

COVID-19: Thematic Guidance

Practice and Lab-based
Assessment

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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
4. Practice and laboratory-based assessment (this guidance).

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](#).

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.

Practice-based assessment in the creative arts, music and performance

1 Practice-based courses in the creative and performing arts include a substantial amount of assessment that takes place in public settings, such as exhibitions, live art, theatre and dance. Given the current restrictions and closure of public spaces, these assessments are unable to go ahead. Courses in these subject areas also include practical assessments which take place on campus. This guidance will explore some of the main problems associated with adapting creative and performance-based courses for online assessment and offer examples from providers that will alleviate some of these problems while maintaining standards in the subject. This guidance will also cover practical work in STEM subjects which require the use of specific facilities such as laboratories, clinical settings or simulators. It offers key questions to consider and resources aimed at supporting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards while being flexible enough to ensure that each solution should be tailored to individual course requirements.

Where public, individual or group performances are unable to take place, what alternative forms of assessment can be used to test learning outcomes?

2 Our initial guidance stated that for practice-based courses: 'every effort should be made to offer alternatives that meet the learning outcomes of the course/module'. We have examples from providers where attempts to meet learning outcomes for practice-based courses through alternative assessments have been implemented. It is important to emphasise that, where possible, providers should consult with student representatives when considering changes to course learning outcomes, alternative assessments, and other material changes to the student's learning, teaching and assessment experience.

3 In some cases, it may be possible to assess live performance work through alternative forms of assessment such as video recordings, sound files, online portfolios and written assessments such as essays, reflective blogs and production folders. It will be important for course teams to judge whether module and/or course learning outcomes can still be met via these forms of alternative assessment. In designing alternative assessment, providers should ensure that it is achievable by home-working students (who often only have access to basic technology like a smartphone or tablet) and assessable by home-working markers. Consideration will also need to be given to how practice-based work which was group or cohort-focused could be assessed in alternative forms.

4 Examples from providers across the sector include:

- In place of live individual music recitals, students are being asked to upload video recordings to the virtual learning environment. To ensure parity, video recordings are restricted to camera/smartphone devices. One method of supporting students is for tutors to give feedback on rehearsed recordings prior to assessment.
- Depending on the format, live group performances can be adapted to unedited online performances using digital sharing platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The use of these platforms is not only useful for assessment purposes but helps to create a digital learning community, particularly for music or performance students studying at home who are used to working in groups and ensembles. Use of social media apps such as Instagram or WhatsApp also allow for connective working practices to be

developed. Other evidence, such as stage and lighting designs, script adaptations and rehearsal notes can be submitted online.

- Replacing practical music conducting assessments with written assessments or vivas that test the same learning outcomes.
- Alternative written assessments to live performance in theatre and drama, weighted to reflect the level and length of performances. An example from one provider has a weighted alternative assessment at 100 words x minute of performance x year of the degree: a first-year student due to give a 10-minute performance, would write a 1000-word essay (10x100x1); a second-year student due to give a six-minute performance would write a 1200-word essay (6x100x2); a third-year student in a group of six, due to give a 30-minute group performance would write a 1500-word essay ((30÷6=5)x100x3). This work could include reflective practices of individual students' contribution to productions.
- One alternative assessment example from a provider uses the term 'speculative project', which uses material like designs, production plans and virtual research that provides a platform or basis for a proposed theatre production or performance activity without that activity having to take place.
- For some live performance work in theatre, music and dance, it may be possible to grade the working practices and rehearsal process rather than the final performance and still meet the required learning outcomes of the module or course.
- To support online teaching and assessment, coaches and accompanists are providing bespoke recorded accompaniments to act as 'backing tracks' for singers who would otherwise struggle to perform unaccompanied in their home environment.
- Some providers have removed end of year performances in Year 1 and 2 and replaced them with a reflective process that takes into account previous performances and achievements, allowing students to demonstrate how they have met the learning outcomes in a diagnostic progression with tutors and examiners.
- Subjects like games design, photography, film, animation and other types of media-practice courses, are well placed to assess using virtual studios and online portfolios.
- Film, television and radio practical assessments all use scripts, storyboards, shooting scripts, designs, location plans and edit decision lists that could be submitted as evidence of work completed to meet learning objectives together with written explanation of their intentions.

What alternative forms of assessment can be used for practical work which includes artefacts, garments, exhibitions and 3D models?

- In some creative arts subjects, students can submit work digitally which would otherwise have been submitted or assessed in an exhibition or final-year degree show. Clear guidance from tutors to students on what should be submitted and how, will be

important particularly on how learning outcomes can still be assessed via these alternative methods.

- In place of an assessed final-degree show, it may be suitable to assess students through online vivas and presentations, where the focus is on reflective, self-evaluation of practice rather than the finished artefact or model.
- It may be appropriate in some circumstances to award credit where partial assessment has already taken place through work in progress and where learning outcomes have been met.
- Some providers are planning to move final-year degree shows to online platforms, working closely with students to ensure the work is presented to their satisfaction.

Where learning outcomes cannot be met using alternative methods of assessment for practice-based courses, what contingencies can providers use to support students and assure standards?

- For first and second-year work, it may be possible to progress students based on their performances in previous terms/semesters, as long as they have met relevant learning outcomes. One suggestion is to use the remainder of the academic year to preload credit through projects that can be completed online that will count towards next year's outcomes, thus allowing a focus on live performance work in the succeeding years. Careful consideration would need to be given to pre-requisites, levels and the threshold standards in the qualification frameworks.
- Changes to assessment weightings so work in progress or work already assessed, as long as it meets course or module learning outcomes, becomes the whole mark rather than a percentage of the mark. Any redesign of assessments should, where possible and practicable, be carried out in consultation with students and must be subject to any university regulations that are in place for managing changes to validated assessments.
- Some work which necessitates specialist equipment or instruments that students will not be able to access at home, will not be suitable for alternative assessment via other means; some providers will allow final-year students the opportunity to take the assessment at the earliest available opportunity with 'no detriment'. This may mean practical assessments for third-years being pushed back to late summer or early autumn. This approach has significant ramifications for graduation, student employability, timetabling and workloads for staff, and needs to be carefully considered and consulted upon.

How can providers support students through navigating alternative forms of assessment?

- Many providers are giving students agency in how they are assessed and how their final awards are achieved. This may include previous live performances/work that have met the learning outcomes, tutor reports, reflective processes and alternative assessment outcomes. Providers will choose the result that is most favourable to the student as the final classification.

- Many providers are producing 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQs) about remote learning and assessment.
- It is important to remind students that the general advice concerning preparation for assessments still stands. For example, the importance of having a personal assessment; timetable; scheduling revision; taking care of their health; working with others online.
- Some providers are also ensuring that students in different disciplines can continue to practice at home, by supplying specialist equipment such as portable floors.
- It may be possible for providers to loan specialist software which can be loaded remotely to allow students to complete digital design work.
- Creative arts graduates often rely on a physical portfolio of work for potential employers. Providers should provide opportunities for students to collate physical portfolios when specialist facilities are made available, even if the assessment of the work is completed online and through virtual studios. Many providers have separated out the assessment of final-year work from a degree show aimed at employers and industry.

Practice-based assessments in laboratory and simulated clinical environments

If a course has assessments that take place in a laboratory setting should these assessments be postponed until the premises are open again?

5 The range of laboratories in use across the sector is extensive and encompasses those used to delivering programmes in the more traditional sciences such as chemistry, physics, engineering and biology, but laboratories are also used in subjects such as computing, psychology and languages, and the term is often used to describe simulated clinical environments in nursing, medicine and other allied professions. This, therefore, provides a challenge in providing guidance for the complete range of subject areas involved.

6 In the context of assessing student learning, a significant factor in carrying out assessments in laboratory settings is that there is often an element of psychomotor skill and competence involved in using or manipulating equipment. The extent to which any assessment can be modified so that it can take place remotely depends on the degree to which the learning outcomes assess skill and competence in the use of equipment. If the learning outcomes require the demonstration of laboratory skills using laboratory equipment, it may be that such assessments, where they are essential to the achievement of an award, have to be postponed. However, this action should only be taken when other options have been explored and it is in the student's interests. For the student, postponing assessments has the potential to delay a student's progression or the achievement of their award, which may lead to loss of career opportunity, expense and emotional harm. For the provider, postponement adds additional logistical complexity in organising replacement assessments, with consequential demands on

resources and staff time. Notwithstanding this, at all times the academic integrity of the award must remain in focus and essential or mandatory learning outcomes must be assessed.

Is it possible for alternatives to laboratory-based assessment to demonstrate the learning outcomes normally assessed in a laboratory setting?

7 Where possible, alternative online or remote assessments should be considered rather than postponing laboratory-based assessments. The design of such assessments should, as always, be aligned with the intended learning outcomes. If the learning outcomes do not include the requirement to demonstrate skill or competence in using equipment then it is likely that the outcomes will be directed towards the handling, analysis and interpretation of data and reaching conclusions. In such instances, alternatives may include:

- Presenting students with data sets and asking them to interpret them.
- Using remote simulations such as an experiment being conducted in a video presentation where students can see the data being produced. They could then be asked to provide a critical commentary on the conduct of the experiment. Depending on the learning outcomes, this may include analysing the data obtained. This example could go some way to enabling a student to demonstrate that they understand the equipment being used even if they are not able to demonstrate their personal competence in manipulating it.
- When providing students with data sets for them to analyse it helps to use a variety of data sets so that students cannot overshare, especially where the assessment is based on an individual student's performance and not a group's.
- In the field of electrical engineering, some providers are finding programming tasks that can be undertaken remotely rather than in a laboratory. This is also the case in computer sciences.

If students have had laboratory experience earlier in their programme of study, to what extent has this already addressed the skills-based outcomes being assessed in a later laboratory assessment?

8 Opportunities to achieve related learning outcomes are often provided several times during a course. For later assessments it may be possible to ascertain that students have already achieved particular outcomes at an earlier stage of a course. In this case, redesigning a laboratory assessment that includes the demonstration of competence in handling equipment so that this is no longer required could be justified if there is sufficient indication that the relevant competence has already been demonstrated elsewhere in the course. Even though students may be working in a modular context with module outcomes, it is important to keep in mind the overall programme outcomes, as it is the demonstration of these that should determine the award. As noted in the guidance on practice-based creative arts courses, any redesign of assessments should, where possible and practicable, be carried out in consultation with students and must be subject to any university regulations that are in place for managing changes to validated assessments.

Sources of additional information

- Teaching Theatre Online: A shift in pedagogy amidst Coronavirus outbreak: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1i-keJ_frOOEUa50CLAdz86hq5CxQwBQ2T4hbSI2nYdM/mobilebasic?fbclid=IwAR0QEEHNCVenpCiZlg7vKsdmXz-UBegev12A931CeMD1ZHlu74mVSYh09TI
- Paul Allain and Stacie Lee Bennett-Worth, University of Kent: The digital performer: <https://thedigitalperformer.co.uk/workingwiththebody/>
- University of Bristol: Planning your on-line assessment: www.bristol.ac.uk/digital-education/support/tools/online-assessment/planningyourassessment.html
- Tzu-Hua Wang (2018) Developing a web-based assessment system for evaluating examinee's understanding of the procedure of scientific experiments: www.ejmste.com/download/developing-a-web-based-assessment-system-for-evaluating-examinees-understanding-of-the-procedure-of-5386.pdf
- Kumar D et al (2018) Virtual and remote laboratories augment self-learning and interactions: Development, deployment and assessments with direct and online feedback. *PeerJ Preprints* 6:e26715v1: <https://doi.org/10.7287/peerj.preprints.26715v1>

There are websites that claim to provide online laboratory simulators or provide teaching resources such as videos of experiments. These may be worth exploring for ideas if not actual materials:

- The BioInteractive website provides educators with [planning tools](#) to build resource playlists and storylines, and [professional learning](#) materials and opportunities to deepen their scientific and pedagogical expertise:
- JoVE creates solutions for advancing research and science education by making and publishing videos of scientific experiments from the top laboratories around the globe. <https://www.jove.com/science-education-library> This site has free access until 15 June 2020.

Examples of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

[Glasgow Caledonian University](#)

[Ulster University](#)

[Durham University](#)

[Cardiff University](#)

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