

COVID-19: Thematic Guidance

Accelerated Degrees

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Purpose of this document

Following on from our [Initial Guidance for Higher Education Providers on Standards and Quality](#), we are now releasing specific guidance looking in more depth at the biggest issues facing the sector during the COVID-19 crisis:

1. Securing academic standards and supporting student achievement
2. Work-based learning (to include placements/partnerships/apprenticeships/study abroad)
3. Accelerated degrees (this guidance)
4. Practice and laboratory-based assessment.

QAA has developed this guidance with our Members and sector bodies for the benefit of the UK higher education community. It is intended to support providers by sharing emerging practice now, as well as distilling practice we can learn from for the future. It is structured around a set of reflective questions and challenges with potential solutions, and sets out guiding principles that should help providers through the radical changes to delivery that the current situation demands.

This guidance is not regulatory and following it will not ensure compliance with the regulatory requirements in your part of the UK, nor does it constitute advice on how to comply with legal obligations issued by organisations such as the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and the Competition and Markets Authority. These organisations are themselves responding to COVID-19 disruptions and their own advice should be consulted. The Office for Students (OfS) has set out the approach that registered higher education providers in England should be taking during these exceptional circumstances. Providers and students in England should refer, in the first instance, to [guidance published by the OfS](#). Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should consult the guidance provided by their respective funding bodies.

Our guidance contains references to external resources. These are for your information. Their inclusion is not an automatic endorsement by QAA.

As we develop our suite of guidance, we would encourage you to share the practice in your own institution with us or request additional areas of guidance. Please email us at guidance@qaa.ac.uk or contact us through our [QAA Quality Discussion Forum](#). The accumulation of examples of practice will allow us, at a future date, to produce a thematic analysis which will support future contingency planning and share learning across the sector.

Introduction

We are making some assumptions about what the next few months might mean for higher education providers and students. Our initial guidance was written before the stricter social distancing conditions were imposed by the UK Government on 23 March, and some proposals for how the sector could solve issues relating to remote teaching and assessment were therefore superseded by the new measures in place. The new restrictions meant that most, if not all, UK higher education providers are now having to operate remotely. It is highly unlikely that 'normal' resumption of teaching, learning and assessment will occur before September 2020 and, even then, the current restrictions around physical access to campus provision across the UK will have significant ramifications into the next academic year and beyond. This will affect progression, award and graduation, especially for final-year students at FHEQ Level 6 and 7; SCQF Level 9 and 10.

The changes to pre-entry qualifications for higher education will also impact providers' admissions processes and students entering higher education for the first time.

These are significant disruptions to all aspects of a provider's systems and processes, including the more obvious ones such as learning, teaching, assessment and awards but also course monitoring, partnerships, validation, student support, estates, timetabling, facilities and resource allocation.

Guiding principles

There are a number of principles which apply across our guidance:

- Providers who have not already done so are advised to establish a set of principles which can act as a framework to support planning and to facilitate consistency of decision-making. It will also provide a record of the rationale underpinning key decisions.
- The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is based around outcomes and offers considerable freedom to providers to adapt their approaches while securing academic standards.
- 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.
- Providing clear communication and support for students who are facing changes to their modes of teaching, learning and assessment is vital in helping them to achieve successful outcomes. Students who already require specific support - such as reasonable adjustments made for disabled students - will require careful consideration to ensure the current changes do not present them with additional challenges. Alternative assessments and adjustments to online teaching also need to recognise the needs of other students with specific learning requirements, such as those with caring responsibilities, those for whom broadband and internet provision may be difficult to access and those students who are ill or may be needing to self-isolate.
- Awarding bodies remain responsible for the academic standards of their awards, including those delivered with or by partners.

The advice set out in this document follows the current, and sometimes rapidly changing, guidance issued by the governments in [England](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) in response to COVID-19. The advice is also linked to information from the [UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#) and the [Department for Education](#). Links to further resources are provided at the end of the document.

Accelerated degrees

1 Accelerated degrees are full degrees, taught in a condensed time period and usually offering three semesters over a calendar year. This type of provision makes use of the time allocated as teaching breaks for other, longer degrees. The structure of accelerated degrees will vary between providers, but these qualifications are likely to present some unique challenges because of COVID-19 adaptations and the condensed timescales in which to implement change before the start of semester three provision.

Progression

2 With almost all accelerated degrees making use of a third semester in a calendar year, the academic process which allows students to progress is compressed. Accelerated degrees, therefore, have a compressed period for marking provision and will have designed assessments to work within these timescales. Alternative online provision and assessments may require more time to mark and providers may be unable to schedule additional work, reassessments and resubmissions during semester three, as this semester is already in use as part of regular delivery. This is an ongoing tension for all accelerated degrees, but may be exacerbated as staff and students move to online provision, as decisions must be made more quickly to allow students to progress normally. There may also be concerns that the alternative assessments offered will not meet the course and/or module learning outcomes.

Assessments

How can providers mitigate the increased risk of there being delays in turnaround times for assessment (including confirming results to students), particularly while academic staff are dealing with new forms of marking and assessment - for which there may be a staff development need?

3 It is not unusual for students on accelerated degrees to start FHEQ Level 6 or 7/ SCQF Level 9 or 10, prior to final confirmation of their results from the previous semester. However, the COVID-19 situation has the potential to increase the extent to which this happens. If a module has more than one point of assessment, it may be helpful to reduce the number of assessments, counting work that has already been submitted as 100% of the module while ensuring that course or module learning outcomes have been met. If, by reducing the point of assessment, a learning outcome has not been met at a modular level, then the learning outcomes need to be evidenced at a course level.

4 When planning upcoming delivery, providers may want to revisit the pattern of assessment for modules and adopt a similar approach as outlined above. Given the compressed turnaround times, this may help alleviate the burden of marking for staff and could reduce the load for students who will be resitting or resubmitting work from the previous semester. Providers will need to take into account that reducing the volume of assessments may be subject to degree-awarding body regulations, as well as noting any prerequisites that students may need to achieve in order to progress, offering extra student support to ensure successful progression if required.

5 The impact on students of delaying confirmation of outcomes also needs to be fully considered as this could have implications for those who need to resit or resubmit work and may delay student entry into the employment market. Delaying confirmation of module results to students could lead to assessments for the current semester of study occurring simultaneously with reassessments from the previous semester. Considering patterns of assessment to avoid 'bunching' will help to mitigate the impact of delayed grades.

6 Students on accelerated courses will rely on confirmation of outcomes to progress and, given the compressed timescales, this will involve swift decision-making and advanced planning to ensure that outcomes can be communicated to students as quickly as possible.

7 For accelerated degree courses that cover creative and performing arts practice, learning outcomes may be more difficult to achieve through alternative assessments. See guidance on [practice and lab-based assessments](#).

Deferral, delay and compression of delivery

What are the implications of extending the deadline for the submission of assessments?

8 There may be implications for students on accelerated provision, given that they may be starting new modules while trailing assessments for the previous level of study. Due to the use of semester three for standard delivery in accelerated provision, the need to mitigate against the potential loss of delivery hours and access to specialist facilities is especially relevant.

9 Any action should not disadvantage students or place them in a position where they are less likely to be able to achieve a successful outcome. This could be avoided by revisiting the course pattern of assessment to establish whether assessment weightings can be revised, while still meeting module and course-level outcomes.

Can hours be compressed in an effort to make up the hours that students have lost?

10 Any addition of hours across semesters to make up for lost delivery must be fully discussed and agreed by students, as it has implications on workload for both staff and students. Students with caring responsibilities, with disabilities or specific learning requirements may need additional support to transition to compressed hours. Providers may need to temporarily increase staffing to accommodate compressed hours and to ensure staff are not overly burdened with an excessive workload. Using the compressed hours solution will be dependent on whether students feel this is the best option for them. Other options are discussed below and may include moving students to a part-time mode of study and extending the completion time.

Given the current uncertainty regarding when regular delivery of provision might be resumed, can providers move non-practical modules to the first semester of the new academic year and the practical ones into semester two? What are the quality concerns related to moving modules in this way?

11 Altering the diet of modules and when they are delivered may well offer a pragmatic solution to some of the issues being faced. Careful consideration would need to be given to prerequisites, levels and the threshold standards in the qualification frameworks. As this applies to all undergraduate provision, not just accelerated degree programmes, please also see the thematic guidance on [securing academic standards and supporting student achievement](#) and [practice and lab-based assessments](#).

What are the implications of any delay in confirming assessment grades or degree classifications for students on accelerated degrees who want to apply for postgraduate study?

12 This is particularly pertinent where the postgraduate course is due to commence before degree classifications are confirmed.

13 Where a student is in their final year of study it is likely that, by this stage, there will be some existing information about their likely final outcome. Accelerated degree providers should, at this stage of study, be proactive in communicating with research institutions to which their students are progressing - potentially offering transcripts covering all but the final semester. Accepting institutions need to make very clear to applicants any condition under which they are being accepted, for example, whether the student would be expected to withdraw if they missed a degree outcome (for instance, a minimum of 2:1). This would also require consideration and clarification of whether any fees would be waived in such a situation. Alternatively, the postgraduate provider may be willing to waive conditions of entry after seeing the student's transcript. This would be at the provider's discretion and would need to accommodate any PSRB restrictions. Providers may also need to consider the implications for financial support from relevant funding bodies or student loans and whether students would be affected by withdrawal of offers, especially if they wish to enroll on a postgraduate course in the future. Clear communication between providers is the key to alleviating this situation. Clear communication with the student is also vital to ensure they are fully aware of discussions taking place between providers.

Should providers consider delaying the start of semester three?

14 If the current restrictions are loosened, it is advisable not to delay the start of a semester as this will build in pinch points throughout delivery that are best avoided if possible. Instead, providers should plan to return to regular delivery, but ensure that alternative plans are in place for every module or course should there be a necessity to move to online delivery once more.

15 This will be particularly pertinent for providers who do not validate their own provision and follow the degree-awarding body's examination board timescales. Providers who validate accelerated degree provision at independent and alternative providers need to be mindful of the issues presented within this guidance. It may be helpful for validating partners to hold a separate exam board for accelerated degree provision to accommodate the revised timescales. This could be held via a video conferencing platform if necessary. Some providers are planning for delivery of semester three to be online with scope for students to complete at home regardless of whether campus reopens or not. The intention here is to clarify the position for those students needing to make decisions now regarding cancelling semester three rental agreements where possible and applicable.

Students on accelerated degrees are likely to be either entering the final semester of their final year (FHEQ Level 5 or SCQF Level 8) of their studies. What can providers do to support students to continue studying now, rather than defer?

16 It is advisable for providers to draw up a range of options for students considering deferral and other mechanisms to allow them to tailor the best solution for their circumstances, including the following:

- Switch to traditional delivery: If providers offer a longer delivery model, students could be offered the option to switch to this model. Providers could also opt to create a traditional model by delaying FHEQ Level 5/SCQF Level 8 to a September

start and running two further years of traditional study. However, students choosing accelerated provision are unlikely to choose traditional study because accelerated degrees enable them to enter/return to the workplace swiftly and this should be considered carefully given the needs of those choosing the accelerated model. Providers should also clarify how this option will affect students' funding models.

- Part-time accelerated degrees: Offering to switch students to a temporary part-time mode of study may be more appealing, especially for those about to begin their final semester of study. Although offering accelerated provision via a part-time mode may seem contradictory, in these circumstances it may offer the flexibility of entering/returning to the workplace while continuing studies, rather than non-completion.

Examples from providers in supporting students include:

- Student engagement online is now monitored on a daily and weekly basis to establish who may be at risk of non-continuation. Students are proactively contacted by tutors to ascertain any further support needs and ensure they are progressing.
- Students can now access online pastoral support as well as an increased level of support for study skills.

Should providers plan for semester three, and even semester one of the new academic year, to be delivered online, or through a combination of online and 'in person' delivery?

17 While you may wish to prepare students for a return to their regular method of delivery, every course or module needs to have a plan for alternative delivery and assessment should the current situation continue. This is also good practice in case of other circumstances arising throughout the course which need mitigation, such as access to facilities.

18 There will be a need to ensure that specialist facilities and equipment have been checked and that everything is ready to move to regular delivery. Students are likely to have a lot of questions and may need extra support, therefore providers will need to ensure adequate support mechanisms are in place for both students and staff.

How can providers best accommodate resubmissions for accelerated degree provision, given this is likely to have an impact on progression?

19 It is not unusual for students on accelerated degree courses to complete resits and resubmissions during the delivery of the next semester's modules. Providers should adhere to their current academic regulations regarding resits and resubmissions but may wish to consider adding emergency regulations (see the guidance on [securing academic standards and supporting student achievement](#)) with the underpinning principle being that no student should be disadvantaged due to the current situation, or what has been called the 'no detriment' or 'safety net' policy.

20 Resubmissions or resits of assessment should ensure that the learning outcomes of the module or course are met and, where practicably possible, follow the same format as the first sit assessment. Clear communication and consultation with the student body is essential should anything change in relation to the method of assessment.

21 Considering the pattern of assessment is vital to ensure that assessments and reassessments are not submitted at the same time but are instead staggered throughout the term or semester.

Do students have the right to refuse the alternative assessment devised if they think it will negatively impact their achievement and grades?

22 This will need to be fully discussed with students to ensure they can achieve the best possible outcome from their studies. Essentially, students can choose to defer or delay should they feel the alternative assessment does not enable them to achieve to the level of the original assessment. The choices students ultimately make will depend to a great extent on how they are engaged and counselled. Students with disabilities are likely to need additional support in helping them to reach a decision that meets their particular needs.

Sources of additional information

JISC have a number of supporting materials for online delivery and assessment, including:

- Online briefings on moving to online delivery:
www.jisc.ac.uk/training/planning-for-coronavirus
- Transforming assessment and feedback with technology:
www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/transforming-assessment-and-feedback
- Blogs and resources:
www.jisc.ac.uk/coronavirus
- Ensuring continuity of learning during enforced absence:
www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/ensuring-continuity-of-learning-during-enforced-absence
- Practical tips to maintain teaching, learning and business operations, including case studies for engaging content and an overview of collaboration tools:
www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/creating-blended-learning-content
- Guides on technology and tools, staff-student partnerships, and a report on what makes a successful online learner:
www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/online-learning
- Technology and tools for online learning:
www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/technology-and-tools-for-online-learning

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