



**QAA**

# Explaining class size

Guidance about providing information for students

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## Introduction

The provision of information for prospective and current students<sup>1</sup> is a topic that has attracted increasing attention following policy changes giving UK students greater responsibility for funding their own higher education.<sup>2</sup> Accessible, reliable and trustworthy information is necessary to ensure that prospective students understand the nature of the learning experience they can expect on particular programmes from a higher education provider. The provision of appropriate information enables applicants to make informed choices in the light of their career aspirations and preferred learning styles, and ensures that the investment they make will be based on an accurate understanding of what is offered.

### About this guidance

This guidance, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), is one of a suite of publications intended to help providers ensure that transparent and helpful information is available about the teaching methods and learning opportunities associated with their higher education programmes. The provision of such information gives applicants an understanding of the teaching and learning methods, support and contact time, learning opportunities and workload that they can expect to experience while studying for particular qualifications.

The publications offer detailed guidance on providing information about the following topics:

- *Explaining staff teaching qualifications*
- *Explaining class size* (this publication)
- *Explaining students' workload*
- *Responding to feedback from students*

The guidance is intended to be of practical help to programme leaders, quality assurance professionals, academic registrars, educational development practitioners, marketing departments and others involved in providing and managing information for prospective and current students.

The four publications for providers are complemented by a companion set of guides for students on the same themes:

- *Information on staff teaching qualifications: a student guide*
- *Information on class size: a student guide*
- *Information on workload: a student guide*
- *Information on how you can comment on your course: a student guide.*

Providers should endeavour, wherever possible, to make clear information available to prospective and current students about the teaching and learning experience, programme structure and the qualifications of the staff who will support that experience. When publishing such information, providers should refer to **Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education**, which addresses how providers make available information that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, in relation to wider information.

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<sup>1</sup> See Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

<sup>2</sup> Implementation of proposals in the UK government White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, June 2011).

The present guidance relates to information about higher education provision that providers publish on their websites and in their promotional material, as distinct from the Key Information Set (KIS) required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI).

## Using this guidance

Providers are encouraged to draw upon this guidance in considering their approach to providing information about class size, clarifying its role and significance in the context of the pedagogical approaches relevant to a particular course. It is expected that these approaches will differ between subject areas, levels of study and providers.

The guidance should be used to complement the Indicators and Expectations of the relevant Chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, particularly Part C: Information about higher education provision and Chapters *B3: Learning and teaching*, *B5: Student engagement* and *B8: Programme monitoring and review*.

Research indicates that students generally have a well developed understanding of the variety of ways in which their learning is facilitated, together with other related issues, such as class size.<sup>3</sup> Since pedagogic approaches to higher education are therefore familiar to staff and students alike, the present guidance limits its discussion of them to indicative lists in the two appendices:

- Appendix 1: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods
- Appendix 2: Indicative list of assessment methods

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<sup>3</sup> Bekhradnia (2012), NUS (2012), QAA (2011).

## The importance of class size to students

Prospective and current students expect to be provided with clear and transparent information regarding the size of classes in which they will be taught during their studies. This information should explain that class size is only one factor within a planned learning experience and that each component of this experience has a different purpose and may be facilitated in differing ways, by a range of staff members. For example, a lecture by a leading expert in a subject could be attended by 100 students, during which there would be little opportunity for interaction. However, this could be followed by seminars with the lecturer, in smaller groups of perhaps 15-20 students, to focus on specific aspects of the lecture topic, thus enabling discussion and interaction. It is also likely to be complemented by individual or small group tutorials to provide formative feedback in respect of assessed coursework.

### Evidence from student surveys

Detailed research into the student experience was carried out by the National Union of Students (NUS) during 2008-11. This provided evidence that students perceive a high-quality learning experience as comprising a range of aspects, with the top three matters of importance to them being:

- the teaching skills of staff (cited by 91 per cent of students surveyed)
- use of interactive group sessions (83 per cent)
- the size of the class (70 per cent).

When students were asked to reflect on what improvements they would make to enhance the quality of the learning and teaching experience, the most common suggestions were for:

- more interactive group sessions (50 per cent)
- more individual teaching sessions/tutorials (43 per cent)
- more contact with a personal tutor (42 per cent)
- lecturers with better teaching skills (35 per cent).

It is appropriate to consider how interaction between staff and students, together with opportunities for peer interaction, promote the achievement of learning outcomes. Graham Gibbs (2010) reported that what happens during contact time is more significant to students' learning than the amount of contact that students experience. Hence, it is important to consider this guidance on class size in conjunction with the other guidance in this suite of documents (on teaching qualifications, student workload, and how feedback from students is used).

### What information would students find helpful?

As part of the development of the KIS, HEFCE commissioned research into the information that prospective students would find helpful. Students rated the significance of 51 pre-supplied pieces of information, one of which was the 'proportion of teaching [taking place] in lectures with a class size over 100'. Of those who responded, a moderate 53 per cent said that they would find this information 'useful' or 'very useful', ranking this piece of information 24 out of 51 in order of importance. This suggests that students might not regard class size in relation to lectures as particularly relevant to the totality of their learning experience.

Guidance published by QAA on the provision of public information<sup>4</sup> encourages providers to place information about class size in context (relating it to a specific learning/teaching method). Giving prospective students an indication of the average class size for different types of activities on a particular course provides them with a more meaningful and reliable basis on which to make informed choices. This approach also lends itself more readily to comparison between subject areas (should this be a dimension of student choice) and between providers with different missions, where particular traditions and styles of teaching and learning support are well established. Small class sizes may be of more significance to learning within some subject areas than others, for example when access to specialist resources is necessary, such as in science laboratories.

Additional sources of information, such as media reports and references made in the student submissions that form part of QAA's review processes, suggest that students feel dissatisfied when class sizes differ from what was expected.

## Matters to consider when providing information

When providing information about class size, it is recommended that higher education providers make clear its significance in relation to their particular pedagogical approach, and consider students' views about the impact of class size on their learning experience. When presenting information about class size to prospective and current students, providers should explain the learning experience offered in a way that emphasises the holistic and complementary nature of the various activities of which it is comprised, together with the supporting infrastructure (for example libraries, learning support centres and virtual learning environments). The particular approach used could be framed within institutional or departmental teaching and learning strategies.

It is also important that the role of the student as a partner in learning is emphasised. The transition to higher education and the effective development of the required skills as an independent and autonomous learner require a structured learning programme, with appropriate academic support at each stage, so that the learner is able to progress through the levels of the qualifications frameworks,<sup>5</sup> demonstrating the appropriate cognitive outcomes. The learner must be an active participant in this process, and must be made aware that the responsibility for learning is mutual.

When publishing information for students, providers should consider:

- presenting class size as an aspect of the collective delivery methods for a specific course
- stating the ways in which teaching and learning are facilitated, and by whom
- specifying, in pre-entry course information, how effective learning is supported by sufficient provision of specialist resources, suitable class sizes, and the availability of resources.

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<sup>4</sup> Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/quality-code/pages/quality-code-part-c.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/quality-code/pages/quality-code-part-c.aspx).

<sup>5</sup> *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS)*. For more information see *Chapter A1: The national level* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-a1.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-a1.aspx).

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## Appendix 1: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to learning and teaching vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Methods are described in terms of how they are used to present course-level information rather than being evaluated from a pedagogical perspective.

### Lecture

#### **A presentation or talk on a particular topic**

The term 'lecture' covers everything from the traditional model, where a single member of the institution's staff or an affiliate<sup>6</sup> introduces ideas or delivers facts to a group of students, to approaches that might be much more interactive, involve a variety of contributors, make use of a range of media and technologies, and take place virtually as well as in person. Lectures are assumed, in general, to involve larger groups of students than seminars and tutorials, but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

### Seminar

#### **A discussion or classroom session that focuses on a particular topic or project**

Seminars are defined as sessions that provide the opportunity for students to engage in discussion of a particular topic and/or to explore it in more detail than might be covered in a lecture - the extent of interaction will depend on the delivery method. A typical model would involve a guided, tutor-led discussion in a small group. However, the term also encompasses student or peer-led classes with a staff member or affiliate present. Seminars are assumed in general to involve smaller groups of students than lectures, but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

### Webinar

#### **A virtual lecture or seminar**

The term 'webinar' refers to both a virtual lecture and an online seminar, made available through technology enabled-learning (TEL). Participation is regarded as guided independent study.

### Tutorial

#### **A meeting that involves one-to-one or small group supervision, feedback or detailed discussion on a particular topic or project**

Tutorials may be distinguished from seminars for the stronger emphasis they place on the role of the tutor in giving direction or feedback. Tutorials can be used to provide one-to-one feedback in respect of assessed work and can happen virtually as well as face-to-face.

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<sup>6</sup> A lecturer, researcher, technician, member of support staff or graduate teaching assistant of the institution or a visiting or external specialist.

## **Project supervision**

### **A meeting with a supervisor to discuss a particular piece of work**

The term 'project supervision' is used to refer to the meetings that a student or group of students would have with a supervisor to plan, discuss and monitor progress on a particular piece of work, such as a dissertation or extended project. Meetings can take place virtually or in person. The size of a project supervision meeting will depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned and the nature of that work, but supervisions will frequently also take place on a one-to-one basis.

## **Demonstration**

### **A session in which a practical technique or skill is demonstrated**

Examples might include the demonstration of laboratory skills, clinical skills, performance art or fieldwork techniques. Demonstrations can take place in person or virtually. The size of a demonstration is likely to depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned, as well as the nature of that work, but could also take place on a one-to-one basis.

## **Practical class or workshop**

### **A session involving the acquisition, through practical application, of a particular skill or technique**

Examples are wide ranging and could include a laboratory class, recital, artefact handling/identification, language conversation, sports match, and so on. Practical classes and workshops might incorporate elements of teaching or guided learning, and they are at least likely to be supervised or observed. These sessions are more likely to take place in person but, depending on the nature of the subject, may also be conducted remotely. The size of a practical class or workshop will depend upon the nature of the activity. Workshops are likely to involve at least a small group of students but practical classes could take place on a one-to-one basis.

## **Supervised time in studio/workshop**

### **Time in which students work independently but under supervision, in a specialist facility such as a studio or workshop**

Examples might include time spent in an art or design studio, or in a rehearsal space such as a workshop theatre. It could be timetabled or take place on an ad hoc basis. This type of learning frequently involves interaction with peers as well as staff. Due to the nature of the activity, it is unlikely to take place virtually.

## **Fieldwork**

### **Practical work conducted at an external site**

Examples of fieldwork might include survey work and other forms of data collection, excavations and explorations. The work might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervision could be provided by staff or appointed representatives. Fieldwork might occur in groups of various sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the work involved.

## **External visit**

**A visit to a location away from the usual learning spaces, to experience a particular environment, event, or exhibition relevant to the course of study**

Examples are wide ranging and could include a visit to a business or industrial site, built environment site, museum or collection, or attendance at a performance or exhibition. These visits might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervisors could include staff or appointed representatives. Site visits may be carried out in groups of varying sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the visit and the location.

## **Work-based and placement learning**

**Learning that takes place in the workplace**

A key example of work-based learning would be a managed placement in an organisation or business. The term covers any learning that takes place through an organised work opportunity, rather than in a university or college setting. Some supervision or monitoring is likely to be involved, and may be carried out either by a member of staff or a mentor within the host organisation. Due to the nature of the activity, work-based learning is unlikely to take place virtually. Students might undertake work-based learning individually or in groups, depending on the nature of the workplace and the learning involved.

## Appendix 2: Indicative list of assessment methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to assessment vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Methods are described in terms of how they are used to assess course-level information rather than being evaluated from a pedagogical perspective.

### Written examination

#### **A question or set of questions relating to a particular area of study**

Written examinations usually occur at the end of a period of learning and assess whether students have achieved the intended learning outcomes. They may be 'seen' (where students are aware in advance of the question(s) they are expected to answer), or 'unseen' (where the questions are only revealed in the examination itself). In an 'open-book' examination, a student is allowed to use a selection of reference materials. A written examination may require a range of different responses, including writing essays, writing short answers, solving problems or use of multiple-choice. Written examinations usually (but not always) take place under timed conditions.

### Written assignment, including essay

#### **An exercise completed in writing in the student's own time**

A written exercise that typically has a deadline attached but which is not carried out under timed conditions. A well known example is the essay, where students are required to write about a particular topic or answer a question in depth. Other examples include written briefings on particular topics.

### Report

#### **A description, summary or other account of an experience or activity**

There are many different kinds of report: often students are required to produce a report after participating in a practical activity such as fieldwork, laboratory work, work experience or a placement. Reports typically have a prescribed format and can serve as the culmination of a project.

### Dissertation

#### **An extended piece of written work, usually for purposes of summative assessment**

A dissertation is a substantial piece of writing deriving from research that a student has undertaken. Dissertations are the result of a student's independent work, carried out under the guidance of a supervisor. Subject areas may follow different conventions in relation to the production of dissertations. (Note that other outputs from projects are listed separately.)

### Portfolio

#### **A compilation of coursework produced in response to specific assessment briefs**

Portfolios of work are a usual component of art and design programmes, and frequently feature as an assessment method in competence-based qualifications. Typically, a portfolio contains a number of pieces of work, usually connected by a topic or theme. Students are usually required to organise their work and perhaps supplement it with reflective accounts in the form of diaries or logs.

## **Project outputs**

### **The products of project work, often of a practical nature (excluding report/dissertation)**

Students may be assessed on the output of a period of project work (see also **Report** and **Dissertation**). Examples are diverse and include the staging of a play or other performance, a piece of artwork, a new product or a poster.

## **Oral assessment/presentation**

### **A conversation or oral presentation on a given topic**

Examples of oral assessments and presentations might include conversations, discussions, debates, presentations and individual contributions to seminars. This category would also include the viva voce exam, which is typically used by institutions in specific circumstances, such as to clarify assessment decisions or to test the thesis of a doctoral candidate.

## **Practical skills assessment**

### **Assessment of a student's practical skills or competence**

Practical skills assessment focuses on whether, and/or how well, a student performs a specific practical skill or technique (or competency). Examples include clinical skills, laboratory techniques, identification of or commentary on artwork, surveying skills, language translation or listening comprehension.

In the performing arts context, a performance can be used to assess the practical skills of individual students (or groups of students). It usually takes place as a 'one-off' live performance viewed by an examiner, though sometimes the examiner may review a recorded performance.

## **Group critique**

### **A method of receiving feedback from both tutors and peers**

In the visual arts, the group critique is an established method of receiving either formative or summative feedback from both tutors and peers.

## **Set exercises**

### **Questions or tasks designed to assess the application of knowledge or of analytical, problem-solving or evaluative skills**

Examples might include data interpretation and data analysis exercises, and problem-based or problem-solving exercises.

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