

COVID-19 supporting resources

www.qaa.ac.uk/covid-19

COVID-19: Overview of Quality and Standards - Information for Students' Unions

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis, and the world's response to it, is an extraordinary global situation, changing by the day. It affects all industries and areas of life, but the higher education sector faces a particular set of challenges. Your highest priorities, of course, are the health and wellbeing of your students, and representing their academic interests in this challenging period. This disruption poses significant challenges to the student experience, to staff and their delivery of programmes, and to a range of academic regulations and policies.

QAA's role is to support the sector to maintain academic standards and quality, while encouraging and highlighting some of the innovative solutions to the disruption. We are producing [guidance and supporting resources](#), working with our members and the wider higher education community across the UK. This guidance is not exhaustive, nor is it mandatory - the responsibility to maintain standards remains with your degree-awarding bodies. It incorporates suggestions from different areas of policy and regulation, and is continually updated in line with government and regulatory advice as the situation develops.

Our guidance has been clear that it's more important than ever for providers to involve students and consult student representatives on any changes to provision. We wanted to make sure that our guidance is accessible for academic officers in students' unions, so you can best represent your students' interests in your institution. We hope this briefing provides a useful overview of the different pieces of guidance published, and what it means for you. We also wanted to reflect the work being undertaken by students' unions (used in this document to cover guilds, associations and representatives), and have included data and case studies from the National Union of Students, sparqs and individual unions.

Guidance breakdown

1 Regulatory and funding body changes

The Office for Students (OfS), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland are communicating directly with universities and colleges to set out the regulatory and funding requirements in place during this period. An overview of changes to be aware of is set out below.

England: Office for Students (OfS)

The OfS is the English higher education regulator. In its [initial letter \(25 March\)](#), OfS told providers that it was suspending some regulatory requirements and changing others. It has since published new guidance on [quality and standards](#) and [admissions](#). An overview of quality and standards principles is listed below.

Guidance on teaching

- Providers should make **all reasonable efforts** to provide alternative teaching and support for students, broadly equivalent to usual arrangements; not doing so will raise regulatory concerns.
- Providers must make sure that they communicate clearly with students about changes and impact, and provide learning support.

Guidance on assessment

- Providers should make **all reasonable efforts** for achievement to be reliably assessed, and for qualifications to be awarded securely; not doing so will raise regulatory concerns. Approaches that promise 'no detriment' or a 'safety net' are likely to be appropriate. However, providers should assess students' achievement reliably and awarding bodies should make sound judgements with reliable evidence and secure standards.

Guidance for particular student groups

- Providers must consider how their approaches will affect **all students** - in particular those who might be most vulnerable to disruption.
- Providers also need to give particular consideration as to whether and how online delivery can replace practical learning. Where placements are taking place, students must be appropriately supported and supervised. For postgraduate research students, providers should consider the actions they need to take, discussing and agreeing with individual students how they will progress.

Guidance on other regulatory requirements

- Providers need to ensure contractual terms and conditions for students are fair and easily understood, and that they abide by these in practice. Providers no longer need to update OfS if they implement their student protection plan (condition C3), or change their governing documents (condition E1), but they are required to report when they cease teaching some or all courses.
- A [proposed new temporary condition](#) would prohibit providers from engaging in conduct which could have a material negative effect on the stability and/or integrity of the English sector.

Wales: Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and Welsh Government

HEFCW is the Welsh Government sponsored body responsible for funding the higher education sector. It is reviewing its priorities and, in the meantime, has referred providers and students to central Welsh Government [guidance for higher education](#). This includes the below principles on teaching, learning and assessment.

- The Welsh Government expects providers to consider the needs of students in providing alternative and accessible formats for both teaching and assessment.
- Students should be able to leave with qualifications that are a fair reflection of their abilities, while maintaining quality and standards. No student should be penalised unfairly for being in their final year of study.

Scotland: Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

The SFC is the non-departmental public body responsible for funding Scotland's further and higher education sector. Scottish universities are autonomous, but both SFC and the Scottish Government have supported the sector to take a planned transition to online learning and assessment.

- The SFC has recognised that there may be a need for some flexibility in the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) and Institution-led Review schedules, and encourage higher education institutions to discuss this with QAA Scotland.
- Providers are being offered flexibility around a number of data returns including Institutional Gender Action Plans, Upskilling Fund reports, Final Statistics Returns, or funding for shortfalls against outcome agreement targets.

Northern Ireland: Department for the Economy

As Northern Ireland has no higher education funding council, the Department for the Economy fulfils the roles of both a government department and a funding council. The Department has advised students to seek advice directly from the five Northern Ireland higher education institutions.

2 Quality and standards guidance

QAA is providing guidance to help the sector mitigate the impact on assessment, progression and graduation in present and future academic years.

QAA guidance - an overview

QAA is the independent UK body that checks on standards and quality in UK higher education. So far, QAA has published seven pieces of guidance on quality and standards. This is supportive advice - not regulatory requirements - and is based on examples of good practice from around the UK.

Published guidance

- [Initial guidance](#) (20/23 March)
- Thematic guidance: [Practice and Lab-Based Assessment](#) (7 April)
- Thematic guidance: [Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement](#) (7 April)
- Thematic guidance: [Accelerated Degrees](#) (8 April)
- Thematic guidance: [Work-based Learning \(including Placements/Partnerships/Apprenticeships/Study Abroad\)](#) (8 April)
- Overview documents on key areas, including [online learning](#), ['no detriment'](#), [degree transcripts](#), transnational education, [assessing with integrity](#), and [international responses](#)
- QAA is also hosting a [Quality Discussion Forum](#), which now has nearly 300 registered users, and [regular webinars for QAA Members](#) to explore the guidance - student union staff and officers are welcome to engage with these.

Overview of relevant advice

- Providers should have a response planning framework in which they are urged to involve relevant student union officers. Discussions on academic practice may include course reps, and decisions on credit and awards need to be made with student consultation. Clear communication and support for students facing changes to teaching, learning and assessment are also vital. (see Initial Guidance)
- Online learning and teaching activities need to be designed and structured carefully. They should be flexible and consider special arrangements for particular groups. For access to tutors, staff and students should choose solutions that work for them. Some work may need refreshing, but we do not recommend repeating years where possible. (see Initial Guidance, p 3)
- In assessment, providers should exercise flexibility and consider online alternatives. Students should, wherever it is possible and is in the student's interest, be enabled to finish their intended studies for the current academic year, meeting the same learning outcomes where possible. Online safeguards should be in place. The ability, conditions and impact on all students should be considered; accessibility for disabled students and those with specific learning requirements is especially crucial. (see Initial Guidance, p 8)
- Providers should remind students of the dangers of contract cheating, including potential exposure to fraud and extortion. (see Initial Guidance, p 8)
- Providers should prepare systems for increases in academic appeals and/or complaints. (see Initial Guidance, p 9)

Please see the full guidance for further detail, examples and additional resources.

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA)

The OIA is the independent body set up to review student complaints about higher education providers in England and Wales. It has published a set of [FAQs for students](#) and a [briefing note for providers](#). This guidance includes a range of suggestions, and several pieces of essential advice. The essential advice is outlined below.

Guidance on changes to teaching

- Providers need to keep full records of teaching that has been missed and what has been done to make up for it, and to explain to students that the alternative provision is designed to do this.
- Providers need to make arrangements for students who don't have access to reliable fast broadband or can't use it.
- Any online resources need to be well advertised.
- Providers need to communicate any significant change to term or semester dates to students as early as possible.
- Arrangements for delivering teaching online or through other media need to be fully accessible for disabled students.

Guidance on changes to assessment

- Providers should let students know as soon as possible if exams are postponed.
- Providers should relax any requirement that students submit medical evidence when requesting special consideration. Students shouldn't be penalised for missing any teaching or assessments because they have coronavirus symptoms, because they are following advice to self-isolate, or because they have unexpected caring responsibilities.
- Providers should consider whether changes to assessment arrangements may affect disabled students more than others.
- Where placement activities have changed, providers need to take this into account, and may have to talk with professional regulators about how this affects students' qualifications or progress. Students should keep a record of what they have been doing, or what had to be changed or missed.

Guidance on procedural issues

- Providers are encouraged to address all complaints and appeals within a reasonable timeframe. Where staff absences cause delays to complaints, academic appeals and other processes, it's important to tell students and to keep them informed about how long their case is likely to take.
- Providers should do everything they can to minimise the impact of the disruption. Students can complain to providers about how the coronavirus has affected their studies and may also be able to make an academic appeal if progress or grades have been affected.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, complaints are handled by the SPSO and NIPSO respectively, which act as the ombudsmen for all public service organisations. General COVID-19 statements are available on the [SPSO](#) and [NIPSO](#) websites.

Several other bodies have also released sector guidance and position statements, including [Universities UK](#), [UCAS](#), [University and College Union](#), and, for international students, the [Home Office](#) and [UK Council for International Student Affairs](#).

Activity in Students' Unions

We have been clear to providers that continuing to act in partnership with students ensures that they are acting fairly and in students' best interests. Our guidance has urged providers to involve the relevant student union officers as full members in COVID-19 response planning groups, and to consider bringing students' union and senior course representatives into relevant discussions on academic practice.

It is critical for students that teaching, learning and assessment challenges are managed. A [recent NUS survey](#) of 9,872 students found that while 78% of students reported that they are now receiving online learning, only 65% believed that it was good quality. Below are some case studies of students' unions that have been engaged effectively in providers' responses to issues of quality, standards, and wider student engagement practices.

Case study on assessment: University of Exeter

University of Exeter Students' Guild and Falmouth & Exeter Students' Union worked with the University of Exeter to agree an approach to assessment which recognises the different ways students will be affected. The approach provides three assessment options, with students able to choose what's best for them.

- 1 An open-book non-invigilated paper that students must complete in their own time over a specified 24-hour period. There will be no fixed duration, but the University expects the paper to take approximately the same length of time as the original planned examination.
- 2 An open-book non-invigilated paper that students must complete in a specified 24-hour period but with a fixed duration to complete the paper. The duration will be adjusted to individual learning plans.
- 3 An alternative coursework assessment taken over a number of weeks. The form of coursework will be similar to work students have already done and will be designed so as to be manageable given other time pressures, examinations and assessments.

Student union staff and officers were involved in the process of policy development and agreement. The policy is accompanied by the University's 'safety net' ('No Detriment') policy, and all results will be scrutinised at the University's Assessment Progression and Awarding Committees to safeguard standards. [More information is available on the University of Exeter website.](#)

Case study on teaching: Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

Robert Gordon University (RGU) have updated online teaching strategies in partnership with students. A pulse survey, carried out by the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Access (DELTA), allowed the students' union and University to understand the experiences of students in online learning environments. This accompanied feedback gathered by reps, school officers and the students' union through social media groups and the University's virtual learning environment.

This process identified technological and social barriers to learning, which were included in extenuating circumstances. Student union officers participated in the University working groups for Teaching & Learning and COVID-19 Response, and new teaching strategies were developed.

Online teaching strategies also allowed RGU to develop a programme of free online industry-focused short courses. The suite is designed to address regional skills needs in response to the economic challenges of COVID-19. [Contact details for RGU DELTA can be found on the RGU website.](#)

Case study on student engagement: University of Bath

The SU Bath has a developed approach to communication with students. The union is in regular contact with academic reps, has created Microsoft Teams sites for communicating with international, postgraduate taught and doctoral students, and has a Facebook 'Corona Community' with nearly 4000+ students. This accompanies normal communications including emails and social media.

This approach has allowed the union to scrutinise the University's 'No Detriment' policy, and gather student experiences of online learning. Through this, the union has worked with the University to agree an Exeter-style guarantee for final-year students, an extension for all doctoral students, and a capturing process for online learning engagement data. [More information is available on the SU Bath website.](#)

You may wish to use the current environment as a chance to innovate in student engagement activity. QAA will be establishing a Student Engagement Forum to gather insight into effective engagement methods during this crisis. A link is available in the further resources section below.

Consistent across many of the examples and pieces of different guidance above is the importance of accessibility in teaching and assessment design. 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. Considering the diversity of ways that teaching and learning can be delivered and engaged with is essential.

In doing so, clear communication with students and representative bodies is critical. NUS Wales and others have indicated that while some providers are communicating effectively with students' unions and students, this is not consistent across the sector. We hope the resources and examples above support you to encourage collaboration.

Further resources

Information for student bodies

- [Student Engagement Forum](#) (QAA, due 25 May 2020)
- [COVID-19: Online Delivery and Student Experience materials](#) (QAA, 2020)
- [Transition Skills and Strategies for Students webpage](#) (QAA Scotland, 2017)
- [Focus On: Building Learning Communities at a Distance](#) (QAA Scotland, 2016)
- [Student Co-creation in Technology Enhanced Learning](#) (QAA Scotland, 2016)
- [Student Guide to Using Evidence in Higher Education](#) (QAA Scotland, 2019)
- [UK Quality Code Advice and Guidance on Student Engagement](#) (QAA, 2018)

COVID-19: Sources of information

These resources are developing and should be checked regularly for new additions or changes. QAA guidance and supporting resources are available on our website: www.qaa.ac.uk/covid-19

Government

Department for Education	Up-to-date advice and guidance, and featured articles	www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education
Home Office	Advice and information	www.gov.uk/government/organisations/home-office
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	Advice and guidance about travel	www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office
Scottish Government	Information and advice including travel and visas	www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19
Welsh Government	Overarching advice and guidance for the education and childcare sectors	https://gov.wales/education-skills
Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland)	Advice for schools, colleges and universities	www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-schools-colleges-and-universities

HE regulators and funders

Scottish Funding Council	Travel and education-specific information for Scottish colleges and universities	www.sfc.ac.uk
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)	Regulatory advice for higher education providers in Wales	www.hefcw.ac.uk/home/home.aspx
Office for Students	Specific advice for providers and students in England covering a wide range of areas	www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education	Hub of information relating to apprenticeships in England	www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/covid-19-information-regarding-apprenticeships
Skills Development Scotland	Advice and support for graduate apprentices in Scotland	www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19
Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)	Range of resources arising from CMA's monitoring and response to consumer and competition problems, arising from the pandemic	www.gov.uk/government/organisations/competition-and-markets-authority
Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)	Briefing note for providers including information on some things it may be helpful for providers to think about in terms of possible complaints arising from the Coronavirus situation	www.oiahe.org.uk/resources-and-publications/latest-news-and-updates/oia-briefing-note-complaints-arising-from-coronavirus-covid-19-disruptionand-updates/oia-briefing-note-complaints-arising-from-coronavirus-covid-19-disruption

UK sector bodies

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)	Information regarding any changes to data collection activities	www.hesa.ac.uk/news/coronavirus
UK Advice and Tutoring (UKAT)	Range of advice and resources to support staff who are tutoring students online	www.ukat.uk
Advance HE	Information regarding any changes to awards and Fellowships; and student surveys (PTES, PRES, UKES)	www.advance-he.ac.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-updates
UCAS	Updates for students, their advisers and providers	www.ucas.com/coronavirus-updates-hub
UK NARIC (National Recognition Information Centre)	Updates on the impact of COVID-19 on international education	www.naric.org.uk/naric/News%20Story.aspx?NewsID=1056
IELTS	Information about IELTS testing arrangements	www.ielts.org/news/2020/covid-19-information-for-our-global-test-taker-community

National Union of Students (NUS)	Information on changes to conferences and events, on NUS campaign for a Student Safety Net, and on the research study into COVID-19 and mental health	www.nus.org.uk
sparqs	COVID-19 Hub with information about sparqs' refocused work plans, resources, online events and support relating to student engagement in quality	https://tinyurl.com/sparqs-COVID-19-hub
Student Minds	Provision of guidance and resources for university students and staff to look after their mental health and wellbeing	www.studentminds.org.uk
Universities UK	Information and resources for UK universities, and links to related news stories	www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/covid19/Pages/default.aspx
Association of Colleges	Range of resources to support colleges (such as teaching and learning, HR, and apprenticeships)	www.aoc.co.uk/covid-19-resources-coronavirus
GuildHE	General information and guidance for members	https://guildhe.ac.uk/coronavirus-general-information-and-guidance-for-members
Independent Higher Education	Information hub, resources and links	http://independenthe.com/activities/covid-19-hub
Russell Group	New stories and policy statements, some specific to COVID-19 measures (for instance, on online assessment)	https://russellgroup.ac.uk
UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)	FAQs/guidance for research and innovation communities	www.ukri.org/research/coronavirus
British Council	Information for current and future international students	www.britishcouncil.org/coronavirus-covid-response
Erasmus+	Travel advice and guidance about mobility placements	www.erasmusplus.org.uk/news/advice-about-erasmus-in-relation-to-coronavirus
Turnitin	Blog post on upholding academic integrity	www.turnitin.com/blog/how-to-uphold-academic-integrity-in-remote-learning
WonkHE	Latest COVID-19 articles	https://wonkhe.com

Association for Learning Technology	Resources for those involved with online learning design	www.alt.ac.uk/communityResources
Jisc	Resources and practical advice to help maintain teaching, learning and business operations during COVID-19	www.jisc.ac.uk/coronavirus
Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP)	Resources to help support providers, their employers and their learners	www.aelp.org.uk/covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-and-patron-support
University Vocational Awards Council	Updates linked to apprenticeships	https://uvac.ac.uk
UK Council for Graduate Education	Resources to support postgraduate students and providers of research degrees	www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/supporting-members-during-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-454.aspx

International

UK Council for International Student Affairs	Information for international students	www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Studying--living-in-the-UK/Coronavirus-Covid-19-info-for-international-students
UNESCO	Policy measures to address the COVID-19 challenges in education	https://en.unesco.org/covid19
European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)	ENQA statement on the pandemic and its impact on quality assurance agencies	https://enqa.eu
European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)	Information and answers to FAQs about the possible impact of COVID-19	www.eqar.eu
Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)	Guidance and resources in relation to alternative arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment	www.qqi.ie
Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)	News, stories and resources focused on North America	www.chea.org
Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)	Information for Australian providers and students, with many relevant links. Information sheets for international students; and an Online Learning Good Practice support guide	www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-latest-regulatory-advice

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)	Information for New Zealand tertiary education providers and students	www.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/covid-19
Universities Canada	Information and resources on how Canadian universities are responding to the impact of COVID-19	www.univcan.ca/coronavirus-covid-19-and-canadian-universities-information-and-resources
EU Commission	EU Commission's Coronavirus response statement	https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en
International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI)	Information and links to related pages and sites about academic integrity and remote learning	www.academicintegrity.org

Contact us

Our guidance around COVID-19 disruption responses is emerging and developing. If you have any questions about this guidance, please contact Luke Myer at l.myer@qaa.ac.uk

If you have any questions that are not covered by this guidance, or the other thematic guidance we have developed, please contact: guidance@qaa.ac.uk

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