

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS

(DEvised IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY  
RESTRICTIONS)

26 MARCH 2020 (EXTENDED UNTIL 31 AUGUST 2021)



**QQI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Adding Value to Qualifications



QQI recognises the extreme and unanticipated circumstances in which providers and learners find themselves. Changing assessment design in a radical manner in mid-course is contrary to the norms of good programme design and providers are only taking these steps, in the interests of learners, on account of the current emergency.

We all need to be responsive and flexible in accommodating the abruptly changed environment caused by the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Insofar as practicable, the graduating classes of 2020 and 2021 should be enabled to achieve the qualifications that they are striving towards. While we cannot yet be certain about the level of impact that COVID-19 will have on the tertiary education system's capacity to adapt, we are confident that with ingenuity and resolve many learners will be able to graduate this year as planned with trustworthy qualifications.

In setting out this guidance, QQI distinguishes between assessment for progression within a programme and assessment for the final stage of a programme which leads to an award in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (award stage assessment). There is a greater urgency to the latter and these assessments are the principal focus of this document.

This guidance is intended for all providers of programmes leading to NFQ awards. Providers vary in their levels of autonomy. Designated awarding bodies determine their own standards and policy and criteria for making awards. Other providers use standards and criteria determined by QQI. Nevertheless, all providers are responsible for the assessment of their own learners and all are responsible for maintaining the integrity of awards in the NFQ.

Qualifications are only awarded on the basis of validly and reliably assessed learning outcomes. This fundamental proposition continues to hold even in these exceptional circumstances. Learners and other users of qualifications need to be confident that 2020 and 2021 qualifications have the same value and fitness for purpose as those made in other years. The following high-level principles are intended to support this objective. The guidance set out here has been devised within the context of QQI's statutory [Core QA Guidelines](#), with particular reference to the sections on governance, teaching and learning and assessment of learners.

There are other useful resources that you should refer to also: The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) has produced [10 Points to Consider in Choosing Alternative Assessment Methods for the Online Environment](#) and [Selecting Online Alternatives to Common Assessment Methods](#) in the context of Covid19 contingency planning. Another resource is [10 Ways to Ensure Online Assessment is Accessible and Inclusive](#) developed by the NFETL in partnership with AHEAD.

Other international agencies have also produced guidance for providers that you may find useful. The United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency's recent [guidance to providers on maintaining standards and academic quality](#) is valuable.



## Principles Underpinning Alternative Assessment

- **Learning outcomes-based approaches:** The achievement of a qualification in the National Framework of Qualifications indicates that certain explicitly defined learning outcomes have been attained. In principle, a given learning outcome can be assessed in multiple different ways. What matters is not the form of assessment used, but rather that it can validly and reliably determine whether the necessary learning outcomes have been achieved. The learning outcomes approach thus lends itself to changing the assessment method to accommodate to emergencies like Covid-19.

The term 'expected learning outcomes' denotes those outcomes required to gain an award or academic credit.

- a. The alternative assessment makes an evidence-based determination on whether the expected learning outcomes have been achieved.
  - b. Those determining assessments seek the views and feedback of peers in the academic community on the proposed arrangements as a means of ensuring good practice and securing due recognition.
  - c. Intended learning outcomes can sometimes be quite granular and include elements that are incidental rather than essential to expectations for the qualification. If the current situation makes the achievement of such incidental outcomes impossible, it is reasonable (subject to the approval of the appropriate governance structures) to replace or remove them, provided it does not substantially affect the overall expected learning outcomes. This does not apply to core learning outcomes associated with the qualification; these cannot be compromised. Nor does it apply to any core regulatory or professional body requirements save with the agreement of the relevant body.
- **Integrity of assessment:** The integrity of assessment is central to the credibility of awards. Moving to alternative forms of assessment, such as introducing online assessment in a short timescale, introduces new risks, particularly in a context where both staff and learners have had limited time to prepare in a normal, systematic, consultative way. The work of the [National Academic Integrity Network](#) continues to explore the steps being taken to promote academic integrity in the Irish context.
    - a. All alternative arrangements should be documented and approved by the appropriate, senior internal governance structure, and the oversight and governance arrangements for them recorded.



- b. Plan and document how learner identity will be verified when undertaking assessment and how to determine that work submitted / completed is by the enrolled learner. There are many resources online that may be useful in this regard; for example, that produced by UC San Diego: [https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Moving-to-Remote-Assessments-with-Integrity.html?soid=1129123483094&aid=9byY06J\\_J9s](https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Moving-to-Remote-Assessments-with-Integrity.html?soid=1129123483094&aid=9byY06J_J9s)
  - c. Reaffirm expectations for learners to behave at all time with academic integrity – engage with learners to ensure they comply with this imperative and consider how assessment methods may impact on learner behaviour e.g. unrealistic bunching of deadlines may increase the temptation to cheat.
  - d. Inform staff and learners about the new laws in relation to provision of cheating services (please see: <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Academic-Integrity.aspx>).
  - e. It is important to note that not all modules/elements are suited to online assessment, for example those with mandatory work placement/skills assessments. That can impact on whether a programme can be completed under physical isolation conditions.
- **Proportionality:** The arrangements put in place should reflect the significance and weighting of the assessment to the programme type and stage. Given the uncertain duration of the current restrictions, and the potential for increased incidence of illness among student and staff populations over the coming period, it is preferable that assessment and award activities are concluded as soon as possible rather than being deferred (though this may still be the preferable option in some instances).
    - a. Priority and focus should be given to award stage assessments.
    - b. Recognise that intra-programme progression stage exams are not as critical at this time given the enormous pressures that staff and students may be under.
    - c. Where possible, and in consultation with learner representatives, consideration should be given to advancing or delaying the scheduled date of an assessment. This may also facilitate a longer, more staggered examination period, reducing the pressure on staff and online systems at a critical juncture.
  - **Support for staff and students:** Recognise the challenges for staff and students in switching at such a late stage to alternative modes of teaching and assessment. Many staff are not only having to cope with the development of alternative assessment, but also alternative tuition and all this is happening little more than two months before the end of the academic year and often in the context of disrupted personal circumstances (e.g. having to work from home and care for dependants). This will be more challenging for some than others and additional support should be provided as far as



practicable. QQI Core QA Guidelines oblige providers to put arrangements in place to support staff and learners. Online modes of programme delivery and assessment may pose competence, access and equity issues for learners in some contexts.

- a. Provide staff and learners as much time as possible to prepare for and engage with new modes of delivery and assessment.
  - b. Liaise with those leading teaching and learning/learning technology units to determine what support/resources may be needed to assist them in coping with dramatically increased demand for support.
  - c. Further options may need to be provided for some learners where reasonable and practicable.
  - d. Provide systematic training, as required, for staff tasked with grading assessments where criteria have been adapted or rubrics changed. Access may need to be made available (as stated in the preceding point where reasonable and practicable) to computers and / or IT support and training.
  - e. Some learners may feel that they would be disadvantaged by an alternative assessment and it is reasonable that such individuals be given the option to defer where practicable.
  - f. Consider student need and preference in determining alternative assessment types.
  - g. Consider how the impact of IT failures and illness on assessment will be dealt with.
- **Confidence and transparency:** Ensure public confidence in awards and in the national qualifications system is maintained by adopting realistic and reliable alternative assessment methods and by transparently communicating your plans in this regard to learners and the general public in a timely manner.
    - a. Know when to defer assessment rather than take unacceptably high risks to academic integrity (e.g. problems with fairness, validity, reliability, or cheating) with unfamiliar methods.
    - b. Communicate alternative arrangements to learners in a timely and efficient manner to ensure learners have sufficient time and resources to adequately and confidently engage with alternative assessments.
    - c. Publicly state via the provider's website what alternative arrangements are being put in place and how the integrity of these assessment is being assured. In so doing, provide sufficient detail to support confidence in the validity and reliability of the alternative approaches adopted.



- d. Maintain open and active communication channels with all stakeholders, particularly learners.
- e. Consider how requirements to record and store assessments in new formats may be met; this may be particularly pertinent for formats such as video which are storage space intensive.
- f. Consult with QQI and other relevant stakeholders as necessary, including professional and regulatory bodies, and notify them when the alternative assessment arrangements have been agreed and published.
- g. Whilst these are exceptional circumstances, the amendments made to assessment at this time should be evaluated at a later stage in order to help inform whether they were successful and can lead to long term system learning and enhancement. Highlight any weaknesses that might arise, for example, in the context of learner appeals.