Summary

Heriot-Watt University has already published its Academic Safety Net approach for 2020/21 in order to mitigate the continuing impact of COVID-19 on assessment, progression and award and to put in place a range of measures to ensure that both continuing and graduating students are not unfairly disadvantaged. The Academic Safety Net is outlined in a policy document for staff and in versions designed for students (student summary; student guide). The role of Boards of Examiners is critical to the implementation of the Academic Safety Net, as is set out in both the staff and student versions.

This paper provides additional, more detailed guidance for all Boards of Examiners in implementing the Academic Safety Net to ensure that students are not disadvantaged, but also to ensure that the quality and academic standards of HWU’s provision (including awards) are maintained and the value of qualifications over time is secured. This “Maintaining Academic Standards” Guide is located here.

The particular focus is to provide guidance on “grade/good degree class inflation”, i.e. where emerging assessment results indicate a significant increase in graduate attainment in comparison with that of preceding, pre-pandemic years.

Background: External and Internal

HESA 2019/20 data highlighted that, across UK HEIs as a whole in relation to qualifications achieved, 35% of classified first degrees were awarded first class honours compared to 28% in 2018/19; the proportion of lower second qualification classification fell by 4 percentage points from 19% in 2018/19 to 15% in 2019/20 (the proportion of upper seconds declined by 1% from 48% to 47%).

In response to the HESA publication, the Office for Students, in its statement on 28 January 2021, acknowledged that the introduction of “No Detriment” policies, as a means of mitigating the impact of the pandemic, had resulted in a “significant increase in first class honours awarded to students graduating in 2020” (OfS press release, 28 January 2021). The OfS highlighted the extraordinary disruption caused by the pandemic and the need to recognise the extreme impact on students, but simultaneously highlighted the need to retain the value of qualifications and not “bake in” further grade inflation through “temporary changes”. A similar position has been emphasised by the Quality Assurance Agency, including in its analysis of increasing attainment and grade inflation prior to the pandemic.

This national increase of 7% is comparable to HWU’s position for UK-based undergraduate provision (note: degree outcomes data is not yet available for Dubai and Malaysia), although the spread was different across degree categories:

- there was no increase in first class Enhanced First Degrees (the UG Integrated Masters) and 3% increase in first class Honours degrees (compared to UK-wide 7% increase);
- there was a 3% increase in upper second Enhanced First Degrees and a 6% increase in upper second increase in Honours degrees;
- the proportion of lower second Honours degrees declined by 6%.

Similar to the OfS and QAA, Heriot-Watt University is keen to ensure that the increase in “good degree classification” effected by the emergency response to the pandemic does not become the norm as further temporary measures continue. Therefore, the following guidance is provided to Boards of Examiners to assist them in their decision-making and to put in place an equitable, transparent approach across the institution as a whole.

This guidance applies to all taught provision (foundation, undergraduate, postgraduate taught) and is applicable to taught programmes delivered across all modes and locations.

Decision-Making by Boards of Examiners

Although an Academic Safety Net has been introduced and Regulation 31: Authority of Heads of School and Examiners in Exceptional Circumstances remains in place, Boards of Examiners should reach course grade decisions and decisions on progression and award, as per normal and should follow established University policies and processes related to academic decision-making. Information is provided through the Guidelines on Examination and Assessment.

1 Scottish HEIs: a similar 7% increase from 28% to 35% in first class degrees; the proportion of upper seconds fell by 2% and lower seconds by 4%.
In reaching such decisions, Boards of Examiners will continue to ensure that that no student, irrespective of programme, degree, location or mode of study, will be academically disadvantaged or penalised due to the circumstances under which assessments were taken and due to the disruption to studies caused by the pandemic.

The University’s policies and procedures have been devised to accommodate such considerations: a robust framework is in place for ensuring no academic disadvantage while simultaneously maintaining academic standards, retaining academic decision-making in full, assessing all learning outcomes, securing academic integrity and preserving the value of qualifications.

**Process for Decision-Making by Boards of Examiners**

The following section summarises the existing remits of Boards of Examiners (Assessment, Progression, Award), as outlined in the University’s Regulations and in the suite of documentation comprising the Guidelines on Examination and Assessment. Additionally, it includes examples of practice used currently across HWU – and more detailed guidance on the role of the (Course) Assessment Board - to support consideration of matters related to grade inflation. This Guide is part of the supplementary information produced due to COVID-19.

(Course) Assessment Boards
(see Regulation 3, para 12.2 and similar paragraphs in other taught programme Regulations; see also Section 1: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Assessment Procedures)

(Course) Assessment Boards consider and confirm the results of course assessments, across all modes and locations; they comprise the staff involved in the teaching and assessment of the course.

The following diagram illustrates the (Course) Assessment Board process.

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**Key Information**

**Key feature of HAPS and COVID guidance:**
- All assessment decisions are formally returned as grades;
- Marks are not usually adjusted in mapping to grades, but rather the raw mark remains and grades are adjusted to reflect the recommended decisions of the Course Team.
- Regulations and policies state that marks may be adjusted only for courses contributing to the overall degree classification. However, in order to address the impact of COVID-19, where entire cohorts have been affected, marks may be adjusted for all courses, whether or not they contribute to the overall degree classification in order to provide fair, equitable and comparable results;
- In the case of marks adjustment, under HAPS, the mapping is from raw mark to adjusted mark (and corresponding grade);
- A justification for any usual mapping of marks to grades or for adjusted marks (“scaling”) must be recorded in the Course Review Report and (Course) Assessment Board Minutes.

**Unusual Results which warrant further consideration, PART ONE:**
- For marks-based profiles, cohort performance is 5% or more above or 5% or more below the average in each of the preceding 3 years (excluding Semester 2 2019/20 due to exceptional circumstances of the pandemic).
- For new courses, where no prior data is available, comparable course data or average stage performance may be used as a benchmark as per above.
- Cases where there is a high level of absenteeism, where there is excessive bunching of results (low standard deviation), differences between modes/locations or other features of the results which cause concern.

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR MORE SPECIFIC THRESHOLDS

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**Marking and Consideration of Results by Course Teams**

Once marking is completed and CMLs (Course Marks Lists) produced and checked, the Course Leader and Course Team consider the results across all modes and locations.

In its consideration of results, the Course Team focuses on marks which contribute to the overall, final mark, ie summative assessments. The term “summative assessment” is not restricted to end-of-semester assessments, but applies to all marks contributing to the overall mark, including those from assessments which took place during a course and which may have already been returned to students.

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**Consideration of Results and Comparison with Performance prior to COVID-19**

The results may be accepted as being fair and accurate, or adjustment may be recommended by the Course Team where marks seem unusual compared with previous years.

Results should be compared with those of at least the previous three years, ie from 2018/19 and earlier. Results for 2020/21 are not required to be adjusted to be identical to those of preceding years; rather, the data is there to provide a benchmark for discussing and recommending any adjustment.

2019/20’s results should not be included in the comparison with previous cohorts, as Semester 2 results were affected by the pandemic and P grade was routinely used.

The recommendation for adjustment or no adjustment will be part of the Course Review Report to the (Course) Assessment Board, which is held after each semester or completion of assessment and is typically discipline-based, considering all related courses.
The (Course) Assessment Board needs to confirm the final grades for each course, and the (Course) Assessment Board should present, in due course, to the Progression or Award Board.

Adjustment of Grades or Marks

The processes of adjusting grades or marks and of comparison with previous years – moderation – are key aspects of maintaining academic standards and the value of results and qualifications over time.

A justification for any usual mapping of marks to grades or for adjusted marks ("scaling") must be recorded in the Course Review Report (recommended adjustment) and (Course) Assessment Board Minutes (approved adjustment).

Whatever approach is used in reaching a final decision (ie through adjustment of marks or grades), all results are reported formally as HAPS grade and so the (Course) Assessment Board needs to confirm the final grades for each course.

Academic Judgement and Academic Standards

The process for the (Course) Assessment Board ensures that student performance is considered fairly and transparently, and that academic judgement informs outcomes; it is not a mechanistic calculation.

This robust process ensures that quality and academic standards are maintained, and that students receive results which reflect their capabilities in spite of the impact of the pandemic.

As a consequence, students do not receive a grade lower than they deserve (academic disadvantage), nor do they receive a higher grade than would be merited (grade inflation).

Provisional Course Results

Even after confirmation by the Course Assessment Board, course results released to students are still provisional until ratified by a Progression or Award Board.

Students should be made aware that all course results are provisional at this stage.
Progression Boards
(see Regulation 3, para 12.3 and similar paragraphs in other taught programme Regulations; see also Section 1.5: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Assessment Procedures). Regulations set out the composition and function of Progression Boards.

Progression Boards consider and confirm the results recommended by (Course) Assessment Boards, across all modes and locations, and make decisions on progression, reassessment (and, where appropriate, repeat) and intermediate awards.

The following diagram illustrates the Progression Board process.

**Process**

The Progression Board considers each student’s performance over the whole academic year across all (typically eight) courses, and takes into account individual mitigating circumstances (based on recommendations from the Mitigating Circumstances Board) as well as circumstances affecting the whole cohort such as the impact of COVID-19.

Performance is reviewed across different modes and locations, and is also compared with the previous three years (ie 2018/19 and previously; 2019/20 Semester 2 results being significantly affected by the pandemic).

The Board will also consider student performance close to grade boundaries for core or pre-requisite courses, given that this will impact on the overall decision in relation to progression, reassessment or intermediate award.

Where such information is available, the Board may also consider the performance of individual students in the earlier, pre-pandemic stages of their programme.

The Board will be informed by the specified SCQF credit and level requirements for progression, as well as any programme-specific requirements.

The Progression Board considers the information* from each Course Assessment Board as well as the profile of all results for each student. (* each School can determine the format of the information presented, provided it includes marks and grades).

The Progression Board confirms the marks and grades proposed by the (Course) Assessment Board. Only in exceptional circumstances can these marks/grades be altered; adjustment (either as an increase or a decrease) may be undertaken in order to, for example, mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on overall decisions.

The Board will be mindful of the Academic Safety Net 2020/21 in making any adjustment to marks or grades.

The Progression Board returns a decision for each student on progression, reassessment (and, where appropriate, repeat) and intermediate awards, as per the University’s Regulations.

The Progression Board’s signed Assessment Results Report is submitted by the specified date. Minutes are produced (using the University template), recording the justification for any changes to marks/grades and any factors influencing the Board’s decisions. Minutes are also submitted centrally.

**Key Information**

**Key feature of HAPS for Progression Boards:**
- The Progression Board confirms the marks and grades put forward by the (Course) Assessment Board;
- Only in exceptional circumstances can the marks and grades recommended by the (Course) Assessment Board be adjusted and the justification for any modifications must be recorded in the minutes/formal record of the meeting.
- The Progression Board can use Discretionary Award of Credits (DC) to facilitate the progression of undergraduate students to the next stage (DC cannot be used for progression in PGT programmes)

**P Grade withdrawn:**
- The use of P grade as a part of the rapid response to COVID-19 in 2019/20 has been withdrawn
- P grade cannot be used for individual or whole cohort performance
- If credit is to be awarded, a grade A-E or DC should be selected.

**External Examiner and Deans Rep:**
- The External Examiner and the Deans Rep should be made aware of the Board’s process for ensuring that students are not academically disadvantaged or advantaged by the impact of COVID-19.

**Results which warrant further consideration:**
- For marks-based profiles, average cohort performance is 5% or more above or 5% or more below the average in each of the preceding three years (excluding 2019/20 due to exceptional circumstances of the pandemic).
- For progression decisions based on grades, where there is an unusual pattern of grade profiles, eg bunching at higher or lower grades, compared to each of the preceding three years (excluding 2019/20 due to exceptional circumstances of the pandemic).
- Student performance is at the grade boundary on core or pre-requisite courses.
- Student performance has not met the specified progression requirements in terms of level or number of credits.
- Cases where there is a difference between modes/locations.
Award Boards
(see Regulation 3, para 12.4 and similar paragraphs in other taught programme Regulations; see also Section 1.5: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Assessment Procedures). Regulations set out the composition and function of Award Boards.

Award Boards consider and confirm the results recommended by (Course) Assessment Boards, across all modes and locations, and make decisions on awards.

The following diagram illustrates the Award Board process.

**Process**

The Award Board considers each student’s performance over all stages contributing to award, including weighting of contribution from non-final year courses. The Board also takes into account individual mitigating circumstances (based on recommendations from the Mitigating Circumstances Board) as well as circumstances affecting the whole cohort such as the impact of COVID-19.

Performance is reviewed across different modes and locations, and is also compared with the previous three years (i.e. 2018/19 and previously; 2019/20 Semester 2 results being significantly affected by the pandemic).

The Board will also consider student performance close to degree classification boundaries (as per the University’s policy), given that this will impact on the overall decision in relation to award.

Where such information is available, the Board may also consider the performance of individual students in the earlier, pre-pandemic stages of their programme.

The Board will be informed by the specified SCQF credit and level requirements for award, as well as any programme-specific requirements.

The Award Board confirms the marks and grades proposed by the (Course) Assessment Board. Only in exceptional circumstances can these marks/grades be altered; adjustment (either as an increase or a decrease) may be undertaken in order to, for example, mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on award decisions.

The Board will be mindful of the Academic Safety Net 2020/21 and any potential “good degree classification inflation” in making any adjustment to marks or grades. The views of the External Examiner and Deans Rep may be helpful in this context.

The Award Board returns a decision on award for each student, as per the University’s Regulations, and by the specified dates.

The Award Board’s signed Assessment Results Report is submitted and the Minutes produced (using the University template and returned centrally), recording the justification for any changes to marks/grades and any factors influencing the Board’s decisions. The Minutes should document how the Award Board has managed potential “good degree classification inflation”.

**Key Information**

**Key feature of HAPS:**
- The Award Board confirms the marks and grades put forward by the (Course) Assessment Board.
- Only in exceptional circumstances can the marks and grades recommended by the (Course) Assessment Board be adjusted and the justification for any modifications must be recorded in the minutes/formal record of the Award Board meeting.
- The Award Board can use Discretionary Award of Credits (DC) where UG or PGT students have insufficient credits for the recommended award (note: limit on number of DCs).

**P Grade withdrawn:**
- The use of P grade as a part of the rapid response to COVID-19 in 2019/20 has been withdrawn.
- P grade cannot be used for individual or whole cohort performance.
- If credit is to be awarded, a grade A-E or DC should be selected.

**External Examiner and Deans Rep:**
- The External Examiner and the Deans Rep should be made aware of the Board’s process for ensuring that students are not academically disadvantaged or advantaged by the impact of COVID-19.

**Results which warrant further consideration:**
- For marks-based profiles, average cohort performance is 5% or more above or 5% or more below the average in each of the preceding three years (excluding 2019/20 due to exceptional circumstances of the pandemic).
- For award decisions based on grades, where there is an unusual pattern of grade profiles, e.g. bunching at higher or lower grades, compared to each of the preceding three years (excluding 2019/20 due to exceptional circumstances of the pandemic).
- Student performance is at the classification boundary.
- Student performance has not met the specified award requirements in terms of level or number of credits.
- Cases where there is a difference between modes/locations.

**Classification Profiles**
- The Award Board should pay particular attention to the emerging classification profile and the higher than average “good degree” classification results of 2019/20.