Effective Practice in UK Transnational Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

QAA has produced Thematic guidance on [academic standards and supporting student success](#), the principles of which apply irrespective of how or where provision is delivered. Nonetheless, transnational education (TNE) accounts for a substantial proportion of the UK higher education sector and there are some distinctive elements of that offer which this paper seeks to highlight. For example, it is recognised that the pandemic has affected countries around the world at different times and governments have responded in different ways. Requirements relating to social distancing measures differ throughout the world and therefore the kind of mitigating measures TNE providers have needed to introduce are not universal between countries or over time.

While rapid changes in approaches have required considerable agility from providers, the sector has remained committed to maintaining quality and standards and, in many cases, has been able to draw on considerable expertise in many different approaches to the delivery of learning and TNE to support students and staff. This paper, which has been developed in collaboration with colleagues from UK institutions, offers a selection of effective practice examples - these are relevant for the medium and longer term during which time some restrictions may continue to be placed on physical attendance and international travel, and a variety of virtual delivery models will continue to be developed.

Terminology

TNE is offered through a wide variety of models, some involving collaborative partnerships and others by UK institutions themselves. Our aim in this paper is to share examples of effective practice which providers can consider and, where appropriate, adapt and apply to their own model. It is not our intention to create new rules or provide extensive definitions but, for the avoidance of doubt, this paper uses the following terms:

Online: a broad spectrum of practice is covered by this term, including provision of online resources, for example, libraries or virtual learning environments, or engagement with students virtually or through digital channels.

Transnational education (TNE): higher education learning opportunities that are provided outside the UK but lead to an award of a UK degree-awarding body. In some partnerships this might be a joint or dual award.

Branch campus: a campus of a UK university that is located in another country.

TNE partner: organisations that deliver higher education on behalf of one or more degree-awarding body.

Provider: the TNE partner and/or UK institution responsible for the delivery of the provision.

UK institutions: the degree-awarding body located in the UK that has a partnership agreement with the TNE provider and/or delivers courses at a branch campus.

Is virtual learning recognised locally and globally?

Some countries have not formally recognised online, digital or virtual forms of delivery previously, which can have an impact on academic progression or access to certain professions. However; the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about greater flexibility and, in most cases, governments have now accepted virtual delivery as a contingency measure while social distancing arrangements are enforced. It is important for providers to be aware of the extent of flexibility permitted in the country where delivery usually takes place. The flexibility might be course or delivery model-specific, for example, only relating to students studying courses overseas or students on 2+2 courses. Flexibility might also be temporary in which case providers need to be clear about the timeframe.

We would recommend that the specific requirements of regulators are taken into account. For example, checking whether retrospective change requests should be submitted for approval by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs), or if prospective approval is needed in respect of any changes planned for the next academic year. We would advise that UK institutions, and where applicable their delivery partners, check the requirements regularly as changes may be made quickly in response to changing local circumstances.

What are the implications of a rapid change in delivery mode for TNE quality arrangements?

Where the original delivery model involves students physically attending a campus or other study location, the providers, awarding bodies and students will need to adapt to different forms of delivery. The location of the students will also influence any revisions to the mode of delivery. In some countries, a certain amount of in-person or on-campus delivery has been able to continue. This has resulted in some blended or dual delivery where on-campus activity is combined with the provision of materials and staff contact through digital means. For example, models which involved flying faculty visiting from the UK have, for the most part, moved to virtual rather than in-person delivery due to travel restrictions from the UK. Models which include local tutor support, such as staff located in a branch campus or TNE partner staff, in some cases have been able to continue depending on the local government requirements for managing COVID-19.

We would advise that UK institutions check the terms of their partnership agreement, or other formal contract, and pay particular attention to any operational agreements in place with their TNE partner (for example, collaborative framework documents, annual activity agreements, operational delivery plans) which may need to be adapted. It is advisable and in the interest of UK institutions, that they are clear about the terms of the overarching legal agreement as well as any operational agreement which articulates the roles and responsibilities between the two parties, and to check that any changes in delivery mode are permitted within these formal agreements. If the formal agreements do not permit the kind of flexibility which managing COVID-19 might require, institutions could consider introducing addendums to the agreements in line with their usual approval processes, adhering to any emergency regulations which they may have put in place, or adapting their operational agreements in the shorter-term.

To meet the specific context of the TNE partner, changes in delivery may be required and could include substantial adjustments to quality processes such as revised arrangements for course and/or assessment boards and annual monitoring activity.

For example, such revisions might include:

- moving from in-person, in-country assessment boards to virtual meetings
- moderation by UK institutional staff being conducted virtually rather than in-person, which could involve the electronic transfer of considerable volumes of student work (and is likely to be even more complex for certain disciplines, for example, practice-based courses or courses involving assessment of artefacts)
- engaging with external examiners virtually rather than having the examiners visit in-person to conduct their duties or, in some cases, gathering student feedback
- adjustments to the quorum for boards to account for staff sickness where necessary.

Decisions about changed delivery methods could involve the UK institutions' partnership or other management structures such as committees, internal groups, individual partnership managers. These structures may be used to consider and document decisions about changed delivery patterns. It is possible, depending on the social distancing arrangements required to manage COVID-19, that delivery patterns might need to be adjusted a number of times over the coming year(s). Recording these changes becomes important, to track the extent of changes and to support clear decision-making. It is also important that the decision-making process involves key professional services such as IT and library services, given the need to ensure continued access to learning resources.

UK institutions, by using their knowledge and experience to evaluate the associated strengths and potential weaknesses of each partnership, will arrive at a tailored approach, mitigating risks to quality and standards. The range of factors taken into account may include the strength of the partnership relationship itself, national regulatory requirements and the outcomes of annual monitoring activity to date.

How do changes in delivery affect students' expectations?

Student expectations will be influenced to a significant extent by the original delivery model. For many students having a direct relationship with the UK institution is significant. If the original model involved in-person contact with staff from the UK institution, whether in country or through the student visiting the UK for a period of study, we would advise that the institution gives particular consideration to how this can be recreated through other activity where possible. For example, an 'international experience' might be offered by engaging students in projects delivered virtually between the UK and TNE partner, through including TNE students in study groups with UK students (assuming challenges around access to technology and time difference can be resolved) and/or by delivering a programme of online activities given by staff from the UK institution.

Managing student induction - or putting in place specific transition support for students - is another key stage in setting student expectations and managing the relationship with the UK institution. Induction is often run in collaboration between the UK institution and TNE partner. Changed delivery might involve offering induction or transition programmes virtually but still in partnership, and possibly starting at an earlier stage to allow students more time to adjust to the changes. In models where delivery in the TNE partner is synchronised with delivery in the UK institution, there may be additional opportunities for interaction and sharing resources between staff and student groups in the different locations. There is evidence that TNE students identify more strongly with the UK institution and express greater satisfaction with

their experience overall, where there are increased opportunities for direct interaction with the UK institution, for example, through being taught by staff and/or engaging with UK students.

It is even more important than usual that providers engage with students to ensure that any changes to delivery and assessment are clearly communicated. UK institutions and TNE partners should engage student representatives including any student officers. While approaches to student engagement vary across TNE jurisdictions and providers, we recommend that information be provided to all students about how they are being asked to engage with the changes that are being implemented. For example, providing briefing documents to set out how classes will be delivered and resources - such as online library facilities and study skills - can be accessed, as well as identifying how courses will be assessed and indicating how students will receive feedback on their work. Where there are significant changes to policies - for example, the introduction of a 'no detriment' policy - these should be explained clearly.[1] Making answers to frequently asked questions readily available is also helpful, as are regular emails or discussion forums. In the medium and longer term, it is advisable that UK institutions with their TNE partners, consider providing revised or new student handbooks.

UK institutions are recommended to work proactively and collaboratively with their TNE partners to help support their students, tailoring their approach to each partnership. This could include agreeing any revised principles with the partner, such as what constitutes acceptable extenuating circumstances. It could also include agreeing whose responsibility it is to communicate directly with students about exceptional changes - where this is a shared responsibility, particular care is needed to avoid any mixed or potentially contradictory messages. Providers are advised to keep addressing student communications, linked to any ongoing partnership management working groups.

In developing guidance for students, providers may choose to emphasise the continuing relevance of existing good practice - such as the need for students to continue employing their organisational skills, study plans and work schedules - as well as helping students to develop strategies for engaging effectively with virtual forums, such as speaking and presenting on camera. These activities might be challenging to some students who are less confident about their language proficiency and guidance could offer access to tools to help boost proficiency and confidence. A range of effective practice in engaging students in digital delivery models is discussed in QAA's supporting resource on [assessing with integrity in digital delivery](#).

Are there specific challenges in engaging with technology?

It is recognised that there can be challenges for students and staff in certain countries gaining access to reliable internet infrastructure. In some countries there are restrictions placed on access to internet content which is commonly used in the UK, such as YouTube videos, and this will require continuous consideration by providers. In common with some UK students, there are TNE students who have limited access to necessary technical equipment, a suitable broadband service, or perhaps facilities such as a quiet room with a desk and a computer. Where the delivery model involves a local partner, the UK institution could work with them to address these issues with appropriate flexibility.

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[1] Further information about 'no detriment' policies and what they aim to achieve is provided in QAA's supporting resource on ['no detriment' policies](#).

Approaches which can help include:

- using a range of platforms to allow students flexibility and increase the likelihood of students gaining access
- working with TNE partners to understand any restrictions such as access to online resources or specialist software, licensing criteria or limitations to the reliability of services, for example, during peak times
- considering alternative assessment modes or staging submissions where there are technical issues such as file capacity.

Students will value guidance on the technical support and training that is available to help them access and/or gain increased use of virtual platforms. This is particularly important where the delivery model has not previously involved significant digital delivery or where revisions to delivery involve increased engagement with a virtual learning environment (VLE). Provision of technical support might be the responsibility of the UK institution solely or in partnership with the TNE partner. Clarity over this responsibility is also important.

Adaptations to delivery could include providing TNE students with access to additional provision. For example, many universities offer online self-training packages for UK students and it may be possible to extend these to TNE students. UK institutions often give TNE partners access to their e-resources and/or online library support sessions, and providers may wish to consider extending these in some cases.

UK institutions and TNE partners whose existing delivery models include digital activity are likely to have made the transition more easily than those where this is not included. There is an opportunity for those with significant experience in delivering virtual courses to consider ways of sharing effective practice and experience. There is also an opportunity to focus on the pedagogical underpinning for the delivery model, developing approaches including the flipped classroom and the use of asynchronous delivery, which can have the additional benefit of helping to combat the challenge of time differences.

Does moving to digital assessment require additional measures?

UK institutions should liaise with their TNE partners to make sure that any changes to assessment policies are recognised by the appropriate bodies, such as course or faculty boards, in accordance with the institution's quality arrangements. As indicated in QAA's thematic guidance on [academic standards and supporting student achievement](#), it is advisable to communicate with external examiners over changes to assessment.

Mapping the proposed changes to the original learning outcomes is effective practice, assists decision-making and provides a clear record. If the required learning outcomes cannot be assessed or evidenced, institutions, by liaising with their TNE partners, can ensure that their procedures for making emergency minor amendments are followed - for example, to enable students to progress and achieve the 'missing' learning outcomes where possible. This is explored in more detail in the QAA Thematic guidance on academic standards and supporting student achievement. Information on [practice and lab-based assessment](#) is also available as thematic guidance. In addition, UK institutions can ensure, with their partner where relevant, that any local requirements for students to complete mandatory modules, such as those on national history and culture, are addressed.

Individual students who already require specific support - such as reasonable adjustments made for students with disabilities - will require careful consideration to ensure that any changes in delivery or assessment do not present them with additional challenges.

Further information on effective assessment practice is provided in the QAA supporting resource on [assessing with integrity in digital delivery](#).

Providers may also wish to consider whether any changes in assessment policy or practice should be reflected in transcripts and student records. [Arguments for and against including a COVID-19 statement on degree transcripts](#) are outlined in another QAA supporting resource.

Do staff need additional development and support?

Changes in delivery model are likely to require additional briefing and potentially development for staff, particularly those in TNE partners, for example, adjustments in assessment boards and related processes, new ways of working with the UK institution, any new uses of technology, and new approaches to pedagogy.

Some UK providers engage technical support mentors to help develop capacity, asking staff with expertise to support others in the use of VLEs and virtual communication tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and WeChat. This support should recognise that staff based in countries where virtual delivery has not previously been recognised, may need considerable support. Equally, staff based in overseas jurisdictions may have substantial experience of suitable local digital platforms which can enhance the student learning experience and can be shared with staff from the UK provider.

Staff are likely to benefit from academic development support targeted at the changes in learning and teaching approaches associated with any shift to virtual delivery. Support might include engaging academic and professional staff with experience of developing virtual materials as mentors. These mentors can help staff review pedagogic approaches, assessment design, marking and feedback, and create and adapt material for virtual learning. Examples from the sector of pedagogic initiatives for virtual learning include:

- Inviting students to be curators or creators of blogs, wikis, repositories or news feeds relevant to the course content.
- Setting up, or participating in, platforms where students and staff can work on projects in virtual teams with professionals and community members outside the institution.
- Students generating some of the content such as sourcing and curating material or creating assessment questions for peers.

Reflective questions

The following questions can be used by providers to evaluate their approach.

1   Are there any restrictions on changes to the mode of delivery arising from the contractual and/or operational agreements that need to be considered?

2   Are there any local regulatory or professional body requirements to be taken into consideration with regard to changes to delivery and assessment?

3   Do changes to delivery and assessment need to be subject to a formal approval process?

4   Are you making adjustments to any existing teach-out plans for partnership or course closure?

5   Are any adjustments required to annual monitoring or other quality processes?

6   Have any changes been clearly documented to form a clear record?

7   Can all learning outcomes be achieved and assessed? If there are any changes required to the mode or nature of assessment, how can you demonstrate that the academic standard of the award remains unchanged?

8   How can you demonstrate that the quality and standard of the award delivered through TNE is equivalent to the award delivered in the UK?

9   What support and guidance are you providing for students who may be moving between delivery modes? Or who are experiencing a mix of delivery modes such as on-campus, virtual and/or blended provision?

10   If you are planning for a transition back to on-campus provision, what factors should you take into account? Have you accommodated the need for any potential period of quarantine for students and staff?

11   What forms of learning support are in place for students while teaching is digitally delivered? And how have you ensured it is accessible for all students?

12   How can you support students to engage with their studies during virtual delivery?

13   Do all students have access to clear information about any changes to provision or assessment? Do they know where they could go for additional information and support if they have questions?

14   What measures have you put in place to support staff in the change of delivery model? Are there ways of promoting peer mentoring or collaboration to produce learning materials for students?

Sources of additional information

- QAA's COVID-19 support and guidance resources
  These include a range of Thematic guidance and supporting resources, such as the scan of international policy and practice. The materials and links are updated regularly:
  www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/support-and-guidance-covid-19

- QAA (2017) Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education:
  www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education.pdf

- QAA Scotland's Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning Resource Hub has an extensive range of materials to support providers moving provision and assessment to digital delivery. The Resource Hub includes toolkits for staff and tips on engaging students, including supporting student mental health and wellbeing. The resources include practice from across the UK and internationally:
  www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/technology-enhanced-learning

- Heriot-Watt University's Rapid Response Toolkit to support student learning virtual in response to the pandemic:
  https://lta.hw.ac.uk/supporting-student-learning-online

- Sally Brown and Kay Sambell, Alternative assessment approaches: https://sally-brown.net

- QQI guiding principles for alternative assessments in response to COVID-19 emergency restrictions: www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Guiding%20Principles%20for%20Alternative%20Assessment%20%28COVID-19%29.pdf

- Jisc's coronavirus virtual resources centre covers practical tips to ensure continuity, a supportive community space, and free virtual briefings. Jisc and EMERGE are also working on a report on digital assessment, publication of which is being brought forward in light of the current crisis. This should be helpful in aiding thinking around solutions for digital proctoring and invigilation, and with self-assessment: www.jisc.ac.uk/coronavirus#virtual-content

- Jisc guidance on transforming assessment and feedback with technology: www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/transforming-assessment-and-feedback

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