RCOT quality assurance and monitoring of amendments to accredited programmes in response to COVID-19

Introduction

RCOT is committed to supporting education providers to adapt their accredited programmes to facilitate ongoing delivery within the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. We recognise that in doing so, we need to be flexible and pragmatic in the application of our Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Education (2019) and the associated quality assurance and monitoring processes for established programmes.

There are multiple challenges to address in terms of constraints that COVID-19 imposes on established patterns of delivery, the need for flexibility to allow pre-registration students to participate in the workforce responding to the national crisis where appropriate, all while safeguarding the workforce supply pipeline and supporting students to complete as close as reasonably possible to their expected end date. When considering the adaptations that need to be made to accredited programmes, we encourage education providers to make all reasonable efforts to protect the interests of students and maintain standards.

Within the spirit and principles of RCOT’s Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Education (2019), we encourage education providers to assess local needs and contexts, exercise their professional judgement and experience as gatekeepers to the profession, and explore innovative solutions. We encourage drawing on the collective wisdom and experience of programme and broader faculty / institutional teams and external examiners to work through the challenges as pragmatically as possible. This will necessitate working differently and creatively within the principles of the Standards and teams will need to assure themselves of the ongoing quality of provision and learning. We continue to recommend that teams keep an audit trail of the decisions taken, including the calculation of practice placement hours (please see earlier correspondence regarding placement hours and the FAQs on our website: https://www.rcot.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-0).

Minor and major changes to accredited programmes

The process for notifying RCOT of minor and major changes to accredited programmes is outlined on our website: https://www.rcot.co.uk/node/2268/. Minor changes do not require prior-approval, but should be notified to RCOT via the Annual Monitoring Report. In the exceptional circumstances of the global pandemic, RCOT recognises that it is not feasible to adhere to the usual major change processes. We have previously issued advice on this matter (please see earlier correspondence and the FAQs on our website: https://www.rcot.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-0).
Quality assurance and monitoring of COVID-related programme changes

RCOT recognises that, in addition to having their own internal quality monitoring and enhancement mechanisms, educational provision in HEIs generally, and pre-registration occupational therapy provision specifically, is scrutinised by a range of other bodies including the Office for Students, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Health and Care Professions Council. At a time of unprecedented challenge, RCOT seeks to take a supportive approach that does not add unduly to the administrative burden of our colleagues.

RCOT therefore plans to incorporate a reflective review of changes made in response to COVID-19 within our normal Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) cycle for academic year 2019/20. Initial guidance issued requested that programme teams maintain a record of the changes made to the delivery of both the academic and practice-based learning elements of their programmes. This audit trail will facilitate accurate reporting of the nature and rationale for both minor and major changes implemented in response to the pandemic. Where major changes have been made, programme teams will need to engage with the major change process retrospectively, via the amended AMR process for 2019/20.

As the AMR period for 2019/20 approaches, we are preparing to ensure that each HEI is able to record the changes made and share supporting evidence which should be mapped to RCOT’s Learning and Development Standards to demonstrate how the changes made continue to meet their requirements. It would be helpful for those HEIs who have sought advice from RCOT ahead of progressing changes to attach evidence of this correspondence when they submit their completed AMR. Evidence of any plans for transitioning back to the originally accredited programme structure, where that is possible and/or desirable, will also be sought via the AMR process.

The AMRs for 2019/20 will doubtless reveal lessons that we can all learn from as we move forward from the pandemic. They will highlight innovative and creative adaptations that have proved successful, some of which might even be retained. They will also reveal those that did not play out in practice quite as planned or for whatever reason did not fulfil their potential. RCOT would wish programme teams to feel assured that decisions based on sound rationale and made in good faith within the spirit of RCOT’s Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Education (2019) will be reviewed through a supportive lens. All submissions will be considered within the context of the exceptional and extraordinarily challenging circumstances imposed on us all by the global pandemic. Where RCOT identifies the opportunity for enhancements to be made to the adaptations already introduced to a programme, we will work collaboratively with the programme team to ensure that RCOT’s Learning and Development Standards continue to be met as we move into 2020/21 and beyond.

As always, staff in the pre-registration education team are happy to discuss and advise on developing plans. Please contact Maureen.shiells@rcot.co.uk or Clair.parkin@rcot.co.uk in the first instance.