

# COVID-19 supporting resources

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## The impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education in Apprenticeships: An Overview of the Challenges facing Higher Education Providers

### Introduction

In the QAA COVID-19 thematic guidance on [work-based learning \(including placements/partnerships/ apprenticeships/study abroad\)](#) published on 8 April 2020 there was an acknowledgement of the challenges associated with the delivery of higher education in apprenticeships, along with some signposting to resources available to support providers. As the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on delivery arrangements, higher education providers are continuing to implement solutions to the current challenges and focus on potentially altered arrangements for the next academic year/cohorts.

This paper aims to highlight some of the key challenges providers are identifying and the sources of support being used. A range of examples of practice from the sector are shared in a companion resource on [contingency planning for placement provision](#) and, while that document is not focused on apprenticeships, the examples included do offer potential ways of addressing the challenges associated with moving work-based learning into an online setting.

The range of higher education providers delivering apprenticeships across the UK and the different requirements between the Nations means that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to managing the provision. There are differences in terminology, for example the term 'Graduate Apprenticeships' is used in Scotland, while 'Degree Apprenticeships' is used in England and Wales, and there are differences across all four Nations in terms of other higher apprenticeships. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'apprentice' is used, as opposed to 'learner' or 'student'.

### What are the challenges of COVID-19 for providers of higher education in apprenticeships?

When seeking to address the challenges associated with COVID-19 contingencies, it would be important for providers to reflect on three key elements:

- their ability to adapt their teaching/training in the current circumstances
- the capacity of the employer to continue to provide an appropriate setting for work-based learning
- the extent to which the requirements of the apprenticeship can continue to be delivered.

The challenges for providers can be considered under the following topics, each of which is explored in this paper:

- Compliance with funding, regulatory and reporting requirements
- Disruption to employment
- Impact on work-based learning
- Disruption to learning, teaching and assessment
- Digital technology and communication strategies
- Access to additional support
- Forward planning.

## **Compliance with funding, regulatory and reporting requirements**

An overarching issue is ensuring that funding, regulatory and reporting compliance requirements are being met, as appropriate to the provider's location within the UK. Apprentices' access to work-based learning opportunities will vary according to their employer's situation and ability to instigate any particular course of action. Therefore, some apprentices may be furloughed while others may still be working, even if re-deployed or working from home.

## **Disruption to employment**

The initial response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 needed to be swift, particularly where apprentices were furloughed. This initial phase highlighted the interdependencies between organisations in the apprenticeship landscape, with, for example, funding decisions and the options for any amendments to end-point assessment in England requiring input beyond the higher education provider itself.

Employers and providers in England are being encouraged by the [Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#) to continue delivering apprenticeships where possible. This situation is replicated in other Nations, for example, with employers and providers in [Wales](#) encouraged to support apprentices to continue with their learning using technology as appropriate and working from home if they are required to self-isolate or their workplace closes. While some apprentices may be furloughed and on a break in learning, these actions are not mutually exclusive, and some furloughed apprentices are continuing with their training.

In England, in some cases, there was a swift move towards apprentices having a break in learning where it was deemed that the apprenticeship would be paused for longer than four weeks. This break in learning should be agreed by the employer, the apprentice and the provider, and be reported to the [Education and Skills Funding Agency \(ESFA\)](#) with the end date of the apprenticeship being extended and end-point assessment re-scheduled as appropriate. After these initial decisions, mechanisms to enable apprentices to continue have become clearer.

In Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has outlined the steps it is taking to reduce the regulatory burden on higher education providers, and provide information about future actions and requirements in a number of areas, such as funding and degree apprenticeships ([Circular W20/11HE](#)). For Higher Apprenticeships, the Welsh Government outlined the option of placing an apprentice on an authorised absence for as long as required if it is not possible for the apprentice to continue despite the option of alternative arrangements. Providers are being asked to record any authorised absence due to COVID-19 or self-isolation.

Universities in Scotland have confirmed that they will retain apprentices and support them to reach the end of the year on the apprenticeship programme, making adjustments to assessments and providing help to find alternative employment if required. Where apprentices have been furloughed (for example, in the childcare sector) and are not able to continue with their employment or studies, there is scope for modules to be carried into the next year.

[Advice in Northern Ireland](#) is similar to that in other nations. Training contractors have been asked to continue and complete training (as part of their contracted hours of employment) in a different way including facilitation of online learning, learning portfolio building work where possible and re-scheduling planned assessment activity for a later date.

Across the UK, where apprentices have been redeployed (such as those working in a Local Authority) this can have consequences for their availability. For example, they may not be able to engage with live lectures or other synchronous learning opportunities. In other cases, even where apprentices have not been furloughed, they might have had projects stopped or other priorities changed and this is having an impact on work-based learning for the apprenticeship programme.

At the timing of writing it is still regarded as relatively early for the full impact of the pandemic on employment to be seen. Due to the nature of the roles involved in many degree or graduate apprenticeships, most apprentices are able to continue their work from home or, if they have been furloughed, they can continue with their studies. The impact on employment can be specific to particular sectors, for example where apprentices work for small businesses or where the industry has experienced disruption (for example, in construction).

Looking further ahead, some employers have been asking providers about the potential arrangements for those due to begin apprenticeships in the next academic year. In preparing for 2020-21 more widely, providers should ensure they also consider the suitability of their plans for apprenticeships. Providers should also keep under review the ongoing impact of the pandemic to satisfy themselves that, irrespective of the changes to employment or to the model of delivering learning, they are still able to offer an apprenticeship which aligns with their regulatory and funding requirements.

Overall, it is recognised that employers and providers will need to exercise flexibility with individual apprentices whose employment roles may change. For example, where an apprentice's initial role is no longer continuing and a new job is found, the apprenticeship may be continued as long as there is flexibility and support from the provider and the employer.

### **Impact on work-based learning**

A key longer-term challenge is maintaining the integrity of the apprenticeship and its roots in work-based learning. While the academic delivery can usually continue in a distance/online learning format, the work-based links are dependent on the employment situation and whether apprentices are able to gain the required experience or will be able to in the near future. The longer the disruption to the work-based experience, the further the apprenticeship may move from its planned form.

As with other higher education courses, providers have been making increasing use of distance/online learning approaches, and new digital technologies. The challenges associated with this change to delivery may be exacerbated by the learning arrangements in place for the apprenticeship, for example, whether apprentices are usually on campus for block periods or whether the arrangements are more akin to day release. Providers operating a block provision arrangement have faced the requirement to move a substantial portion of the planned delivery (for example, seven to eight weeks) online at short notice.

As with other higher education provision, a move to online learning raises questions for individuals, particularly when the provider's on-campus facilities are not available. For example, if apprentices require additional equipment or access to online sources or a suitable study environment. There may also be particular challenges associated with assessment of coursework assignments, observations and examinations, some of which might be possible online, but others may require alternative arrangements.

## **Disruption to learning, teaching and assessment**

From a learning and teaching perspective, there have been discussions around the elements that need to be prioritised. For example, there have been questions around the contribution towards apprentices' progression of the non-credit bearing activities, which are part of some older apprenticeships. Communication between the employer, apprentice and higher education provider is key as there may be differing views regarding the overall arrangements. For example, an employer may want to instigate a break in learning for the apprentice, but the apprentice and higher education provider may want to continue. It is important for providers and employers to maintain close links so that any plans the employers have to furlough staff are shared with the higher education provider directly.

Some of the planned learning and teaching activities have been adjusted because they would not work as effectively online without modification (for example, live projects and group or lab work). Where assessments cannot be undertaken because they are not suitable for delivery online, providers have made use of reflective evidence, for example in place of practical activities. One assessment approach, aimed at encouraging reflection on work-based learning, has been to produce a document with suggested questions for apprentices regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their work. Potential adjustments to assessments are also considered in QAA's thematic guidance on [practice and lab-based assessment](#).

Apprentices and employers have asked about the implications of practical assessments and examinations being altered, deferred or cancelled. They have raised questions such as whether mentors who are furloughed are permitted to engage with the apprentices as their mentees. The answers often depend on the specific nature of the agreement between the employers and the providers, and on the nature of assessment required. Many providers have produced a set of frequently asked questions and these are usually available on public-facing websites.

Providers have made adjustments to make assessments more flexible, for example, to recognise the mitigating circumstances of apprentices who have been ill due to COVID-19, who have been re-deployed, or have childcare/home schooling issues. These more generic provider measures include moving teaching and assessment online with extensions for some assessments and course end dates as required. Some requests for extensions and other forms of flexibility relate to the increased workplace demands apprentices have experienced, for example where they are employed in areas that have been in high demand during the pandemic (such as the public sector). Meeting requests for flexibility in these cases has often been vital to ensuring apprentices can continue to balance work and study.

Those apprentices requiring end-point assessment (EPA) in England have required particular attention, given that changes to the original arrangements require the input/approval of the EPA organisation and, where applicable, the associated external quality assurance provider. Guidance published by the [Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education \(IfATE\)](#) includes a number of professional discretions that 'may also be applied to Integrated degree apprenticeships'. The guidance states that 'breaks or pauses in learning should be applied in conjunction with the HEI's procedures so that the EPA still takes place and its outcome is incorporated into the awarding of the degree'.

A number of higher education providers are making use of safety net or 'no detriment' policies, contingency regulations and exceptional circumstances policies. Providers should consider how these policies will be applied to apprenticeship programmes and in all cases, a clear record of decision making should be retained. QAA has produced an [overview of 'no detriment' policies](#).

## **Access to additional support**

In order to assess the extent to which additional equipment or other support might be required by apprentices at this time, some providers have issued questionnaires. In some cases, providers have then supplied the necessary equipment.

As with other higher education provision, providers are making a range of support available to apprentices including:

- recorded or pre-recorded sessions for those who cannot engage at specific times
- catch-up question and answer sessions
- flexible assessment submission dates.

Apprentice support is recognised as a key feature in terms of maintaining motivation and engagement, and providers have been making use of key contacts such as mentors and coaches to ensure apprentices remain positive and are able to continue with their studies. This also means that support and guidance for mentors and employers is important, for example, through the publication of guidance and use of online forums to share commonly raised issues.

## **Forward planning**

After managing the initial challenges, providers are focusing on future delivery.

Where the time remaining before apprentices complete their awards allows, and depending on the learning and teaching model, there are likely to be options to make adjustments, for example rescheduling teaching blocks or replacing certain activities. There is likely to be more flexibility for providers offering 'roll on, roll off' arrangements rather than traditional terms or semesters. In addition, courses that are already delivered via distance/online learning may also be able to accommodate any changes more easily.

Considering the overall structure of apprenticeships is important now that it looks increasingly likely that social distancing measures will continue - or may be reintroduced - throughout 2020-21 and possibly beyond. Measures being considered by providers include flexible start dates or extending other deadlines. Providers are also continuing to seek support for the development of innovative employer engagement methods and to share good practice.

## **Digital technology and communication strategies**

Higher education providers have tended to differ in the extent to which online learning is used within courses. In cases where there is a substantial element of online learning, or indeed the whole taught element of the apprenticeship is already online, the challenges of the COVID-19 situation have been easier to mitigate. While online provision may appeal to some employers and apprentices, there can be an initial resistance to it associated with reservations regarding the quality of the learning experience. This might be influenced by the prior experience of individuals and can be overcome by delivering a high-quality online offer.

Where providers have opted for online provision it has been helpful to demonstrate how this can include opportunities for interactivity with an emphasis on making activities meaningful

and creating a cohort identity. In apprenticeships there can be a range of colleagues to provide support and different viewpoints, such as the academic team in the provider, mentors in the workplace and potentially additional support in the form of work-based learning advisers. Colleagues from different backgrounds (such as industry and further or higher education) who might previously have met apprentices in the workplace at set intervals to check on progress against the required competencies, can be engaged through a variety of activities at a distance, for example online or by telephone.

In planning for future online or blended learning delivery it is important to mitigate against any potential 'digital fatigue' both for apprentices and staff. Key points to consider include:

- the pacing of, and support for, the apprentice - potentially adjusting dates, in consultation with the apprentice and employer
- being mindful of the wellbeing of apprentices - making sure there is regular contact with apprentices and ensuring they know who to contact with particular issues
- maintaining contact with the employer
- supporting the apprentice to continue, where that is in their best interests, and to avoid deferring too many classes to later stages of the programme. In an online setting, providers can still monitor how apprentices are engaging and proactively offer support and encouragement.

Further information on [assessing with integrity in digital delivery](#) is available on the QAA website.

## Useful sources of information

Those higher education providers responsible for apprenticeship delivery have been looking to the UK Governments and various funding agencies across the nations for information, for example:

- [Department for Education](#) and [Education and Skills Funding Agency](#) in England
- [Department for the Economy \(DfE\)](#) in Northern Ireland
- [Skills Development Scotland](#)
- [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales \(HEFCW\)](#).

Other sources of advice have also included Public Health bodies and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies.

In England, the [Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#) has been producing guidance in addition to specific [apprenticeship standards](#). There are approximately 80 standards where flexibilities are being used to:

- extend the assessment window, working with the [Education and Skills Funding Agency \(ESFA\)](#) in relation to pauses in learning
- deliver assessment methods in a different order
- use digital tools to deliver more virtual assessments.

The IfATE aims to continue working with external quality assurance providers, the ESFA and other stakeholders to monitor the implementation and the impact of the flexibilities. The Institute also intends to work with end-point assessment organisations and external quality assurance providers to adjust end-point assessment plans to allow delivery over the next 6-12 months, responding to changes in circumstances.

Those individuals responsible for apprenticeships are also guided by the overarching decisions of the higher education provider (and the awarding body). For example, in relation

to examinations, 'no detriment' policies and progression arrangements. A number of the [QAA guidance documents](#) have been used to inform institutional policy, for example, on ['no detriment' policies](#) and [transcripts](#).

The [University Vocational Awards Council](#) has been holding weekly web-based forums for its members. These have been cited as a useful source of information and opportunity to raise questions.

There are also frequently asked questions on many provider websites and internal sites in relation to COVID-19. There are examples of practice, not linked to the COVID-19 situation, such as the [case studies](#) provided by the University of Strathclyde which are linked to apprenticeships that were designed to be delivered online.

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