The OfS blended learning review

Why it matters - and how to incorporate
into both course rep training and advice

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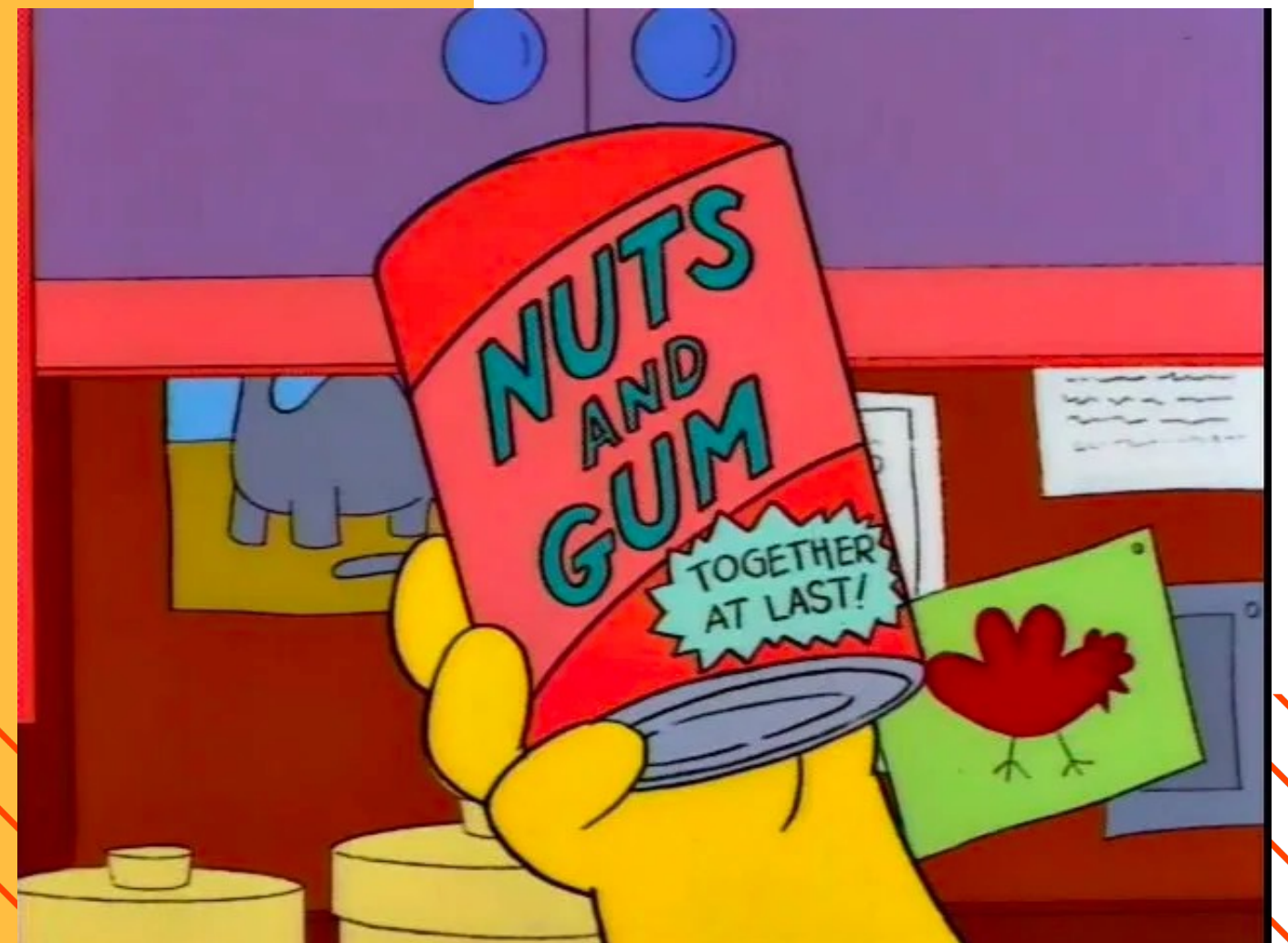SUs

The OfS blended learning review

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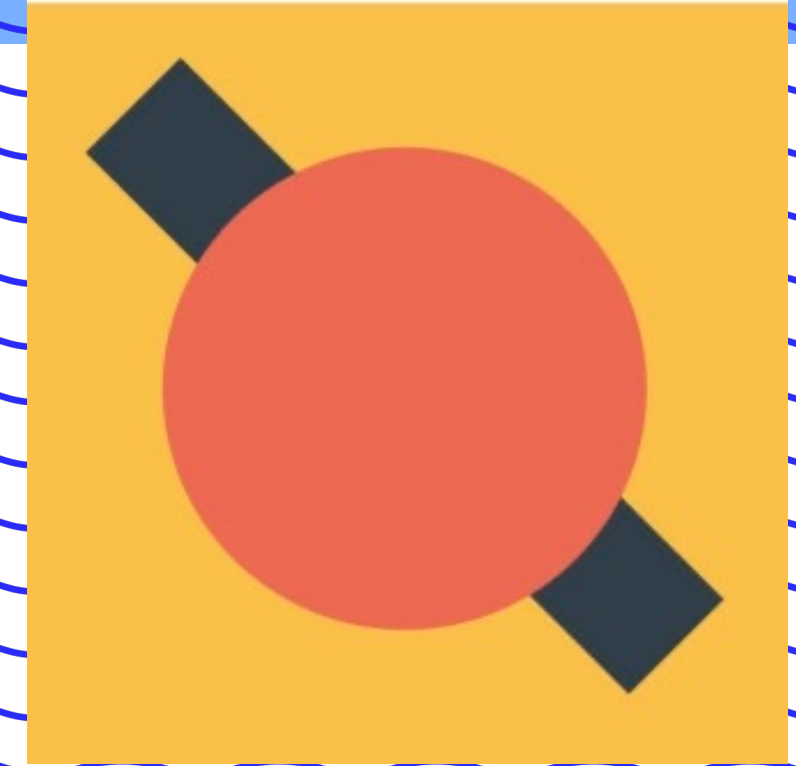
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An hour of "contact"	Online only (1)	In person and online (2)	In-person only (3)
Student needs max timetabling flexibility (4)	A	B	C
Student relaxed or torn between 4 and 6 (5)	D	E	F
Student needs max in-person contact (6)	G	H	I

Do students care?

- 32 per cent of respondents said they received poor or very poor value for money or from their course in the 2021-22 academic year.

- The second most cited factor explaining this view (behind 'tuition fees' but ahead of the volume of in-person or online teaching) was 'teaching quality'.

- Given the extent of online teaching and learning being delivered across the higher education sector at this time, this survey result may suggest that blended approaches to teaching and learning are not considered by a significant proportion of students to be of sufficiently high quality.

Student Academic Experience Survey 2022

AdvanceHE

hepi

Jonathan Neves (Advance HE) and Alexis Brown (HEPI)

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Quality

- OfS B Conditions replace the quality code
- See webinars and briefings from earlier in 2022
- More detailed and granular about minimum expectations
  - Condition B1: Academic experience
  - Condition B2: Resources and support (and engagement)
  - Condition B3: Student outcomes
  - Condition B4: Assessment and awards
  - Condition B5: Qualification standards

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Example in B2

34. In relation to "physical and digital learning resources" the following is an illustrative non-exhaustive list of matters relating to 'digital learning resources' that would fall within the definition:

a. Appropriate hardware. Students have, or have reliable and consistent access to, the hardware that allows them to effectively access all course content. Hardware is of the specification required to ensure that the student is not disadvantaged in relation to their peers.

b. Appropriate software. Students have, or have reliable and consistent access to, the software they need to effectively access all aspects of course content.

c. Robust technical infrastructure. Technical infrastructure and systems work seamlessly and are repaired promptly when needed.

d. Reliable access to the internet. Students have reliable and consistent access to an internet connection. Reliability and bandwidth of the internet connection are at a sufficient level to ensure that a student is not disadvantaged in relation to their peers.

e. A trained teacher or instructor. Students have a trained teacher or instructor who is equipped to deliver high quality digital teaching and learning.

f. An appropriate study place. Students have consistent access to a quiet space that is appropriate for studying.

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Blended review

- The role of the review panel is to provide expert academic judgements about providers' approaches to blended learning.

- OfS will draw on the panel's report to make its own independent judgements about approaches that would be likely to meet the OfS's regulatory requirements, and approaches that would not.

- OfS' judgements will be consistent with the requirements expressed in relevant conditions of registration.

- Panel members were selected to ensure the panel has a range of expertise.

- They are drawn from different academic disciplines and, collectively, have experience of conducting reviews and have expertise directly relevant to the review, including in relation to digital and blended learning; and the impact of blended learning approaches on students with different needs.

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Results

- Panel examined six providers' approaches to blended learning.

- The sample included:
    a. High, medium and low tariff higher education providers
    b. Large, research-intensive providers through to small and specialist
    c. A geographical spread that covered different regions in England.

- Four subject areas: humanities; medicine and allied health; natural sciences and engineering; and performing arts
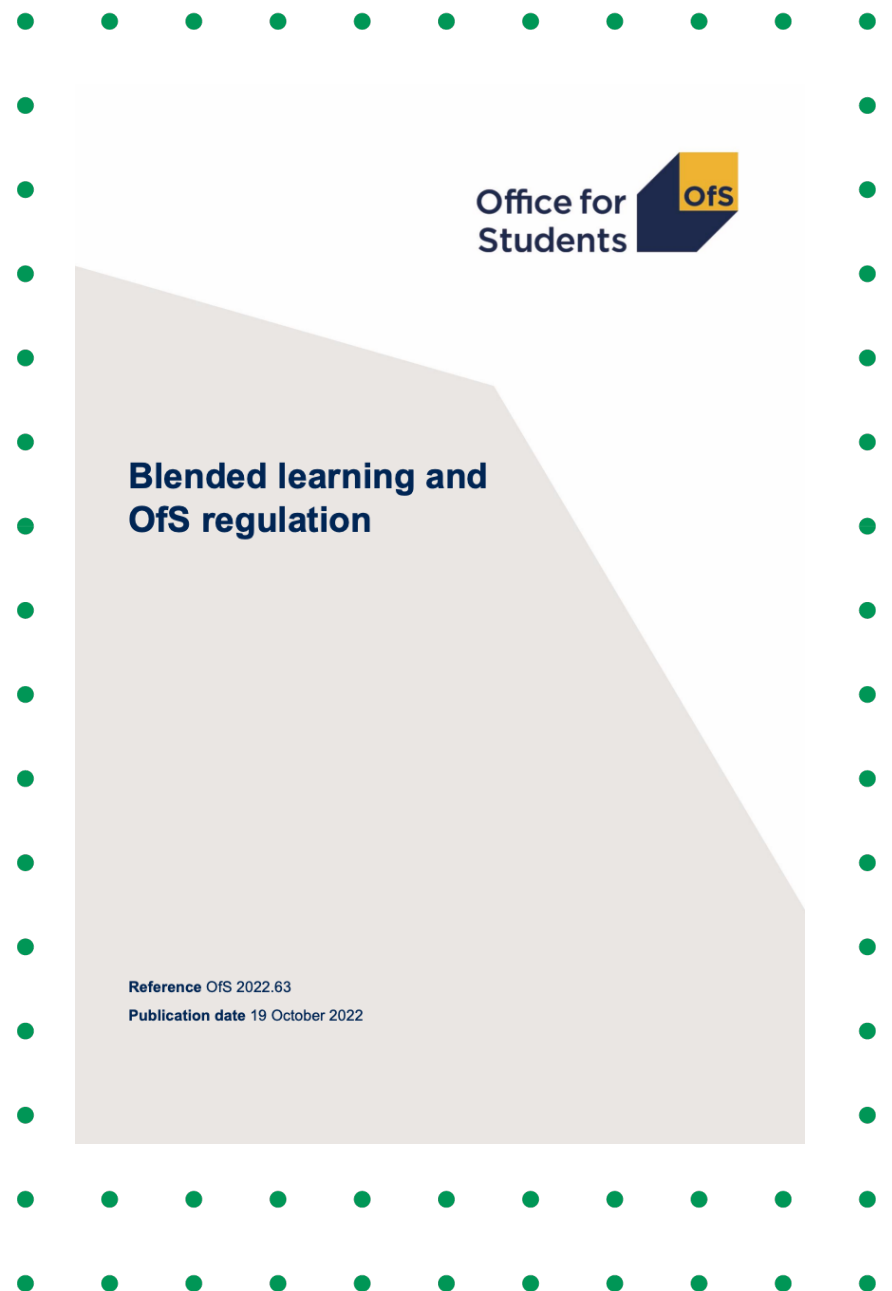
- Students consulted (but not SU)

Covers...

- Blended learning definitions
- The blend approach: strategic, departmental, local?
- Student number growth
- Communicating the reasons for the blend
- On-campus teaching and learning
- Equality, diversity and the needs of different students
- Online lectures
- Teaching staff's digital skills
- Feedback on learning progress in online contexts
- Attendance and engagement
- Structuring Independent Study
- Digital learning support for students
- Being part of a blended academic community
- Learning from students' experience of teaching and learning

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- Indicates ways in which a university or college should approach blended learning to comply with requirements.

- Report considers different approaches to blended learning in the context of the OfS's requirements relating to providing a high quality academic experience with appropriate resources, support and student engagement (conditions of registration B1 and B2).

- Also covers C conditions on Consumer Protection Law guidance

- Also published a short online guide for students, parents or interested members of the public.

- Explain what students can do if they have any concerns about their academic experience.

- Students, parents or members of the public can also use the report to explore in more detail what our requirements might mean for the way a university or college offers blended learning

Office for Students

Blended learning and OfS regulation

Reference OfS 2022.63
Publication date 19 October 2022

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B1 Academic experience

B1.3.a   each higher education course is up-to-date…
B1.3.c   each higher education course is coherent
B1.3.d   each higher education course is effectively delivered
B1.3.e   each higher education course, as appropriate to the subject matter of the course, requires students to develop relevant skills.

a. For the purposes of B1, 'up-to-date' means:

representative of current thinking and practices in the subject matter to which the higher education course relates, including being appropriately informed by recent:

i.   subject matter developments;

ii. research, industrial and professional developments; and

iii. developments in teaching and learning, including learning resources.

b. For the purposes of B1, 'coherent' means:

i.   there is an appropriate balance between breadth and depth of content;

ii. subjects and skills are taught in an appropriate order and, where necessary, build on each other throughout the course; and

iii. key concepts are introduced at the appropriate point in the course content.

c. For the purposes of B1, 'effectively delivered' means:

the manner in which the higher education course is taught, supervised and assessed (both in person and remotely) including, but not limited to, ensuring:

i.   an appropriate balance between delivery methods, for example lectures, seminars, group work or practical study, as relevant to the content of the course; and

ii. an appropriate balance between directed and independent study or research, as relevant to the level of the course.

d. For the purposes of B1, 'relevant skills' means:

i.   knowledge and understanding relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher education course; and

ii. other skills relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher education course including, but not limited to, cognitive skills, practical skills, transferable skills and professional competences.

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B1 Academic Experience

OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B1, if a provider's blended learning approach:

- Uses **lecture recordings** that are no longer up-to-date when re-used, or are not appropriately informed by subject matter developments, research, industrial and professional developments, or developments in teaching and learning.

- Does not **facilitate feedback** for students that is appropriate to the content of their course, such as where dialogue and immediate feedback is required for course content to be effectively delivered.

- Does not **foster collaborative learning** among students registered on a course, which may indicate the course is not being effectively delivered.

- Does not **consider changing expectations** for students' digital skills in related disciplines or industries, if this means that a course is no longer up-to-date, or that a course does not require students to develop relevant skills, in a manner appropriate to the subject matter and level of the course.

- Does not **require students to develop practical skills** in a manner appropriate to the subject matter and level of the course.

- Is driven by an **arbitrary fixed blend ratio** for a course, rather than using the most appropriate delivery method for the subject material. If decisions about the delivery method (for example: online or in-person) are not being made for sound pedagogical reasons, this may indicate that the course is not being effectively delivered.

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d. For the purposes of B1, 'relevant skills' means:

i.   knowledge and understanding relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher education course; and

ii. other skills relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher education course including, but not limited to, cognitive skills, practical skills, transferable skills and professional competences.

B1 Academic Experience

OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B1, if a provider's blended learning approach:

- Is driven by **limitations in the supply of physical learning resources**, including physical locations, which may indicate that a course is not coherent or effectively delivered, as decisions are not being made for sound pedagogical reasons.

- Is delivered in a way that results in **low attendance and engagement** that may mean there is an inappropriate balance between delivery methods or between directed and independent work that indicate that the course is not effectively delivered.

- Is **confusing or difficult to manage for students** due to insufficient coordination across modules on a course, meaning there is not an appropriate balance between delivery methods, leading to a course not being effectively delivered.

- Contains a volume of recorded online lectures and other digital learning resources that is **too high for students to engage with effectively** and adversely affects their ability to participate fully in their course. This may indicate that a course is not being effectively delivered.

- Is not **communicated effectively** to current or prospective students in terms of the pattern of blended delivery, which may suggest that a course is not coherent or being effectively delivered.

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B2 Resources and support

each cohort of students registered on each higher education course receives resources and support which are sufficient for the purpose of ensuring:

i. a high quality academic experience for those students; and

ii. those students succeed in and beyond higher education;

a. For the purposes of B2, 'resources' includes but is not limited to:

i. the staff team that designs and delivers a higher education course being collectively sufficient in number, appropriately qualified and deployed effectively to deliver in practice; and

ii. physical and digital learning resources that are adequate and deployed effectively to meet the needs of the cohort of students.

b. For the purposes of B2, 'appropriately qualified' means staff have and maintain:

i. expert knowledge of the subject they design and/or deliver

ii. teaching qualifications or training, and teaching experience, appropriate for the content and level of the relevant higher education course; and

iii. the required knowledge and skills as to the effective delivery of their higher education course.

c. For the purposes of B2, 'physical and digital learning resources' includes, as appropriate to the content and delivery of the higher education course, but is not limited to:

i. physical locations, for example teaching rooms, libraries, studios and laboratories;

ii. physical and digital learning resources, for example books, computers and software;

iii. the resources needed for digital learning and teaching, for example, hardware and software, and technical infrastructure; and

iv. other specialist resources, for example specialist equipment, software and research tools.

d. For the purposes of B2, 'support' means:

the effective deployment of assistance, as appropriate to the content of the higher education course and the cohort of students, including but not limited to:

i. academic support relating to the content of the higher education course;

ii. support needed to underpin successful physical and digital learning and teaching;

iii. support relating to understanding, avoiding and reporting academic misconduct; and

iv. careers support,

but for the avoidance of doubt, does not include other categories of non-academic support.

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SUs

B2 Resources and support

OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2, if a cohort:

- Does not receive **adequate access to appropriate physical spaces** for students that allow them to access and engage with digital learning. This would be particularly likely if there is evidence that students are not receiving access to physical resources because of pressures on the supply of those resources which the provider could have mitigated.

- Does not receive ade**quate access to sufficient hardware, specialist software and IT infrastructure,** as appropriate, to access digital content.

- Does not receive **sufficient support to develop the skills students need for effective digital learning** and a high quality academic experience.

- Does not receive, where relevant, **well-produced online lectures**, instead, for example receiving poorly recorded audio or video which leads to students missing course content or administrative information relating to their course.

- Receives **re-used lecture recordings** that contain incorrect and confusing administrative information.

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B2 Resources and support

OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2, if a cohort:

- Is not provided with **appropriately qualified teaching staff**, with sufficient digital skills to effectively deliver their course.

- Does not receive **timely and high quality feedback** that supports students to engage with their course and understand subject content, as appropriate to the course.

- Does not receive **appropriate support to develop skills** to engage with in-person teaching and learning, informed by consideration of the cohort's academic needs.

- Does not receive **appropriate support to manage their timetables** and overcome the challenges of combining online and in-person delivery and the need to balance on-campus and independent work. This may include a failure to support students to develop skills in knowing how long to spend on tasks or how to prioritise work.

- Does not receive **sufficient resources and support** that are appropriate to students' academic needs, (including those which may be linked to students' protected characteristics), in order to ensure a high quality academic experience.

each cohort of students registered on each higher education course receives resources and support which are sufficient for the purpose of ensuring:

i. a high quality academic experience for those students; and

ii. those students succeed in and beyond higher education;

a. For the purposes of B2, 'resources' includes but is not limited to:

i. the staff team that designs and delivers a higher education course being collectively sufficient in number, appropriately qualified and deployed effectively to deliver in practice; and

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b. For the purposes of B2, 'appropriately qualified' means staff have and maintain:

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iii. support relating to understanding, avoiding and reporting academic misconduct; and

iv. careers support,

but for the avoidance of doubt, does not include other categories of non-academic support.

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C1 Consumer protection law

- Registered providers must give due regard to relevant guidance about how to comply with consumer protection law ('condition C1').

- Universities and colleges should ensure their marketing information is clear and provides sufficiently detailed information about how courses will be delivered.

- OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition C1 if a provider cannot demonstrate that it has had due regard for relevant guidance about how to comply with consumer protection law in developing and publishing information for prospective students about a course, or if there was otherwise evidence that suggested it had not complied with consumer protection law.

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B1, B2, C1

1. Academic Experience

- Up-to-date
- Effectively delivered
- Appropriate challenge
- Coherent
- Relevant skills

2. Resources and support

- Good staff
- Learning resources
- Academic support
- Academic integrity
- Careers support
- Feedback and engagement

3. Consumer protection

- Make specific types of promises
- Keep those promises

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Decision making

- Students at one provider reported concerns with the high volume of recorded lectures with which they had to engage each week.

- They commented that this quantity of learning would have been unlikely to fit into a fully face-to-face timetable and that it was easy to fall behind.

- The blend they received was heavily influenced by module choice, and students felt that the provider had not acknowledged these challenges.

- The review panel took the view that there was a lack of coherence at course level.

- If this meant that the course was not being 'effectively delivered', OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B1.

LEVELS

WONKHE
SUs

Decision making

- The panel highlighted a variety of ways in which providers manage and describe their blended approach, setting different levels of autonomy for decisions about the approach at different levels within their organisational structures.

- **The panel's view was that where decision-making is devolved to module level, the blended offer should be coherent at course level.**

- OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 if a lack of coordination between modules on a course meant there was not an appropriate balance between delivery methods, leading to the course not being 'effectively delivered'.

- It would also be likely to have compliance concerns if teaching activities were moved online to meet a fixed blend ratio for a course, rather than using the most appropriate delivery methods for the material being taught.

- If decisions were not being made for sound pedagogical reasons, this could lead to concerns about whether a course is 'effectively delivered'.

LEVELS

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Number growth

- The panel found that increased student numbers and space constraints at a provider appeared to lead to a whole day of online learning being regularly scheduled for students on its medicine course that had previously been in-person, despite the removal of government restrictions on face-to-face teaching.

- Some students the panel spoke to regretted that this teaching was not delivered in-person as it had been before the coronavirus pandemic.

- The panel also observed at a different provider that a decision to retain recorded versions of online lectures as part of its delivery of multiple courses partly related to overcrowding on a campus.

- The overcrowding resulted from unexpected numbers of students meeting entry tariffs in 2021 after receiving centre-assessed grades.

- The panel found that this contradicted assertions by other staff at the provider that decisions about the blend were driven by discipline-based academics making decisions about which blend was most appropriate in their subject context.

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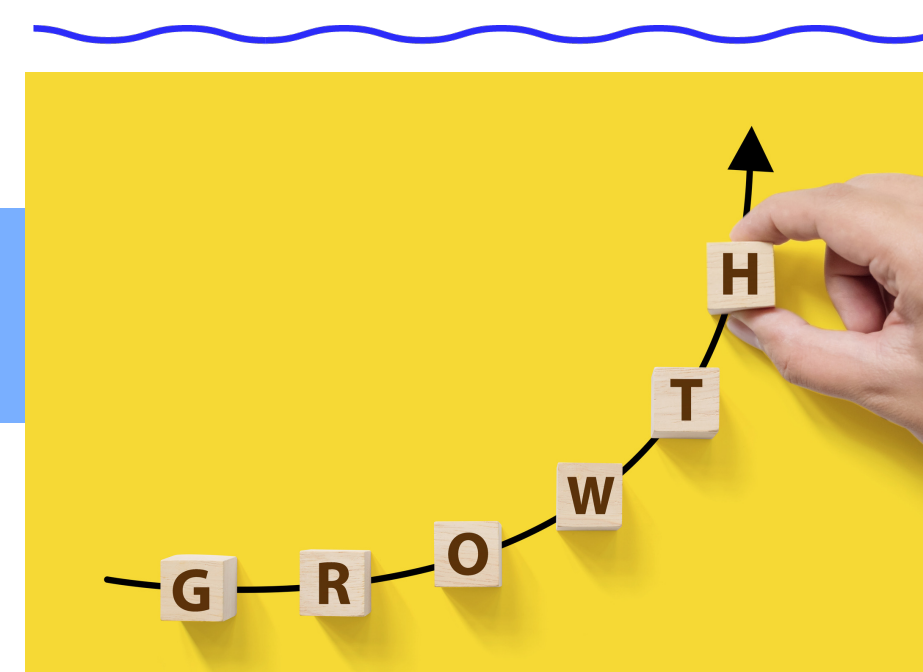
Number growth

- The panel observed in several cases that managing increasing demand for space on campus caused by increases in student recruitment was linked to permanent shifts to online delivery for elements of a course.

- The panel's view was that providers should make sure that sound pedagogic principles inform their approach to blended learning rather than factors such as student number growth.

- OfS likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 if factors such as limited physical learning resources, including in-person teaching facilities, drive decisions about how a course is delivered.

- If a course is re-timetabled because there is not appropriate access to the in-person teaching spaces that certain subjects or skills require and, as a consequence, that course is no longer taught in an appropriate order, this may indicate that the course is not coherent.
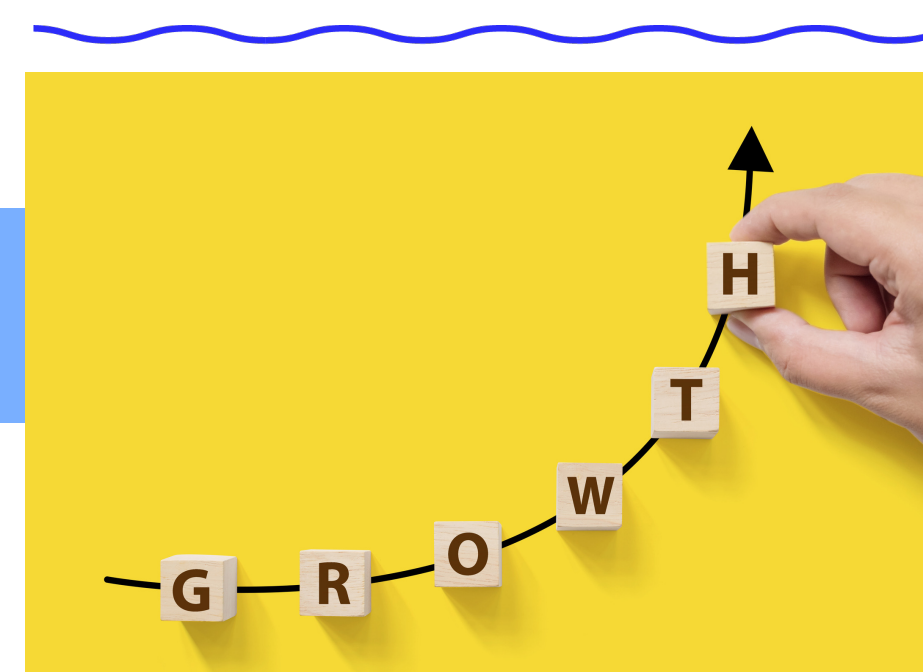
Number growth

- If decisions about how teaching is delivered do not take sufficient account of sound pedagogical considerations, OfS may conclude that the course is not effectively delivered. Either finding would indicate that students on the course are not likely to be receiving a high quality academic experience.

- OfS likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if a cohort of students appears not to receive access to appropriate physical resources sufficient for the purpose of ensuring a high quality academic experience or success in and beyond higher education. This would be particularly likely if there is evidence that the absence of physical resources is linked to pressures driven by, for example, increases in student recruitment.

- This is likely to raise compliance concerns because it may indicate that a provider has not taken reasonable steps to mitigate those pressures on resources (for example, by restricting student recruitment such that physical teaching resources are available at appropriate times and on an appropriate scale).
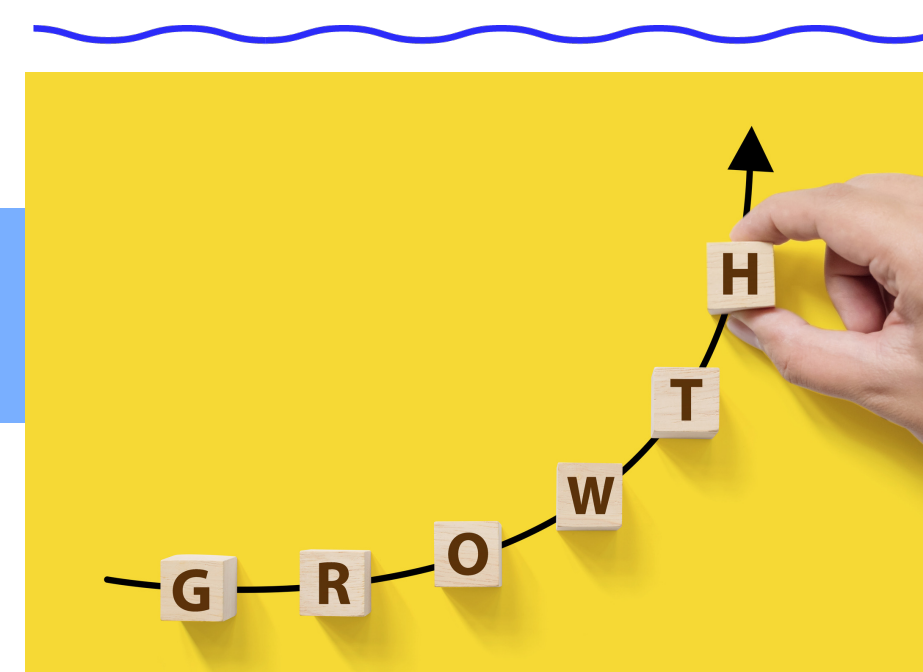
Communication

- The panel found one course at a provider that offered students a choice between a face-to-face or blended approach to course delivery.

- Where a provider has decided to offer a course in this way and ensured students are provided with the material information necessary to enable an informed choice, this would be unlikely to raise compliance concerns with condition C1.

- Such an approach, in itself, is also unlikely to raise compliance concerns with relevant elements of condition B1 because it does not raise concerns about the design, delivery or management of the course, giving no reason to suppose that the choice offered to students means that the course would not be effectively delivered.

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Communication

- The panel observed that some providers had communicated to students the ratio of face to-face and online learning that they could expect on their course or at a whole-provider level.

- It took the view that while this could enable students to understand how their blended learning was to be delivered, expressing a ratio could over-simplify blended learning by assuming that it was just about the proportion of face-to-face and online delivery.

- This could be unhelpful in some cases where the boundary between in-person and face-to-face learning is blurred.

- For example, in some cases teaching was 'dual-cast' and available both face-to face and online at the same time. In other cases, lectures were available live and face-to face but also recorded for future consumption.

- The panel's view was that providers should ensure their web-based information gives applicants clear information about the approach to blended learning at course level.

- Similarly, registered students should be given accurate information about the blended approaches on their course and modules.

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Communication

'The [Consumer Protection Regulations] make it unlawful to mislead students by failing to give them the information they need to make an informed decision, such as about what and where to study. This is called material information. Material information does not necessarily include all of the information that might potentially be of interest to a student but is the information the student needs to make an informed decision…'[20]

57. The CMA guidance then specifies that the type of course-related information that is material information under the Consumer Protection Regulations is likely to include the following:

'…Information about the composition of the course and how it will be delivered, and the balance between the various elements, such as the number and type of contact hours that students can expect (for example lectures, seminars, work placements, feedback on assignments), the expected workload of students (for example the expected self-study time), and details about the general level of experience or status of the staff involved in delivering the different elements of the course;…

…location of study or possible locations, which should also include the likely or possible location of any work placement to be undertaken (where known);'

Communication

- If a provider cannot show that it has given due regard to relevant guidance about how to comply with consumer protection law in developing and publishing information for prospective students about a course, or there is otherwise evidence that suggests it is not complying with consumer protection law, we are likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition C1

- Providers are always required to comply with consumer protection law.

- OfS is likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 if a provider does not communicate to current or prospective students information about the extent to which a course will be delivered through a blended approach.

- This might suggest that the design, delivery or management of that course is weak.

- This in turn would be likely to raise compliance concerns because it would indicate an increased likelihood that the course would not be considered effectively delivered.

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On campus teaching

- Students reported to the panel that they had difficulty finding facilities on campus where they could engage appropriately with digitally delivered teaching and other digital learning resources.

- The panel expressed particular concern about this issue when there was not a coherent approach to timetabling of blended learning courses.

- Its view was that providers should consider how students engage with online elements of their course while they are physically on campus.

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SUs

On campus teaching

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- The panel expressed particular concern about this issue when there was not a coherent approach to timetabling of blended learning courses.

- Its view was that providers should consider how students engage with online elements of their course while they are physically on campus.

- At one provider, students (citing overcrowding on campus) reported struggling to find space to study or to join online lectures.

- Some students felt that this issue was compounded by an increasing quantity of online lectures. One student suggested that a traditional campus-based teaching calendar would not be able to accommodate the number of lectures that were produced.

- OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2, if, because of a lack of suitable facilities on campus, a cohort of students could not participate in online learning or study at appropriate times relevant to the delivery of their course.

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On campus teaching

- Where a course is delivered through a blended approach with a significant quantity of digitally delivered teaching, or requiring the use of digital learning resources, the cohort of students on that course is unlikely to have a high quality academic experience if students are not able to access and engage effectively with digital learning.

- OfS has specified in the guidance that underpins condition B2 that having consistent access to an appropriate place to study is an example of digital learning resources for the purposes of that condition.

- Such facilities also clearly correspond to the 'physical locations' element of the definition of physical and digital learning resources.

- OfS is likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if a provider requires students to spend a significant proportion of their time engaging with digital learning, without ensuring access to appropriate physical spaces to allow them to do so.

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Learning resources

- The panel described a number of ways in which providers had provided additional support for students to access blended learning.

- These included laptop loan schemes, bursaries to purchase equipment, digital skills training and access to learning technologists.

- Sometimes, students were unaware of these resources, but this may have been because the students interviewed did not have the need to access them.

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SUs

Learning resources

- Provision of laptop loans or bursaries may be one of many appropriate ways to provide students with access to digital content.

- However, the existence of such schemes on their own may not be sufficient to satisfy the requirements of condition B2 if, for example, relevant students are not aware of them.

- Providing access to learning technologists and digital skills training are likely to be appropriate ways of providing 'support' to students on blended courses.

- OfS would take these examples of practice into consideration as part of any assessment of a provider's compliance with condition B2.

- Providers should satisfy themselves that they have taken all reasonable steps to provide sufficient 'physical and digital learning resources' and 'support' to ensure each cohort of students' high quality experience on blended courses.

- OfS is likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if students do not have access to sufficient hardware and infrastructure to access digital content as part of a blended course.

- OfS would also be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if students do not receive sufficient support to develop the skills to engage with digital learning effectively and therefore do not receive a high quality academic experience.

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Equality and diversity

EQUALITY   EQUITY

- The panel has said that providers that fail to consider the resource and support needs of students from different groups and with different characteristics present a risk to the quality of their learning experience, particularly for disabled students.

- The panel's view was that providers should work with students to understand their learning needs, particularly the needs of disabled students, to improve the accessibility of blended courses.

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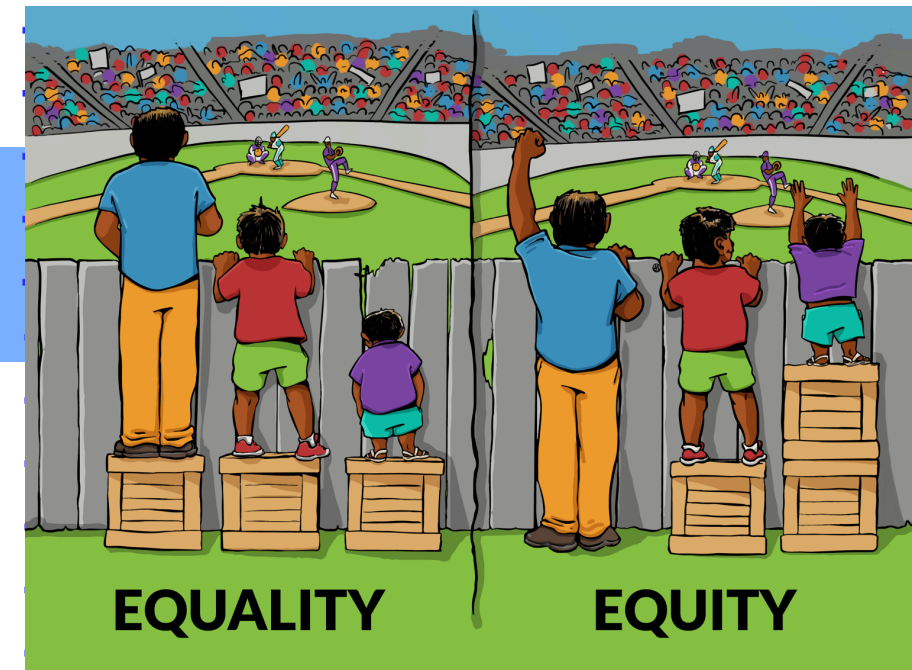
Equality and diversity

EQUALITY   EQUITY

- The panel observed on one course that students are offered a choice at the start of their course between fully online and blended delivery, with provision made for students to change pathway mid-course.

- In this instance, the panel's view was that when a course did not require specialist spaces or equipment, this approach would work well for a wide range of students' needs.

- In contrast, the panel found that students on other courses reported poor experiences of live lectures being dual-cast, as well as staff commenting that they found hybrid delivery – where some students study in-person and others online at the same time – did not work well in their teaching contexts.

- The two scenarios illustrate how adjusting the delivery approach for a course can have a different effect in different contexts.

- If a provider decided that making available online or blended delivery was not appropriate for a particular course, for example because of the extent or nature of student participation and engagement required by the subject matter of the course, this by itself would be unlikely to raise compliance concerns in relation to condition B2.

- This could be the case even where the preferences of individual students could have been more fully met by offering a choice of delivery methods.

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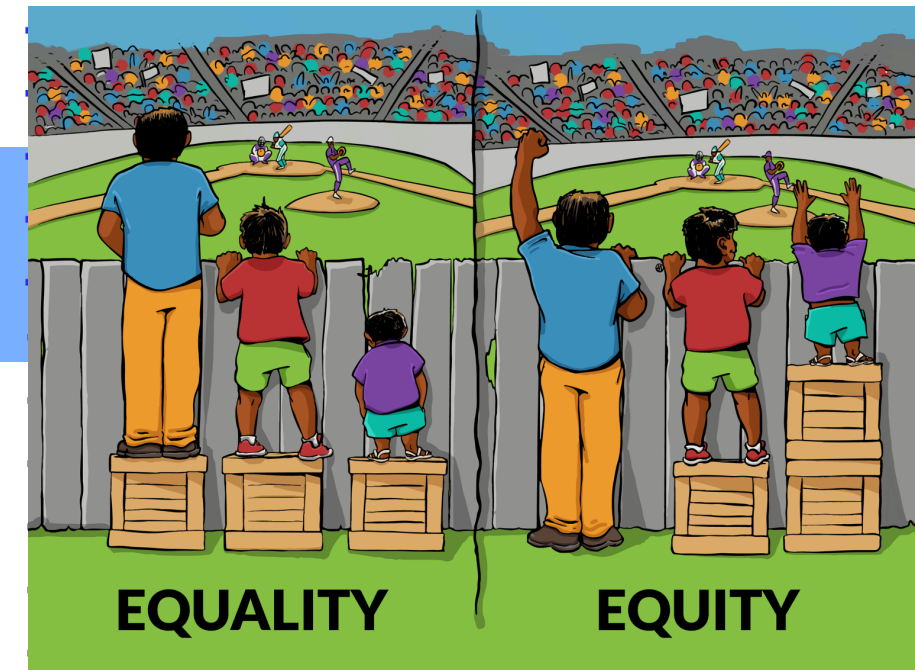
Equality and diversity

EQUALITY   EQUITY

- Providers must actively consider the particular resource and support needs of a cohort of students to ensure students have a high quality academic experience and achieve success.

- A provider that has failed to consider this properly and take all reasonable steps is likely to cause compliance concerns in relation to condition B2.

- Expectation is that the number and nature of the steps that need to be taken (to ensure sufficient resources and support) are likely to be more significant when the academic needs of a cohort are greater.

- A cohort of students that has a range of academic needs will likely result in a provider needing to take more, or more substantial, steps to ensure sufficient resources and support are available to students.

- Academic needs may be linked to some students' protected characteristics or socio-economic backgrounds.

- A provider responding to a cohort of students who have caring responsibilities, by making high quality digital learning resources available to them, could be an appropriate means of supporting their particular academic needs.

- All providers must meet their legal obligations to make reasonable adjustments for a disabled student. For the purpose of condition B2, any reasonable adjustments made to the delivery of a course for an individual student should not have a detrimental effect on the academic experience of the whole cohort.

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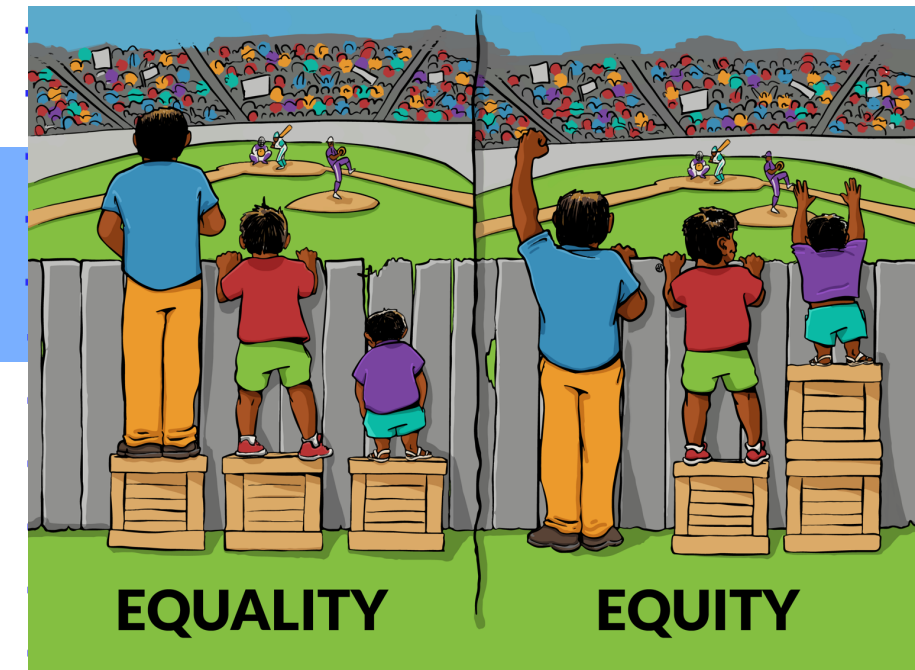
Guest speakers

- A course lead for a performing arts course described how the option of delivering guest speaker sessions online, originally made necessary by pandemic restrictions, had allowed the programme to expand.

- The reduced time commitment and need for travel had made it easier to book guests for online Q&A and careers sessions and, as a result, students had access to relevant figures from industry to discuss career development. The course lead reported that student engagement with this programme was high.

- This example reflected an improvement to the course that was valued by students. However, it is unlikely that we would consider this series of Q&A sessions on its own as evidence that a course is up-to-date or delivering relevant skills.

- If the guest lectures were clearly part of a course, they would be taken into account as part of our assessment of the course as a whole.

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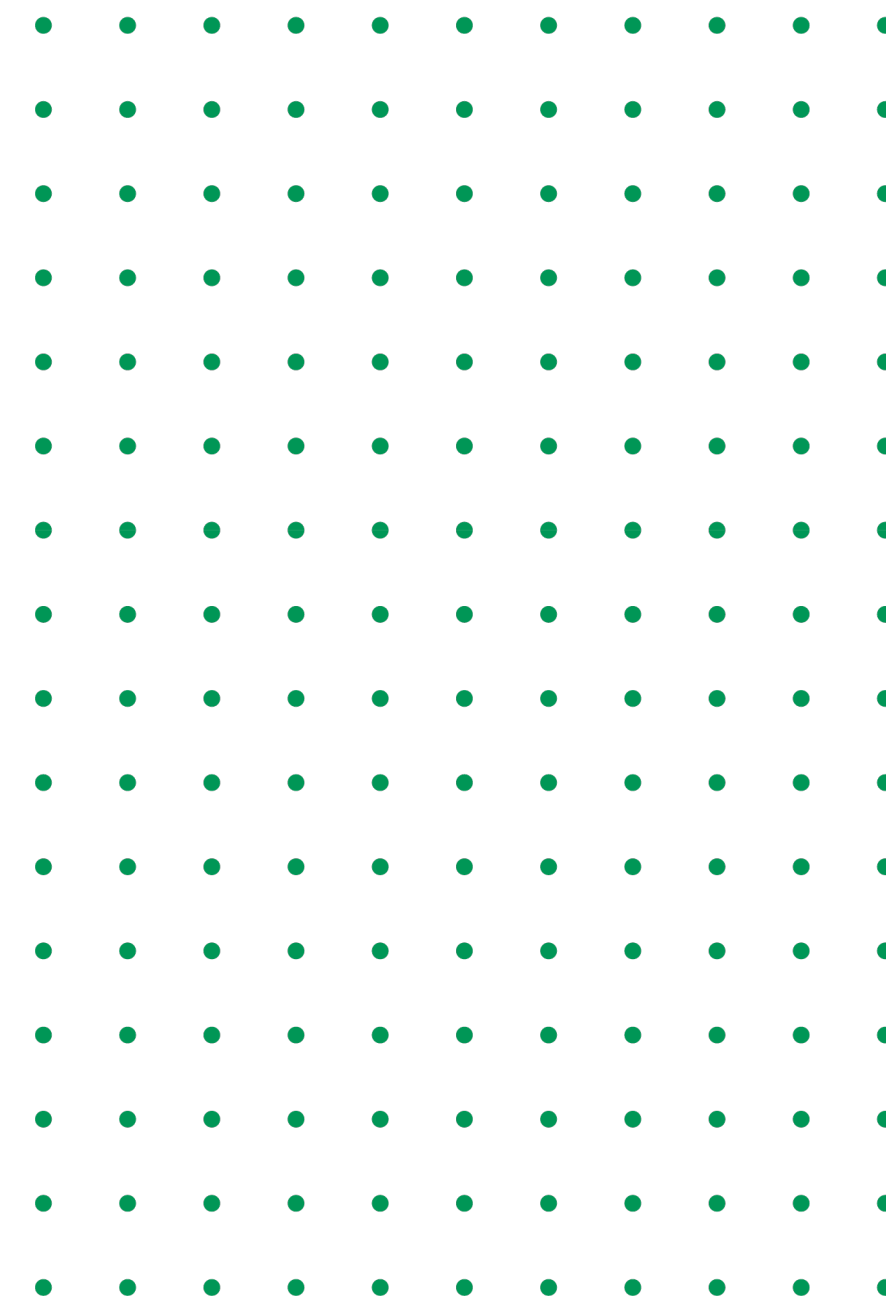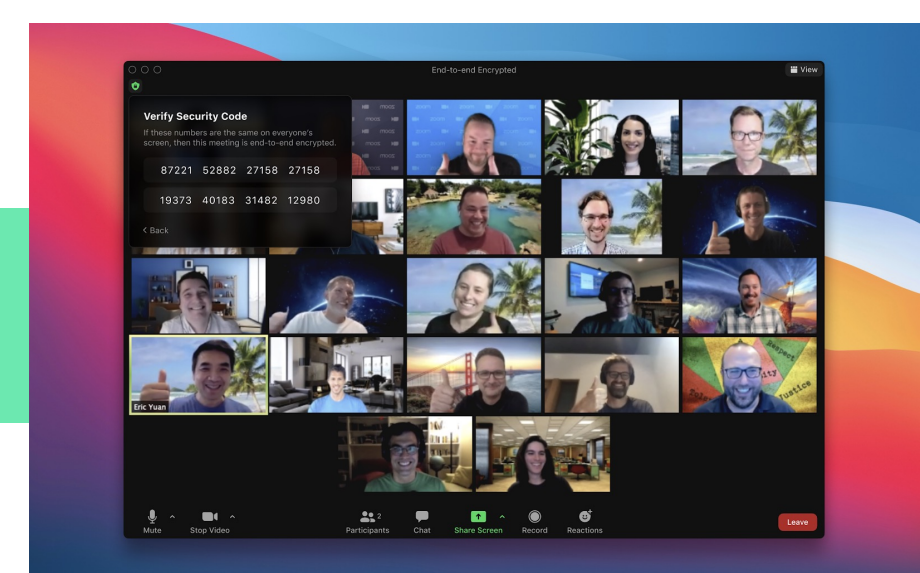
Guest speakers

- OfS may consider a guest speaker programme, delivered using digital technology, to be relevant to condition B1 where it considers it forms part of a course.

- This may mean that a course is more likely to be 'up-to-date' or delivering other 'relevant skills', because guest speakers can contribute course content which incorporates recent developments in a subject area, research, or professional and industrial practice.

- However, this may not, on its own, compensate for other elements of a course that are not up-to-date.

- OfS unlikely to consider the absence of an external speaker programme, by itself, as indicating an increased likelihood that a course is not up-to-date or delivering other relevant skills, as these requirements could be met through other means.
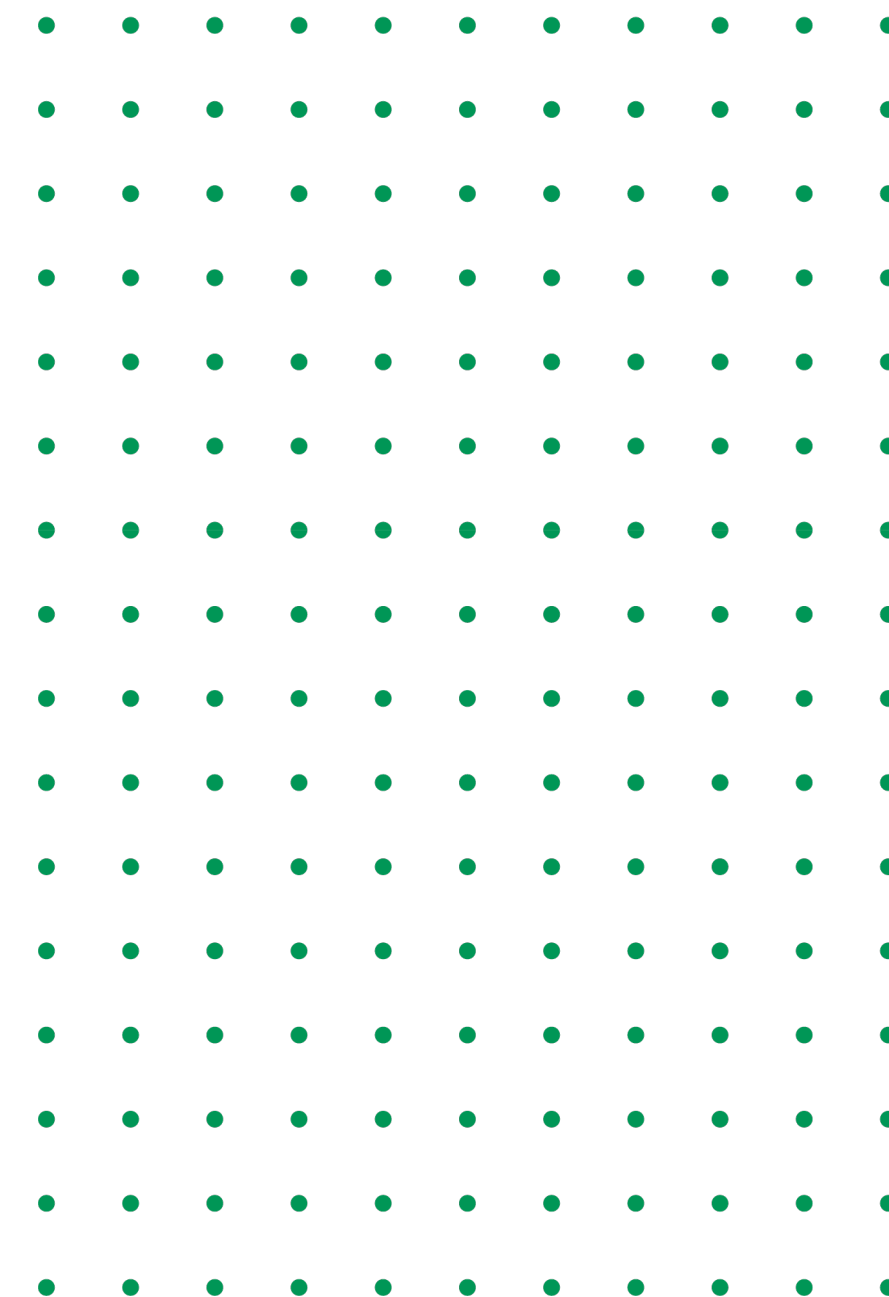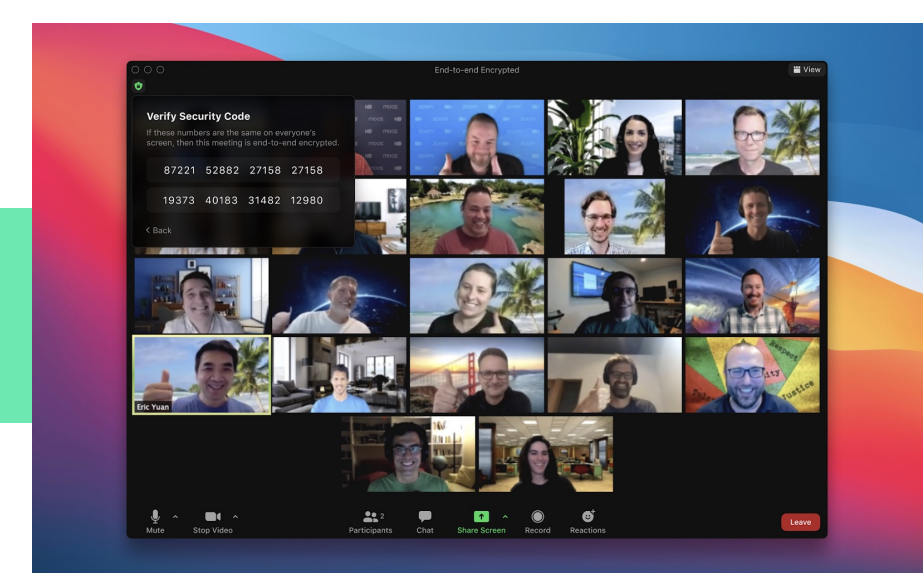
Up to date?

- The review panel took the view that the reuse of lecture recordings from previous years should not be assumed to be a sign of low quality teaching, because in many cases content will remain relevant across years.

- However, the panel's view was that teaching staff should ensure that any reused assets remain up-to-date.

- As well as including out-of-date course content, reused lecture recordings may include inaccurate deadlines or administrative information from previous years, which can cause confusion and detract from students' learning experience.

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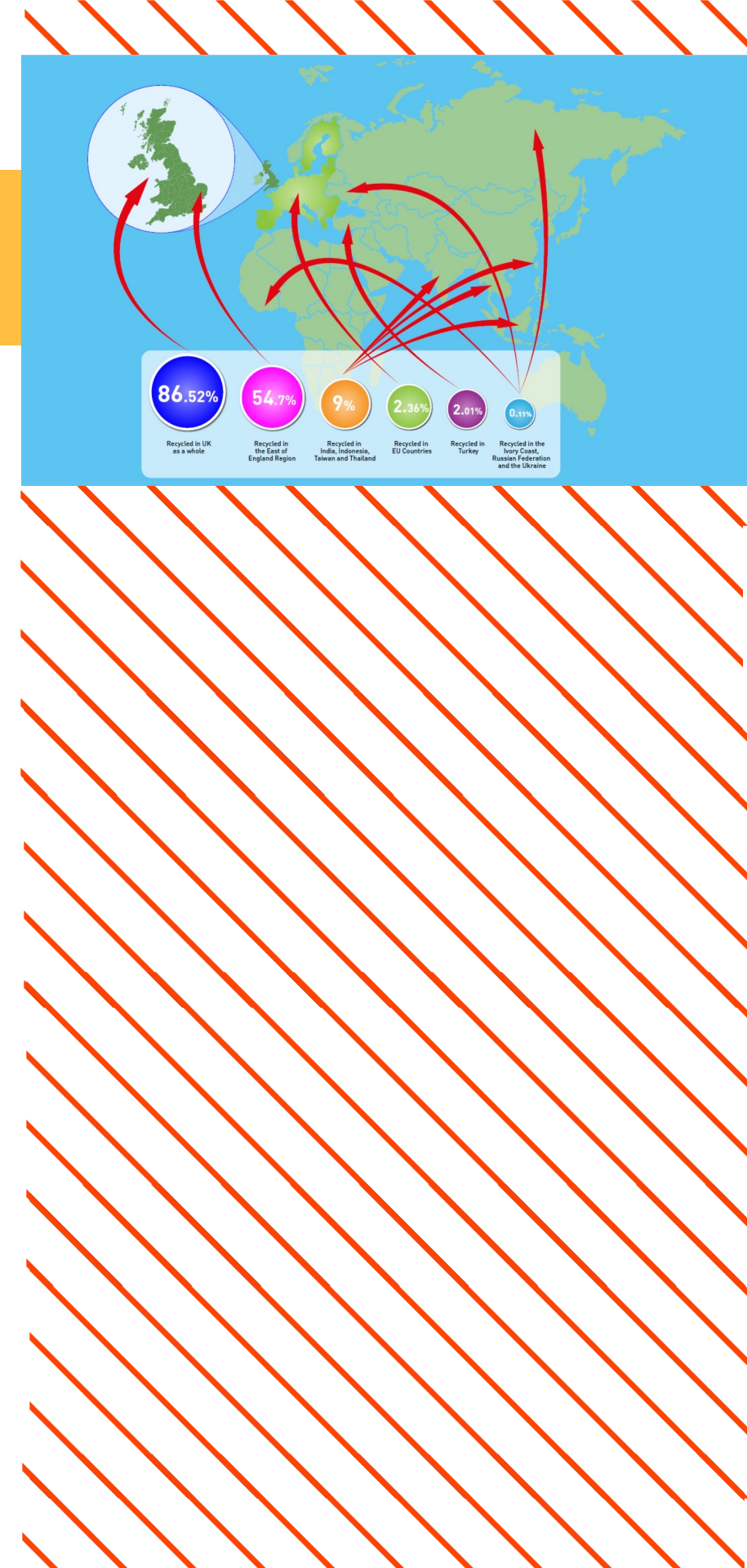
Up to date?

- The re-use of lecture recordings, particularly for core course content that remains similar year on-year, would, in itself, be unlikely to cause compliance concerns. This is because reusing high quality lecture recordings from previous years could support improvements in the academic experience, as the time of teaching staff may be freed up for other beneficial engagement with students.

- However, there is a risk that lecture recordings are not up-to-date when they are re-used, for example, because they can include course content that no longer reflects the curriculum design. The re-use of lecture recordings would be likely to raise compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 if the re-used lectures are not up-to-date, which could be because they are not appropriately informed by subject matter developments, research, industrial and professional developments, or developments in teaching and learning.

- The re-use of lecture recordings may also result in students being provided with lectures which include incorrect administrative information, such as previous years' course deadlines or timetables. This can create confusion for students and impede their learning. The re-use of lecture recordings would be likely to raise compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if the extent of incorrect and confusing administrative information they contained meant that they could not be considered adequate and deployed effectively to meet the needs of students.

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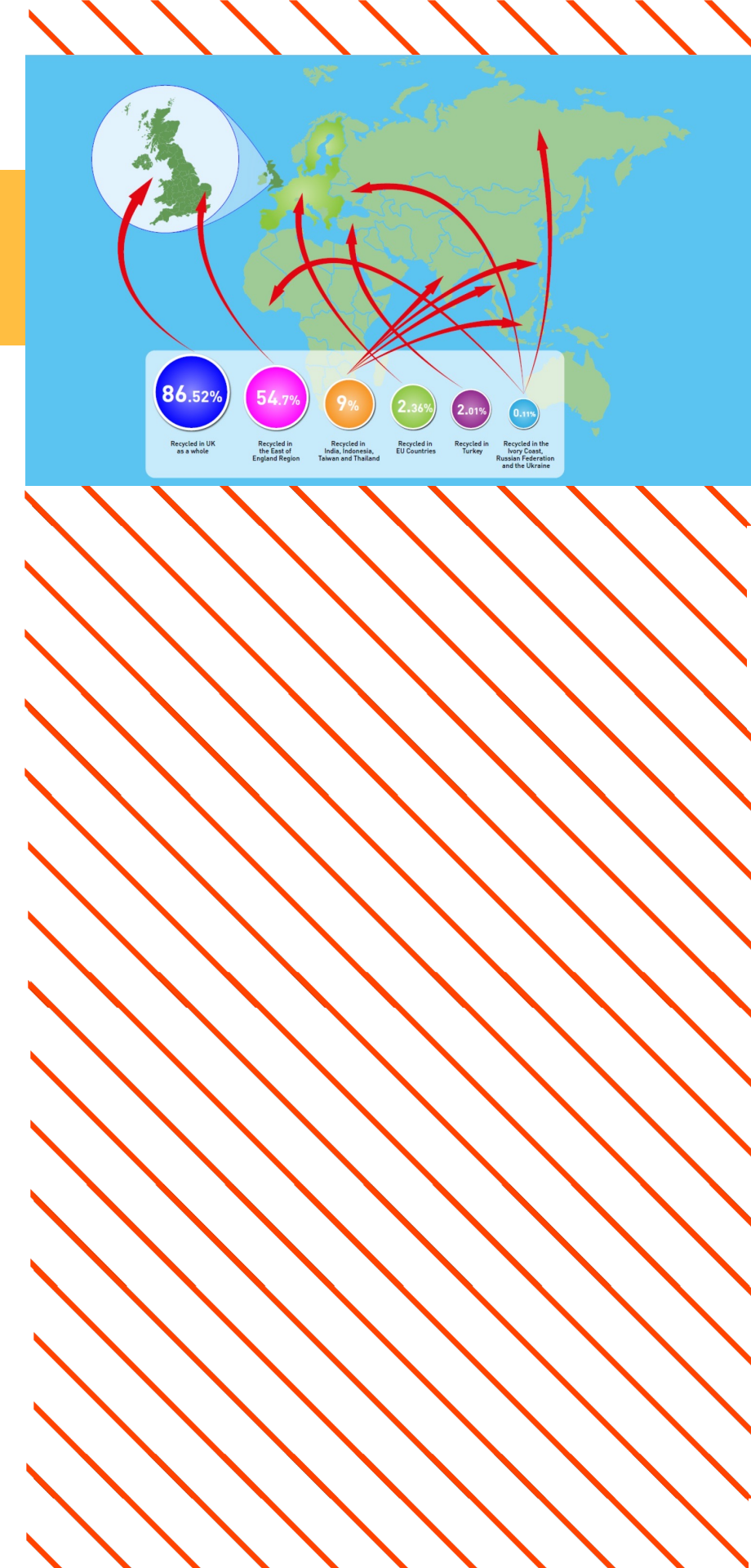
Online lecture quality

- The review panel heard from students about instances where online lectures were poorly produced. Students cited examples of issues including:
    - content on whiteboards being out of shot
    - sound quality being poor
    - sessions being overly long.

- The panel's view was that the impact of poor quality teaching was the same whether it was delivered online or in-person, and emphasised that the increased use of online lectures was highlighting the importance of well-produced online lectures as part of a high quality academic experience.

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Online lecture quality

- At two providers, students reported that they missed course content because information written on whiteboards was not visible in lecture recordings, and teaching sessions were so long that they struggled to interact fully for the session's duration.

- At one of these providers, students reported that audio was poor and that they were unable to hear parts of the session.

- At one provider, students stated that when lectures were broadcast live (rather than pre-recorded), there were frequent technical issues which meant they missed content and found it difficult to interact with these lectures.

- These examples would be likely to cause compliance concerns in relation to condition B2, as they indicate that a provider is providing poor quality resources which are not meeting the needs of the cohort of students

- Poorly produced online lecture recordings would be likely to raise compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if students were receiving resources that were not adequate or not deployed effectively to meet students' academic needs.

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Staff skills

- The review panel took the view that the low quality of some of the online teaching materials identified during its fieldwork suggests that, in some instances, teaching staff did not have sufficient digital skills to deliver blended learning effectively.

- It also took the view that in many cases there had been significant efforts by teaching staff to upskill in digital teaching, both individually and led by teaching and learning enhancement teams or digital champions.

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Staff skills

- One provider had employed and offered training to a significant number of students to provide digital support to students and staff. Staff at this provider spoke positively of the impact this approach had on their digital skills.

- On a performing arts course, the panel described digital developments in the creative arts sector (such as headphone theatre and livestream theatre) which had been integrated into a course, with dedicated technical teams to support teaching staff's ability to teach up-to-date digital approaches.

- If a provider were taking these approaches to upskill staff and those approaches were effective in practice, we would be unlikely to have compliance concerns with condition B2 in relation to staff's digital skills, as we would be likely to consider that the provider had taken some steps to ensure its staff team was appropriately qualified.

- OfS would be likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if a provider is not taking all reasonable steps to ensure its staff team was appropriately qualified, with sufficient digital skills to effectively deliver courses employing blended learning approaches.

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Feedback

- Some students told the panel that they did not feel they had access to timely or sufficiently helpful feedback and academic assistance when learning and teaching took place online.

- Students reported not feeling able to ask for support in online sessions, while staff and students stated it was difficult to create dialogue and participation during online teaching, for example, using virtual classrooms.

- Some students said that seeking feedback by email outside online teaching sessions could be a slow process, with the 'learning moment' passing before a student gained the information they needed. This lack of feedback was linked to students reporting difficulty understanding aspects of the curriculum taught solely or predominantly online.

- Students also said that when lectures were online, they could not see whether other students were struggling with the same content, as would be possible during in-person lectures.

- The panel's view was that these examples suggested a lack of informal feedback which could be compensated by additional structured feedback for students.

Feedback

- Students at one provider said that online delivery caused issues with timely and effective feedback on the mathematical elements of their course. They said that chat functions on video calls did not enable students to write or annotate complex formulas, and that email responses to queries were too slow to be helpful.

- OfS compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 in this instance, as delivery methods may not be appropriate for the course content, causing students to miss appropriate feedback, which suggests that the provider may not be delivering the course effectively.

- Students at one provider said that during the coronavirus pandemic, teaching staff increased contact through email and set up informal virtual meetings to discuss student work-related concerns, and that this practice had now become common. Students reported that this had improved communication and helped them resolve issues quickly and effectively

- This illustrates one way in which teaching staff can create new routes or improve current routes for providing feedback to students, as part of online learning and teaching. OfS unlikely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 if a provider had taken steps such as this to ensure students receive sufficient support to facilitate effective learning and teaching.


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Feedback

- Students reported that issues with the timeliness and quality of feedback during online teaching could make it more difficult to fully engage with their course and understand course content.

- Condition B2 requires a provider to take steps to ensure that students receive support to facilitate a high quality academic experience.

- OfS likely to have compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if a provider were not offering timely and effective support appropriate to a course and if students were struggling to interact fully with physical or digital learning and teaching as a result.

Attendance and engagement

- Students and staff reported low attendance and engagement across providers and subject areas, especially for on-campus teaching. The panel identified a difference between attendance ('Is the student present?') and engagement ('Is the student actively participating?'). It also identified a lasting impact of the coronavirus pandemic on attendance and engagement, such as the potential for coronavirus infections to cause short-term decreases in attendance.

- The panel's view was that low attendance and engagement affects whole cohorts because, as students and staff reported, it can mean that learning and teaching sessions are less collaborative and effective.

- The review panel also took the view that low attendance and engagement has implications for individual students, as attendance and engagement are associated with improved continuation and attainment.
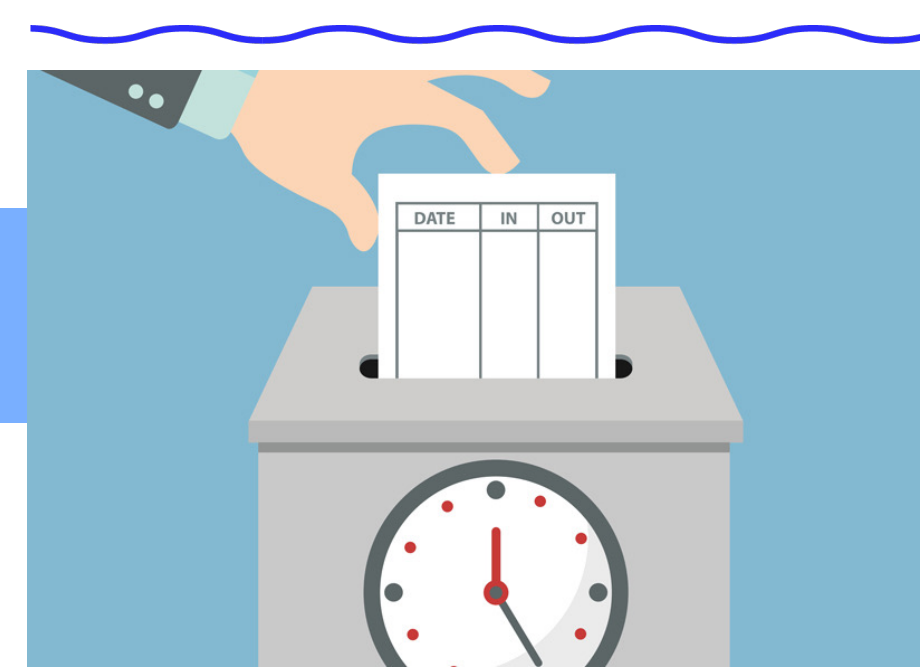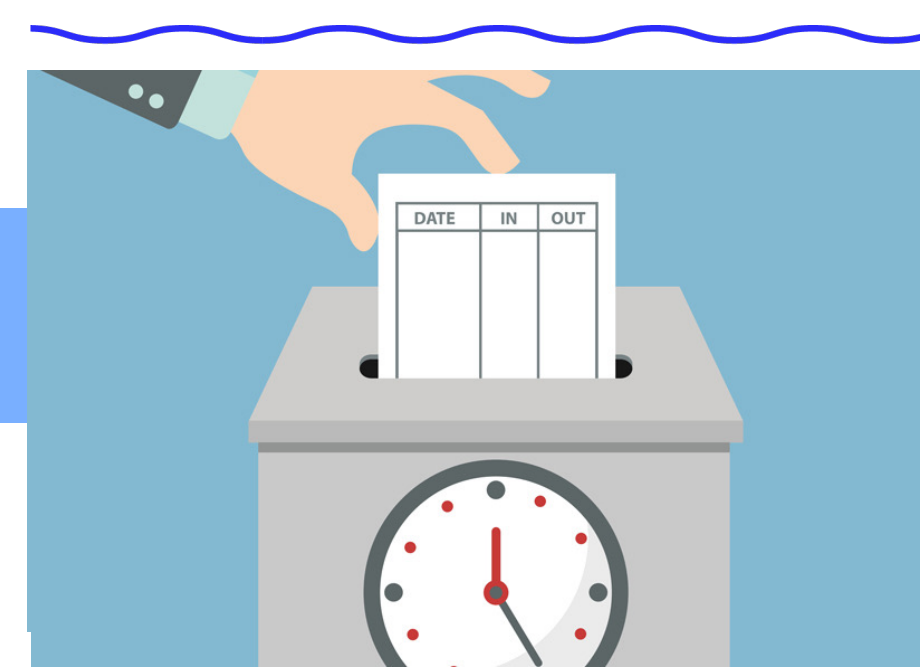
Attendance and engagement

- The panel found one course for which students reported attendance rates below 50 per cent for in-person elements of the course, and that many students had left the course. One student on this course said:

> 'About February, March, a lot of the students became disinterested. And they lost their motivation to actually do the proper work. Maybe 10-15 students at a time within those tutorials, which from a student body which was [a much larger number], that's not exactly enough.[24] ... Whether it was the fact that the university struggled at the beginning of the year or whether it was just some stress post-pandemic, we don't know [...] The motivation wasn't just within this course.'

- This particular course was providing a significant amount of online teaching. Students said that this had led to an increased emphasis on theory-based learning as opposed to the practical elements which took place in laboratories, and that this had resulted in less interaction with academic staff.

> 'And another problem with online learning as such is that once you get down into more difficult calculations or equations, sometimes you need the lecture[r] to be there with you to actually guide you through.'

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Attendance and engagement

- This case study suggests that decisions about the delivery method for a course can be linked to low attendance and non-continuation.

- OfS compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 in this case as low attendance and increased non-continuation suggest that a course is not effectively designed and delivered.

- In this case, OfS likely to consider that the course was not effectively delivered because of an inappropriate balance between delivery methods and between directed and independent study.

- However, there are other factors that could indicate that a course is not effectively delivered in the manner which it is taught, supervised and assessed.

- In addition, this example raises questions about whether students are adequately supported by their provider. A sustained period of low attendance on this course should have signalled to the provider that the academic needs of students may not have been adequately met.

- OfS compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 as it appears this provider did not take all the steps it could and should have taken after a pattern of low attendance emerged, to ensure students received sufficient resources and support as relevant to their academic needs which would ensure their success in and beyond higher education.

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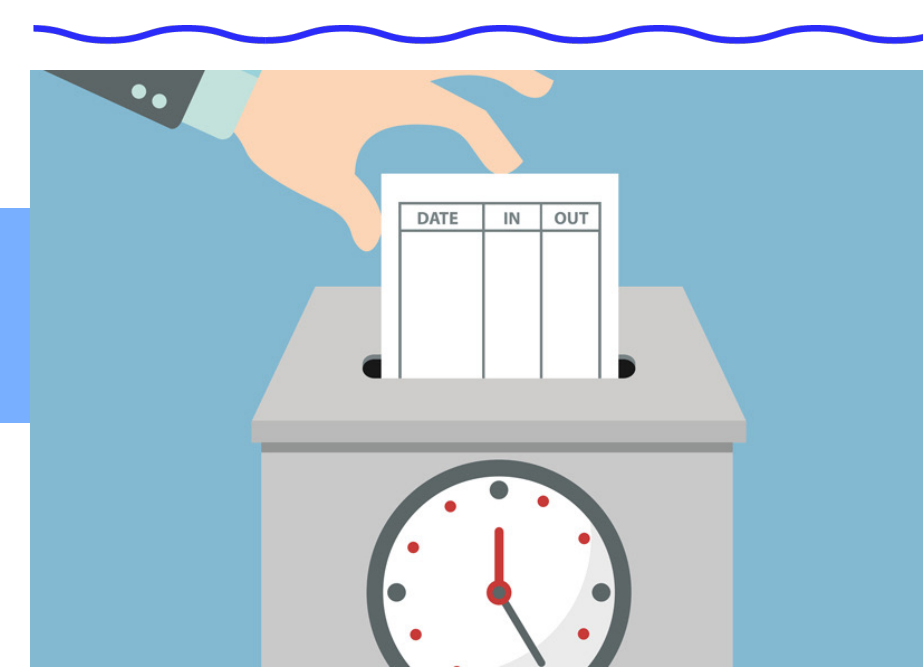
Independent study

- The panel described that an increase in online learning and teaching may lead to 'content overload' on some courses, with students reporting that they receive more content online than they could properly manage while studying a reasonable number of hours per week. A frequently mentioned factor was that online lectures were often longer than they would be in a timetabled slot on campus.

- Students reported challenges in keeping up with course content and managing their individual timetables, especially on days with both on-campus and online sessions. The panel observed that this could be exacerbated where approaches in different modules were not sufficiently planned.

- Students reported that teaching staff were often unaware of the volume of asynchronous learning being set simultaneously in other modules. There may be links between this theme and the 'on-campus teaching and learning' and 'student number growth' themes explored earlier in this report, if for example issues with accessing online content on-campus relate to the provision of appropriate facilities or overcrowding on campuses.

- The panel's view was that providers should consider ways to develop students' independent learning skills, to allow them to participate more effectively in learning and teaching and to manage their own timetables

Independent study

- The panel identified situations where the volume of recorded lectures and other digital learning resources students were receiving was too high for them to engage effectively. This was exacerbated where the overall plan for learning and teaching was not joined up across modules.

- Where this is the case, it suggests that there is an inappropriate balance on a course between delivery methods or directed and independent study, and therefore that the course may not be effectively delivered.

- OfS compliance concerns in relation to condition B1 if a large volume of learning content negatively affects students' ability to participate fully in their course.

- Students reported that they struggled to manage their timetables, often not knowing how long to spend on tasks or how to prioritise work. Students often missed course content as a result.

- Although students need to manage their timetable on any higher education course, doing this on blended learning courses can be more challenging because of the range of delivery approaches and the need to balance on-campus and independent work.

- Providers should be able to remedy these issues by offering students appropriate support to help them manage their workload more effectively. OfS compliance concerns in relation to condition B2 if a provider did not take steps to support students with timetable management challenges.

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Three more issues

Digital learning support for students
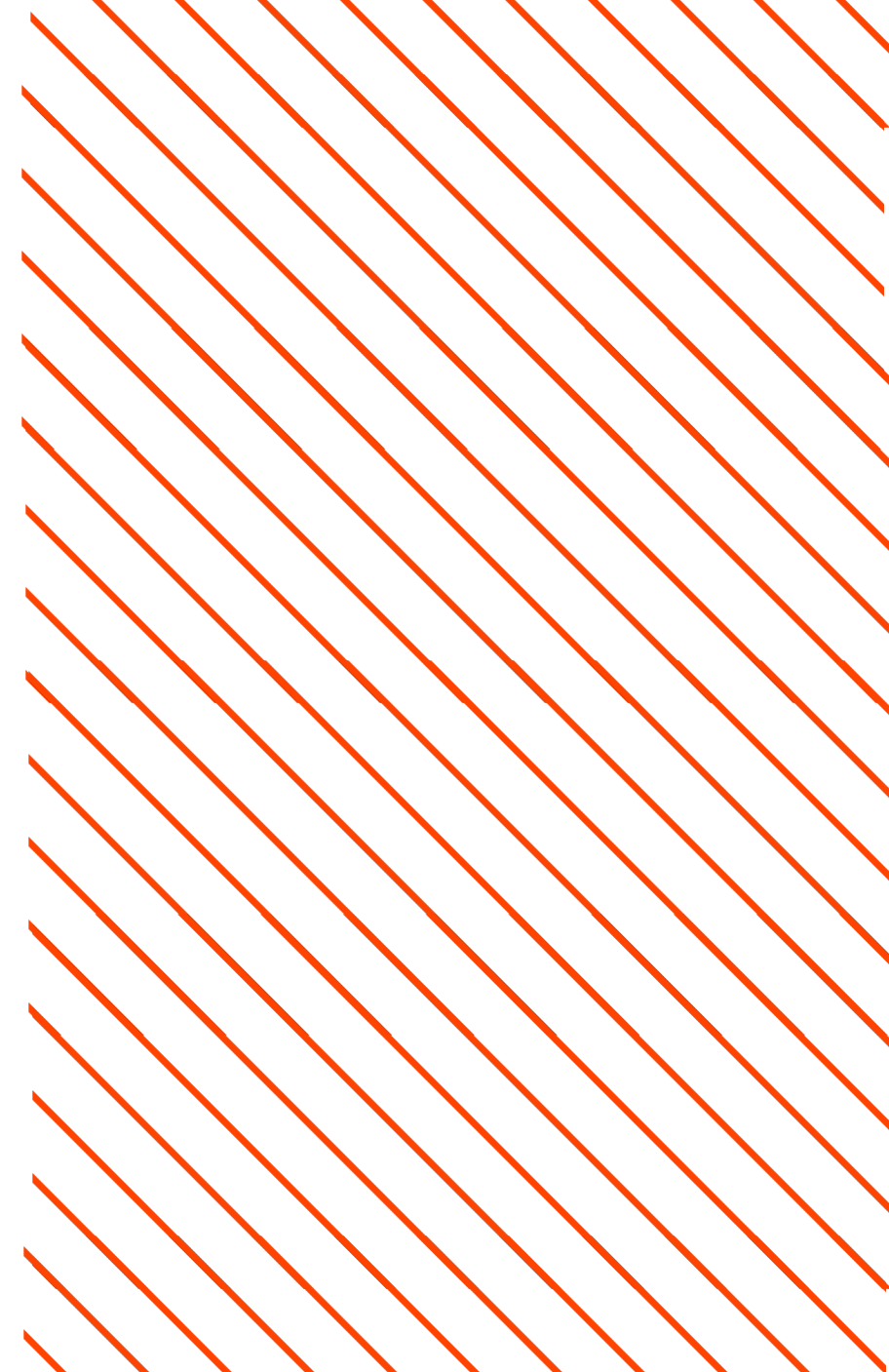
Being part of a blended community

- We have set out in the guidance underpinning condition B1 that a course that is predominantly taught through large-scale lectures without providing opportunities for small group teaching would be likely to raise compliance concerns.

- In relation to postgraduate research students, our view is that failing to provide opportunities for structured engagement with other researchers would also be likely to cause compliance concerns.

- We would also take the view that a course delivered using blended approaches that does not foster collaborative learning among students would be likely to raise compliance concerns in relation to whether it is effectively delivered.

Graduate attributes

- We would be likely to have compliance concerns if a course does not appropriately reflect changing expectations of digital skills in relevant disciplines or industries such that a course was no longer up-to-date.

- This could also mean that the course did not require students to develop relevant skills, in a manner appropriate to the subject matter and level of the course

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What next?

- Rights!
- Build into rep training?
- Find ways to communicate to students?
- Ensure that advice staff and voice staff briefed
- Audit current provision/what happened last and this year
- Is there a link to the TEF student submission?
- Notification?
- Audit of provision collaboratively with reps?

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The OfS blended learning review

Why it matters - and how to incorporate into both course rep training and advice

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The OfS blended learning review

Why it matters - and how to incorporate
into both course rep training and advice

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