Summary

This summary is designed to provide Guidance for Boards of Examiners in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on assessment, progression and award in 2020/21.

Heriot-Watt University’s approach is encapsulated in its overall “Academic Safety Net”, which comprises a range of measures to ensure that both continuing and graduating students were not unfairly disadvantaged because of the extraordinary circumstances caused by the global pandemic. Although there were no policy or regulatory changes required as a result of developing the Academic Safety Net, the overall approach was endorsed by the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness (SCIBE) at its meeting on 18 January 2021. The Staff Version of the Academic Safety Net approach is available on the Learning and Teaching Policy Bank here and there are two Student Versions (student summary; student guide).

Additionally, there is a key supplementary document, Maintaining Academic Standards, which provides comprehensive guidance to all Boards of Examiners (Course, Progression, Award) on implementing the Academic Safety Net.

A Different Approach to Spring 2020's Emergency Response

In its preparations for the AY 2020/21, through the Learning and Teaching COVID Task and Finish Group, the University introduced a range of policy changes related to assessment and, at the same time, Schools made major adaptations to assessment as part of Responsive Blended Learning (RBL), ensuring that all forms of assessment (coursework and take-home exams) could be completed online. Thereafter, further assessment-related changes, none of which required policy modifications, were endorsed by the Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG) at its meeting on 16 December 2020. Assessment 2020/21: Key Policy Information can be accessed here.

With these modifications in place as well as the existing role of Boards of Examiners to take into account exceptional circumstances in making academic judgements and the fact that Regulation 31: Authority of Heads of School and Examiners in Exceptional Circumstances remained in place, it had not been deemed necessary to reintroduce a specific approach to “No Detriment” for session 2020/21. The emergency response had been replaced by an integration and restatement of existing policies which would ensure no academic disadvantage.

In view of the escalation in global restrictions from January 2021 and the shift to wholly online teaching in many countries, concerns raised by students about the impact on assessment, progression and award has led to all HEIs revisiting last session’s No Detriment policies.

As a means of differentiating this session from last, HWU’s approach in 2020/21 referred to the University’s “Academic Safety Net” approach.

Withdrawal of Emergency Measures

Given the more planned and managed approach to assessment and the existing powers available to Boards of Examiners to take into account exceptional circumstances in making academic judgements, the following emergency measures which were in place in for 2019/20 have been withdrawn. These are stated here so that Boards of Examiners are aware that these options are no longer available:

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1 On 24 April 2020, the Quality Assurance Agency UK published an Overview of No Detriment Policies. HWU’s measures to avoid students being disadvantaged by the changes in learning, teaching and assessment that have arisen due to the pandemic was entirely in line with the guidance issued by QAA Scotland.
• No wholesale cancellation of exams for specific year groups;
• No automatic progression for specific year groups;
• No use of P grade for individuals or for whole year groups;
• No postponement of exams to a later date for specific groups.

**Decision-Making by Boards of Examiners**

Boards of Examiners should reach course grade decisions and decisions on progression and award, as per normal. Information is provided in the Guidelines on Examination and Assessment.

In addition, in reaching such decisions, Boards of Examiners should ensure 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 and securing academic integrity.

**Key Information for Boards of Examiners**

As well as the information provided in the Guidelines on Examination and Assessment, Boards of Examiners should be aware of the following:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 on Assessment, Progression and Award</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Regulation 31 still in place, which permits Heads of School and Boards of Examiners to award grades and to make award and progression decisions in the absence of complete assessment information or in cases where there has been disruption across entire cohorts. Additionally, Boards of Examiners will continue, as in normal circumstances, to exercise academic judgement in decision-making. Deans Reps will continue to be allocated to Boards as normal, providing consistency and independence, with Directors of Learning and Teaching and Directors of Academic Quality who have been approved as Deans Reps being able to act in this capacity for some of their own School Boards.</td>
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<td>2. Boards of Examiners should use the following information to inform their academic judgements and their decision-making:</td>
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<td>• information regarding the overall outcomes and results profiles for the previous years of each course and the programme;</td>
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<td>• the results for students on each course and the programme this academic year;</td>
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<td>• information confirming the impact on learning, teaching or assessment on the relevant courses and the changes already made;</td>
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<td>• course and programme learning outcomes.</td>
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<td>3. P grade (Pass) cannot be used for entire cohorts/entire semesters (ie the blanket use of P grade for all Semester 2 2020 results has been discontinued), nor should it be used in individual circumstances. A grade in the range of A-E should be selected. If the student is exiting with an award, DC can be used if the Board does not have enough information (eg because of accepted mitigating circumstances) to select a grade in the range of A-E, but wishes credit points to be awarded.</td>
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<td>4. The University’s Assessment and Progression System (HAPS) allows the use of Discretionary Award of Credits (DC) for progression and award in UG programmes (DC for up to 30 credits on UG programmes; up to 45 credits on Combined Studies programmes) and award only in PGT programmes (DC for one course only; DC cannot be used for the dissertation).</td>
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<td>5. The revised Mitigating Circumstances Policy and related process enables the particular circumstances of individual students to be taken into account in addition to cohort-wide dispensation provided through Regulation 31.</td>
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6. Degree algorithms have not been altered, ensuring that awards made are comparable with preceding years and academic standards are maintained.

7. University's plagiarism and disciplinary procedures remain in place, ensuring that academic standards and academic integrity are maintained.

8. University awards will not be made with fewer than the specified SCQF credits, enabling students to demonstrate, through their transcript, that they have achieved in their award the full complement of credits.

9. Where any scaling of marks or any non-standard mapping of marks to grades occurs (both are permitted by Boards of Examiners), these should be justified in the Minutes of the relevant Boards of Examiners.

10. Decisions on course results, on progression and award should be made with reference to the specified learning outcomes in order to ensure that quality and academic standards are maintained.

### Guide for Boards of Examiners on Maintaining Academic Standards

As well as the Academic Safety Net Approach document, a separate, detailed guide has been produced for Boards of Examiners on implementing the Academic Safety in the context of maintaining academic standards.

This is a core guidance document for Boards and it is highly recommended that all involved in Boards take the time to review the "Maintaining Academic Standards" Guide.

The “Maintaining Academic Standards” Guide is designed for Course Assessment, Progression and Award Boards.