

Introduction

The sector is again facing a lockdown owing to the pandemic. Much of the COVID-19 guidance that we have produced over the last year continues to be pertinent now. Documents that are especially relevant to the current circumstances are listed at the end of this short paper. In addition, we have published another short document focused on the renewed attention being given to [safety nets](#).

Two of the areas likely to be most impacted by this further lockdown are the courses that require specialist facilities for practice and lab-based work and those that include a placement. While we produced thematic guidance focusing on both these areas in April last year, there was an important difference at that point - in those early days of the pandemic, the graduating cohort was only being affected by restrictions relatively late in their studies. This meant that many were close to completing work placement hours, which are often greater in courses that are required by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), and there was a greater likelihood that practical competencies in practice or lab-based courses would have been tested before that initial lockdown took effect. Further, for the cohorts at earlier stages in their courses, there was still hope that activities which could not take place in the rest of 2019-20 might be deferred until later in their studies. As the current academic year has unfolded, lockdowns and, outside of those, the restrictions around physical distancing have continued to present difficulties.

This guidance was first published in January 2021. In April 2021, it was updated to include a section on field work or field trips as the ongoing situation has also affected this area of work across a range of courses.

Practice and lab-based assessment

Challenges:

- 1 Continued lack of access to specialist facilities or restrictions on social interaction in the 2020-21 academic year impact on students demonstrating skills that are required to meet the intended learning outcomes of the course.
- 2 PSRB recognition of the course is compromised.
- 3 For progressing students, there are implications for the next stages of their course in terms of the outcomes they have been able to demonstrate so far and the next level, potentially requiring amendments to courses.
- 4 A backlog might also have implications on the future availability of specialist resources.

Possible options include:

- In terms of course intended learning outcomes, reviewing whether students really need to demonstrate (or demonstrate further) the specified skills to achieve an award in a particular subject and/or whether they need to demonstrate them in the way prescribed.

- Offering the students an alternative qualification that acknowledges the alternative theoretical emphasis of the course rather than a practical one. This might require emergency modifications and/or course design and development activity if an appropriate alternative does not exist already, as well as requiring close communication with, and consent of, the participating students.
- Supporting deferrals/interruptions of studies if that is a student's preference
- Offering students opportunities to return in the future, including post-graduation, to gain additional experience using specialist equipment or facilities that will enable consolidation and support them in specialist professions.
- Separating the elements that relate primarily to PSRB recognition from those that are necessary for the integrity of the academic award so that the latter is prioritised for graduation and the opportunity to achieve PSRB recognition is enabled subsequently.
- Extending the academic year.

Resources

- [Subject Benchmark Statements](#)
- Quality Code Advice and Guidance: [Assessment](#), [Course Design and Development](#)
- [Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, Specialist and Newer Providers of Higher Education](#)
- [COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Practice and Lab-based Assessment](#)

Work-based learning, including placements

Challenges:

- 1 Placements have not been able to take place in the way intended.
- 2 Industries or particular companies/organisations have not been able to support placements at all, reducing availability.
- 3 PSRB recognition of the course is compromised.
- 4 There are implications for the stated intended learning outcomes of the course.
- 5 For progressing students, the option of deferring placements is becoming more challenging as a backlog might now be developing, with associated implications for future years and placement availability.

Possible options include:

- Offering students options to move to a non-placement alternative course (this might require emergency modifications and/or course design and development activity if an appropriate alternative does not exist already).
- Where there has been some placement or industry-related activity, reviewing intended learning outcomes of the course with respect to placements to see if they might reasonably be amended without compromising the integrity of the award

- Offering students opportunities to return for placements in future, post-graduation, and recognising their achievement in a further award subsequently (for example, a 'top-up').
- Reviewing the amount of placement required or how the placement activity is structured in order still to meet the needs of the course and/or PSRB requirements.
- Supporting deferrals/interruptions of studies if that is a student's preference.
- Considering whether the placement outcomes can be achieved another way, for example, through 'live briefs', research projects or other alternatives.

Resources

- [Subject Benchmark Statements](#)
- Quality Code Advice and Guidance: [Work-based Learning, Course Design and Development](#)
- [COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Work-Based Learning \(including placements/partnerships/ apprenticeships/study abroad\)](#)
- [Supporting resources: Work-based learning including study abroad](#)

Field work

Another area of higher education study that is continuing to be affected by the ongoing impact of the pandemic is fieldwork. Field trips vary widely in their nature, and can:

- be local to the place of the provider, UK-based but distant from the provider, or international
- require a student to work independently or be organised for cohort groups
- be compulsory or optional elements of a course
- be credit-bearing or non-credit-bearing
- involve working solely outside or include engagement with interior environments, such as a museum or arts space
- potentially include interaction with external agents, for example, staff working at a site that is being visited
- have residential and/or significant travel requirements, depending on length and locality.

The restrictions in place across the UK, and the plans for relaxing those restrictions, vary by jurisdiction, although - at the time of writing - all are tentatively suggesting that they anticipate a significant relaxation of requirements by the end of June 2021. Higher education providers are being encouraged to deliver by distance learning as far as possible with practice-based courses being prioritised for on-campus delivery. Field trips, however, are relevant to a much broader range of subject disciplines than that.

The concept of field trips is, quite reasonably, predicated on an expectation of a physical visit. There is a range of ways in which students might be enabled to meet aims and learning outcomes through a virtual equivalent to a field trip, but resistance to this is both inevitable and understandable. Thus, consultation and clear communication with students will continue to be vital in reaching what might have to be the 'least worst' solution for reasons that are outside of the provider's control.

Challenges:

- 1 Some fieldwork has seasonal constraints.
- 2 Some students will have been attracted to a particular course and/or provider by an advertised field trip opportunity.
- 3 Programmes that are more reliant on fieldwork will have been designed to enable students to practise and develop skills in this area throughout the levels of study. This potentially presents challenges related to progression.
- 4 Postponing field trips may create capacity issues for some sites or, if moved outside of term-time, disadvantage some students disproportionately.

Possible options include:

- Enabling students to meet aims and intended learning outcomes without physical field trips.
- A member of staff visiting a site or venue and producing a recording which will form the basis of students' research work. Where relevant, this could be in collaboration with an organisation that manages a site or area.
- Similarly, where students would normally have carried out further work back on campus, for example on samples collected from a site, there might be an option for a staff member to collect the samples on the students' behalf to reduce the impact on the overall work related to the field trip.
- Explore with sites or venues what electronically-available resources they have, including normal level of access to those resources. Where a resource is normally only available within the organisation, some may be willing to provide access to students, even for a limited period.
- Where national/local restrictions permit, adapting the fieldwork brief so that students can more easily respond on an individual, self-directed level and within their own locality.
- In the case of international field trips, working with any international partners, collaborators or contacts around how they might be willing and/or able to support virtually elements that were planned to take place.
- In some cases, it may be possible to offer field trips during the summer vacation period to supplement the students' learning experience, but this will depend on the nature of the field trip and students' personal circumstances. As some students will be unable to take part in a field trip that has been moved to the vacation period (for example, because they are reliant on that period to earn money or owing to caring responsibilities), providers would need to be sensitive to the risks of disadvantage and this is unlikely to be an appropriate solution for compulsory field trips.
- Planning to undertake overseas field trips before the start of next academic year would probably be unwise as these are going to depend on the situation in the host country as well as the UK, and there may be ongoing uncertainty into next academic year as well. As such, providers may wish to consider whether courses can be modified for next academic year to accommodate this, for example by re-positioning a second-year module that relies on an international field trip to the third year or considering whether the necessary outcomes can be achieved through a UK-based field trip or a virtual experience. (These opportunities are likely to be fewer as many providers will have already taken all possible action prior to the 2020/21 academic year.)

Resources

- [Subject Benchmark Statements](#)
- Quality Code Advice and Guidance: [Assessment](#), [Course Design and Development](#), [Learning and Teaching](#)
- Education for Sustainable Development Guidance: [Executive Summary](#) (openly available) and [full guidance](#) (QAA Members only)

Note: although this document addresses longer-term sustainability issues, these are issues that are particularly pertinent to field trips so this guidance may support thinking around mitigation of the immediate challenges.

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)

The nature of PSRB accreditation or recognition varies considerably across disciplines and professions. In some cases, PSRBs provide graduates with a professional status that has significant implications for health, safety and wellbeing; other PSRBs provide a more general acknowledgement of knowledge and/or skills in a field of study or work. There is also a difference between graduates of accredited courses who move into a field with ongoing regulation where their skills and knowledge might continue to be tested after initial qualification, compared to those whose degree is the main security of skill and knowledge for accessing a profession or field where there is no, or limited, further regulation. These factors will affect the extent to which a PSRB can apply flexibility to its requirements. It remains important for providers to continue discussions with PSRBs in line with pre-pandemic approaches.

What we are doing

On 12 January 2021, we [convened a discussion](#) between the Minister for Universities in England, Michelle Donelan, senior representatives of 17 PSRBs and Universities UK (UUK). This was followed on 24 February by a [further roundtable discussion](#) involving the Minister, Universities UK, PSRBs and senior representatives of higher education providers.

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

We are also continuing to work with all of our member providers to support them through guidance, exchange of good practice, and working with key organisations to enable the successful graduation of students without compromise to academic quality and standards.

Additional resources

QAA has produced and curated a substantial volume of guidance, advice and supporting resources, most of which are available on our [COVID-19 Support and Guidance webpage](#).

Two particularly relevant documents developed in collaboration with the sector to support online learning are:

- [Building a Taxonomy for Digital Learning](#) (published 26 June 2020)¹
- [Questions to Inform a Toolkit for Enhancing Quality in a Digital Environment](#) (published 3 July 2020)

Another document which should prove helpful is our December 2020 report - [How UK Higher Education Providers Managed the Shift to Digital Delivery During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

It includes an Annex listing the guidance that we have produced in relation to blended learning, teaching and assessment with quick links to the resources. That list of guidance is also appended here for quick reference. Please note, some of the detailed resources, such as case studies, are available for QAA Members only. All staff and students from QAA Member institutions can access [Membership Resources](#).

Additional supporting resources relating to [placements, work-based learning and study abroad](#) are also available. These include:

- [Reaching decisions about placement provision](#)
- [Contingency planning for placement provision](#)

¹ This document is also available in the Welsh language: [Adeiladu Tacsonmeg o Ddulliau Dysgu Digidol](#)

Annex

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

Date	Title	Nature	Contributors
Monthly	Membership Headline Briefings	Webinars	QAA
23 March 2020	COVID-19: Initial Guidance for Higher Education Providers on Standards and Quality	Guidance document	QAA
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
7 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Practice and Lab-Based Assessment	Guidance document	QAA
7 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement	Guidance document	QAA
8 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Accelerated Degrees	Guidance document	QAA
17 April 2020	COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Accelerated Degrees	Webinar	QAA
21 April 2020	COVID-19 Guidance - Work-based Learning COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Work-based Learning	Webinar Guidance document	QAA
24 April 2020	'No Detriment' Policies: An Overview	Supporting resource	QAA
1 May 2020	Should Providers Include a COVID-19 Statement on Degree Transcripts	Supporting resource	QAA
7 May 2020	Assessing with Integrity in Digital Delivery	Supporting resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • QAA's Student Strategic Advisory Committee

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
28 May 2020	The Impact of COVID-19 on Admissions and Transitions into Higher Education	Supporting resource	QAA + nine providers (listed in link)
1 June 2020	COVID-19 Guidance Breakdown for Students' Unions	Webinar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA • NUS
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)
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
June 2020	Developing a Sense of Belonging in Online Distance Learning (Supported by QAA Scotland's Enhancement Theme Collaborative Cluster course)	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
25 June 2020	Building a Taxonomy for Digital Learning	Guidance document	QAA plus 17 providers (listed in link)
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
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

7 August 2020	Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, Specialist and Newer Providers of Higher Education	Supporting resource	QAA plus 16 providers (listed in link)
1 September 2020	Focus on Technology Enhanced Learning	Document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QAA (Scotland) • Jisc • Heriot-Watt University
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
7 September 2020	Supporting Student Transitions - Working with Students' Unions (QAA Members' site)	Webinar and case studies	<p>SU representatives:</p> <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
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
30 September 2020	How have small, specialist and newer providers of higher education adapted to the challenges of COVID-19? (QAA Members' site)	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
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
5 February 2021	How good practice in digital delivery and assessment has affected student engagement and success - an early exploration	Document	QAA + providers and organisations (listed in link)

31 March 2021	The impact of good practice in digital delivery on student engagement progression and achievement	Document	QAA + providers and organisations (listed in link)
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