Introduction and Background

This paper sets out HWU’s approach in 2022/23 to academic decision-making and maintaining academic standards in relation to assessment, progression and award. During the pandemic, this approach was referred to as the “Academic Safety Net”\(^1\). As the University transitions out of the pandemic, with a return to campus and a reintroduction of some pre-COVID types of assessment, such as in-person exams, this approach represents, in essence, a return to “business as usual”. However, there might need to be some continuing mitigation as students experience particular forms of assessment for the first time, eg in-person, invigilated exams.

At its meeting on 26 October 2022, the Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee (LTAOC)\(^2\) agreed that the Academic Safety Net, which had been in place in 2020/21 and 2021/22 as a pandemic-specific response, should be repositioned as “Academic Decision-Making: Assessment, Progression and Award”. This approach reflects the fact that the Academic Safety Net had always been a summary of the University’s existing policies and procedures, rather than a set of special measures introduced specifically in response to the pandemic. It further reflects the aforementioned ongoing transition out of the pandemic.

Although no policy changes have been required, the overall approach was forwarded the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness (SCIBE), as well as to the University Committee for Learning and Teaching (UCLT), for information. This “Academic Decision-Making: Assessment, Progression and Award. Summary Guide for Staff” is available on the Learning and Teaching Policy Bank here.

Related Information

In its consideration of assessment arrangements for AY 2022/23 and of student and staff communications related to assessments (exams and coursework), the LTAOC noted that all key policy information had been produced and circulated, but should be communicated again as part of the dissemination of this information on Academic Decision-Making: Assessment, Progression and Award:

1) **Assessment 2022/23: Key Policy Information** (accessible here and separately listed below):
   - Assessment 2022/23: 1) Summary of Key Policy Information (post-pandemic)
   - Assessment 2022/23: 2) Making Changes to Assessment
   - Assessment 2022/23: 3) Types of Assessment and Definitions
   - Assessment 2022/23: 4) In-Person Exams and Timed, Online Coursework (former Take Home Exams)
   - Assessment 2022/23: 5) Coursework Scheduling
   - Assessment 2022/23: 6) Submission of Coursework (including late submission policy)
   - Assessment 2022/23: 7) Feedback on Assessment (Coursework and Exams)
   - Assessment 2022/23: 8) Review of Assessments (Coursework and Exams) by External Examiners
   - Assessment Policy 2022-23 Briefing for Staff (Sept 2022)
   - Assessment: School Roles and Responsibilities

2) **Academic Integrity Policy and Guidance 2022/23** (accessible here)

[Note: due to constraints with the external website, links to the L+T Policy Bank are by alpha category only rather than sub-categories within each alphabetised section; sub-categories can be reached by scrolling down]

The measures listed above, plus the Academic Decision-Making Approach explained below and the existing role of Boards of Examiners (Course Assessment, Progression and Award) to take into account exceptional circumstances in making academic judgements, can collectively be regarded as the University’s approach as it transitions out of the pandemic and as it recognises the need to take consideration of the legacy impact of the pandemic.

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\(^1\) The 2020/21 Academic Safety Net replaced the 2019/20 emergency measures introduced to mitigate the impact of COVID (eg no exams for Y1 and Y2). The 2020/21 and 2021/22 Academic Safety Net were each a summary and a clear specification of existing policies and procedures rather than any new measures. Unlike other HEIs, HWU never introduced a “No Detriment Policy” in the first phase of the pandemic.

\(^2\) The Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee was formally established on 28 September 2022 as a sub-committee of the University Committee for Learning and Teaching. It was created from a merger of the Student Learning Experience Committee, which had been paused during the pandemic, and the Learning and Teaching Academic Year Group (and its previous version such as the L+T COVID Group), which managed the University’s learning, teaching and assessment response to the pandemic.
**HWU’s Academic Decision-Making Approach in 2022/2023**

The following tables summarise the key aspects of HWU’s Academic Decision-Making approach in 2022/2023, ie the steps taken to ensure that continuing and graduating students are not unfairly disadvantaged due to the legacy impact of COVID on their studies and to ensure that, as the University transitions out of the pandemic, it continues to maintain an equitable, transparent and effective approach to decisions related to assessment, progression and award. A robust framework remains in place for: maintaining academic standards and the value of HWU Awards, retaining academic decision-making in full, assessing all learning outcomes and securing academic integrity. These are primarily approaches, policies and procedures which were in place prior to the pandemic3 or have since become standard practice.

The University has also streamlined, standardised and automated its Mitigating Circumstances Policy and Procedures, ensuring that if the generic Academic-Decision Making approach does not sufficiently address the particular situation of an individual student, this can additionally be taken into consideration when considering assessment performance.

All information outlined below reflects decisions taken collaboratively and in consultation with student representatives. All decisions have been and will continue to be communicated clearly and in a timely way to students, and communicated during weekdays. A consistent approach on communications with students is in place across the institution to ensure clarity of message and means of communication, including dedicated Student News and Information pages.

| 1. | The Types of Assessment 2022/23 recognises AY 2022/232 as a transitional year as the University community emerges from the restrictions related to the pandemic, with a return to campus and the reintroduction of pre-pandemic assessment types such as in-person exams. Timed Online Coursework (formerly known during the pandemic as “Take Home Exams”) remains in place for all Online programmes and most partnerships (in-person exams have been reintroduced for the three largescale Joint Education Programmes in China). A small number of Timed Online Coursework, which are held in the Exams and Assessment Diets, are being used for on-campus courses; the vast majority of courses using time-limited assessment have returned to in-person invigilated exams. |
| 2. | Regulation A10: Authorities in Exceptional Circumstances is still in place, which permits Executive Deans and Boards of Examiner 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 Award Boards (the practice of Deans Reps at Progression Boards was discontinued during 2021/22). The following pandemic-related measure has been discontinued and Directors of Learning and Teaching and Directors of Academic Quality who have been approved as Deans Reps are no longer able to act in this capacity for some of their own School Boards, subject to approval. |
| 3. | P grade (Pass) cannot be used for entire cohorts/entire semesters (ie the blanket use of P grade introduced as an emergency measure for all Semester 2 2020 results was discontinued after session 2019/20) and cannot be used for individual students. A grade in the range of A-E should be selected if credit is to be awarded. If the student is exiting with an award, DC can be used if the Board does not have enough information (eg because of mitigating circumstances) to select a grade in the range of A-E, but wishes credit points to be awarded. |
| 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 20 credits only; DC cannot be used for the dissertation). |
| 5. | The University’s Assessment and Progression System (HAPS) allows for reassessment and for courses to be repeated in UG and PGT programmes (and in exceptional circumstances, for final year courses in Honours or UG Integrated Masters). |

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3 The following emergency measures introduced in spring 2020 were discontinued at the end of 2019/20 and are no longer in use: blanket use of P grade for whole year groups/diets; use of P grade in individual circumstances (either a Grade A-E or DC should be used to award credit); cancellation of exams for whole year groups; postponing take-home exams to later diets

HWU’s Academic Decision-Making Approach, 2022-23, 16 November 2022 (m.king@hw.ac.uk)
6. Specific guidance for Boards of Examiners and tailored briefing sessions for Chairs of Boards of Examiners and Deans Reps will continue to be provided. Boards of Examiners will again be asked to consider carefully the impact of any disruptions and to be fair and equitable in deciding on degree awards. Each Board will be asked to review performance over previous in reaching decisions.

7. HWU has continued to document all approaches and decisions made through papers to UE, SCIBE, Senate and UCLT and LTAOC meetings.

8. A briefing note will again be issued to External Examiners on the decisions taken by HWU and on their role. Although the standard report template no longer includes a section for Externals to comment on how Boards operate in the context of COVID-19 (other HEIs have likewise removed this), Externals will, as previously, be able to comment on aspects such as response particular circumstances. As previously, Schools will continue engage their Externals in commenting on assessment tasks (coursework and exams), either prior to completion by students or as part of the end-of-year review.

9. Student General and Technical Guides on Exams and Timed Online Coursework, which include information on mitigating circumstances and on the decision-making processes of Exam Boards, will be issued for each exam diet and for tailored groups of students. The weekly series of communications to students in the run up to exams will be repeated in 2022/23.

10. Alternative arrangements put in place for students with learning profiles and for students with individual mitigating circumstances.

11. Centralised processes for mitigating circumstances, temporary suspension of studies, appeals and complaints, academic misconduct and other disciplinary matters to ensure decisions are reliable, fair, consistent and transparent.

12. Degree algorithms have remained unaltered throughout the pandemic, ensuring that awards made are comparable with preceding years and academic standards are maintained.

13. University’s plagiarism and disciplinary procedures remain in place, ensuring that academic standards and academic integrity are maintained. Academic integrity guidance for students and staff has been revised and expanded for 2022/23.

14. University awards will not be made with fewer than the specified credits as required by both HWU Regulations and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, enabling students to demonstrate, through their transcript, that they have achieved in their award the full complement of credits.

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

16. Revised and update Assessment Policy Information 2022/23 (see section 1, page 1), reflecting the transition out of the pandemic and return to campus.

## Communication and Links to Information

The University's approach to academic decision-making has been publicised to students via the University's communications on preparing for the Exams and Assessment Diets and also further communicated by the Student Representative Bodies via their networks. Additionally, for students, there is a general overview and a more detailed guide. Both documents are also available on the Supporting Our Students site here.

For staff, the communication has been via the L+T Academic Operations Committee and weekly Staff Briefings on preparing for the Exams and Assessment Diets; this version for staff is available on the L+T Policy Bank. Additionally, there is further, detailed Guidance for Exam Boards (Course, Progression and Award) on Maintaining Academic Standards.