'Setting work for a long-haul shut down' – Tom Sherrington (March 15 2020) (adapted)

Be realistic. Most schools will need to cater for a range of home learning/parenting environments: Some kids will have heavily-involved parents who are all over it, wanting lots of info and more or less expecting it to be a full replacement service; some students will be pretty much left to their own devices (either trusted or just de facto expected) to follow the system entirely on their own. Some kids will have extensive computer access; some will have very partial access. Some kids will be supervised during the day while studying; many will not. You can't control this so it's helpful to be realistic. You are just doing your best to keep students engaged with learning; not providing a school away from school. It's just not possible.

Keep communication simple and routine: It's useful for recipients to know exactly where and when information will be sent. eg. A weekly email on Friday. Or an updated set of guidance on the website or VLE each week. It's frustrating if promised communications don't happen OR if it's too hard to find out what the work being set is. If the guidance is confined to one portal, one webpage, one document or one clearly labelled folder, then it's likely to work better. Don't make kids or parents work too hard to find the info scattered across several places. Have some kind of paper-based back-up that can be posted or collected from the school office – if there's a skeleton operation to do that.

Sustain a manageable student workload: What's reasonable to sustain at home? Two hours a day? More? In my experience you will overwhelm the system if you overcook the demands on students. If your systems support all students to do two full hours of study every day at KS3 – that's probably going pretty well, given the supervision pressures. It's something you can sustain week on week. Don't make it five hours – and make sure it can't all be knocked out in 15 minutes. Older students should obviously do more and there's the opportunity to make it more revision focused than about new learning. If there are core tasks all must do, you can always add a list of supplementary tasks that could be done if there is time. There's an important balance, not overwhelming kids with too much but never letting other kids feel like there's not enough to do.

Balance on-line and off-line tasks. Beyond the issue of computer access, it's hard to create a sustainable, varied, healthy diet of work if all tasks are computer based even if this is how instructions are communicated. It's possible to blend say time on a maths platform, some online video resources, some internet research with lots of off-line reading, writing tasks and structured questions and a few bits of project work. Avoid suggesting things that need materials beyond pen and paper and some online access. Provide the reading materials as far as possible (but don't assume nobody has any books at home either).

Balance a core of structured, directed tasks with just a few open-ended tasks. It's important for most tasks to be highly structured. In the absence of a teacher, the guidance needs to read like a set of clear instructions. This helps students to get a sense of achievement and progress, moving through the tasks. Questions, short tasks, directed reading, reading comprehension, and some structured research tasks should probably be the mainstay. Published subject workbooks and textbooks – or scanned photocopies of them – can help to generate lots of material all at once, and give students a reassuring sense of working through a planned set of material rather than lots of disconnected sheets.

Use some repeatable task structures: In the absence of teachers, students need simple routine tasks: Reading plus questions; doing questions and checking answers etc. I think it's helpful to use repeatable structured research tasks like Book Review; Fact File on X (person, cosmic object, famous discovery, ancient civilisation, historical event); Country Profile; An Artist/Composer and their Work. Make a template that students can use for lots of different examples of each type, something they can do one of each week. These can be as challenging as you choose to make them – beyond a lame wiki-cut and paste.

Include some form of never-ending long-term personal project: Even if optional, this can be a neat way for students to keep motivated and to always have something to do. Set a long-running task in addition to the structured subject work, which encourages them to get stuck into something that they love. It could be a personal reading diary, a daily photo record, a blog, a collection of short stories. It could be factual project report based on collecting and examining examples of anything they're interested in – figures from history, news stories, objects in space, exotic animals, musicians, sports people etc etc.. This could be structured to different levels but you'd need to give it high status and make a fuss of people who produce brilliant projects at the end.

Keep the need and expectations around teacher feedback to a minimum: I think it's important for students to be given answers to the questions they do – in separate documents so they don't look them up too soon. Students can largely check their own. But beyond that, getting too bogged down in students sending in work to and fro for teacher marking creates almighty hassles and demands that are hard to sustain. I would suggest a) stressing that students will have some 'how did you get on' check-ups when things get back to normal – so they are definitely expected to do the work and learn the stuff – and b) perhaps offering to mark just one or two bits of work every few weeks at most, depending how long it goes on. One neat idea is for students to compile all their work into a folder – and tell students that their school closure folders will need to be handed in at the end for checking and prizes

etc. Students need to know that it matters to you that their work is done at the same time as moving away from only doing it to get feedback..

Include plenty of optional suggestions that go beyond the normal. This isn't the first priority but students itching to have stuff to do will appreciate suggestions that have your approval – films to watch, books to read, things to make; activities to try…. anything interesting and stimulating that makes it actually quite rewarding to have a different way to learn for a while.

Use existing resources wherever you can: a) to save work and b) where the quality is really good and access is easy: For example bbc bitesize is packed with great materials including videos and knowledge quizzes that are automatically checked. Make pupils aware of any subject specific websites they could access.