Summary

This briefing paper is designed to provide External Examiners with an overview of the approaches taken by Heriot-Watt University to mitigate the continuing impact of COVID-19 on learning, teaching and assessment, with a specific focus on examination and assessment-related information which will be key to supporting External Examiners in their roles. The briefing paper is available on our External Examiner website.

Responsive Blended Learning

The Learning and Teaching COVID-19 Task and Finish Group and its successor the Learning and Teaching AY2020/21 Group have been responsible for managing the University’s ongoing learning, teaching and assessment response to the pandemic.

The groups operate 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).

The University’s actions were framed by its Responsive Blended Learning (RBL) approach. RBL has combined active, supported online learning and face-to-face support. Each multi-campus global course team has developed 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 have supported asynchronous student learning no matter where our students have been located, and this asynchronous learning has then been supported by 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 have been attended by students in Scotland, Dubai and/or Malaysia. On campus engagement included timetabled classes in specialist learning spaces such as engineering laboratories and workshops, IT laboratories and design studios.

The RBL approach was designed right from the outset to be flexible so that the University would be able to respond dynamically to continually changing situations across Scotland, Dubai and Malaysia as the academic year progressed.

External Endorsement

Heriot-Watt University’s Responsive Blended Learning approach has been endorsed by all relevant in-country accreditation authorities, including in Dubai (KHDA) and Malaysia (MQA). Additionally, the University’s approach and agile response was commended in its in its recent QAA Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR Technical Report, para 74; November 2020).

The University was also commended, for its management of quality and standards during the pandemic:

Institutional quality framework – the University has a mature and effective institutional quality framework which is well-understood by staff across all campuses and is supported by the use of clear and accessible documentation. This has enabled an agile and effective response to the global coronavirus pandemic across all campuses, which was effectively led and coordinated at senior level, working across different national contexts.

ELIR Outcome Report, November 2020

Additionally, all of the University’s PSRBs have confirmed their satisfaction with the University’s approach to assessment, including Take-Home Exams.
**Academic Safety Net**

In continuation of its approach to managing the impact of COVID-19 on progression and award in 2019/20, Heriot-Watt University has not introduced a rules-based “No Detriment” Policy; rather, we have maintained our approach of ensuring no academic disadvantage. As a means of differentiating from last year’s approach, since we have removed some of last year’s emergency measures such as awarding “P” grade for all Year 1 and Year 2 courses in Semester 2, we have referred to this as our “Academic Safety Net 2020/21”. The Academic Safety Net, which puts in place a range of measures to ensure that both continuing and graduating students are not unfairly disadvantaged, is outlined in a policy document for staff and in versions designed for students (student summary; student guide).

**Academic Safety Net: Maintaining Academic Standards**

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. Although an Academic Safety Net has been introduced and Regulation 31: Authority of Heads of School and Examiners in Exceptional Circumstances remains in place (as approved by the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness), 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. Extensive Information is provided for Boards of Examiners in the Guidelines on Examination and Assessment.

In addition to the above, Heriot-Watt University has provided additional, more detailed guidance to Boards of Examiners (Course Assessment Boards, Progression Boards and Award Boards) 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.

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

There are staff and student versions of the guides. The Academic Safety Net: Maintaining Academic Standards Guide for Boards of Examiners (ie the Staff Version) is available here. The Student Version is available here.

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

The role of our External Examiners is particularly critical in ensuring the comparability of academic standards with other UK HEIs.

**Reports from External Examiners**

As per 2019/20 session, report templates for External Examiners and Chief External Examiners have been adapted to allow commentary specifically on how Boards and programme teams have responded to, and mitigated the impact of, the pandemic in 2020/21. Templates will shortly be made available on our External Examiner website; their availability will be communicated in an email nearer to the time when reports are due.

- Undergraduate External Examiner Reports: 30 June 2021
- Postgraduate Taught External Examiner Reports: 31 October 2021
- Chief External Examiner Reports: 31 January 2022

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