



# **Covid-19 and aftermath: Guidance for Higher Education Providers on Standards and Quality**

## **Introduction**

Disruption to face-to-face activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) due to Covid-19 lockdowns has been common across the globe. The impact of this disruption varies depending on the ability to continue with the delivery of the programmes to students even without face-to-face delivery modality. HEIs are forced to deliver their programmes through various E-learning methods; notably virtual modality and blended teaching.

It is acknowledged across the globe that many HEIs may face difficulties to transfer to E-learning from traditional face-to-face delivery modality, given the lack of experience with similar situations in the past. Many HEIs may not have sufficiently mature virtual education system as the traditional delivery was face-to-face. HEIs didn't get much time to adapt to this new situation as they are facing unprecedented disruption to their normal operations.

In this emergency, MQA's initial stand was focused to acknowledge this difficult situation for all, especially HEIs and students by showing flexibility in our review process, adapt current activities where necessary and seek ways to support higher education institutions. Guidance and support is given to various HEIs on matters such as the transfer to online learning and teaching, alternative assessment methods and maintaining academic standards and student services. As an initial response, MQA released a circular (number (IUL)218-CS/1/2020/9) to all HEIs acknowledging this difficulty and facilitating continuation of studies in delivery modalities other than the traditional face-to-face modality. To monitor and assure quality of this set-up, the referred circular asked the HEIs to submit specific information related to the programmes offered in this arrangement.





This guidance is written to provide further instructions to HEIs to facilitate continuation of teaching and learning by maintaining existing quality standards. While MQA's role is upholding and maintaining academic standards and quality, at this difficult time, some of the innovative solutions to what could be months of disruption to the academic calendar - even after the lockdown is eased, are encouraged.

### **Principles in the continuity of teaching**

The need for social distancing has prompted HEIs to deliver their academic programmes through online teaching and assessment. Many HEIs have chosen to continue offering regular programmes or courses using virtual platforms. However, there is a huge difference between those HEIs that have their own online teaching capabilities both technical and teaching resources and experienced teachers and those that do not. Even in the case of HEIs accustomed to an intensive use of technology in teaching, some have seen the need to prepare teachers and students for the transition to virtual education, with all that entails in terms of technology and skills for digital teaching and learning. It is also important to reinforce the already existing virtual education systems and arrangements of HEIs, precisely to guarantee better support for teachers and students.

Maintaining standards remains a responsibility of providers by adhering to minimum standards outlined in the Maldives National Qualifications Framework and in the approved programme documents of each and every academic programme approved by MQA as well as other standards related to Programme Approval and Institutional Audit. Academic standards already in place shall be maintained no matter what adjustments that need to be made to the learning and assessment strategies in light of Covid-19 and its impact even after the lockdown is eased due to expected prolonged implementation of various precautionary health measures such as social distancing and disinfection.

In light of recommendations by organizations' such as UNESCO and various Higher Education Quality Assurance agencies across the globe, institutional arrangements to deliver higher education programmes should be based on the following principles.





1. Adhering to basic minimum quality standards outlined by the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) and respective approved programme documents.
2. Learning activities need to be designed and structured with the same care as direct teaching as online teaching and assessment are not simply a matter of placing classes and lectures onto a virtual learning environment (VLE).
3. Accept the reality that all students may not have access to the equipment and broadband needed to fully engage with online learning and assessment. Under physical distancing, quarantine or lockdown precautions, students may well have limited quiet space of their own to work online.
4. Support students to access IT systems more than usual, and that includes checking whether they have access to broadband services if students are being asked to undertake online learning and assessment as an alternative. Also, providers should have sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.
5. Online teaching is better suited to some types of subjects and/ or activities than others. Academics may have to adjust their teaching styles to suit this different format.
6. As some programmes with significant practical teaching methodologies and/ or small cohort sizes will simply be impractical to continue for the time being, the focus should then be on how to minimize impacts on these students and return to normality as soon as possible.
7. Suitable alternative arrangements should be made for students with disabilities who may have special arrangements (for example, assistance in lectures) and may not have their needs met by moving to wholly online provision.
8. Clearly communicate to students what has changed, and let students make an informed choice. This may include the offer of the chance to defer, but also to undertake more academic activities (more tutorials, drop in sessions, refresher lectures, and so on) when things are back to normal. It is also important than ever to ensure that support services are adequately resourced, supported and prepared for possible future scenarios.





9. Review current arrangement to fit E-learning delivery modality without compromising MQAs minimum quality standards.
10. Prepare in time for the resumption of face-to-face classes in accordance with the guidelines of the Health Protection agency (HPA).
11. Resumption of face-to-face activities of HEIs should be seen as an opportunity to re-think and re-design teaching and learning processes taking advantage of experience gained with the intensive use of technology, paying special attention to equity and inclusion.
12. HEIs should create coordination mechanisms that allow joint progress in generating greater resilience in this situation. Hence, it is essential to involve students, teaching and non-teaching staff in designing responses that emergency situation demand.

## **Assessments**

It is important to bear the following points in changing assessment methods due to restrictions posed by Covid-19 Pandemic.

1. Approval of MQA has to be sought for the use of alternative assessment methods not included in the approved program document.
2. When developing alternative assessment methods, bear in mind that students will still need to meet the same learning outcomes where possible and practicable.
3. Ideally, in terms of exams, where the duration of the pandemic affects the schedule of the examinations it is advisable to postpone them until the latest possible date. Should this not be possible, alternative assessment mechanisms would apply or the exams can be conducted using technological platforms or exams can be held with social distancing as stipulated in the HPA guidelines.
4. Consider how many units/ modules have already been completed, whether there are only assessed elements left in modules/ units, and how much work a student would need to undertake between now and next year. Focus on workload and ensure that, where the workload is 'reasonable', they allow students to trail results or examinations into the next academic period.





5. Where practicable, consider substituting exams with online assessment, with appropriate safeguards including unique ID, same start times, same log-ons, tech support, remote proctoring solutions, and so on - but always in ways and conditions students are able to do.
6. Please bear in mind potential vulnerability to misconduct when changing assessment methods. Be careful to remind students of the dangers of contract cheating, including potential exposure to fraud and extortion. There are early signs of essay mills, increasing advertising and seeking to exploit the current situation.
7. Consider the impact on students who have final assessments by way of exhibitions, shows or performances, clinical settings, laboratory work, viva voces, and workplace-based experience. Online assessment will not be suitable in all of these contexts. If they have not already had clarity over what the implications are for them, they will be anxious to know as soon as possible.
8. If HEIs are unable to assess work which is dependent on cohorts being in a specific time or place, or work which is performance or workplace-based, then every effort should be made to offer alternatives that meet the learning outcomes of the course/ module.
9. HEIs may choose to move the assessments to different times of the year, when campus space is more likely to be available.
10. Consider amending elements of assessment strategies to facilitate students completing more coursework or project work up-front and moving the examination elements to later in the academic session, or even into subsequent years.

### **Reopening classrooms**

The exceptional situation experienced by all HEIs and students invokes many uncertainties about what will happen when HEIs are reopened for face-to-face teaching in classrooms. HEIs must ensure that each and every MQA approved programme is delivered as per the existing standards and guidelines of MQA for each programme.

- a. Co-curricular activities: In fields such as health and education sciences, if typical practical requirements are not completed during the face to face





activities, those requirements shall be completed by moving to a later date or carrying out with necessary precautions.

- b. In the event that the cessation of classroom activities is close to or exceeds an academic term, attention should be focused on compensatory and validating mechanisms and, eventually, an extension of the duration of the academic year instead of the repeat of the students.
- c. In regards to applying for delivery of programmes in modalities other than face-to-face after Covid-19 emergency, shall be done by HEIs after analyzing their own capacity for arrangements such as virtualization and appropriateness of programmes in general and specific modules/ units for delivery through online. Thus, MQA shall make the appropriate decisions on a course-by-course or programme-by-programme basis.

