



QAA-convened roundtable with Minister Donelan and representatives from PSRBs and higher education providers

As part of ongoing joint work between QAA, the Department for Education and the sector, on 24 February, QAA convened a second roundtable discussion between the Minister of State for Universities in England, Michelle Donelan, Universities UK and senior representatives of higher education providers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

The aim of the discussion was to identify areas where additional action might be needed to ensure students on accredited courses could safely graduate and move into the workplace.

Confidence for students and employers

The Minister received reassurance on two key points:

- Providers are ensuring students meet the learning outcomes of their courses before graduating - this is vital to secure the academic standards of their awards.
- Providers and PSRBs are working together to ensure that students will continue to meet the professional competencies of accredited courses, even where there may need to be flexible or adapted arrangements for doing so. In this case, it is important to recognise that students' ability to demonstrate competence is more important than the time taken to achieve it. An analogy could be drawn with driving where competence on the road is more important than the number of lessons required to pass the test.

Providers welcomed the announcement that students on practice-based courses would soon be able to come back on campus, with others due to follow. Publication of the roadmap for coming out of lockdown was welcomed as an aid to planning, particularly to take account of the support needed for students and staff.

The Minister highlighted that providers, in partnership with PSRBs, have worked incredibly hard with great agility and imagination to ensure students could continue to achieve the learning outcomes of their courses. Students who have experienced the difficulties of the pandemic alongside changed arrangements for completing their courses, have demonstrated great resilience, which is a skill many employers will find attractive.

The Minister also heard about the variety of positive arrangements which have been made including:

- simulated placements and students receiving kits to enable practical work - such as experiments - to be conducted at home

- in some areas students have received increased levels of one-to-one or small group support as a result of the measures in place during lockdown.

The Minister hoped these successes could be communicated widely by higher education providers and PSRBs to give further confidence to employers about the skills of incoming graduates.

Discussion points

Measures to ensure student safety on campus and on placements include:

- Regular testing is in place and there are opportunities for students in certain disciplines or courses to receive early vaccination. The Minister emphasised that students should be encouraged to take advantage of the robust testing system which is now in place. In future, there may be more opportunities for home testing, particularly for those who do not live close to campus, and this would be welcome.

Placements:

- PSRBs emphasised the value of opportunities for students to engage in simulated placements, particularly where lockdown restrictions have made in-person placements challenging to arrange. The recent announcement that in-person placements can continue again from March was welcomed. There were also suggestions for ways of identifying more venues to increase the availability of simulated placements to help meet demand.
- It is understood that some students who had alternative placement arrangements due to the pandemic circumstances will have incurred additional costs. The Minister indicated it would be helpful to understand the full extent of this.

Completing learning and teaching:

- The Minister emphasised that providers should continue to explore all options for delivering learning and teaching before seeking to extend into the summer, due to the likely additional costs this would create, especially for students in privately rented accommodation. Options might include opening facilities at weekends and using the spring break. It was emphasised by providers and Government that any measures should facilitate accessibility and must not exclude students - for example, those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with caring responsibilities.
- It was recognised that there have been significant efforts by providers and PSRBs to ensure students could graduate on time or very close to time. The Minister learned of some specific cases where additional practical preparation activities might need to be offered to support students into the workplace or to ensure their readiness for engaging in placements. It was noted that, in these cases, additional funding support - for example, to assist with students' additional living costs - would be welcomed. There were many examples of positive initiatives. It was noted there may be value in designing a more formal arrangement for recent graduates to help them secure employment.