

A Launch Pad for Future Success: Using Outcomes-Based Approaches to Scaffold the Pandemic Year and Build for the Future

COVID-19 Support
and Guidance

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Overview

QAA commissioned Professor Elizabeth Cleaver and Professor Mike McLinden, independent higher education consultants, to carry out a project called 'Learning from the Online Pivot: Approaches to aligning assessment and learning outcomes for student success'. This briefing paper provides an outline of the project and the anticipated final outcomes which will be available for QAA Members in June 2021.

The project explores how outcomes-based approaches were used to assure the quality and standards of UK higher education during the pandemic year, identifies what worked well and what is likely to endure as part of sector practice in the longer term.

The key points reported in this briefing paper are:

1 What matters? Reaffirming the role of outcomes-based approaches

- Outcomes-based approaches sit at the heart of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2018) - the sector-agreed reference point for the assurance of quality and maintenance of standards.
- Drawing on a sector survey and case study evidence, this project offers insight into how the UK sector built on considerable expertise in outcomes-based approaches to ensure positive student outcomes and progression.

2 What works? Exploring preliminary sector survey findings

A number of positive legacies have emerged from the pandemic period including:

- developing confidence and skills for more flexible delivery
- ensuring the content and wording of learning outcomes do not unnecessarily constrain modes of learning and assessment
- re-establishing understanding and oversight of institutional portfolios
- re-engaging with students about the importance and purpose of quality assurance
- rethinking and redesigning regulations for greater future resilience
- reflecting on, and embedding, inclusivity in courses
- increasing engagement with the idea and use of authentic assessment.

3 What happened? A preview of our sector case studies

- Our invited case studies showcase the importance of outcomes-based activity at a range of levels within 13 providers. This briefing note provides a preview of three provider case studies.

4 What's next?

- The project outcomes comprise a wider set of insights and resources which will be made available to QAA Members in June 2021.

1 What matters? Reaffirming the role of outcomes-based approaches in assuring quality and maintaining standards

This section reaffirms 'what matters' with respect to the role of outcomes-based approaches in assuring quality and maintaining standards in the UK sector.

Outcomes-based approaches in the UK Quality Code

The [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code) is the sector-agreed reference point for the assurance of quality and the maintenance of standards in higher education. It draws on 10 'guiding principles' to support the translation of guidance into practice, with the first principle stating: 'Assessment methods and criteria are aligned to learning outcomes and teaching activities.' (Guiding Principle 1: UK Quality Code)

The Quality Code makes explicit reference to the outcomes-based approach most used in the UK higher education sector - constructive alignment (see Biggs & Tang, 2011). Through constructive alignment, teaching activities and assessment approaches are connected by a clear and upfront articulation of what students should learn (intended learning outcomes), and how they should express their learning (assessment criteria). Teaching is then designed to ensure that learning activities enable students to work towards achieving these outcomes, with assessment tasks designed in ways that ensure students know what is expected of them, and assessors can make clear comparable judgements as to the extent to which the outcomes have been met. Constructive alignment is therefore viewed in the Quality Code as a prerequisite for:

- the maintenance of *academic standards* - ensuring course-level learning outcomes are consistent with relevant national qualification frameworks' descriptors, and associated assessments can determine whether each student has achieved the expectations of these descriptors
- the development of *high-quality courses* - where curricula, teaching and learning, learning outcomes and assessment are fully aligned, thus enabling an effective and focused learning experience, leading to reliable assessment which accurately and consistently measures the extent to which students have achieved their course learning outcomes.

Reaffirming the role of outcomes-based approaches

During the COVID-19 pandemic year, a series of guidance documents and evidence-based reports have steered and mapped the shift towards remote digital teaching and learning. Each reflects the rapid (and often creative) ways in which the providers responded to the challenges posed by a series of pandemic lockdowns and associated governmental requirements and expectations. One of the most anticipated reports was *Gravity Assist: propelling higher education towards a brighter future* - a report of the digital teaching and learning review produced by the Office for Students (Barber et al, 2021). In relation to the use of learning outcomes in curriculum design and delivery, the report notes:

'Designing for delivery in a digital environment has provided an opportunity for many higher education providers to review their curriculum design and consider in detail how teaching and learning activities mapped across to learning outcomes.'
(Barber et al. 2021, p 46)

This acknowledgement reflects earlier guidance, provided by QAA in June 2020, which recommended that:

'Providers should aim to develop strategies for different teaching models that are designed to mitigate risk and also ensure that the student experience remains meaningful, with satisfaction of learning outcomes at the forefront of any redesigned methods.'

(QAA, 2020a, p 18)

In a report published later that year, QAA documented how the sector managed the move to digital delivery during 2020 (QAA, 2020b). Our current project explores in more detail how the review, mapping and redesign was undertaken by providers, and why it was important for ensuring the quality of the educational offer and confidence in the standards of the subsequent awards.

About the current project

This project explores how outcomes-based approaches were used to assure the quality and standards of UK higher education awards during the first pandemic year (defined here as March 2020-February 2021).

In this briefing note, we present evidence gathered from a sector survey* and invited follow up case studies. We explore how providers in the UK higher education sector built on their considerable expertise in the use of outcomes-based approaches to assure the quality and standards of their education and positive student outcomes and progression. In addition, we consider how providers report capitalising on the potential of this '...disruptive change [as] an opportunity to fully rethink assessment - once the recent emergency alterations are dealt with' (QAA, 2020a, p 16), to identify and build long-standing benefits for the higher education sector and its students.

*** About our sector survey**

The free-text project survey was distributed across the UK higher education sector in March 2021 using a variety of online discussion networks including the Academic Registrars Council, the Heads of Educational Development Group, the Advance HE Principal Fellows network and the Staff and Educational Development Association. Although its primary purpose was to identify case study providers, the 34 completed responses offered us an opportunity to explore some wider sector insights, as reported in section 2.

Providers who responded are broadly categorised as:

- Pre-92 providers (universities established prior to the [Further and Higher Education Act 1992](#))
- Post-92 providers (institutions who gained university title through the [Further and Higher Education Act 1992](#) and the [Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 1992](#))
- Modern providers (who gained university status after 1992 or joined the Office for Students' register following the [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#)).

2 What works? Exploring preliminary sector survey findings

We explore preliminary findings through reference to five emergent themes from the sector survey, illustrated with selected quotes from provider responses.

Learning outcomes lie at the heart of quality assurance

Our survey respondents reaffirmed the importance of learning outcomes for quality assurance and the maintenance of standards at all levels of institutional practice.

'We developed a set of principles of practice at the start of lockdown in March 2020 and the first principle was to reinforce to staff that they should take an outcomes-focused approach... this is in our revised set of principles for 2021/22 delivery.'
(Modern provider, Scotland)

Continuing to align modes of learning and teaching with assessment and intended/planned learning outcomes facilitated a consistency of approach, benchmarking across cohorts, and a perception of the overall fairness of the procedures and associated outcomes during the pandemic period. While many providers operated 'no-detriment' or 'safety net' policies, most providers reported that the use of course and module-level outcomes (supported by internal and external peer review) offered the most consistent, fair and robust way of maintaining standards and ensuring student success.

'Learning outcomes were not changed; only the assessment type or number to reduce the load on staff and students... we compared the previous assessments with the new proposed assessments and made a judgement call.'
(Pre-92 provider, Scotland)

A number of respondents additionally pinpointed the important role that course and stage outcomes¹ played in ensuring that overall academic integrity and standards of delivery across a whole course, or a given stage, were maintained.

'At every stage of the pandemic and whenever we needed to make a decision about teaching, assessment, progression etc we asked ourselves the key question 'can the programme outcomes be met?'. We used the meeting of programme outcomes as the key context for any proposed change to practice.'
(Pre-92 provider, England)

Continuation and consolidation of existing good practice: Benefits and opportunities

The survey responses indicated that providers, wherever possible, continued to use existing activities and processes to expedite decision-making and to provide an element of stability in a fluctuating and uncertain environment. This was of vital importance as providers undertook scenario and real-time planning for the 2020-21 academic year, to ensure that staff could be supported to undertake any development and changes, and students could be kept informed in a timely manner.

'In adapting our approach to teaching, learning and assessment online, we conducted an expedited programme approval process so that all COVID-related changes could be captured and communicated to students before the start of the Autumn term.'
(Pre-92 provider, England)

¹ Stage outcomes refer to Levels 4 and 5 of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* and Levels 7 and 8 of the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework*.

This consistency was also seen as important for staff wellbeing, in the constant flux of national policy change that surrounded institutional decision-making:

'A learning outcomes approach ... gave staff a non-moving objective to work towards when everything else was shifting around them. We felt that at a psychological level, this was important ... as it gave them flexibility in terms of delivery and assessment whilst also having something stable to pin that assessment and delivery to.'
(Modern provider, Scotland).

Existing processes of internal and external peer review continued to be employed and were seen as key to assuring the quality of learning, alongside opportunities to work with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, to reiterate and consolidate their expectations.

Augmented governance and decision-making bodies

In recognition of the fact that the normal governance and deliberative decision-making structures in higher education are not designed for emergency decision-making and planning, respondents provided information about new decision-making groups set up to make quick decisions and formulate rapid responses in the uncertain pandemic environment. Importantly, these did not replace deliberative decision-making bodies which continued to provide oversight of the new processes and their outcomes.

'[Our] approach was spear-headed by our DVC (Education), with task forces set up with staff and student representatives across the University to develop and implement this approach. This included academic staff, professional service staff and specifically, those with QA ... with reports to our Education and Academic Standards Boards, as well as Senate.'
(Pre-92 provider, England)

Communicating with and supporting our students

Respondents indicated the importance of keeping lines of communication with students open at all times during this period, often through students' union representatives. This communication was key to ensuring students understood the approaches taken and remained engaged and positive:

'[It's important to tell students] your reasons around your actions and be open. We have found students are likely to surprise you with a positive response if they can see what you are dealing with.'
(Modern provider, England)

'Taking an outcomes-based approach allows us ... to make it clear to students that the standards of their awards are the same as previous years [and quells concerns about being seen to have] had an easier route to passing and progression.'
(Modern provider, Scotland)

In addition, respondents emphasised the importance of offering students wraparound support, recognising that many would have had to balance a range of constraints including digital poverty, home schooling or caring activities, the need to shield (themselves or a vulnerable family member) and changing work commitments. This last point was of particular significance for front-line key workers such as health professionals and teachers.

Respondents also referred to the constraints imposed on students' learning by changing government guidelines and expectations:

'In recognition of wider pressures...we needed to be flexible and allow people the best possible chance to flourish in the [new] learning context, but without putting the quality of students' outcomes or ability to progress and succeed in future years at risk. We also needed to flex with regard to external pressures imposed by for example the travel window which disrupted our students' revision, coursework and assessment period.'

(Post-92 provider, England)

Positive pandemic legacies

While respondents outlined many of the challenges the sector experienced and overcame during the pandemic year, they also highlighted a number of positive outcomes that had emerged over the year. These included opportunities to:

- reiterate the importance of outcomes-based approaches
- develop the skills for more flexible delivery
- re-establish and refresh institutional portfolio understanding and oversight
- re-engage with students about the importance and purpose of quality assurance
- rethink and redesign regulations for greater future resilience
- ensure the content and wording of learning outcomes did not unnecessarily constrain modes of learning and assessment
- reflect on and embed inclusivity in courses
- increase engagement with the idea and use of authentic assessment.

3 What happened? A preview of our sector case studies

In this section we preview three sector stories from the 13 invited case studies. The case studies and associated resources will be made available to QAA Members in June 2021.

Blended and Connected: rising to the challenge of co-creation with our students during the pandemic year

University of Portsmouth

Colleagues from the University of Portsmouth explore how their existing co-created Curriculum 2019 Framework was developed and adapted during the pandemic year. They provide insight into two particular aspects of their work which were key to meeting the challenges of COVID-19, namely how they delivered and assessed a high-quality student learning experience centred on active student engagement and collaboration, and how they continued to co-create and work in partnership with students in the creation of their 'Blended and Connected' offer.

Embedding an Active Learning Framework to enhance student learning and achievement during the pandemic year

Wrexham Glyndŵr University

This case study introduces Glyndŵr University's Active Learning Framework, developed to support learning and teaching as a response to the changes required during the pandemic year. Colleagues outline how they were involved in designing a new 'learning blend' informed by constructive alignment, to support the pivot to online learning and teaching. This included adopting the principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#). The resulting rethink changed the way the institution interacts with learners, to support a more inclusive and flexible approach to learning, teaching and assessment.

Adapting to remote assessment within a conservatoire environment

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Trinity Laban is a small, specialist provider with around 1,200 students on its higher education programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Due to the highly practical nature of its programmes and a reliance on assessment within a collaborative or group performance context, the pandemic restrictions threatened the ability of students to graduate with the necessary competencies and graduate attributes. In this case study, Trinity Laban colleagues explore their swift review of assessment tasks across all programmes in March/April 2020, to ensure that programme and module-level learning outcomes could be met and academic standards maintained.

4 Next steps

The interim findings and case studies introduced in this briefing note form part of a wider set of insights and resources which will be made available to QAA Members in June 2021.

References

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