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Explaining contact hours

Guidance for institutions providing public
information about higher education in the UK

August 2011

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Preface

This publication was prompted by an enquiry undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 2009¹. Media coverage had raised wider interest in the topic of contact hours, suggesting that they might be a measure of quality or 'value for money' in a fee-paying environment. Comparisons were also made between student workloads in the UK and other countries.

QAA's enquiry explored perceptions and experiences among students, staff and other stakeholders around the amount of contact that students have with staff in higher education institutions in England. The information that students receive about contact hours emerged as a key theme and the enquiry suggested that students would benefit from clearer information on the nature and amount of contact with staff they can expect, as well as the role that contact time plays in the context of their learning. The results of a similar enquiry undertaken by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) supported these findings².

This new guidance has been produced as a result of these developments (for more information see **Appendix 1**). It is intended to act as a guide to higher education institutions, to support them in communicating information about contact hours to prospective and current students.

The guidance reflects how approaches to teaching, learning and assessment - including contact time - vary across subjects and across higher education institutions in the UK, and encourages institutions to communicate this information to students. It is primarily aimed at higher education institutions in England but may be of interest to staff and students in higher education across the UK. (It does not form part of the Academic Infrastructure, or its successor, the UK Quality Code for Higher Education³.)

QAA is also publishing a complementary short guide aimed directly at students, entitled *Contact hours: a guide for students*.

¹ QAA (2009) *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/Pages/Thematic-Enquiries.aspx.

² HEFCE (2009) *Report of the sub-committee for Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience: HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance*, available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_40.

³ The Academic Infrastructure is a set of reference points used by UK higher education institutions in setting and maintaining academic standards and managing students' learning opportunities. At the time of writing, work is underway on reviewing and revising some of the component parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which will be re-presented as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

1 Introduction

The amount of contact that students have with staff as part of their overall learning experience in higher education in England has received considerable attention over the last few years. The introduction of tuition fees in 1998 shone a spotlight on students' experiences, as students, and their funders and supporters, began to search for indicators of quality and 'value for money'. The search for suitable measures intensified following the introduction of variable fees in 2006. In the same year, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published the first of three surveys on students' perceptions of contact hours and workload across institutions in England⁴.

The surveys conducted by HEPI, and also by the National Union of Students (NUS)⁵, showed that contact hours vary between courses⁶ in different subject areas and between courses in the same subject offered by different institutions. This is understood among practitioners - courses are designed and delivered in ways that best suit the subject and the skills that the course is designed to help students to achieve. Subjects with an emphasis on developing practical skills tend to involve higher amounts of contact time. Prospective and current students may not, however, be aware of these differences and the reasons why they exist.

There are also differences, as HEPI and NUS reported, in contact time between institutions offering the same subject. Differences in approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, including the nature and amount of contact that students experience with staff, in part reflect the basis on which the course is offered (for example full-time, part-time, distance learning, work-based learning or blended learning).

Institutions and policy makers have therefore recognised the importance of providing clear and reliable information for prospective students to help them make informed decisions about where and what to study, and to understand the nature of the learning experience once enrolled. This guidance is intended to support institutions in providing such information. It offers a framework for explaining the role of contact time in students' learning that institutions may find it helpful to draw upon when communicating their current practice. (The guidance is not intended as a guide to teaching, learning and assessment practice itself.)

At the time of writing (August 2011), the higher education community in different parts of the UK is engaged in various initiatives designed to streamline and improve the information that institutions make publicly available, including that intended for prospective students to inform their choices. From the start of the academic year 2012-13, all publicly-funded institutions, including further education colleges that provide higher education, and private providers that subscribe to QAA, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, will be required to produce a set of information referred to as the Key Information Set (KIS) for their courses by the Higher

⁴ Bekhradnia, B, Whitnall, C and Sastry, T (2006) *The academic experience of students in English universities*, HEPI; Sastry, T and Bekhradnia, B (2007) *The academic experience of students in English universities*, HEPI; and Bekhradnia, B (2009) *The academic experience of students in English universities*, HEPI.

⁵ NUS/HSBC (2008, 2009, 2010) *NUS Student Experience Report*.

⁶ In this document, the term 'course' is used interchangeably with 'programme' to refer to the programme of study that a student applies for (which may itself be made up of smaller units of study).

Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI)⁷.

Who is this guidance is for?

This guidance is intended to be of practical help to programme leaders, quality assurance practitioners, academic registrars, pro vice-chancellors and others involved in providing and managing information for students. It may also be of interest to students, and their parents and supporters, although students are also referred to the companion guide *Contact hours: a guide for students*. Since contact hours have been the topic of much interest and debate in the general and specialist media, this publication may also be of interest to commentators, politicians and journalists.

How is this guidance intended to be used?

Institutions are encouraged to draw upon this guidance in explaining the approach to teaching, learning and assessment on a course and particularly the role of contact hours in students' learning. The information institutions provide is likely to include a description of the range of different methods of learning, teaching and assessment that a student is likely to encounter, the expectations that institutions have for students as independent learners, and the typical number of hours that students should expect to spend studying overall.

The guidance is not prescriptive about the form in which institutions make information for students available. Institutions currently provide information for prospective students through a variety of different means, including via programme specifications, UCAS Entry Profiles, websites, prospectuses, student handbooks and during open days. Information around teaching, learning and assessment, informed by the guidance presented here, may make reference to or be informed by any of these sources. Institutions may also provide information for current students through cross-reference to a student charter or agreement, which identifies mutual expectations and obligations on an institution-wide basis⁸. Institutions may also wish to draw upon the guidance presented here in the first few weeks following enrolment, during academic induction, to help students understand what to expect during their course, and what is expected of them as independent learners.

How is this document structured?

The guidance begins by discussing what is meant by 'contact hours', highlighting the different forms that contact time can take, as well as variation with respect to whom the contact is with and what it is intended to help students to achieve. Section 3 includes practical guidance that institutions may wish to draw upon when communicating methods of teaching, learning and assessment. Sections 4 and 5 look at the relationship between contact hours, quality and student achievement, which is relevant to the broader context. Section 6 focuses on student workload and the importance of institutions being clear with students about their expectations regarding independent study alongside participation in scheduled activities. Lastly, section 7 includes a brief note on what national student satisfaction surveys say around the academic experience and contact hours in particular.

⁸ The Student Charter Group, convened under the direction of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, published its final report and recommendations in January 2011, available at: www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/s/11-736-student-charter-group.pdf.

⁷ Courses included in the KIS will be full and part-time undergraduate programmes lasting more than one year on the basis of a full-time mode of study. For further information, see: www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/infohe/kis.htm and www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2011/W11%2027HE%20Key%20Information%20Sets%20Outcomes%20and%20next%20steps.pdf

2 What is meant by 'contact hours'?

Contact time with staff comes in various different **forms** depending on its **intended purpose**. A lecture, for example, may involve contact with a member of staff giving instruction to a large group of students, while a seminar or tutorial may allow closer interaction between students and a member of staff in the form of participatory discussion on a one-to-one or small group basis. A laboratory session, dance class or site visit, for example, may allow the development of practical skills through demonstration and guided practice. A studio-based session, as well as facilitating the development of practical skills, creates an environment that mimics practice in the professional world, allowing for experimentation and trialling of ideas, group and peer learning, and face-to-face feedback.

Contact time may also take a **virtual rather than face-to-face form**, through the use of email, email discussion groups, virtual learning environments (VLEs) and other technology-aided means. It can also take place in a work-based setting.

It is not just the form that contact time takes that varies but also **whom it is with**. Some learning and teaching sessions will involve a lecturer or visiting lecturer, some will involve a teaching assistant, others a technician or member of specialist support staff, and others still may involve an employer (such as in the case of work-based learning) or other affiliate of the institution. (Interaction with other students as peers is also considered by some to be a form of contact time, where a student is not working solely independently - particularly during scheduled group activity.)

Opportunities for one-to-one interaction with members of staff⁹, during which students can receive individual help or personalised feedback on their progress, may not always present themselves as formal, scheduled sessions. '**Office hours**' for example, are a frequent feature, where members of staff are available for one-to-one sessions during set times. Interaction via email is another example of one-to-one contact time. It is important that students are able to recognise these as opportunities for interaction with institutional staff.

When students receive **feedback** on assessed work, whether one-to-one or in a group setting, this can also be considered to be an important element of contact time which contributes to students' learning but which, again, may not be formally scheduled.

Given these variations in the form that contact time takes and the functions it serves, as well as whether or not it is formally scheduled, it would be challenging and perhaps undesirable to attempt to issue a universal definition. Instead, institutions are encouraged to describe the contact with staff that a student can expect in the context of other learning and teaching activities. In describing contact time, institutions may wish to refer to the dimensions outlined above, namely:

- the form that contact time takes, including an indication of teaching group size
- the intended purpose of the contact time
- whom the contact time is with
- whether or not the contact time is formally scheduled.

⁹ From this point forwards in the document, 'staff' should be taken to mean a lecturer, researcher, technician, member of support staff or graduate teaching assistant of the institution, or a visiting or external specialist.

It is important to note that contact time forms one part of an overall approach to learning and teaching. Presenting a more **rounded picture of teaching, learning and assessment** on a course, including the methods that do and do not involve contact time, is likely to offer a more suitable means of helping students to select an appropriate course for them and to know what to expect once enrolled (see section 3). Students may benefit further from an understanding of how the learning, teaching and assessment activities on a course are designed to help them to achieve, and demonstrate the achievement of, intended learning outcomes linked to the course's main aims and objectives.

3 Communicating information about teaching, learning and assessment

In a survey of prospective and current students (1,926 respondents), commissioned by HEFCE in 2010 as part of its work around public information about higher education, students were asked to score the usefulness of around 50 pre-selected pieces of information. Nearly one-fifth (19 per cent) of students surveyed said that they would be interested to know the 'proportion of teaching in lectures with a class size over 100' that they would experience on a course¹⁰. Seventeen per cent said that they would be interested in knowing the 'proportion of first year teaching by professors', and 38 per cent said that they would be interested in knowing the 'weekly hours of teaching contact time' on a course.

Presenting information solely on weekly contact time would not, however, provide a complete picture of the learning and teaching on a course or allow students to make fully informed decisions between different courses. Instead, such information might be meaningfully presented in the context of the overall teaching, learning and assessment strategy for the course.

Institutions are encouraged to explain their approach to teaching, learning and assessment on a particular course early on in the student lifecycle so that prospective students are able to make informed decisions about what and where to study. Academic induction, at the start of a programme of study or whenever a student joins, can help to emphasise the expectations that the institution has of students as independent learners, and what students can in turn expect from the course and the institution.

3.1 Learning and teaching

A range of approaches to learning and teaching (pedagogy) are in use across UK higher education. This flexibility and diversity allows institutions to:

- be responsive both to individuals and to cohorts of students
- take account of the latest developments in educational research and technology
- deliver courses in the most appropriate ways for the subject or area of practice
- accommodate different methods of course delivery (such as distance learning or e-learning).

¹⁰ Report to HEFCE by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University (2010) *Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education*, available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2010/rd12_10/

Courses in similar subjects may share commonalities in approaches to learning and teaching because of the needs and traditions of particular disciplines. Courses in subjects with an emphasis on developing practical skills are likely to involve more scheduled sessions to allow students to learn via demonstration and supervised practice. Some subject areas rely heavily on particular methods, for example, students studying art and design subjects or architecture will almost certainly experience a large proportion of their learning via the 'critique'¹¹.

Not all methods of learning and teaching involve contact with staff and, where they do, there may be qualitative differences in terms of whom the contact is with and what it is intended to help students achieve (see section 2). A list of methods of learning and teaching that typically involve contact time is given below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods that typically involve contact with institutional staff or affiliates

Lecture A presentation or talk on a particular topic.
Seminar A discussion or classroom session focusing on a particular topic or project.
Tutorial A meeting involving one-to-one or small group supervision, feedback or detailed discussion on a particular topic or project.
Project A meeting with a supervisor to discuss a particular piece of work.
Demonstration A session involving the demonstration of a practical technique or skill.
Practical classes and workshops A session involving the development and practical application of a particular skill or technique.
Supervised time in studio/workshop Time in which students work independently but under supervision, in a specialist facility such as a studio or workshop.
Fieldwork Practical work conducted at an external site.
External visit A visit to a location outside of the usual learning spaces, to experience a particular environment, event, or exhibition relevant to the course of study.
Work-based learning Learning that takes place in the workplace.

¹¹ More commonly known as the 'Crit', this may take the form of a review or presentation and is an established part of studio-based culture where teachers and students can discuss, experiment with and develop concepts and ideas.

A more detailed description of each method is provided in **Appendix 2**. The list is presented as indicative only, reflecting that approaches vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. It may nonetheless serve as a guide to institutions in communicating their practice to prospective and current students.

The descriptions in Appendix 2 indicate the nature and extent of variation with respect to **teaching group size and who the teaching is with**. Teaching groups vary in size between different methods (but may also vary within methods). Some methods are better suited to larger groups of students than others - lectures, for example, traditionally involve a fairly didactic approach, where a member of staff delivers key facts or ideas to a large group of students, while seminars present an opportunity for greater interaction and participation via in-depth discussion.

In addition to participating in scheduled learning and teaching activities, students in higher education are expected to study independently (sections 3.2 and 6). Accordingly, most courses combine scheduled activities with private or personal study time, which may itself be directed by the institution. Presenting a rounded picture of the teaching, learning and assessment on a course would include expectations for private or personal study as well as information about contact with staff.

At the time of writing, institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be required, from 2012-13, as part of the Key Information Set, to indicate the proportion of time in each year of study that students can expect to spend engaged in:

- scheduled learning and teaching activities
- guided independent learning
- placement/study abroad.

HEFCE and HEFCW will issue technical guidance in September 2011 to assist institutions in working with the Key Information Set.

3.2 Private/personal study

Higher education is distinguished from general and secondary education by its focus on independent learning. Scheduled learning and teaching activities typically feature alongside time in which students are expected to study independently, which may itself be 'guided'. Independent study might include preparation for scheduled sessions, follow-up work, wider reading or practice, completion of assessment tasks, revision, and so on. The relative amounts of time that students are expected to spend engaged in scheduled activities and independent study varies between courses.

The **total** amount of time that students are expected to spend studying (student workload) is typically denoted by the volume of credit attached to the course or unit of study (section 6).

In all cases, students are expected to be responsible for their own learning, with appropriate support being provided by the institution. Such support can be via a variety of means, including, for example, through the provision of study skills training, feedback on assessed work, access to libraries and learning spaces, language skills training, and so on (see description of academic quality in section 4).

3.3 Assessment and feedback

Methods of learning and teaching cannot meaningfully be considered in isolation from assessment of students' learning. The three are typically aligned in an overall strategy for a programme of study, designed to enable students to acquire the key areas of knowledge, skill and understanding, and to demonstrate this acquisition via assessment of learning outcomes. Furthermore, contact with staff often takes place in the context of giving feedback on assessed work.

In summative assessment or assessment of learning, the outcome counts towards the final marks or grade awarded. Assessment can also be strongly formative, however, where the comments of the assessor help to shape students' learning and aid their progress through a course (assessment for learning). Assessment can also be both formative and summative at the same time. The feedback that students receive as part of assessment forms an important part of their learning - feedback sessions may involve contact time with institutional staff but will not necessarily be scheduled.

A list of the most common methods of assessment is given in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2: Indicative list of assessment methods

Written exam
A question or set of questions relating to a particular area of study.
Written assignment, including essay
An exercise completed in writing.
Report
A description, summary or other account of an experience or activity.
Dissertation
An extended piece of written work, often the write-up of a final-year project.
Portfolio
A collection of work that relates to a given topic or theme, which has been produced over a period of time.
Project output (other than dissertation)
Output from project work, often of a practical nature, other than a dissertation or written report.
Oral assessment and presentation
A conversation or oral presentation on a given topic, including an individual contribution to a seminar.
Practical skills assessment
Assessment of a student's practical skills or competence.
Set exercises
Questions or tasks designed to assess the application of knowledge, analytical, problem-solving or evaluative skills.

A more detailed description of each method is provided in **Appendix 3**. The list may serve as a guide to institutions in communicating their practice to prospective and current students. As with learning and teaching methods in section 3.1, the list is presented as indicative because methods of assessment vary between different courses and can change over time.

As with methods of learning and teaching, some forms of assessment may be more common in certain subject areas than others. Courses in subjects with an emphasis on the development of competencies are likely to feature a greater proportion of practical tests or examinations for example.

Research commissioned by HEFCE on prospective students' information needs suggested that 35 per cent of students surveyed (1,962) would find it helpful to know 'the proportion of overall assessment that would be conducted via coursework'¹². Presenting this information in isolation would be unlikely to provide a balanced overall picture of the assessment on a course. The importance of presenting a more rounded picture in order to allow students to make informed decisions about what and where to study has already been emphasised in section 3.1.

At the time of writing, institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be required, from 2012-13, as part of the Key Information Set, to indicate the proportion of summative assessment for each year of a programme of study that will derive from:

- written exams
- practical exams
- coursework.

HEFCE and HEFCW will issue technical guidance in September 2011 to assist institutions in working with the Key Information Set.

4 Contact hours and quality or 'value for money'

Students in higher education in England have been paying tuition fees since 1998 (variable since 2006). The introduction of fees has increased attention on what students, and their parents and supporters, perceive that they are getting in return for their financial investment. At the time of writing, when the existing cap on how much institutions in England can charge is set to be lifted, the focus on 'value for money' has intensified.

Indicators of value for money revolve around notions of quality - how it can be measured and how prospective students, and their parents and supporters, can be assured of it. Contact hours are one of a number of measures taken by some as a proxy for quality and thus an indicator of value for money. However, as has been set out in this document, contact time with staff forms one part of an overall approach to learning and teaching that is designed to fit the particular course and subject being studied. There is no evidence to suggest that, taken alone, contact hours offer a meaningful way in which to measure quality.

¹² Report to HEFCE by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University (2010) *Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education*, available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2010/rd12_10/.

Quality (or more specifically, academic quality) is about providing an environment that creates the potential for students to succeed in their studies. Quality is more commonly measured in a qualitative rather than a quantitative way, and by a whole range of factors that include:

- access to learning spaces and resources such as libraries, laboratories or design studios
- the availability of Information and Communications Technology as an aid to learning
- the transparency of assessment criteria, allowing students to understand what is expected of them
- the quantity, quality and timeliness of feedback on assessed work
- support for individuals' needs and entitlements
- the extent to which the institution takes account of students' feedback in making continual improvements to existing provision.

(QAA refers to these factors as 'learning opportunities' and discusses how well a given institution manages these opportunities in its audit and review reports. Institutions themselves also carry out routine monitoring and periodic reviews of quality as part of maintaining and improving the services and support made available to students.)

5 Contact hours and student achievement

Factors that affect educational achievement are multifarious in the same way as are determinants of quality. In addition to the learning opportunities that institutions make available, other factors thought to be important in determining achievement include:

- how prepared students are for higher education (their preparedness)
- students' background and qualifications upon entry
- students' motivation to study and to seek help when they need it.^{13,14}

Previous studies have illustrated the difficulty of trying to tease apart multiple determinants of quality and student achievement, and advise caution in trying to assign a direct causal relationship between individual variables (that will include contact hours) and student achievement^{15,16}. Specifically around contact with staff, previous studies have suggested that what happens during sessions, in the form of interaction between students and staff, may be particularly important to students' learning¹⁷.

The lack of available evidence to suggest a direct relationship between contact hours and student achievement does not lessen the importance of institutions providing clear and reliable information about the teaching, learning and assessment on a course so that students are able to select a course that best suits their needs, including their learning styles and lifestyle.

¹³ Gibbs, G (2010) *Dimensions of quality*, HEA.

¹⁴ John, B, Patel, K and Tang, W (2009) *Diversity in the student learning experience and time devoted to study: a comparative analysis of the UK and European evidence*, report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, CHERI.

¹⁵ Gibbs, G (2010) *Dimensions of quality*, HEA.

¹⁶ John, B, Patel, K and Tang, W (2009) *Diversity in the student learning experience and time devoted to study: a comparative analysis of the UK and European evidence*, report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, CHERI.

¹⁷ Gibbs, G (2010) *Dimensions of quality*, HEA.

6 Student workload and academic credit

The amount of independent study that students on a particular course will be expected to undertake will vary, partly depending on how much time they spend engaged in scheduled learning and teaching sessions. The total amount of time that students spend studying each week is often referred to as 'student workload' and will be made up of time spent in structured learning and teaching sessions and time spent engaged in private or personal study.

It is important that institutions are clear with students prior to enrolment, and during induction, about how much time they are expected to spend studying outside scheduled learning and teaching sessions. The notional learning hours associated with qualifications, programmes and individual units of study are based on a broad agreement across institutions that students can expect to spend 10 hours learning on average in order to gain one academic credit unit¹⁸. This includes time spent in scheduled learning and teaching activities and private/personal study (for example, preparation for scheduled sessions, reading, preparation for assignment tasks, revision, and so on).

7 A note on student satisfaction surveys

The focus of this guidance is on the information that institutions make available to students about contact hours, and teaching, learning and assessment more generally. However, as was outlined in the Introduction, the original starting point concerned perceptions and commentary in the specialist and general media around the sufficiency of contact hours and their meaning in relation to quality or 'value for money'. Previous sections have attempted to address some of those perceptions. This final section looks briefly at what student satisfaction surveys reveal about how students feel about this aspect of their experience.

The National Student Survey (NSS) is a large-scale questionnaire of final-year students' views on their academic experiences that has run consecutively over the last seven years (since 2005) across publicly funded institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and participating institutions in Scotland. The survey attracts a high response rate - 66 per cent in 2011, with around 406,000 responses¹⁹. Although not asked specifically for their views about contact time, students are asked to rate how satisfied they are with the teaching and assessment on their course, as well as questions to do with how well the course was organised and run and the learning resources and support that were made available by the institution. The results of the NSS over the last seven years have been consistently high, with an overall satisfaction rate of around 81 per cent²⁰.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has also conducted annual surveys of students' views over the last three years (in 2008, 2009 and 2010). Sample sizes in the NUS surveys are significantly smaller than for the NSS (3,135 in 2008; 1,187 in 2009; and 3,863 in 2010) but the NUS surveys asked students specifically for their views about contact time. When asked whether they thought the contact hours they had received were appropriate, around 75 per cent of students surveyed felt that they were (75 per cent in 2008; 76 per cent in 2009; and 78 per cent in 2010)²¹.

¹⁸ QAA (2006) *Academic credit in higher education in England*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/AcademicCredit.pdf

¹⁹ HEFCE circular letter: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circlets/2011/cl15_11/.

²⁰ Results from the NSS are made publicly available on the Unistats website at: <http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>.

²¹ NUS/HSBC (2008, 2009, 2010) *NUS Student Experience Report*.

Appendix 1: Background to this publication

This publication is produced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges and through contracts with the higher education funding bodies in the UK. QAA visits universities and colleges to review how well they are fulfilling their responsibilities for academic quality and standards. QAA's mission is 'to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education'.

In developing this new guidance, QAA worked with representatives from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Subject Centres. The HEA is an independent organisation funded by subscriptions from higher education institutions and grants from the higher education funding bodies. The HEA identifies and shares effective teaching practices in order to provide the best possible learning experience for all students. At the time that the work was begun, the HEA structured its subject-level support through means of 24 Subject Centres, from which representatives were drawn to form the **Contact Hours Working Party** (see page 13).

The **Contact Hours Working Party** was convened in June 2010 to develop new guidance that would help higher education institutions to identify and explain the role of contact hours in students' learning. At around the same time, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) began investigating what information the public and students need about higher education more generally. At time of writing, this work is nearing the final stages of reporting and recommendation²². Funders and higher education representatives in other parts of the UK are engaged in similar discussions.

²² HEFCE (2011) *Provision of information about higher education: Outcomes of consultation and next steps*, available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11_18/

Membership of the Contact Hours Working Party

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QAA is also grateful to the following individuals who joined the 2nd meeting of the Working Party, which acted as an Expert Group discussion on behalf of HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE as part of the development of the teaching, learning and assessment part of the Key Information Set:

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And for contributions via correspondence from:

Liz McDowell

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Appendix 2: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to learning and teaching vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Descriptions are intended to distinguish between methods from the perspective of presenting course level information rather than to present a detailed pedagogical account of each approach.

Lecture

A presentation or talk on a particular topic.

The term 'lecture' covers everything from the traditional model, where a single member of the institution's staff or an affiliate²³ introduces ideas or delivers facts to a group of students, to approaches that might be much more interactive, involve a variety of contributors, make use of a range of media and technologies, and take place virtually as well as in person. Lectures are assumed, in general, to involve larger groups of students than do seminars and tutorials but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

Seminar

A discussion or classroom session focusing on a particular topic or project.

Seminars are defined as sessions that provide the opportunity for students to engage in discussion of a particular topic and/or to explore it in more detail than might be covered in a lecture - the extent of interaction will depend on the delivery method. A typical model would involve a guided, tutor-led discussion in a small group. However, the term also encompasses student or peer-led classes with a staff member or affiliate present. As with lectures, use of technology means seminars may take place virtually. Seminars are assumed in general to involve smaller groups of students than lectures, but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

Tutorial

A meeting involving one-to-one or small group supervision, feedback or detailed discussion on a particular topic or project.

Tutorials may be distinguished from seminars for the stronger emphasis that they place on the role of the tutor in giving direction or feedback. Tutorials can happen virtually as well as face-to-face.

Project supervision

A meeting with a supervisor to discuss a particular piece of work.

The term 'project supervision' is used to refer to the meetings that a student or group of students would have with a supervisor, to plan, discuss, and monitor progress on a particular piece of work, such as a dissertation or extended project. Meetings can take place virtually

²³ A lecturer, researcher, technician, member of support staff or graduate teaching assistant of the institution or a visiting or external specialist.

or in person. The size of a project supervision meeting will depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned and the nature of that work but supervisions will frequently also take place on a one-to-one basis.

Demonstration

A session involving the demonstration of a practical technique or skill.

Examples might include the demonstration of laboratory skills, clinical skills, performance art or fieldwork techniques. Demonstrations can take place virtually or in person. The size of a demonstration is likely to depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned, as well as the nature of that work, but could also take place on a one-to-one basis.

Practical classes and workshops

A session involving the development and practical application of a particular skill or technique.

Examples are wide ranging and could include a laboratory class, recital, artefact handling/identification, language conversation, sports match and so on. Practical classes and workshops might incorporate elements of teaching or guided learning, and they are at least likely to be supervised or observed. These sessions are more likely to take place in person but, depending on the nature of the subject, may also be conducted remotely.

The size of a practical class or workshop will depend upon the nature of the activity. Workshops are likely to involve at least a small group of students but practical classes could take place on a one-to-one basis.

Supervised time in studio/workshop

Time in which students work independently but under supervision, in a specialist facility such as a studio or workshop.

Examples might include time spent in an art or design studio, or in a rehearsal space such as a workshop theatre. It could be timetabled or take place on an ad hoc basis. Peers as well as staff or affiliates may be involved. Due to the nature of the activity, it is unlikely to take place virtually. Supervised time in a studio/workshop might involve a group or individual.

Fieldwork

Practical work conducted at an external site.

Examples of fieldwork might include survey work and other forms of data collection, excavations and explorations. The work might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervision could be provided by staff or appointed representatives. Some fieldwork may be conducted virtually. Fieldwork might be conducted in groups of various sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the work involved.

External visits

A visit to a location outside of the usual learning spaces, to experience a particular environment, event, or exhibition relevant to the course of study.

Examples are wide ranging and could include a visit to a business or industrial site, built environment site, museum or collection, to attendance at a performance or exhibition. These visits might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervisors could include staff or appointed representatives. Site visits may be carried out in groups of varying sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the visit and the location.

Work-based learning

Learning that takes place in the workplace.

The term covers any learning that takes place through an organised work opportunity, rather than in a university or college setting, and includes managed placements. Some supervision or monitoring is likely to be involved, and may be carried out either by a member of staff or a mentor within the host organisation. Due to the nature of the activity, work-based learning is unlikely to take place virtually. Students might undertake work-based learning individually or in groups, depending on the nature of the workplace and the learning involved.

Appendix 3: Indicative list of assessment methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to assessment vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Descriptions are intended to distinguish between methods from the perspective of presenting course level information rather than to present a detailed pedagogical account of each approach.

Written exam

A question or set of questions relating to a particular area of study.

Written exams usually occur at the end of a period of learning and assess whether students have achieved the intended learning outcomes. They may be 'seen', where the student is aware in advance of the question(s) they are expected to answer, or 'unseen', where the questions are only revealed 'on the day'. In an 'open-book' exam, a student is allowed to use a selection of reference materials during the assessment. The questions asked as part of a written exam may be essay, short answer, problem or multiple-choice. Written exams usually (but not always) take place under timed conditions.

Written assignment, including essay

An exercise completed in writing.

Written exercises that typically have deadlines attached but which are not carried out under timed conditions. A well-known example is the essay, where students are required to write about a particular topic or answer a question in depth. Other examples include written briefings on particular topics.

Report

A description, summary or other account of an experience or activity.

There are many different kinds of report - often students are required to produce a report after participating in a practical activity such as fieldwork, laboratory work, work experience or placement. Reports typically have a prescribed format.

Dissertation

An extended piece of written work, often the write-up of a final-year project.

A dissertation is a substantial piece of writing deriving from research that a student has undertaken. Dissertations are the result of a student's independent work, carried out under the guidance of a supervisor. Different subject areas may follow different conventions in relation to the production of dissertations. (Note that other outputs from projects are listed separately.)

Portfolio

A collection of work that relates to a given topic or theme, which has been produced over a period of time.

Typically, a portfolio contains a number of pieces of work, usually connected by a topic or theme. Students are usually required to organise the collection of examples and the portfolio often includes some reflective accounts (diaries/logs). Examples include, in education,

that students may collect in a portfolio essays around particular teaching methods, lesson plans, teaching materials that they have developed and a report about the teaching experience itself.

Project output (other than dissertation)

Output from project work, often of a practical nature, other than a dissertation or written report.

Students are assessed on the output of a period of project work (other than in the form of a dissertation or written report). Examples are diverse and include the staging of a play or other performance, a piece of artwork, a new product or a poster.

Oral assessment and presentation

A conversation or oral presentation on a given topic, including an individual contribution to a seminar.

Examples of oral assessments and presentations might include conversations, discussions, debates, presentations and individual contributions to seminars. This category would also include the viva voce exam which is typically used by institutions in specific circumstances such as clarifying assessment decisions reached via other means.

Practical skills assessment

Assessment of a student's practical skills or competence.

Practical skills assessment focuses on whether, and/or how well, a student performs a specific practical skill or technique (or competency). Examples include clinical skills, laboratory techniques, identification of or commentary on artwork, surveying skills, language translation or listening comprehension, and so on.

Set exercises

Questions or tasks designed to assess the application of knowledge, analytical, problem-solving or evaluative skills.

Examples might include data interpretation and data analysis exercises and problem-based or problem-solving exercises.

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