



Scottish Sector Learning from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary Report



About this booklet

We used key information sources to identify the ways in which institutions were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our work focused on the main adaptations to quality processes, policy, and regulation relating to teaching, learning and assessment practice, and some aspects of the wider student experience.

13 themes emerged from our analysis and are covered in detail in a separate full report:



This booklet highlights positive points on the sector's COVID-19 response. The key points of reflection are aimed at supporting institutions in future planning.

Positive practice

Pivot to digital teaching and learning

- The fast pace of institutional responses to developing or upgrading their digital infrastructures
- The development of innovative practices to support specialist subject areas
- Comprehensive training for academic staff to improve their skills relating to digital delivery, which was shared between institutions
- The development of institutional pedagogical principles or frameworks of good educational practice online, which complemented a sector-wide strengthening of institutional technological capability and infrastructure
- The extraordinary effort of academic and professional services staff in supporting the effective transition to digital provision
- Institutions' intention to use learning from the pandemic to enhance future practice - for example, the development of student performance platforms

Assessment

- The introduction of alternative assessments has been a positive step towards providing necessary flexibility for the learning support needs of individual students and particular student communities
- The implementation of 'no detriment' policies in the transition to emergency digital provision has reflected institutions' supportive approach to students

Student support

- Students' positive response to digital availability of support services, particularly: counselling provision; personal, pastoral and academic tutoring; student learning services; and employability platforms
- The introduction of online peer mentoring systems to support students in the transition to digital provision, creating opportunities for connection among student communities
- The development of induction packages for incoming students in preparation for blended or digital delivery

Student engagement

- The use of short, targeted pulse surveys to gather student feedback on their experience of digital provision, which enabled institutions to respond quickly and proactively to issues raised by students
- The use of digital meetings than face-to-face meetings, boosting student confidence and leading to increased levels of student engagement in quality processes

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

- Institutions worked quickly and effectively with multiple PSRBs to ensure that all policy and regulatory amendments met the requirements of the relevant body

Communication

- Innovative approaches to communicating complex information to students through the use of explainer videos, infographics and direct to camera videos, which have been particularly useful in communicating information about institutional 'no detriment' policies or approaches, and degree algorithms

Key points of reflection

Applying our learning



As the pandemic (and government guidance) has developed so have institutions' responses, taking account of feedback through their own institutional mechanisms on what worked and what did not, from benchmarking against practice at other HEIs and from using QAA guidance.

How can institutions learn individually and collectively from their pandemic experience?

Decision-making



Institutions responded rapidly to the pandemic's challenge to the provision of learning opportunities, making changes in weeks and months that normally would have been planned and delivered over a much longer period.

What can we learn from the rapid decision-making and organisational structures that supported it, to facilitate future decision-making? How might the experience shape HEI's governance structures? What data and evidence have helped institutions in their decision-making?

Responding to change



Teaching, learning and assessment have changed significantly during the pandemic. All institutions adapted programme delivery away from 'in person' towards some form, or a variety of forms, of digital delivery.

What efficiencies have been gained and lost and what have been some of the unforeseen consequences of rapid change to teaching, learning and assessment? How will HEIs decide what changes will remain? What new delivery and business models might be developed from changes enforced by the pandemic? How will institutions fulfil future students' expectations and preferences?

Impact on student outcomes



An extraordinary amount of effort has been invested by staff and students over the duration of the pandemic in making, and adapting to, changes.

What is the cumulative impact of this change on the learning experience and student outcomes? How do experiences and outcomes differ from pre-pandemic cohorts? What have we learned that might inform the debate about grade inflation?

Listening to students



Student feedback processes have been altered to enable rapid change – for example, some HEIs have used student ‘pulse’ surveys.

What have we learned from changes to these processes that can inform future student feedback mechanisms? To what extent might those changes impact on the current redevelopment of the National Student Survey?

Allocating resources



Scottish Government funding to institutions, to enable them to support students facing financial difficulties while studying, have been welcomed but there are areas where sector-wide investment would greatly help institutions to make digital provision more accessible and inclusive. These include video captioning and the licensing of electronic resources.

What support can be provided at sector level to help institutions choose which resources might best support their students?

New ways of working



While all institutions continued to carry out their normal processes for the assurance of the standards and quality of their provision during the period of the pandemic, every institution made some alterations to procedures with a view to accommodating changes in circumstances. Some institutions drew attention to an increased level of student engagement in quality processes, attributed to greater student confidence in participating in digital meetings than in face-to-face meetings.

How can this enhanced student engagement be maintained and transferred to other areas of activity that depend on student feedback? What additional effects on quality assurance processes, or their timing, may not yet have been identified? What efficiencies from revised course change processes can be retained or adapted?

Collective problem solving



A unique aspect of the Scottish higher education sector is its sector-wide commitment to collaboration. Institutions emphasised that this collaborative approach to large-scale problem solving was particularly helpful in responding to emerging issues relating to COVID-19 and the emergency transition to digital provision.

How might the collective ambition in working together to share practice and find solutions be taken forward in future endeavours?

Looking after wellbeing



All institutions praised the dedication and resilience of academic and professional services staff during what has been an exceptionally demanding time. An ongoing challenge is the clear and widespread concern about the ongoing need for skills development, sustainability of workloads and staff wellbeing.

With continuing uncertainty around the pandemic, how can institutions promote and support both staff and student wellbeing?

Sending a positive message



Scottish institutions have contributed to regional, national and global efforts to manage the pandemic.

How can the sector use these positive messages and successes to counter the negative media coverage?

Further reading and resources

Read the full report at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/sector-wide-projects/scottish-sector-learning-from-covid-19

[Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning Resource Hub](#)

[Learning from Disruption: Exploring What Counts in Higher Education Conference, June 2020](#)

[QAA's COVID-19 Support and Guidance](#)

Published – 30 September 2021

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