

Supporting resource

How UK Higher Education Providers Managed the Shift to Digital Delivery During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Contents

How UK higher education providers managed the shift to digital delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic	1
About this report	1
Introduction: Responding to the challenge	2
The second phase	3
Summary of findings	4
Next steps for providers to consider	5
Section 1: Transition in 2019-20	6
Strategic and operational planning	6
The involvement of students' unions and student representatives in COVID-19 planning ..	6
Academic planning in 2019-20 and its outcomes	7
Section 2: Preparing for 2020-21	9
Academic planning for 2020-21	9
Preparing students for blended learning in 2020-21 and beyond	10
Preparing staff for blended learning in 2020-21	10
Conclusions	11
Annex A: Examples of QAA guidance relating to COVID-19 and blended learning, teaching and assessment	12
Annex B: Case Studies - Mitigating Risk in Approaches to Quality	15
Annex C: Case Studies - Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, Specialist and Newer Providers of Higher Education	18

About this report

The transition to blended learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic required extraordinary flexibility and speed of action on the part of higher education providers. We also saw tremendous cooperation between providers across the UK working together to maintain academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience in challenging circumstances. Our work with providers confirms that the transition to blended learning has been rapid and effective. We hope this report provides confidence in the work undertaken by the UK higher education sector as well as identifying next steps for providers who continue to address the ongoing adjustments needed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

QAA engaged with a substantial number of providers to capture positive practice and support the sector in continuing to meet the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Over 60 higher education providers from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales (Annex A, B and C) contributed information about the steps their institutions were taking to secure academic quality and standards in their responses to the pandemic. The range of contributors to QAA guidance, webinar panels and case studies includes smaller, specialist and newer providers, as well as large, established providers. Students' union sabbatical officers and NUS representatives have provided their views (A11, A14, A24), as have professional bodies (A3) and a range of sector agencies and groups, including HEPI, Independent HE, GuildHE, MillionPlus and Universities UK (A15, A19, A20, A22, A23, A26, A27).

This report provides an overview of approaches adopted and includes examples taken from the case studies and webinars (referenced in Annex A-C) to indicate how providers have responded to some of the key questions contained in QAA's guidance on [Preserving Quality and Standards Through a Time of Rapid Change: UK Higher Education in 2020-21](#).



Introduction: Responding to the challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an emergency transition to virtual teaching and assessment, which was performed quickly and under extreme pressure. It is hard to overstate the extraordinary effort by the UK higher education sector that this represented. It accelerated change, brought forward strategic plans, and instigated new ways of working. Higher education providers anticipated the announcement of lockdown on 23 March 2020, and most had emergency planning groups in place by mid-March to assess the risks posed by the pandemic and to chart a path forward. The majority engaged students in planning and design, and ensured that communication with staff and students was clear and constructive.

This transition also saw a level of collaboration among providers that might not have previously been imagined. It was on this basis of partnership that QAA was able to provide support for the sector in developing solutions to the unique demands it faced; the insights and reflections on emerging practice in this early stage formed the basis of QAA's [initial guidance on maintaining quality and standards](#). One of the most immediate challenges providers faced, was how to ensure online teaching and assessment methods could serve as robust alternatives, compatible with the sector-agreed standards set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Providers took care to adapt assessment methodologies, module specifications, and digital skills and infrastructure. In our view, it is clear that the effort to maintain quality and standards remained a priority.

There are some areas which presented a challenge for the sector. The success of providers in transitioning online largely depended on their starting position; providers which had already been developing online learning programmes, or which had high staff and student digital literacy, found the transition easier than others. There were wide differences between types of provider too, with small and specialist providers often equipped with greater flexibility to handle broad issues, but fewer resources for particularly granular ones. Given this variation, it was critically important that providers worked together, sharing positive pedagogical practice, and maintaining an overall flexibility of approach. We began to see a strong level of collaboration and flexibility, and maintaining this remains important to the sector's response to the ongoing restrictions today.

As well as these overarching differences between institutions, it was clear that providers needed to take account of disparities among students, and consider the needs of students who faced particular barriers to learning. The QAA guidance document, [Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement](#), set out what some of these might be and how they could be approached by providers. The nature of online learning is not accessible by default; not every student has the same kind of access to technology and skills, and access in a general sense does not necessarily equate to access in specific activities. Many providers expressed concern about digital poverty among students, and geographical disparities in internet access for students in areas of deprivation or in rural areas. Access for students with disabilities was, and remains, crucial; it is easy for emergency adjustments to inadvertently create new barriers. Even those students working towards more practical learning outcomes faced difficulty preparing for alternative assessments remotely.

For each of these complex questions, we saw examples of providers responding innovatively. Some providers took practical steps to support students experiencing digital poverty, such as establishing emergency IT hardship loan funds, or, as in the University of South Wales, simply providing hundreds of devices to students. Other examples of positive practice included consulting students on local circumstances and using responses to inform mitigation decisions. Providers worked closely with students to identify alternative learning outcomes. A range of case studies demonstrated positive consideration of students with disabilities; providers, including the University of Central Lancashire and the University of Wolverhampton, introduced British Sign Language interpreters to online lectures, for

instance, with follow-ups from academic support staff. Feedback from students' unions suggest that, while engagement differs from provider to provider in terms of consistency and clarity, generally there is a concerted effort on the part of the sector to address issues of access. All providers we have spoken to were making efforts to support students to find solutions, in preference to allowing students to defer or withdraw from their studies.

The second phase

From Easter onwards, providers began to turn their attention to 'recovery', and to the development of blended learning approaches that were capable of increasing resilience. Flexibility remained a priority, with efforts to ensure the relative volume of online and in-person teaching was able to be adjusted according to public health restrictions. Planning for the academic year 2020-21 triggered the need to validate large numbers of online variants of programmes and modules originally designed for in-person delivery. The sheer volume of these modifications, following on from those needed to complete the delivery of 2019-20 provision, led providers to look at ways of streamlining their standard approval processes. This involved implementing risk mitigation systems, as well as consulting with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), external examiners and, for providers without their own degree awarding powers, awarding bodies. Changes were recorded and approved by the relevant deliberative committees so that institutional oversight could be maintained.

Institutions with a strong track record of remote provision, such as the Open University, had many years of experience to develop the best ways to design diverse curriculums with blended or digital delivery. Although programme development is often sensitive, it was essential in this context that providers worked together and established communities of practice, to ensure that new and modified programmes carried appropriate digital pedagogy. As with the wider collaborative approach providers have taken throughout the pandemic, the willingness to share practice in this is a credit to the collegiality adopted within the sector. It is a positive arising from the pandemic that should have longer-term implications.

It is too early to have a complete picture of the impact of the pandemic on higher education, the awards and the students, particularly when providers were making necessary transitions at speed. There remain a number of concerns - about the robustness of IT systems, for example, or the variation between teaching staff in their preparedness to handle blended approaches. Outside quality and standards, the importance of culture and collective wellbeing remains. But as we reflect on the scale of cooperation among providers, the picture is one of a sector responding innovatively to the challenge.

After considering a range of scenarios in their strategic planning, most providers are now committed to blended learning precisely because of its flexibility and responsiveness to student needs, and to public health regulations. Many students have expressed their support and even eagerness for the possibilities offered by blended learning models – indeed, some students have been studying in this model for many years. Nonetheless, student surveys indicate a preference for some in-person teaching, and institutions wish to provide this, but the safety of staff and students comes first.

We have found that providers are planning their approaches to future blended learning provision in a principled and consistent manner, working together to identify and resolve issues early. As we continue to navigate the impact of the pandemic, we hope that this account can provide a summary of this experience to help inform future decision-making. The examples and case studies here should help providers reflect, strengthen confidence in the integrity of UK degrees, and protect the global reputation of UK higher education.

Summary of findings

Analysis of the intelligence gathered supports the following findings:

- **Providers have used strategic steering groups and operational sub-groups effectively.** These have been guided by their mission and student profile, to ensure that decisions are taken at institutional level to manage complexity and retain consistency and control. This has been particularly important in providers where there has been a tradition of autonomy at school, faculty and department level, and has facilitated a common approach to quality assuring the transition to blended learning.
- **Providers have developed rapid approval plans.** In respect of modifying courses for delivery in 2020-21, the issue of speed has been complemented by that of volume, with some large providers having in excess of 2,000 modules to modify for delivery in a blended learning context. Plans have allowed for risk mitigation and careful recording of decisions.
- **Providers have engaged in a substantial rethink of assessment procedures.** This is particularly challenging for practice-based courses of all kinds, but also includes alternative and online assessment considerations for particular student groups.
- **Providers have engaged with students and staff in planning changes to the delivery and assessment of learning and teaching in blended contexts.** Student feedback from the blended learning introduced at the end of the academic year 2019-20 is being used to inform current approaches. SU sabbatical officers are members of the learning and teaching sub-groups of the top-level COVID steering groups in many providers, and there is student representation on the committees that consider changes to modules and courses.

Next steps for providers to consider

- Some providers' student feedback has highlighted areas needing further development. Providers should continue engaging with students individually and collectively, and ensure that they are involved in planning enhancements to remote delivery.
- Some practical learning outcomes have been difficult for providers to assess remotely. Providers should consider alternative assessments, or work with students to identify alternative learning outcomes. Similarly, traditional examination formats that have simply been moved online should be revisited to ensure learning outcomes are being met.
- Students should be supported to understand what to expect from online teaching, and how best to undertake independent learning from home.
- Several small and specialist providers have identified the need for a shift in culture to promote collective wellbeing. Although this can be challenging given resource limitations, many small providers are better positioned than larger ones to provide a more personalised student experience.
- Providers are concerned about the robustness of IT systems and digital poverty among students. It is important to check that IT capacity can cope with increased levels of traffic, and that devices or support are provided to students in areas of deprivation and in rural or remote areas where internet connectivity can be particularly problematic.
- There remains variation between providers in terms of the preparedness of teaching staff to move to blended approaches. Providers should implement training programmes aimed at technological upskilling, as well as how to embed inclusion and diversity into blended and remote module design.



Section 1: Transition in 2019-20

Strategic and operational planning

1 For all providers, charting a path through the COVID crisis involved two distinct phases: a first phase incorporating emergency actions taken immediately before or at the onset of lockdown to implement business continuity plans, conduct risk analysis, close campuses, ensure the safety of students and staff, and identify how teaching and assessment could continue for the remainder of the academic year 2019-20 (B4); and a second phase incorporating more forward-looking actions taken, generally from Easter onwards, to develop blended delivery variants, commence space planning for an eventual return to campus and resume some in-person teaching and learning in the context of physical distancing (B2, B3, B4). The importance of clear communication was paramount in both phases.

2 All providers, irrespective of size, established a senior COVID steering group to oversee the institutional response to the pandemic. Steering groups were known by a variety of names, such as 'Business Continuity Planning Group', 'COVID-19 Group', 'Crisis Management Group', 'Gold Group' (B2, B3, B4, C10), and most met on a daily basis at the outset of lockdown.

3 Providers' strategic thinking did not take place in a vacuum. It was guided by a combination of their mission, core values and student profile (B2, B3). One university was able to achieve an important element of continuity by basing substantial parts of its COVID-19 strategic planning on its existing strategic plan, which already envisaged reducing its campus footprint ('clicks for bricks'), and on principles already known to students and staff through its Student Experience Plan (B6).

4 Steering groups appointed operational groups and sub-groups for key activities such as learning and teaching, professional services, health and safety, and estates (B2, B4, B5, B6, B7). For larger providers, particularly those with overseas campuses and a tradition of relative autonomy for schools and faculties, a key priority was the adoption of university-wide principles and processes to ensure a consistent approach in all locations of delivery (B3). Universities working with others through franchised provision or articulation arrangements, involved partners in COVID-19 planning (B3) and shared 'no detriment' policies and changes to assessments (B2).

5 All providers established sub-groups to operationalise the strategic decisions taken by the senior planning group. Typically, these included a sub-group for learning and teaching. Sub-groups generally reported to the COVID steering group, but any recommendations with regulatory implications required approval by a senior deliberative committee such as Senate, Academic Board and the Board of Governors (B4, all C institutions except C8). This permitted the involvement of students through the existing arrangements for student representation on committees, institutional oversight of quality and standards, and record-keeping through the minuting of key decisions.

The involvement of students' unions and student representatives in COVID-19 planning

6 As mentioned above, student representatives continued to attend meetings of their deliberative committees by videoconference during campus closure, and providers involved students' unions and associations in strategic and operational decision-making through membership of their COVID planning group and/or its sub-groups. Both providers and students' union sabbatical officers found real value in this synergy.

7 One sabbatical officer reports that the students' union had a good working relationship with the University prior to the pandemic, and that this relationship has been strengthened during the lockdown and post-lockdown periods. The SU President has regular meetings with the Vice-Chancellor's Group, attending its daily COVID-19 Action Group and Recovery Group meetings, and the SU and student representatives continue to attend the University's deliberative committees which have been conducted online during the pandemic. The SU sees one of its major roles as being to communicate student concerns quickly to university managers; throughout the pandemic it has held daily Student Voice meetings to identify patterns in the concerns expressed by students via email and social media platforms. These meetings serve to brief the SU President about student concerns which can then be reported directly to COVID-19 Action or Recovery Group meeting held on the same day. The SU feels that the University has generally listened sympathetically to what it has had to say, and that this has enabled it to influence decision-making in ways that are of positive benefit to students (Transitions Seminar 1). These views echo those of other SU officers (A24) and are reciprocated by providers who acknowledge the vital importance of their contribution (C10).

Academic planning in 2019-20 and its outcomes

8 The first task of academic planning sub-groups was to make urgent recommendations about how to continue teaching and assessing students for the remainder of the academic year 2019-20, which included the adoption of a 'no detriment' assessment policy (A9), and the replacement of invigilated, closed-book, in-person examinations by, for example, 'take home' or 'takeaway' examinations, or open-book examinations conducted over a 24-hour period (B3). The size of this task varied from provider to provider according to their reliance on traditional examinations as opposed to coursework.

9 Where modules contributed to professional accreditation of programmes, providers contacted PSRBs which appear generally to have been understanding about adjustments to assessment approaches and timings (B4 Assessment).

10 Providers also consulted external examiners about changes to assessments. At one institution, where substantial numbers of modules required changes to assessment, but the changes were consistent and policy-based, providers explained the policy to external examiners and sought their agreement to the policy and to the resultant changes. Changes were then agreed at Faculty Teaching Quality and Standards committees, or equivalent, and endorsed by University Teaching Quality and Standards Committee before being received by Academic Board (B2). Another provider revised its assessment regulations after drawing on discussion with external examiners, national guidance and the approach being taken by other providers, with all changes being approved by Academic Board and reported to the governing body.

11 Temporary approval processes of this type were not felt to compromise institutional oversight, and another provider introduced a [temporary process for approving changes](#) being introduced due to COVID-19 (B4).

12 Smaller, specialist providers without degree awarding powers, report working closely with their partner universities to obtain approval of changes to assessments. One provider produced for each of its programmes, a table comparing what was stated in the programme specification with its planned changes to assessment and submitted it for approval to its partner university (C5). Another provider's Learning, Teaching and Quality Assurance Committee worked closely with its partner university to produce guidance on acceptable emergency measures that could be taken by Member Schools to ensure

standards were maintained while delivery and assessments changed (C9). In most cases providers adopted the 'no detriment' policy of their university partner.

13 Where examinations or other assessments (in disciplines such as music and the performing arts, laboratory-based subjects, subjects allied to medicine and sports science) could not be replaced, they were generally postponed until they could be completed on campus.

14 It is too early to have a complete picture of the impact of the pandemic on higher education, the awards and the students. However, there are a number of indications from student surveys, external examiners and awards (for example, B3, B4, B7, C6, C8) that steps taken by providers to address the needs of existing students from March-August 2020 have been effective. Early student surveys signal good levels of student satisfaction. A feedback survey at one provider found that positive responses to the new approach outweighed the negative; students had worked longer than recommended on their 'take home' examination, but felt that this was balanced by the reduced stress of working in their own environment and being able to make multiple 'draft' or initial submissions before selecting a final one (B4 Assessment). A survey conducted at another provider found that continuing students were largely positive about the new approaches to assessment, particularly the flexibility in when and where they can work (B3 Assessment; B3 Strategy). Satisfaction levels seem to be particularly high in smaller and specialist providers. A survey conducted by the students' union at a third provider (C13), coupled with feedback from student representatives on its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee, elicited positive feedback in a number of areas such as engagement with asynchronous lectures and synchronous interactive videoconferencing sessions for tutorial and revision purposes. Areas identified as needing further development by students have been used to plan enhancements to remote delivery in the autumn term, 2020-21 (see Section 2).

15 External examining appears to have operated effectively in the circumstances, so levels of student achievement have been subject to internal moderation and external scrutiny, as in a 'normal' year. One provider comments that despite initial concern, group projects had worked well online, grade distribution was normal, and external examiners had commented that the standard is similar to that of previous years (C6). Another provider notes that all examination boards took place as planned (but virtually) with external examiners present, and that student performance was in line with expectations (C8).



Section 2: Preparing for 2020-21

Academic planning for 2020-21

16 Once arrangements were in place for the remainder of the academic year 2019-20, academic planning sub-groups turned their attention to 2020-21. One university signalled this change by establishing an 'Adaptation and Renewal Team' (B3), and another other by 'Project Restart' and 'Project Enhance' (B5). The great majority of providers have adopted blended learning strategies designed to promote 'curriculum resilience' (B3) and mitigate the potential risk of disruption from possible spikes or further waves of infections and local or national lockdown restrictions (B2, B3, B4). This required modifications to large numbers of existing modules, but in most providers the deliberative committees that approve such modifications meet infrequently. Providers therefore adopted streamlined processes capable of processing large numbers of modules quickly without compromising institutional oversight of academic standards. Typically, providers used a generic templating system designed to distinguish between modules that could be modified for online use without impacting on the existing programme specification, which were then dealt with via a 'light touch' process, and modules which were ineligible for such treatment because the proposed modifications had structural ramifications at programme level and therefore required more detailed scrutiny (B2 Strategy, B4).

17 With regard to assessment in 2020-21, some providers have reflected on what has been learned about the robustness of various assessment methods during the lockdown period, and the difficulties of assessing some practical learning outcomes through remote assessment. Other providers with a firm commitment to examinations are exploring remote proctoring which could form part of invigilated take-home examinations, and shorter-format online examinations which are thought to mitigate students finding answers to questions online. There is interest in revisiting traditional examination formats that were simply repurposed for use remotely (B3 Edinburgh Assessment).

18 Providers are planning their approaches to blended learning in a principled and consistent manner. Universities whose schools and faculties enjoy substantial autonomy are centralising some planning operations, so that plans have been made through a combination of academic-led and centralised decision making (B4 Assessment). One university has adopted a two-pronged approach between central and department-led planning by creating a cross-university expert group to draw up design principles for 'online rich' blended delivery. Programme and module leaders then translate these principles into teaching and learning 'norms' describing the mix of live teaching, structured and supported teaching and learning, and independent student learning that best suits the programme in question (B5). Another university has identified a 'threshold student entitlement' for all modules to be delivered digitally which included a minimum number of hours of activity each week, at least one personal interaction with a tutor per week, and workarounds for the absence of laboratories, and practice and performance-based facilities (B2 Strategy).

19 The diversity of the sector means that some providers will make less use of online teaching than others. In creative arts and practice-based institutions, for example, lectures are less frequently used than in other providers (B1), but some providers specialising in these areas are planning a 'mixed economy' blended model of tutorial and academic support that builds one-to-one contact between students and tutors into all programmes and modules, thereby preserving in virtual format its pre-Covid 'open door' policy (A25 ICMP).

Preparing students for blended learning in 2020-21 and beyond

20 Providers understand the need to prepare incoming and returning students for the blended approach that will characterise their learning, teaching and assessment in the academic year 2020-21 (A24). One university has modified existing MOOCs for new and returning students in the light of the changes made because of COVID-19. Helping students to understand what to expect from online teaching, how to take ownership of learning, studying at home, managing their time, and undertaking independent learning (which is likely to become a more important skill than it was because of the increase in online learning) all feature in this MOOC (A25 Reading). Another provider is developing online monitoring systems capable of taking over from in-person attendance monitoring, with a view to minimising disengagement among new and returning students and initiating a new approach to embedding community and social frameworks into its programmes (A25 Aberdeen). This view also featured in QAA's survey of small, specialist providers (A21), a number of which identified the need for a shift in culture to promote collective wellbeing. Providers are concerned about the robustness of IT systems and digital poverty among students, and have checked that their IT capacity can cope with the increased levels of traffic resulting from the shift to online teaching and assessment. They have also issued mobile devices and computers to help students learn remotely, particularly in areas of deprivation and in rural or remote areas where internet connectivity is a problem (C13, A24).

Preparing staff for blended learning in 2020-21

21 The preparedness of teaching staff to move from in-face to blended learning appears to vary from provider to provider. In general, staff have responded positively to these changes, but most providers have put in place training programmes aimed at technological upskilling, development of blended materials, and delivering them online. One provider, conscious of the diversity of its student body, is working on a checklist and training package designed to help staff build inclusion and diversity into their new modules (A25 Aberdeen). At another provider, tutors undertook an immersive learning programme in online teaching, and the staff learning and teaching conference held in July 2020 included sessions from several principal fellows of the Higher Education Academy on the potential for complementarity of remote/online and in-class learning. The ability to plan for both modes of delivery simultaneously will be vital for the coming academic year, not least for setting up live webcasts from taught classes or making reasonable adjustments to taught sessions that can be accessed remotely and asynchronously (A25 Warwickshire).

22 In many cases, the transition to blended learning was helped by the fact that providers had already taken steps towards digitisation by, for example, recording lectures, including relevant online activity, or 'additionality' in module guides, and investing in e-learning and digital library platforms, and the staff training required to use them (C13). In addition, staff based at Scottish providers have been able to draw on well researched advice and guidance on implementing blended learning produced by QAA Scotland's work on enhancement (A17, A22, A23). A number of smaller, specialist providers made the point that their comparatively small staffing base leaves them particularly exposed to the departure or illness of staff, and one provider employed additional specialist staff to facilitate the transition to blended learning. (A25 ICMP)

23 Finally, it should not be forgotten that the participation of large numbers of staff from the higher education sector in producing the advice, guidance, webinars and case studies listed in Annexes A-C, and of the other higher education staff who have listened to and read them, has served to identify and disseminate good practice between and within providers. This is also playing an important role in preparing staff for the transition to blended learning.

Conclusions

The transition to blended learning has been rapid and effective, allowing for both significant speed and volume of programme modifications. Using strategic steering groups, providers have ensured a consistent, common approach to quality; reflections from these groups have been widely shared, ensuring a cross-sector collaboration effort. It was on this basis that we have been able to provide support, advice and guidance for the sector.

Early student surveys signal good levels of student satisfaction, especially with assessment during the pandemic. However, although the majority intend on continuing with their studies as planned, many students have reported dissatisfaction with online teaching quality.¹ While it is also worth noting that negative reactions from students about the quality of digital teaching seemed to be as much about the quality of the technology and platforms as the quality of the pedagogy and content, there does remain variation between providers in terms of the preparedness of teaching staff to move to blended approaches. In September 2020, the [National Union of Students](#) reported that among students receiving online learning provision, only 55% felt it was good quality; this was a reduction from 65% in March. A level of dissatisfaction is to be expected, but there remains a need to improve the response for the current academic year.

Among these students are particular groups, such as many disabled students, who have been disadvantaged by online learning. Although there has been a widespread acknowledgement of the importance of access for vulnerable groups, with the [Office for Students](#) identifying a range of institutional case studies, these issues have not been resolved everywhere. Blended approaches must be accessible, and we have highlighted ways in which providers may consider inclusion and diversity in their approaches. In many cases, providers have offered additional flexibility in assessment opportunities, and accounted for local circumstances in mitigation processes.

Alongside these shared challenges and others, there remains much to be commended. The effort undertaken by the UK higher education community during the transition to blended learning has been extraordinary, with sector-wide collaboration evident throughout. In many ways, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated trends that were already apparent in higher education. The range of practice identified here stand providers in good stead for adapting to the future ahead.

The shift to blended approaches was on the horizon prior to 2020, but providers today have worked quickly to increase the accessibility of learning resources and interactive sessions in digital form. Similarly, the need to innovate and offer flexibility has fed directly into a developing narrative about adapting academic credit - allowing for a more modular approach to higher education. The need for more flexible qualifications has been raised by the Westminster Government, the [Scottish Funding Council sustainability review](#), and the Welsh Government's post-compulsory reforms. The sector would certainly be less well prepared for such increased flexibility without the adaptations highlighted here. As we look ahead, we hope that this report can give confidence in the work undertaken by the UK higher education sector to secure quality and standards in extraordinary times.

¹ National Union of Students, 'Coronavirus and Students survey: Phase II', September 2020

Annex A: Examples of QAA guidance relating to COVID-19 and blended learning, teaching and assessment

Ref	Date	Title	Nature	Contributors
A1	Monthly	Membership Headline Briefings	Webinars	QAA
A2	23 March 2020	COVID-19: Initial Guidance for Higher Education Providers on Standards and Quality	Guidance document	QAA
A3	6 April 2020	COVID-19 Response - Adapting Assessment for Professional Qualifications (Parts 1 and 2)	PSRB Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • General Optical Council • Nursing and Midwifery Council
A4	7 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Practice and Lab-Based Assessment	Guidance document	QAA
A5	7 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement	Guidance document	QAA
A6	8 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Accelerated Degrees	Guidance document	QAA
A7	17 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Accelerated Degrees	Webinar	QAA
A8	21 April 2020	COVID-19 Guidance - Work-based Learning COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Work-based Learning	Webinar Guidance document	QAA
A9	24 April 2020	'No Detriment' Policies: An Overview	Supporting resource	QAA
A10	1 May 2020	Should Providers Include a COVID-19 Statement on Degree Transcripts	Supporting resource	QAA
A11	7 May 2020	Assessing with Integrity in Digital Delivery	Supporting resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • QAA's Student Strategic Advisory Committee

A12	18 May 2020	COVID-19: Admissions	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • Shoeburyness High School • University of Salford • Edinburgh Napier University • Aberystwyth University
A13	28 May 2020	The Impact of COVID-19 on Admissions and Transitions into Higher Education	Supporting resource	QAA + nine providers (listed in link)
A14	1 June 2020	COVID-19 Guidance Breakdown for Students' Unions	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • NUS
A15	2 June 2020	Preserving Quality and Standards through a Time of Rapid Change: UK Higher Education in 2020-21	Guidance document	QAA + 16 providers and 10 sector organisations and bodies (listed in link)
A16	6 June 2020	The Postgraduate Student Experience and COVID-19	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The University of Sheffield • University of Glasgow • Royal College of Art • The Open University • Durham University
A17	June 2020	Developing a Sense of Belonging in Online Distance Learning (Supported by QAA Scotland's Enhancement Theme Collaborative Cluster programme)	Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA Scotland • University of Dundee • Edinburgh Napier University • The Open University in Scotland • Queen Margaret University • University of the Highlands and Islands
A18	25 June 2020	Building a Taxonomy for Digital Learning	Guidance document	QAA plus 17 providers (listed in link)
A19	3 July 2020	Questions to Inform a Toolkit for Enhancing Quality in a Digital Environment	Guidance document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • Teesside University • The Open University • Arden University • Jisc
A20	13 July 2020	We need to talk about contact hours	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • HEPI • Independent HE • Liverpool John Moores University SU • University of Worcester SU • University of Greenwich • University of Nottingham • Royal College of Art

A21	7 August 2020	Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, Specialist and Newer Providers of Higher Education	Supporting resource	QAA plus 16 providers (listed in link)
A22	1 September 2020	Focus on Technology Enhanced Learning	Document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA (Scotland) • Jisc • Heriot-Watt University
A23	1 September 2020	What are the key ideas and actions arising from our focus on: Technology Enhanced Learning project	Document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA (Scotland) • Jisc • Heriot-Watt University
A24	7 September 2020	Supporting Student Transitions - Working with Students' Unions (QAA Members' site)	Webinar and case studies (in press)	SU representatives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cardiff Metropolitan University • University of Bristol • University of Worcester • University of Bath • University of Central Lancashire • Highlands and Islands Students' Association
A25	22 September 2020	COVID-19: Supporting Student Transitions-Academic Support (QAA Members' site)	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Aberdeen • University of Reading • Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP) • Warwickshire College
A26	30 September 2020	How have small, specialist and newer providers of higher education adapted to the challenges of COVID-19?	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GuildHE • Independent HE • Universities UK • York St John University • London Contemporary Dance School • Richmond, The American International University in London
A27	2 October 2020	COVID-19: Supporting Student Transitions: The Impact of Student Recruitment on the Student Experience (QAA Members' site)	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GuildHE • UUK • University of Aberdeen • ICMP • The Sheffield College

Annex B: Case Studies - Mitigating Risk in Approaches to Quality (QAA Membership Resources site*)

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/ operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
B1	Arts University Bournemouth	AUB's case study deals primarily with space planning, which is being undertaken by the Integrated Planning Team; no courses are being moved to an entirely digital delivery				
B2	University of Bedfordshire (Strategy) University of Bedfordshire (Communications)	Business Continuity Group (BCG) established	BCG Sub-group for L&T chaired by DVC (Academic); all Sem 1 modules reviewed using standard template and via Schools' L&T Action Plans	Partners advised of 'no disadvantage' policy, and changes to assessments, all logged by Registry		

*<https://membershipsources.qaa.ac.uk/s/mitigating-risk-in-approaches-to-quality>

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/ operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
B3	University of Edinburgh (Strategy) University of Edinburgh (Assessment)	Academic Contingency Group (ACG) established in March; Adaptation and Renewal Team (ART) established after Easter	ART planned for 2020-21 and had a 'students' workstream that included curriculum resilience	ACG agreed cancellation of exams and 'no detriment' policy Alternative assessments have worked well	Staff prepared for digitalisation by undertaking a four-week online teaching module	Feedback from continuing students evidences positive response to alternative forms of assessment after cancellation of exams. However, students do not want an entirely digital experience. The University nonetheless takes the view that more work is needed on managing student expectations, and student digital literacy must not be overestimated.
B4	Heriot Watt University (Strategy) Heriot Watt (Assessment)	Strategic COVID-19 Group established in Feb 2020 Decision taken to introduce Responsive Blended Learning (RBL) across five campuses	COVID-19 L & T Sub-group created and headed by PVC; 2000 modules modified for 2020-21 using temporary, generic approval process for RBL (with six exceptions)	Scrutinised by Senate Business Cttee and received by Senate All in-person exams cancelled and replaced by 'take home' exams	Extensive and developed as part of Enhancement Theme in Scottish HE sector	Feedback survey conducted. Overall, positive responses to cancellation of examinations and their replacement by 'take home' examinations and other assessment types.
B5	Exeter University (Space Management)	Exeter's case study deals primarily with space planning, but does make reference to broader academic planning	'Project Enhance' envisages more blended learning, and cross-university expert group established to draw up design principles for 'online-rich' blended delivery		Staff concerns are being listened to and balanced against student expectations	

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/ operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
B6	University of South Wales (Strategy)	The VC's Executive Group became the 'Gold Group'. Referenced Strategic Plan (2020-30) and Student Experience Plan	The Gold Group established work strands to deal quickly with modifications to programmes and assessments. An Operations Group was charged with developing the blended approach to 2020-21 delivery	'No detriment' policy and regulatory adjustments taken to Academic Board	Some lectures already recorded by early adopters	
B7	University of Warwick (Communications)	Gold (Strategic) and Silver (Operational) groups formed, along with operational sub-groups	Warwick's case study deals primarily with communication			The findings of a recent survey to which over 2,500 students responded, indicated good levels of satisfaction with the steps taken by the University to ensure the quality of the student experience in challenging circumstances.

Annex C: Case Studies - Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, Specialist and Newer Providers of Higher Education*

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C1	Berkshire College of Agriculture	SMT COVID-19 Group and Operational Group	Nothing specific mentioned	Regular contact with validating universities; use of their 'no detriment' policy; few changes to assessments required their approval.	Nothing specific mentioned	Switch to online teaching has worked well, partly because of small group size (c. 10); no evidence of digital poverty.
C2	Bishop Burton College	COVID-19 Strategic Planning Group (SPG) established	COVID-19 SPG oversight of transferring L&T online; all lectures will be online in 2020-21; good support from validating universities.	Some variation in assessment, such as the use of videos, have been approved by the validating universities.	Nothing specific mentioned	The student representative system has kept going through the pandemic and student satisfaction feedback has remained high.
C3	The Sheffield College	College Operations Group established, with associated task groups	All boards and committees, including governors, have continued to meet; the College got agreement to make changes, including to assessments, from the validating universities. Plans are for one third online and two-thirds in-person.	All teaching, learning and assessment was moved online. The universities also invoked 'no detriment' policies and a fast track mitigating circumstances policy.	Nothing specific mentioned	Student fora, attended by course representatives, have continued and have been a very useful form of feedback. Students have generally remained engaged and feedback has been positive.

*www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/adapting-to-covid-19-smaller-specialist-and-newer-providers-of-higher-education.pdf

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C4	Warwickshire College	College Leadership Team dealt with COVID	Changes to programmes and assessments dealt with by emergency meeting of Higher Education Quality Assurance Systems; partners consulted for Level 6.	50 examinations adapted for digital delivery; partners consulted for Level 6; College created its own 'no detriment' policy.	Staff conference in July focused on learning and teaching, and staff are confident that online pedagogy has been enhanced.	Dean of Higher Education has sent out regular all-student emails, and course leaders have sent students detailed communications about teaching, learning and assessment.
C5	City & Guilds of London Art School	COVID-19 Precaution Plan implemented at the end of February	The Art School examined each programme individually and produced a table showing what was in the programme specification and what was proposed during the pandemic. Students were consulted and they agreed before it was sent to Ravensbourne University London who validate the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.	'No detriment' policy in place	There are particular difficulties in converting to online learning with arts subjects, for example, conservation of historical artefacts which cannot be taken home. However, teaching staff have been very innovative in their approach and some projects have demonstrated a high degree of creativity and design skills.	Students have said they felt that they have remained part of a community and this helped them get through; this was reflected in a feedback questionnaire in early June. Feedback from students has been important - formally, two students share the role of Chair of Students and one is a member of the Governing Body.

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C6	Sotheby's Institute of Art	Anticipated lockdown and close on 17 March; COVID risk register developed	The Institute's prior experience of online teaching enabled it to affect this transfer swiftly, using existing infrastructure, and to train staff to teach online in a very short period of time.	Because of the absence of practice-based assessments, Sotheby's Institute was able to adapt relatively easily to online assessment and implemented the University of Manchester's 'no disadvantage' policy.	Staff training offered promptly. Despite initial concerns, group projects have worked well online, grade distribution is normal, and external examiners have commented positively on student work, remarking that the standard is similar to that of previous years.	Because student numbers are small, and staff and students know each other well, course teams continued to use email with existing students, whose representatives have been supportive and highly engaged throughout the pandemic.
C7	Backstage Academy	Senior Leadership Team developed risk analysis in March	Along with its awarding body, the Academy transferred its teaching online and provided its students with a detailed overview of what this would involve.	The July Examinations Boards applied the University of Bolton's COVID-19 Assessment Guidelines and blanket mitigation measures to ensure that students were not disadvantaged by the pandemic.		

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C8	Central Film School	Used established committee structure to plan response to pandemic, especially Academic Board	The School consulted and agreed with the University of Gloucestershire over changes to teaching, learning and assessment.	The University's 'no detriment' policy was invoked.	All Examination Boards took place virtually including external examiners, and student performance is in line with expectations.	Despite this student anxiety in the early stages, they are much more engaged now and completing their learning and assessments successfully.
C9	Conservatoire for Dance and Drama (CDD)	Task and Finish Group established to manage response to pandemic	Currently planning for around 50% of classes to be delivered via face-to-face teaching in September, using digital platforms to live-stream or relay formal lectures and independent creative work, as appropriate.	CDD's Learning, Teaching and Quality Assurance Committee worked with one of its validating universities in April and May to produce guidance on acceptable emergency measures that could be taken by Member Schools to ensure standards were maintained while delivery and assessments changed.		Small student communities mean that Member Schools can track and communicate with all their students, and that individual follow-ups are both possible and manageable.

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C10	Institute for Contemporary Music performance (ICMP)	Crisis Management Team (CMT) was established following Crisis Management and Business Continuity procedures	Despite reservations about its capacity and capability to switch to online provision, ICMP did so when it became clear that closure for the remainder of the academic year was imminent; specialist online learning support employed.	The Institute has dispensation from the University of East London to deliver its programmes more flexibly in the short term but anticipates the need for more a substantial revalidation of its provision should the blended model become the norm.	From a teaching perspective, this has required substantial investment in new technology and training to underwrite the increasing volume of online teaching. While it was not an issue on this occasion, the Institute is aware that small staff teams mean that the absence of a single, key individual, through illness or for other reasons, can cause serious problems for small, specialist providers.	The role of the Student President was enhanced - for example, by being included in an advisory role on key working groups - and regular 'Town Hall' meetings were held between senior managers and the student body.
C11	Newbold College of Higher Education	The COVID-19 Crisis Management Group met initially on 9 March; an Academic Planning Group was subsequently set up to plan for 2020-21	The College has worked with its validating university in the UK and with its partner universities in the USA to ensure delivery and assessment are compliant with regulations.	The University of Wales Trinity Saint David has allowed some emergency flexibility to make changes to delivery and assessment as necessary; but module descriptors have not been changed. Examinations were replaced by open book exams, which worked well.		Every Thursday evening for the last six or seven weeks, there has been an evening panel discussion with students to keep them engaged and positive.

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C12	St Mellitus College	The College established a Ministry Working Group, an Operations Working Group and an Academic Working Group. The latter set up two sub-committees dealing with assessment and L&T, respectively.	Programmes are validated by the University of Durham and Middlesex University, and they have been clear about respective responsibilities. At the start of the pandemic, they devolved responsibility for assessments to the College and enabled them to make changes as necessary to cope with the lockdown.	Invoked Durham and Middlesex's 'no detriment' policies. Some written examinations (such as those for language classes) were done orally and rather than giving presentations in person, students were asked to record a video. The College has then reported changes back to their validating institutions and informed them about their plans for the next academic year.		

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C13	Harper Adams University	<p>Emergency Response Team took on business continuity plan</p> <p>IT systems were also tested for increased levels of traffic and mobile devices were provided to help staff and students to work remotely, including where rural broadband connectivity is a challenge.</p>	<p>Assessment regulations were carefully considered, drawing on discussion with external examiners, national guidance and what other providers were doing. All changes were approved by Academic Board and reported to the governing body.</p>	<p>Overall, student engagement with open book examinations and online submission has been very positive with good outcomes.</p>		<p>Student feedback, sought through a students' union survey and the feedback of student reps on committees such as the Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee and Academic Board, has indicated positive feedback in a number of areas such as engagement with asynchronous lectures and interactive Microsoft Teams sessions. Areas identified as needing further development by students were used as the basis for planning enhancements for remote delivery in the autumn term. There have been no synchronous lectures, but synchronous tutorials and revision sessions have taken place.</p>

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C14	Matrix College of Counselling and Psychotherapy	Management team managed COVID and stopped teaching on 16 March	The transition to online delivery was achieved without changing any module descriptors or assessments and in consultation with Middlesex University.	External examiners have been supportive of the standard of student work completed during lockdown, and achievement levels are comparable with those of a 'normal' year.		At the end of May, the College conducted a student experience survey which was supportive of the steps taken by the College and requested the group tutorial in addition to the longer working day.
C15	Richmond, The American International University in London	Management team managed COVID and suspended teaching on 13 March	The University took a decision to suspend all teaching for a week on 13 March in order to 'flip' its programmes to online delivery.	<p>The University's assessment regime follows the US model and involves a substantial percentage of in-course assessment which was easily transferred online. End of year examinations were also moved online.</p> <p>The assessment profiles of all students were scrutinised, and mitigation agreed, where appropriate - for example, in cases of special educational needs. The University has noted very little difference in overall student achievement this year compared with a normal year.</p>	Although it was not an issue on this occasion, the University was conscious at all times that a 'single point of failure', such as the illness of a key member of staff, can have great repercussions for small providers with small staff teams.	Academic staff worked with the Student Government (students' union) to decide how learning and teaching could best be continued, and to communicate short-term arrangements for the remainder of the spring semester to the student body as a whole.

Ref	Name of provider	Strategic/operational response	Approval processes (programmes)	Approval processes (assessment and 'no detriment')	Staff training in blended and online teaching	Student views
C16	York St John University	A COVID-19 Project Group managed the response to Covid in two phases: 'crisis management' and beyond. The latter involved five workstreams, one of which was 'Academic/Student Experience'.	The University will adopt a blended approach to teaching and learning, providing a high-quality, engaging and accessible experience for all students.	York St John have responded to the changing external environment by taking a holistic approach to assessment across each programme, ensuring it can be completed at a distance and submitted online wherever appropriate.		

Published - 21 December 2020

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2020
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557000
Web: www.qaa.ac.uk