

Digital Teaching and Learning in English Higher Education During the Coronavirus Pandemic: Response to Call for Evidence

October 2020

Introduction

This response to the call for evidence has been written drawing on evidence from QAA's extensive engagement with our members across the four nations of the UK and with over 25 quality bodies and regulators overseas.

Whilst Sir Michael Barber's 2019 assessment of the UK higher education sector, QAA has produced 29 sets of guidance and supporting resource, which we have made freely available to all in order to provide as wide a level of support as possible to the sector. Our intention has been to offer support in developing solutions to the demands that COVID-19 has placed on providers and the sector.

In preparing our guidance, we consulted extensively with QAA Member institutions. More than 2,000 representatives from 276 organisations attended 28 events, allowing us to learn about their experiences and approaches to adapting provision. At a senior level, we also undertook a series of conversations

for key activities. These would typically include subgroups with responsibility for teaching and learning provision. The first task of teaching and learning subgroups would typically involve consideration of such issues as to whether to adopt a 'no detriment' policy, and the replacement of invigilated, closed book in-person examinations by, for example, 'take home' or 'takeaway' examination or open book examinations conducted over a 24-hour period.

Approaches to no detriment policies were the subject of QAA's document on [No Detriment Policies: An Overview](#). It did not make recommendations, and was not promoted as guidance, but posed a series of reflective questions to help providers decide on the appropriate policy for their institution. For example, arguments in favour of a policy might be that it would allow students to be free to focus on their learning and realising their academic ambitions rather than worrying about risks to their academic outcomes due to matters that are beyond their control. Conversely, providers might feel that a no detriment policy would risk the creation of a visibly explicit 'COVID' generation whose degree classifications might not be considered reliable.

Looking ahead

In our conversations with providers and sector leaders it was clear the consensus was that all future higher education programmes will incorporate a substantial component of digital learning, with the blend of digital and other provision being determined by the requirements of the discipline and the student cohort served. Some sector leaders did express a note of caution about excessive future reliance on digital provision with one saying there is 'no evidence anywhere of the success of 100% online learning programmes for 18-year olds'. Many disciplines, such as performing arts and laboratory subjects, will continue to require the physical presence of students, even allowing for the introduction of techniques of virtual reality.

Much provider resource and strategic operation in the early weeks of the 2020-21 academic year has been focused on

MOOC. Another provider is developing online monitoring systems capable of taking over from in-person attendance monitoring, with a view to minimising disengagement among new and returning students and embedding a new approach to community and social frameworks into its programmes. This view also featured in QAA's [survey of small, specialist providers](#)