
Higher education course changes and closures: statement of good practice

Introduction

The world class reputation of higher education in England rests on the quality of the student experience and academic outcomes. Students may experience course changes or closures, and for many years providers have addressed these changes as part of their terms and conditions which generally set out what providers and students can expect of each other. The statements below bring together existing good practice and legal requirements in order to help clarify expectations that are reasonable for both students and providers. Taken together they can form a Statement of good practice that will be of benefit to students and providers in the future.

Statement of good practice

We [undersigned representative bodies] are committed to helping to ensure students achieve the best possible academic outcomes from their studies. We know that occasionally events may occur at providers which mean that unforeseen changes will have to be made to modules or programmes¹. We believe that the following statements represent good practice for providers when informing and assuring students how their interests are protected in the event of course change and closure, and helping them to make appropriate choices:

1. There should be transparent, fair and accessible policies and practices governing course closure and changes

Although major changes or closures of programmes of study are the exception and not the norm, it is important for students that there are effective policies and practices in place if these alterations occur. These should be transparent, fair and accessible policies and practices, agreed with students or their representatives. They should form part of the higher education provider's terms and conditions so that students understand both their rights and their responsibilities. (These terms and conditions should be accessible in one place and should be set out in a way that can be clearly understood by students).

Terms and conditions about course changes and closures should also be made clear to potential students at all stages of the application and enrolment cycle.

¹ Programmes and modules are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the changing nature of the subject. In exceptional circumstances, a course or programme may cease to exist or a provider may no longer be able to teach a programme or an aspect of a programme to a specific group of students.

2. Policies and practice should recognise that students invest time and personal effort in their studies and need timely dialogue and clarity of options when changes occur

As well as paying fees, students invest a lot of time and energy into their studies. Policies should reassure students enrolled on higher education courses that, in the event of material changes or closure of courses, there are clear processes that will ensure the continuity of their studies. Policies should set out how the institution will act transparently and enter into dialogue with student bodies to identify options and minimise the impact on students affected by changes and closures.

3. Providers should set out clear arrangements for informing and consulting with students about material changes to continuing courses

Higher education courses are made up of sub components which may occasionally need to change for a variety of reasons, such as loss of key staff. Policies should recognise that in some cases these changes can have a negative effect on students and should endeavour to minimise these impacts, including giving students as much advance notice as possible and explaining the reasons behind the change. Policies should set out the circumstances in which changes may take place and the process for consulting and informing students. Where there are material changes to modules, programmes or locations of teaching, providers need to set out when and how students will be informed and the arrangements for consulting with students on options.

4. Providers should set out clear arrangements for continuity of provision for students in the event of the closure of a higher education course

If a programme can no longer be offered, arrangements need to be made for existing students to be provided with suitable alternatives so that the student is enabled to learn and achieve until the end of their programme.

If teaching-out² in the institution is not possible, policies should address the following areas:

- when and how the institution will offer alternative courses within the institution
- how the institution will help students to transfer to other providers, including transfer of credit and academic progress
- where teaching cannot be completed or where none of the proposed options are acceptable to the student there should be clear policies for refunding all or part of paid fees and recording the amount of credit/academic progress achieved.

Providers who do not award higher education qualifications need to set out policies about how they will work with the awarding partner/body to find alternative provision for students.

Providers who sub-contract responsibility for teaching through a franchise arrangement to another provider without degree awarding powers need to have clear policies which

² 'Teaching-out' is continuing to teach registered students to the end of their courses but closing the provision to new students.

indicate the responsibility of the awarding body to find suitable provision to enable students to complete their studies. Validation documents and arrangements need to be clear as to the awarding body's responsibility to enable students to complete their studies.

5. Providers should consider how they can support the wider higher education sector and its students in the event of programme (or provider) failure elsewhere.

Providers should consider how to minimise the impact on students and the reputation of the English higher education sector from matters such as disorderly programme closure, institutional loss of tier 4 status, or disorderly institutional closure. We, the bodies indicated below, would expect other providers to identify from their academic programmes alternative courses with comparable academic requirements when the original provider is unable to provide a suitable alternative. Under these circumstances we, the funding and representative bodies, would within our remit and powers, do all that we could to work together to facilitate timely information flows and orderly transfer of displaced students. NUS would work with students' unions in affected institutions to provide support and representation for displaced students and with the agencies represented here to advocate for students' interests.