Summary

This paper sets out HWU’s approach in 2020/21 to mitigating the continuing impact of COVID-19 on assessment, progression and award, referred to as the “Academic Safety Net”. HWU’s previous approach in 2019/2020 is taken into account, which put in place 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.

The paper was produced by the Head of Academic Quality and supported by the Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching), the three Student Presidents and the five School Directors of Learning and Teaching on behalf of the Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG). Although there are no policy changes specified, the overall approach was endorsed by the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness (SCIBE) at its meeting on 18 January 2021. This Academic Safety Net approach is available on the Learning and Teaching Policy Bank here.

QAA UK issued Advice for Higher Education Providers on the 2021 National Lockdown - Safety Net Policies on 19 January 2021. The University’s Academic Safety Net, as specified below, is in line with this sector-wide advice.

Introduction and Background

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, 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 and the existing role of Boards of Examiners to take into account exceptional circumstances in making academic judgements, it had not been deemed necessary to rearticulate a specific approach to “No Detriment” 1 – all these measures collectively could be seen as the University’s “Safety Net”/ “No Detriment” Approach.

However, the approaches taken even in December 2020 had to be reviewed in early January 2021 for their applicability to a very different HE environment from that at the end of 2020: the UK in effective lockdown from 4 January 2021; a halt to almost all face-to-face teaching in higher education; stringent restrictions on international travel; requirement that students do not return to their term-time residence. Additionally, due to government requirements, there is no face-to-face teaching at the University’s Malaysia Campus until 1 March 2021.

In the week of 11 January 2021, following the message to students on 8 January 2021 regarding very limited face-to-face teaching, there were questions to the student helpdesk/call centre around impact on assessment, progression and award. However, a follow-up “We are here for you” message from the Deputy Principal (Education and Student Life), Academic Registrar and Student Presidents highlighted the University’s Academic Safety Net, with its focus on no academic disadvantage. Many of the concerns arose because the National Union of Students (NUS) had revitalised the campaign for “No Detriment” in light of the altered UK position and many HEIs are now considering this, recognising that their 2020 approach, which was intended to be a short-term response, will now need reviewing. Finally, QAA UK has been revising and reissuing its own No Detriment guidance.

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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.
For all of these reasons, therefore, it was prudent for HWU to revisit its No Detriment Approach and to communicate this promptly to both staff and students. As a means of differentiating this session from last, 2020/21’s approach is being referred to as HWU’s “Academic Safety Net” approach, as per the aforementioned communications to students on 11 January 2021.

**HWU’s Academic Safety Net Approach in 2020/2021**

The following table summarises the key aspects of HWU’s Academic Safety Net approach in 2020/2021, ie the steps taken to ensure that continuing and graduating students are not unfairly disadvantaged due to the impact of COVID on their studies. The table includes aspects which are a continuation of the 2019/2020 approach (the majority of that approach has been continued, with three exceptions: blanket use of P grade for whole year groups/diets (P grade cannot be used in individual circumstances, either a Grade A-E or DC should be used to award credit); cancellation of take-home exams for whole year groups; postponing take-home exams to later diets).

A separate table includes the modifications introduced specifically for 2020/2021; these modifications have already been approved.

### HWU's Academic Safety Net Approach 2020/2021: Continuation from AY2019/2020

1. Regulation 31 still in place, which permits Heads of School 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 Boards as normal, 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.

2. 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). 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 medical circumstances) to select a grade in the range of A-E, but wishes credit points to be awarded.

3. The University's [Assessment and Progression System (HAPS)](https://example.com) 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).

4. The University’s [Assessment and Progression System (HAPS)](https://example.com) allows for reassessment and for courses to be repeated in UG and PGT programmes.

5. Specific guidance for [Boards of Examiners](https://example.com) and tailored briefing sessions for Chairs of Boards of Examiners and Deans Reps will be provided. Boards of Examiners will again be asked to consider carefully the impact of the disruption and to be fair and equitable in deciding on degree awards. Each Board will be asked to ensure that no students are academically disadvantaged and, where appropriate, will review performance over all years of study in reaching decisions.

6. HWU has continued to document all approaches and decisions made through papers to UE, SCIBE, Senate and UCLT and weekly/then fortnightly L+T COVID Group/AY Group meetings.

7. A briefing note will again be issued to External Examiners on the decisions taken by HWU and on their role. The standard report template will again be modified to enable Externals to comment on how Boards operate in the context of COVID-19. Schools have been asked to notify all Externals of changes to assessment and to engage their Externals in commenting on assessment tasks (coursework and take-home exams), given that there has been a substantial reduction in the number of exams.

8. [Student General and Technical Guides on Take-Home Exams](https://example.com), which include information on mitigating circumstances and on the decision-making processes of Exam Boards, have been issued for each exam diet and for tailored groups of students (eg timed exams, off-campus exams, foundation programmes, January starts)
9. All in-person exams cancelled for all of 2020/21 (up to and including August 2021 diet) and replaced by take-home exams or alternative assessments.

10. With the exception of a very small number of PSRB-related exams, all take-home exams open for 24 hours to accommodate different student circumstances and environments.

11. Ongoing correspondence with all PSRBs and government accreditation authorities over the use of take-home exams or other forms of assessment.

12. Consistent approach and decision-making for all coursework and take-home exams: single, University-wide approach across all locations and modes, with all assessments via Vision.

13. Alternative approaches put in place for students with disabilities, for students with IT restrictions, for students with individual mitigating circumstances (ill-health, caring responsibilities).

14. Centralised processes for mitigating circumstances, temporary suspension of studies, appeals and complaints, and problems on exam day to ensure decisions are reliable, fair, consistent and transparent.

15. All decisions taken in consultation with student representatives.

16. All decisions communicated clearly and in a timely way to students, and communicated during the week and not at weekends when no one there to provide support/responses.

17. Degree algorithms have not been altered, ensuring that awards made are comparable with preceding years and academic standards are maintained.

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

19. 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.

20. 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.

The following table summarises modifications introduced for 2020/21; all of these modifications have already been approved and are operational.

### HWU’s Academic Safety Net Approach 2020/2021: Aspects introduced for 2020/21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>21. Responsive Blended Learning:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A commitment to supporting our students to learn successfully wherever they are and whether or not they are able to attend their normal campus location;</td>
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<td>• A core set of digital materials covering the course learning outcomes, which are provided through Vision;</td>
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<td>• Asynchronous learning supported by engaging timetabled synchronous learning sessions held face-to-face for students who can attend campus and online for those that can’t.</td>
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<td>• Flexible so that the University can respond dynamically to what may well be a changing situation as the academic year progresses, eg changes now being made to fully online for Semester 2 until at least 1 March 2021 (Scottish Campuses and Malaysia Campus)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A rapid upskilling of staff to ensure they have the skills, confidence and collaborative working arrangements to facilitate delivery of RBL (RBL staff training programme)</td>
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<td>• RBL student resources and live sessions during induction</td>
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22. Enhanced student support framework, including extensive induction and re-induction programme, major revisions to Personal Tutoring and extended role for Student Success Advisors. Global student helpline. Regular student surveys to ascertain student views and make immediate changes
23. Consistent approach on communications with students to ensure clarity of message and means of communication, included dedicated Student News and Information pages.

24. Assessment-related policies/approaches:
   - All Schools have adapted assessment (coursework and take-home exams) as part of RBL, taking into account the circumstances of students
   - University-wide programme of sessions for staff on assessment design (coursework and take-home exams)
   - Guidance on communicating assessment changes, types of assessment, assessment scheduling to students
   - Clarification on types of assessment: take-home exams and coursework
   - Standard approach to take-home exams
   - Support for students in preparing for take-home exams
   - Co-ordinated approach to assessment scheduling
   - Restatement of Submission of Coursework Policy
   - Restatement of Return of Feedback on Assessment Policy and extension to include feedback on take-home exams/online exams
   - Advice on reducing the volume of assessment for Semester 2 whilst ensuring that all learning outcomes continue to be assessed

25. Other Policy changes:
   - Interim policy on recording of teaching sessions and captioning
   - Streamlined, consistent approaches to Temporary Suspension of Studies and Mitigating Circumstances
   - Development of Academic Integrity policy and processes to include contract cheating (part of approach to maintain academic standards)

26. Introduction of Global Consolidation Week in Week 6 in Semester 1 and Semester 2, with no new material introduced and no assessment submissions

**HWU’s Academic Safety Net Approach in 2020/2021**

HWU’s Academic Safety Net approach in 2020/2021, as set out in the two tables above, was endorsed by SCIBE on 18 January 2021 as being sufficient in terms of ensuring that continuing and graduating students are not unfairly disadvantaged due to the impact of COVID on their studies and that there is no need for further policy modifications.

On that basis, SCIBE agreed that there was no requirement to reinstate three particular approaches introduced in 2019/20 as part of the University’s emergency response: blanket use of P grade for whole year groups/diets (P grade cannot be used in individual circumstances, either a Grade A-E or DC should be used to award credit); cancellation of take-home exams for whole year groups; postponing take-home exams to later diets.

Rapid adaptations are being made to take account of the changed circumstances in the UK, Dubai and Malaysia in terms of a shift to fully online. The University’s policies and procedures have been devised to anticipate such developments: 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.

The University has also streamlined, standardised and automated its Mitigating Circumstances Policy and Procedures for 2020/21, ensuring that, if the generic Academic Safety Net approach does not sufficiently address the particular situation of an individual student, this can additionally be taken into consideration when considering assessment performance.
Communication

This Academic Safety Net approach has been communicated to students via the University’s approved channels and also further communicated by the Student Representative Bodies via their networks; the student communication is available here. Additionally, for students, there is general overview and more detailed guide.

For staff, the communication has been via the LTAYG and Staff News; this version for staff is available on the L+T Policy Bank. Additionally, there is further, detailed Guidance on Maintaining Academic Standards.