

Royal Society of Chemistry Degree Accreditation in Exceptional Circumstances – Advice for the 20/21 Academic Year

The Royal Society of Chemistry's requirements for accreditation are intentionally designed to be flexible. We welcome, and indeed encourage, diversity in provision to ensure that the range of accredited programmes meet the needs of students and employers across the entire sector. The requirements are based on a set of core principles to ensure that graduates achieve the knowledge, skills and attributes of a professional chemist. The requirements rarely dictate how those requirements must be achieved.

One of the only exceptions is in setting a minimum expectation for experience of practical work. Competence in a practical laboratory is deemed by the community to be an essential requirement for a graduate chemist and our requirements ensure that this minimum standard is reached in all accredited programmes. We do not dictate how that must be achieved. Indeed, we are already very flexible in the application of this requirement, especially for joint-honours, placement or degree-apprenticeship programmes.

Nevertheless, we recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic presents a particular challenge for performing practical work. Universities have already had to adapt teaching this academic year. Some have been able to make up, in part, for the loss of practical hours using online simulations of techniques or by providing students with data that they can at least analyse. Fortunately, in most cases the impact on students has been minimised because they had already completed the majority of their practical courses before the worst impact of the pandemic.

However, we also appreciate that universities will now need to make contingency plans for the very real possibility that they will not be able to run conventional practical classes for some or all of the 2020-21 academic year, and that on-going provision of practical classes will be affected for some time. Providing students with online simulations is potentially one solution and should be used in conjunction with others outlined below. Online simulations or existing data is helpful in enabling students to make the most of more limited time in the laboratory but obviously cannot completely replace a proper experience of practical work longer term. We do also understand that in order to provide students with experience of practical work, programmes will need to be significantly amended, perhaps with practical classes timetabled at the end of, rather than interspersed through, the academic year. It may even be necessary to defer some practical classes to later years of study, or to run out of term teaching with intensive lab courses. We would still expect graduates, over the period of their degree programme, to have undertaken sufficient genuine practical work to satisfy our key requirements with the above flexibility in what are extraordinary times. We do recognise no solution is perfect, but hope departments explore a blend of options to ensure the experience and learning outcomes achieved are requisite of what is expected of a chemistry graduate.

Furthermore, in making these changes, and ensuring that practical work is prioritised, universities may have to limit the options that would otherwise have been available to students, and RSC Assessors will take this into consideration whilst the impact of the current situation works its way through the system.

We do realise there is uncertainty within the community and would like to be able to share tactics and ideas being suggested by other departments. If you are willing to share what you are doing please do let us know so we ease uncertainty and reassure others. Please e-mail any plans you are willing to share to accreditation@rsc.org.

We would encourage departments to review their learning outcomes to ensure any changes that are made are considered and consistent with the approaches taken. Any changes should obviously be clearly communicated with students already enrolled and affected.

Given these changes are likely to affect large numbers of students we ask that you do inform us (accreditation@rsc.org) of these changes when they are available. To allow us to respond before the start of the academic year we ask for this no later than 28th August 2020 this will allow us ensure professional standards are upheld and provide reassurance to the wider community.