](#) (June 2020). We advised providers that credit weightings and scheduled learning hours could be adjusted for placements that could not go ahead. This was, however, on the proviso that the focus shifted to demonstration of meeting the learning outcomes of the module through alternative activity, such as enhanced virtual learning opportunities and/or skills acquisition.

In some cases, providers reviewed course-level learning outcomes to see if they could be amended without compromising the integrity of the award. Deferring placements was also being considered, but we recognised that deferrals may have resulted in backlogs, impacting future availability of placements.

We advised shifting the focus away from the volume of completed learning hours towards assessment and a demonstration of learning and competency. We also suggested portfolio placements where students complete between five and 10 short placements across the academic year, each with its own discrete assessment, rather than one long, extended placement. Volunteering for a charity or helping within the community were also options, provided the students were safe and the experience was fully supported by the host organisation.

Several HEPs worked with placement providers to establish virtual projects in 2020-21, establishing virtual community placement working groups with local employers, and making use of third-party platforms that provide digital mentoring and link employers with students.

We highlighted that the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) offers the freedom to adapt approaches while securing standards. In our [Work-based Learning Thematic Guidance](#) (April 2020), we encouraged providers to establish their own principles to support planning and facilitate consistent decision-making. We also gathered examples of [good practice in digital pedagogy](#) (March 2021).

Throughout our COVID-19 guidance, we stressed the vital need to communicate clearly with, and support, students.

Examples

The [latest guidance](#) from the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education, covers the return to initial teacher education placements in 2021, examining issues like testing, permissions for crossing local authority borders where placements are in a school in a different authority to where the student lives, and the proportion of remote teaching that can count for students at different stages of their programmes.

The British Acupuncture Accreditation Board (BAAB) [notified their students](#) that, while the COVID-19 disruptions continue, course providers can change arrangements for teaching, assessment and other aspects provided that the basic standards for accreditation are met. This took into account the impossibility of completing the required 400 clinical hours by the expected date of graduation. They agreed, exceptionally, that graduating students who have completed all other course requirements may be granted provisional registration for four months following graduation with conditions, including completing the full 400 hours during this period.

Options for practice and lab-based work

In [Ongoing Implications for the Pandemic for Placements and Practice-Based Courses, including Field Work](#) (first published January 2021, updated April 2021) we described the option of separating the elements that relate primarily to PSRB recognition from those of the academic award, prioritising the latter for graduation and enabling a subsequent opportunity to achieve PSRB recognition. We explored the factors affecting the flexibility a PSRB can apply - mainly public safety - and the difference between graduating into a field where the individual's skills and knowledge continue to be tested after initial qualification, and those professions where the degree is the main access point to a profession with limited further supervision post-admission.

Apprenticeships

We have published guidance which looked at some of the challenges of [COVID-19 for providers of higher education in apprenticeships](#). Many of the issues affecting placements also applied to apprenticeships. At the height of the pandemic, providers reflected on their ability to adapt their teaching/training, the capacity of the employer to continue to provide an appropriate setting for work-based learning, and the extent to which the requirements of the apprenticeship could continue to be delivered.

Assessment

Forward-looking advice

Providers are now, gradually, able to move back to onsite assessment approaches, although we are aware HEPs are continuing to conduct some assessments online. If there are further disruptions due to the pandemic, such as further lockdowns, students will need to be consulted about any changes to assessment, and this may also involve PSRBs. Emergency processes for this consultation, as well as internal approval, should be familiar to HEPs if they are needed again.

The lines of communication between PSRBs and HEPs may be well developed, particularly after the last year, but you should be prepared to move quickly once again.

Across the UK, some students in certain key subjects have been able to return to timetabled onsite activities, usually on a phased basis. Many students were engaged in timetabled online exams/assessments when the lockdown restrictions were eased in May. The operation of HEPs is a devolved matter so different nation-by-nation restrictions have been in place, and have been easing in slightly different ways too.

In England, the Government has told providers they can resume in-person teaching and learning from 17 May 2021 for all the remaining students who had not returned at that point. In Scotland, HEPs were allowed to operate under a restricted blended learning model from 17 May, and a full blended learning model is allowed from 7 June. Normal return to campus depends on where the HEP is, as local restrictions are in force. In Northern Ireland, online delivery is still in place for their HEPs with a return to full onsite delivery planned for the academic year 2021-22. All students studying in Wales were permitted to return to campus to access blended learning from 12 April.

Even without a pandemic to drive changes, many of the approaches in remote learning and digital assessment are likely to continue into a post-COVID-19 world, as they have demonstrated their value, reliability and utility. We will be supporting the sector in further embedding the best of these new digital and blended delivery methods, and

helping them consider the most appropriate approaches to securing the integrity of digital assessments. Some guidance for QAA Members has already been published, on [assessing with integrity in digital delivery](#) and [online proctoring](#).

In upcoming QAA advice - the latest of three pieces for member institutions on digital security - we will further explore identity verification (or 'authentication'), remote invigilation, and restricted browser-based tests. Our advice to providers, and to PSRBs, is to consider very carefully the need for such approaches, given some of the well-publicised risks to students some of these solutions pose. For instance, artificial intelligence-based authentication and invigilation has been found in some cases to cause problems for students of colour, therefore posing a risk of unlawful discrimination. We also advise that alternative assessment approaches can be explored instead. A strong focus on student wellbeing and support needs to go hand-in-hand with digital assessment generally, and in particular when enhancing security measures.

Overview of previous guidance to HEPs on assessment

We have produced a number of pieces of guidance on [securing academic standards when moving to online provision and assessment](#), as well as [guidance for practice and lab-based assessment](#) - which concentrates on practice-based courses in the creative and performing arts. This guidance was also relevant to practical work in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects which require the use of specific facilities such as laboratories, clinical settings or simulators.

We emphasised that, where possible, providers should consult with student representatives when considering changes to course learning outcomes, alternative assessments and other material changes to the student's learning, teaching and assessment experience.

We suggested alternative forms of assessment, such as video recordings, sound files, online portfolios and written assessments - for example, essays, reflective blogs and production folders. Accessibility by home-working students (who often only have access to basic technology like a smartphone or tablet) was crucial, and as HEP staff marking them were also working from home, they had to be in a format with which they could work.

Providers used FAQs about remote learning and assessment, provided tailored advice and arranged sessions where students could practice. They reminded students that general advice concerning preparation for assessments - for example, around planning realistic goals for revision, organising study space, asking for help - still stood. Some providers also ensured that students in different disciplines could continue to practice at home by supplying specialist equipment and loaning specialist software which could be loaded remotely to allow students to complete digital design work from home.

Providers and PSRBs altered assessment requirements to allow students to undertake their assessments by using, for example, their online learning experiences, such as video study of patients, or exploration of written case studies. Several providers replaced onsite placements with virtual placements. Where this happened, the placement provider was involved from the outset, to ensure the digital environment offered the same benefits of business and industrial work experience.

Academic integrity

There has been significant attention paid to how a move to offsite, 'open book' exams could expose courses to cheating and impersonation. Through our work on contract cheating, we have stressed the importance of strategic, provider-level approaches to encourage good assessment conduct by students, rather than relying on individual courses or departments to develop their own solutions in isolation.

In our [COVID-19 guidance on academic standards](#) (April 2020), we recommended that providers should enter into dialogue with PSRBs to allay any concerns accrediting bodies might have and adjust assessment approaches to ensure academic integrity. We are preparing to release research to our members on academic integrity investigations, and the penalties imposed across UK higher education providers, as well as advice on additional security methods for digital assessments.

The Bar Standards Board has conducted a [review](#) to identify the lessons learned from their experience of rapidly moving professional assessments online, the report of which may be useful for other PSRBs who are considering centralised computer-based assessment.

Conclusions

QAA's role in the pandemic has been to facilitate the best possible student experience, while retaining the sector's focus on secure academic standards, through issuing non-mandatory guidance, advice and supporting materials. We have also tried to act as a convening agency between HEPs, PSRBs and the governments across the UK. These two approaches have resulted in this advice. While it may appear cautious in places, given the relaxation of lockdown rules in early 2021, we consider it would be prudent to prepare for at least some future COVID-19 control measures.

Through our PSRB forum, we will try to keep you updated as the situation develops and, as always, we will be happy to respond to any queries you might have - please contact Simon Bullock at s.bullock@qaa.ac.uk or Amy Spencer at a.spencer@qaa.ac.uk

Useful COVID-19 resources

We have produced over 30 pieces of guidance for the sector during the pandemic disruptions, these can be found in our [QAA COVID-19 advice hub](#). The following selection may be useful for PSRBs as they focus on securing academic standards and learning in the workplace.

[Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement](#) (April 2020)

[Work-based Learning Thematic Guidance](#) (April 2020)

[Contingency Planning for Placement Provision](#) (May 2020)

[The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education in Apprenticeships: An Overview of the Challenges Facing Higher Education Providers](#) (May 2020)

[The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on providers of higher education in apprenticeships](#) (May 2020)

[Assessing with Integrity in Digital Delivery](#) (May 2020)

[Preserving Quality and Standards Through a Time of Rapid Change: UK Higher Education in 2020-21](#) (June 2020)

[Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, Specialist and Newer Providers of Higher Education](#) (August 2020)

[Ongoing Implications of the Pandemic for Placements and Practice-Based Courses, including Field Work](#) (first published January 2021, updated April 2021)

Published 10 June 2021

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
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