COVID-19 and Preparing for AY2020/21: Learning, Teaching and Assessment
Heriot-Watt University

This document was produced initially for HWU’s Annual Discussion with QAA Scotland on 17 September 2020 and has been updated for submission to QAAS on 12 October 2020 as part of the University’s resumed ELIR (9-13 November 2020).

Contact: m.king@hw.ac.uk
Heriot-Watt University’s response to the impact of COVID-19 on learning, teaching and assessment has been managed in two phases: the remainder of AY2019/20; preparing for AY2020/21. The Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Contingency Planning Group, which was established on 24 February 2020, was responsible for AY2019/20, focusing primarily on examinations and other forms of assessment. It was replaced, from 25 May 2020, by the Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Task and Finish Group, which has focused on preparing for AY2020/21.

This paper summarises the activity undertaken by the Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Task and Finish Group in preparing for AY2020/21 and covers learning, teaching and assessment (a separate paper is available on Responding to COVID-19 during AY2019/20).

This paper has been produced for the University’s Annual Discussion with QAA Scotland on 17 September 2020 and was subsequently update for submission to QAAS on 12 October 2020 in preparation for the resumption of the University’s ELIR, 9-13 November 2020. The purpose of the paper is reflected in its content and areas of focus.

The following papers related to Responding to COVID-19 AY2019/20: Learning, Teaching and Assessment are included here:

- L+T COVID Group – Overview of Preparations for AY 2020/21, updated 5 October 2020 (key document)
- L+T COVID Group – Remit, 25 May 2020
- L+T COVID Group – Membership, 25 May 2020
- L+T COVID Group – Timeline, 7 September 2020
- L+T COVID Group – Decisions, 7 September 2020
- School Summaries - Responsive Blended Learning, 31 July 2020
- Academic Quality – Processes 2020/21, 16 September 2020

Heriot-Watt University, Preparing for AY 2020/21: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (Summary for ELIR Team, October 2020)
Responding to COVID-19, February-May 2020

The Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Contingency Planning Group, which was chaired by the Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching) and comprised senior staff members and student representatives, met weekly from 24 February to 18 May 2020 in order to manage the University’s learning and teaching-related response to the Coronavirus for the remainder of AY 2019/20.

The Group maintained a focus on three key areas:
1. Supported Learning: Working at Distance and Supporting Students at a Distance
2. Assessment, including Examinations
3. Communications to Staff and Students

The Group’s primary area of focus was on examinations and assessment, as much of the support for continuation of learning and teaching had already been provided by the Learning and Teaching Academy through its Supporting Students Learning Online Rapid Response Toolkit. The prompt switch to online had been necessitated by the fact that two-day’s notice had been given of the announcement of an early 2-week vacation period (6-21 March 2020) in the UAE and the government requirement that all teaching and learning should move online from 23 March 2020. HWU had to move more quickly to prepare for online than the rest of the UK sector, where government lockdown was introduced from 16 March 2020.

Examinations and assessment actions, decisions and guidance are summarised in the paper, Procedures and Actions to Mitigate the Impact of COVID-19: Examinations and Assessment, which was presented to a range of committees, including the Senate and the University Executive, in April 2020.

Preparing for AY2020/21: The Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Task and Finish Group

The Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Contingency Planning Group was replaced, from 25 May 2020, by the Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Task and Finish Group, which was again chaired by the Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching) and comprised senior staff members and student representatives, but with an extended membership including: Associate Heads of School, Dubai and Malaysia; Schools Learning and Teaching Managers; Widening Participation Manager; Communications Manager (see remit and membership).

The LTCG operated with delegated responsibility, from the University Executive, for planning and decision-making for AY 2020/21 in relation to all of HWU’s taught provision, across all five campuses, partnerships and online and at all levels (foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate taught). Nine workstreams defined the areas of focus for the LTCG:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. School Developments/Delivery</td>
<td>7. Campus Reopening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Induction and Student Support</td>
<td>8. Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Timetabling</td>
<td>9. Student Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Policies and Registry Systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An overview of each is provided in subsequent sections.

A summary of decisions taken by the L+T COVID Group can be accessed on the Academic Quality’s SharePoint site. Decisions taken by the Group include: University-wide approach to designing learning, teaching and assessment; revised policies and processes, including adapted programme and course approval process; no in-person exams for December 2020; suspension of one year/one semester inter-campus transfers until January 2021; no largescale in-person teaching in semester one; adapted Personal Tutoring; interim policies on: communications with students; recording of teaching sessions and captioning; introduction of global Consolidation Week.
The final meeting of the LTCG, in its format of weekly meetings featuring reports from the nine workstreams, was held on 7 September 2020, the start of global Welcome Week.

The key stages in the University’s journey throughout 2020 in response to COVID-19 is encapsulated in the following diagram (produced by the Director of the Learning and Teaching Academy):

**Responsive Blended Learning**

Heriot-Watt University’s planning for AY2020/21 and beyond centres upon the implementation of a global Responsive Blended Learning (referred to as RBL) approach for all taught programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate) across campus locations. HWU is committing to supporting our students to learn successfully wherever they are and whether or not they are able to attend their normal campus location. Work to underpin this approach has been led by the Director of the Learning and Teaching Academy through the L+T COVID Group, and has included a significant staff training programme as well as consideration of appropriate resources.

RBL combines active, supported online learning and face-to-face support in a way that is both pedagogically robust, but also practically deliverable within the available time and resources. Each multi-campus global course team has been developing a core set of digital materials covering the course learning outcomes, which are provided through Vision, the University’s virtual learning environment. These digital materials support asynchronous student learning no matter where our students are, and this asynchronous learning is then supported by engaging timetabled synchronous learning sessions which are held face-to-face for students who can attend campus and on-line for those that can’t.

Engagement at a distance is facilitated through live online sessions such as: tutorials, discussion forums, collaboration on projects, sharing insights from practical work and possibly other activities. In some cases, synchronous on-line classes will be attended by students in Scotland, Dubai and/or Malaysia. On campus engagement includes timetabled classes in specialist learning spaces such as engineering laboratories and workshops, IT laboratories and design studios. Small and medium-sized classroom sessions have also been timetabled. Large-group lectures, however, will be delivered exclusively on-line.

The RBL approach is designed to be flexible so that we can respond dynamically to what may well be a changing situation as the academic year progresses. It supports individual students experiencing a range of scenarios including where:

(i) A student is unable to attend campus at the start of the semester due to travel restrictions or safety concerns and so studies on-line until joining for face-to-face tuition mid-Semester (eg during Consolidation Week in Week 6) or at the start of Semester 2 in January;

(ii) A student does not wish to attend face-to-face sessions at all in the foreseeable future because they or their family members are in COVID-vulnerable groups and so studies on-line;
(iii) A student who starts the semester studying face-to-face, but is diagnosed with asymptomatic COVID and has to isolate and so switches to on-line study.

(iv) A COVID outbreak during AY2020/21 results in closure of one or more of our campuses or curtails face-to-face provision in some other way so that students attending face-to-face classes are required to switch to wholly on-line.

Preparing for AY20-21 required a rapid upskilling of staff to ensure they had the skills, confidence and collaborative working arrangements to facilitate delivery of responsive blended learning. A bespoke Introducing Responsive Blended Learning module was developed and rolled out at pace in late June – August. Over 750 staff engaged with the module through a supported cohort (c.600) or self-study (c150). In addition, a programme of extension sessions, learning technology ‘confidence building’ workshops and a suite of quick guides and Top Tips materials were produced and used as the basis for group and 1-2-1 support for colleagues.

Links to Responsive Blended Learning: overview; resources; training; support.

A suite of student-facing resources was produced to inform and support students as they began the academic year in Responsive Blended Learning mode. This was supported by live sessions run during induction to help students familiarise themselves with the virtual classroom spaces.

Links to RBL Student Resources, including video overview of Responsive Blended Learning:

The wider RBL activity has been supported by two Special Interest Groups: Labs, Studios and Fieldtrips; Accessibility. Resources are continuing to be added, including, most recently, Top Tips in Physically Distanced Contexts.
School Developments and Delivery

The “School Developments and Delivery” strand has been led by the Director of Learning and Teaching in each of the five Schools. Please see separate School Summaries on Responsive Blended Learning:
(add reference; enclosed as separate documents)

- School of Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society (EGIS)
- School of Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS)
- School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences (MACS)
- School of Social Sciences (SoSS)
- School of Textiles and Design (TEX)

Each School reported weekly to the L+T COVID Group on a wide range of global issues, including: progress with redesigning courses for RBL; managing practical provision; timetabling; managing the blend of online and face-to-face delivery. Each School had its own multi-campus RBL Group. Many of the key decisions were taken on the basis of issues raised by Schools, eg format of exams; inter-campus transfers; a focus on staff wellbeing. Global working across course and programme teams has been strengthened throughout the process.

Induction and Student Support

The “Induction and Student Support” strand has been led by the Head of Student Life and Deputy Registrar and managed through an overarching global steering group comprising 109 members, including student representatives, professional services and Schools. Activity has been progressed through a series of sub-groups covering:

- New Student Induction
- Re-Induction for Continuing students
- Our Community
- Developing Skills/Supporting Success
- Communications
- Dubai
- Malaysia

Planning focused on virtual events provided through Vision, the University’s VLE, with information and activities organised at department, School and institutional/campus levels – a major challenge, covering students across all modes and locations. For new students (including direct entry students), academic and social induction focused on building communities. Re-induction was essential for continuing students, introducing them to Responsive Blended Learning and a different way of learning. As a significant number of students will come to campus later in semester 1 or in January, different models of induction have been developed.

As government requirements changed, each campus was able to provide a series of live induction events, including the Welcome Week Fair, with over 50 clubs and societies, at the Edinburgh Campus. Induction Week was held in Malaysia in w/c 31 August 2020 and w/c 6-7 September at all other campuses.

Personal Tutoring

One of the key areas for development emerging from the “Staying Well, Studying Remotely” student survey conducted in May 2020 was the Personal Tutoring system. It was clear, from student comments, that the rapid shift to learning remotely had impacted on students’ usual support systems and they were looking increasingly to their Personal Tutor for more regular communication, support and advice. In addition, 2020/21 would require a different from of Personal Tutoring.

A series of revisions were made, including the introduction of more contact points, so that all students, both new and continuing, will engage with their Personal Tutor at least three times per semester. MS Teams has become the default mechanism for meetings between tutors and tutees, including year group sessions or multi-year groups.

A Personal Tutoring SharePoint site has been developed for students and academic as well as professional services staff, providing access to an extensive suite of resources, advice, guidance, training and development:
Timetabling

Timetabling for all HEIs has been a significant challenge and difficulty, particularly in light of regularly changing government requirements. For Heriot-Watt, there has been an added complication in having to timetable for 5 campuses across three timezones, and addressing the evolving requirements of three different governments. However, there have been positive outcomes, for example, Responsive Blended Learning facilitated, for the first time, the opportunity for multi-campus live teaching sessions. The challenge of timetabling across three timezones, previously an issue for examinations only, also resulted in some welcome standardisation:

- Edinburgh Campus starting teaching sessions on the hour, rather than 15 minutes past;
- Malaysia Campus beginning teaching from 14 September, as at all other campus locations, rather than a week early;
- Global, standard finishing time of 50 minutes past the hour (to be reviewed after Teaching Week 1, with the intention of moving to 45 minutes past the hour to allow for safe, physically distant movement between venues)
- The introduction of a Global Consolidation Week in Teaching Week 6 in Semesters 1 and 2 for all taught programmes (foundation, UG and PGT), providing an opportunity for reflection, consolidation of learning, workshop, lab and studio activities.

Timetables were devised on the basis of prioritising the return of students groups to campus (eg first year UGs and new PGTs, lab-based provision, final year students), except at the Malaysia Campus where, as government legislation relaxed, all students were permitted to return. Last minute adjustments were necessitated by late publication by the Scottish Government (on 1 September 2020) of the recommendation that class sizes should be 30 persons, with up to 50 permitted in certain circumstances.

Timetables for all five campus locations were published to students in mid-August. A range of information, both University level and School-specific, was provided to students about the timetable, including an explanation of online and on-campus teaching sessions.

Policies and Registry Systems

The need for a collective, rapid response to COVID-19 in February 2020, the subsequent focus on putting in place significant initiatives such as the introduction of a global online exams system and then the major effort of preparing for AY2020/21 resulted in a reframing of some of the University’s assurance and enhancement processes, both for the remainder of 2019/20 and for 2020/21. Adaptations included:

- Postponement of Academic Reviews (HWU’s Institution-Led Review (ILR) process);
- Cancellation of participation in PTES 2020 and of HWU’s internal Annual Survey and Course Feedback Survey, with a COVID-19 “Staying Well, Studying Remotely” substituting these usual surveys;
- Streamlined Annual Monitoring and Review process
A separate paper provides a summary overview of such changes to quality processes: Academic Quality: Revised Processes and Deadlines (March, August 2020) [Nov 2020 Evidence 2: AY2019/20 COVID].

The University has made some specific adaptations to its key processes to assure the quality and standards of Responsive Blended Learning. An overview of all the quality-related changes, including changes to policies, can be found on the global Academic Quality website. A series of New and Adapted Policies for 2020/21 context and for Responsive Blended Learning, such as:

- Use of Approved Channels when Communicating with Students
- Use of Recording for Teaching and Learning Purposes and Guidance on the Captioning of Recorded Teaching Resources
- Guidelines for Boards of Examiners
- Temporary Suspension of Studies and Mitigating Circumstances
- Supporting Personal Tutoring in 2020/21;
- Academic Integrity (including Contract Cheating)

The Approvals Process for programme and course modifications for 2020/21 was streamlined and differentiated by type of change to ensure approvals could be undertaken in good time. However, rigour, consistency and equity have been maintained through overall approval by the Chairs of the University’s Quality and Standards Committee and Studies Committee and monitoring by the Academic Quality team.

Quality Processes in 2020/21
The final paper in this suite of documents, Academic Quality Processes 2020/21 [Nov 2020 Evidence 3: AY2020/21 Preparations] outlines adaptations to a number of the University’s quality processes, recognising the extent of monitoring and evaluation being undertaken through: fortnightly reporting at the L+TAY2020/21 Group; staff and student pulse surveys (Week 1, and planned for Week 4 – students; week 6 - staff); fortnightly meetings with Directors of Learning and Teaching. Additionally, processes have been adapted in recognition of the fact that the University will need to have the capacity to respond rapidly to changing situations and to support student learning in very different circumstances across its five campus locations. To that end, some of the key quality adjustments include: cancellation of Academic Reviews and Internal Audits planned for 2020/21; Annual Monitoring and Review 2020/21 to focus on Responsive Blended Learning.
A global Student Helpline, staffed by volunteers, providing advice and support to students during take home exams, in the months prior to the start of AY2020/21 and continuing through the first few weeks of the semester.

The University has put in place a robust global process for online exams, with a range of security measures in place, including exams being released simultaneously across Scotland, Dubai and Malaysia, and use of Turnitin as part of the submission process. Although introduced as a swift response to COVID, the University is currently considering how to mainstream exams delivered through the VLE capitalising on the efficiency and consistency afforded by a single global approach. As an immediate measure and given the tight timescales, many unseen exams were adapted to 24-hour, take home versions; however, with support from the Learning and Teaching Academy, in other cases, exams were replaced by other forms of assessment specifically designed for the purpose. The L+T COVID Group considered the value of introducing institutional random vivas as an additional step to evaluate the authenticity of student assessment, but concluded that, for the present time, existing academic misconduct processes were sufficient. However, increased information on academic integrity and contract cheating has been produced for students for AY2020/21.

Reviews will continue to be undertaken after each round of online exams in 2020/21, with reports provided to key University Committees. A review of the April/May and August 2020 exam diets is currently in progress, with the report and recommendations due to be considered by the L+TAY2020/21 Group on 7 October 2020. As a result of such reviews, the University has already put in place, through the Learning and Teaching Academy, advice and support for academics in designing remote exams for December 2020, drawing on feedback from students in response to the first round of take home exams in April/May 2020 (see COVID-19 Student Survey Nov 2020 Evidence 2: AY2019/20 COVID Response). The suite of Student Guides on Take Home Exams will be revised for December 2020.

The L+T COVID Group decided on 7 September 2020 that all exams in 2020/21 will be managed through the University’s VLE, and that in-person exams would be held only by exception. Additionally, it was agreed that 24-hour exams would remain in place, enabling the same paper to be used across three timezones; arrangements would be made for timed exams (eg 2 or 3 hours) only where required by professional organisations or government accreditation authorities.

The University has revised its guidelines on the operation of Boards of Examiners, ensuring that there is a specific focus on considering assessment results in the context of COVID, and enabling consistency of approach across the institution. Exam Boards will continue to consider the impact of COVID on assessment results, including comparison of performance between locations and between academic years. Moderation remains a core part of the process.

The 2019-20 report template for External Examiners and Chief External Examiners has been modified to include specific sections on how the Programme Team and its Board of Examiners have operated under COVID. External Examiners have commented specifically on the changes to learning, teaching and assessment (including take home exams) and also moderation processes for dealing with any usual results patterns. External Examiners also consider student performance across locations and in comparison with previous cohorts and student performance at other UK HEIs. To date, all responses from Externals have been positive, with a number of Externals commending the University on its approaches. A specific section on Responsive Blended Learning will be added to the 2020-21 report template, enabling the University to receive an external view on the effectiveness of its global delivery model.

**Information Systems and Learning Technology**

COVID has required a rapid response in terms of information systems and learning technology, with Supporting Students Learning Online being one of the first initiatives. Another major initiative has been the creation of a global online exams system, using the University’s existing VLE, Vision (the HWU name for the Blackboard platform), as the basis. The online exams system has been used by all HWU taught programmes, across all modes and locations, and provides practice areas for students to try out downloading papers and uploading responses prior to the release of the exam. The system is integrated with Turnitin, facilitating academic integrity checking.

Vision is also the global platform for the Responsive Blended Learning approach. Digital materials for each course are located on Vision and all students now access these learning materials through this. Current students are familiar with Vision, as it has been a part of their learning experience since joining HWU. New students have received an introduction as a part of Welcome Week and Induction. Vision is also used as the
platform for AY 2020/21 induction for new and continuing students (see section above on Induction and Student Support).

In the interests of simplicity, consistency and efficiency for students and staff, only a limited number of other platforms are permitted for learning and teaching: Collaborate Ultra (which is a component of Vision) and MS Teams, both of which will support synchronous on-line teaching where this is timetabled. In addition, further consistency has been ensured through a specification of institutionally-approved modes of communication between staff and students. An extensive suite of training has been provided in a wide range of learning and teaching technologies.

Access to all academic learning and teaching software has been provided through the KeyServer remote desktop system, which allows students and staff to have access to the software and processing resources they need, whether on or off-campus and wherever they are in the world. The processing power for the remote desktop service is provided by computing facilities in the UK and so students do not need high specification devices if these are not available to them at home.

The University has a published minimum technical specification for studying through Responsive Blended Learning. Funding is available to students who are unable to meet the minimum specification through a number of schemes, including the University Hardship Fund and further income has been raised through multi-campus Student Emergency Support Appeal. The University has had a laptop loan scheme in place for students since Lockdown began, which has latterly been supported through the Scottish Funding Council's initiative to tackle digital exclusion.

Systems developments continue at pace, as the University responds to the developing requirements of each country in which it operates; for example, the QR code system for tracking attendance at classes in Malaysia has now been introduced at the Scottish Campuses.

### Campus Reopening

In-country government requirements have prescribed the dates and extent of campus reopening across the University's five campus locations. The Deputy Provosts at the Malaysia and Dubai Campuses have provided weekly updates, while the Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching) and the Global Academic Registrar reported on the Scottish Campuses.

The **Malaysia Campus** reopened, on a phased return basis, from 10 June, and has provided a blueprint for planning the reopening of other campus locations. The Provost of the Malaysia Campus provided a video reflection on the first day. Foundation Programme students were the first cohorts to return to the Campus in July and the first HWU students to experience Responsive Blended Learning. UG and PG students have returned in September as planned. As at 1 September 2020, the first day of Welcome Week, some 75% of students had indicated that they would be returning to campus. By the end of Teaching Week 2 (25 September 2020), a larger number of students had returned than at the start of teaching on 14 September 2020. The campus is operating at a maximum of 30% capacity for face-to-face teaching, in line of Ministry of Higher Education requirements, and is expected to be able to revert to full capacity in October in response to further government guidelines.

The **Dubai Campus** will be moving to a new, state-of-the-art location (from January 2021) in a more central area, Knowledge Park. As a temporary measure, from 1 August 2020, the campus moved from International Academic City to an interim location in Knowledge Park, and so the focus for September 2020 has been on setting up the interim campus for the return of staff and students. Each academic unit has been limited to a maximum of three days of on-campus learning per week for undergraduates (daytime). These days are staggered, so that campus footfall on any given day will be much reduced (less than half) compared to a business-as-usual timetable even if all students choose to study. Postgraduate on-campus learning is distributed across weekday evenings and Fridays (weekend day in Dubai) to achieve a similar outcome.

The **Scottish Campuses** reopened to students from Welcome Week on 7 September 2020, with phased moves into accommodation around that date. “Return to Campus” videos (Edinburgh; Scottish Borders) were used to highlight key information to students. In-person teaching, which began on 14 September across all campuses, has been guided by the Scottish Government's requirements, particularly the publication for Universities, Colleges and Student Accommodation (1 September 2020). The University continues to follow Scottish Government guidance in all aspects of student life and to provide support to students accordingly, particularly those living on campus.
Communications

Communications Plans, both for staff and for students, have enabled the L+T COVID Group to manage the dissemination of University-wide learning and teaching-related information. Each campus has, in addition, its own specific communications, ensuring that information is tailored where appropriate. Communications have been developed in collaboration with Student Representative Bodies to ensure that messages are student-friendly, but are also published on SRB social media channels.

One of the challenges in terms of communications has been in ensuring that staff are kept fully informed of all communications being sent to new and continuing students (emails, FAQs, Student Portal messages, Student Newsletters). A Student News and Information section was created on the University’s Coronavirus SharePoint page, providing a single location for information related to: learning and teaching; supporting success; develop your skills; our community. The Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching) used one of his weekly newsletters to remind staff of the available sources of information, and the L+T COVID Group affirmed at its final meeting on 7 September 2020 that the University’s FAQs SharePoint site should be used as the route into locating communications sent to students (navigation note: use the dropdown menu from the FAQs link to gain access to different categories of information).

Links to key communications-related information for staff and students (HWU username and password required for SharePoint access):

1. University’s Coronavirus Advice homepage*
2. FAQs for Returning Students* and Information for Returning Students*
3. FAQs for PGR Students*
4. FAQS for Prospective Students*
5. Return to Campus* (Edinburgh only link)

The University’s Coronavirus Advice homepage* also provides links to general information provided to students, March-June 2020. Learning, teaching and assessment-specific emails sent to students and the weekly newsletters from the Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching) can be found on the Academic Quality*’s SharePoint page.

Six global Learning and Teaching Townhall Sessions were held in June, July and August, providing an opportunity for all staff to be informed of, and ask questions about, the various strands of activity being progressed by the L+T COVID Group.

Student Engagement

Students have been represented on the L+T COVID Groups through the Presidents of the three Student Representative Bodies (Student Union Scotland, Student Council Dubai, Student Association Malaysia) and the Vice-President (Education) Scotland.

In addition, student engagement in the group has been facilitated through the Quality Enhancement Officer (Student Learning Experience), who took up post on 1 June 2020 following the end of his term of office as Student Union President. Each week, the four student representatives and the QEO have met to identify and discuss learning and teaching-related matters, which have been raised at the subsequent meeting of the L+T COVID Group. Issues raised include: induction; return to campus; digital poverty and access to technology.

Collaboration with student representatives has also underpinned the development of the new Personal Tutoring site*, particularly in the provision of information relating to: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Unconscious Bias.

The three Student Presidents have taken the time to highlight how much they have valued being key participants and partners in shaping the University’s learning, teaching and assessment responses to COVID-19, and how much they have valued the institutional focus on student and staff wellbeing throughout.
Postgraduate Research Students

The Deputy Principal (Research and Innovation) and the Chair of the Research Degrees Committee have been responsible for managing the impact of COVID-19 on research and on the postgraduate research student experience. The approach has been broadly similar to that adopted by Learning and Teaching, eg establishment of a Research COVID-19 group and regular publication of a series of FAQs for PGR students. Supervisors maintained contact via Teams meetings and vivas were held via Teams, enabling students to graduate. Students with offers to start in May 2020 were invited to defer entry until September 2020. Extended funding was provided to students in receipt of a University stipend. PGR students were amongst the first students to return to all campuses. While a number of HEIs withdrew from PRES, HWU chose to continue to participated: PRES 2020 results are summarised in the ELIR RA Supplement, paragraphs 2.5.4ff [Nov 2020 Evidence 1: ELIR RA Supplement].

Evaluation

The unprecedented impact of COVID-19 necessitated a rapid response across all of learning, teaching and assessment, across all of the University's five campuses, its network of partnerships and its online provision (where exams have always been held in-person in British Council venues). As government lockdowns came in at different times across the world, the University found itself having to be agile in adapting its provision to a range of in-country requirements. As Dubai was the first campus to close on 6 March, a rapid response toolkit was produced by the Learning and Teaching Academy to support staff in moving to online learning. Thereafter, efforts were concentrated on designing and implementing a global take home exam system, with the underpinning processes for online marking, moderation and Exam Boards.

The pace remained relentless as the University shifted its focus to preparations for the Academic Year, addressing an even broader range of critical issues than in the earlier part of 2020 - teaching online and face-to-face; return to campus; timetabling; induction; student and staff support and wellbeing; access to technology; infrastructure developments – all in a highly pressured environment, as decisions have had to be made and implemented rapidly and staff have struggled to take much-needed annual leave, while balancing the demands of home responsibilities with working remotely. All of this has had to be undertaken globally, in ever-changing landscapes, as authorities in Dubai, Malaysia and Scotland have eased lockdown at a different pace and in a different way. Added to this complexity has been the impact of the challenging financial situation faced by HWU (and many other HEIs).

However, the positives have been numerous. The weekly meetings of the L+T COVID Groups held on Teams has enabled engagement by a much larger, broader membership than would have been possible with physical meetings. As a result, there has been increased: engagement in and discussion of key issues and proposed solutions; ownership of collective decision-making; understanding of the issues and experiences of different campuses, Schools, Professional Services and student groups; pace of implementation. The global Learning and Teaching Townhall Meetings (held on Teams) have enabled an even larger group of staff to be informed, and ask questions, each month about learning and teaching developments.

Students have been represented on the L+T COVID Groups through the Presidents of the three Student Representative and the Vice-President (Education), ensuring that the valued principles of partnership and collaboration in all decision-making have been maintained. The Quality Enhancement Officer (Student Learning Experience), who had been UK Student President until 31 May 2020, has played a pivotal role in strengthening partnership and collaboration with students.

Quality processes and policies have been quickly adapted, and while the volume of activity associated with some processes has been reduced (eg Annual Monitoring and Review), rigour, transparency and consistency have been maintained. Policy decisions have been progressed through the appropriate governance routes through specially convened meetings of the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness (SCIIBE), eg on 30 July 2020 the SCIIBE approved an interim policy setting out the University’s approach to the use of recording to facilitate teaching and learning in AY2020/21. The purpose of the interim policy is to ensure consistency of approach in the use of recording across the University and that all staff, students and guests are clear on their rights and responsibilities with regard to recording and the use of recorded materials that are produced.

As the University moves out of the immediate response phase and as the academic year commences, and so too the cycle of committee meetings, consideration will need to be given to the efficacy of established governance structures in light of the success of specially convened COVID-related groups and more frequent online meetings, where decision-making and problem-solving been swift, inclusive and proactive, and a
broaden range of views and ideas have been heard. The linear, hierarchical pre-COVID committee structure will continue to be too cumbersome to respond proactively to all the continually emerging issues through AY2020/21, particularly as HWU will have to deal with the requirements of three different governments.

While the pace and frequency of online meetings will have to be adapted, distributed leadership and management have been integral to quick, global implementation, and the ongoing inclusion of groups such as Associate Heads of School in Dubai and Malaysia and School L+T Managers will be critical to continued engagement, ownership and delivery. Opportunities for engagement of Senior Programme Directors of Studies and Programme Directors of Studies should be considered, as currently this group do not come together at institutional levels.

There will also be an opportunity to re-evaluate the format and intensity of existing quality processes, given the robustness of adapted measures (eg HWU has already decided to move to global, virtual Academic Reviews – the University's Institution-Led Review (ILR) process).

COVID has also demonstrated the efficiency, transparency and consistency of the OneWatt approach, as single, institution-wide processes have emerged in key areas such as take-home exams, timetabling and semester structure. It will be important to extend this approach, particularly to ensure consistency of the student experience, but also in light of the current financial situation.

The introduction of Responsive Blended Learning has been clearly recognised as not simply being a means of managing the impact of COVID-19, but of accelerating the implementation of the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy and of Strategy 2025’s Pioneering in Education ambitions. RBL will become “the way things are done at Heriot-Watt”, affording flexibility in time, place and space and increasing opportunities for global learning communities. Both RBL and the move to remove teaching, learning and assessment in general have accelerated institution-wide discussions about educational practice and a deeper consideration about aspects such as: unseen exams; personalisation of learning; learning communities; the balance between online and in-person teaching; alignment of this University-wide approach with HWU’s online activity. Preparations for AY2020/21 have necessitated a redesign of the “normal” and it will be interesting to observe the permanent changes emerging from the emergency move to digital.

---

**Evaluation after Teaching Week 1**

After the first week of teaching (w/c 14 September 2020), two short global pulse surveys were undertaken: 1) experiences of academic staff in the first week of teaching; 2) week one experience of students, covering topics such as personal tutoring, wellbeing, learning online and teaching. Approximately 90 staff replied; some 1,600 students replied.

**Staff Survey**

The key overall message from the staff pulse survey was a growing confidence in teaching through the RBL approach and the extent to which student engagement had succeeded expectations, with greater participation than in face-to-face classes. Some of the challenges were time (50-minute slots seemed too short) and, inevitably, technology issues, which reduced as the week progressed. Staff reported increased opportunities to thinking creatively about their teaching approaches. There were concerns, however, around feeling anxious about new approaches and suitability of home IT equipment. The need for ongoing support and training was highlighted.

**Student Survey**

Similar to teaching staff, students across all campuses reported an increased confidence as teaching week one progressed: ease of access to course sites on Vision and accessing live online classes had increased from 57% to 80%. Many students highlighted a very positive experience: online learning helping students to grasp key concepts more easily; usefulness of recorded lectures; helpful academic staff; academic staff adapting well to changes; being able to be an active participant. 90% of students said they felt safe in the public areas of their campus; 76% of respondents reported feeling supported or very well supported by HWU; 75% of students had been contacted by their Personal Tutor by the end of the first week. Some of the concerns highlighted by students including: immature behavior in online session from some students; technology issues; feelings of isolation; struggling to establish a routine.

**Overall Summary and Next Steps**

The common themes, and suggested next steps, emerging from both surveys were as follows:

- Students and staff comments and experiences are very similar;
• A positive start to the semester, with RBL approach being actively engaged with and positively received;
• Participation and engagement seem to have been high, as has respect for the learning community and appreciation of mutual effort on the part of staff and students in a challenging context. A key challenge will be to maintain this through the semester;
• Technology issues and working/learning from home remain a challenge for both staff and students. The time required for staff and students to engage effectively with the RBL approach needs to be taken into consideration;
• Wellbeing must remain a key area of focus, both for staff and students

Further planned snapshots will be held in Week 4 for Students, Week 6 (Consolidation Week) for Staff.

Heriot-Watt University
8 September 2020; updated 1 October 2020
The following papers related to Responding to COVID-19 AY2019/20: Learning, Teaching and Assessment are included in the next sections

- L+T COVID Group – Remit, 25 May 2020
- L+T COVID Group – Membership, 25 May 2020
- L+T COVID Group – Timeline, 7 September 2020
- L+T COVID Group – Decisions, 7 September 2020
- School Summaries - Responsive Blended Learning, 31 July 2020
- Academic Quality – Processes 2020/21, 16 September 2020