Summary and Introduction

As part of Responsive Blended Learning (RBL), Schools have introduced in 2020/21 a range of different assessment methods, many of which are hybrids of face-to-face types and are scheduled in the traditional exam diet periods. Consequently, there has been an ongoing need to revisit current assessment policies either to reaffirm or to adapt, particularly where there has been a lack of clarity about what is permitted or where existing policies do not cover specific points.

This paper provides a summary of the key issues, policy information and associated guidance related to assessment in 2020/21 and is intended to support Schools in designing and managing assessment from Semester 2, January 2021.

The paper includes decisions related to assessment which have already been approved by the Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG) and its predecessors and by the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness (SCIBE) of behalf of the Senate, and also reaffirms existing policies related to the management of assessment. Additional matters were discussed and endorsed by the LTAYG at its meeting on 16 December 2020, none of which resulted in modification to existing policies and so approval by SCIBE was not required.

This Assessment 2020/21: Key Policy Information is a summary paper, consolidating in a single document, all key policy information related to assessment from January 2021. There is intentionally some repetition between the various sections, which reflects the fact that the key information has also, for ease of access, been separated into stand-alone sections, eg Assessment Types; Scheduling of Assessments; Submission of Coursework.

The consolidated document and the stand-alone sections are available on the Learning and Teaching Policy Bank.
Changes to Assessment: Policy on Approvals and School Decisions

In accordance with the University’s adapted approvals procedures, Schools are able to adapt their assessment methods for 2020/21 without going through their own internal full approval process and without updating assessment information on PAMS (ie where these are temporary changes for 2020/21). Schools may set their own internal approvals for assessment changes in 2020/21, including via any specified School committees/groups.

There is no change to the current process in that all changes to assessment:

- are managed and approved at School level in accordance with the standard approval procedures, the Academic Management Structures and the University’s Codes of Practice,
- are ultimately the responsibility of the Head of School, delegated to the Director of Learning and Teaching and overseen by the School Learning and Teaching Committee, and maybe delegated further to the Director of Academic Quality and the School Studies Committee;
- do not require approval by the University Studies Committee;
- are part of the roles of Course Leaders/Senior Course Leaders, Programme Directors of Studies/Senior Programme Directors of Studies and remits of Programme Boards of Studies and Global Course Teams;
- are undertaken by Course Leaders in consultation with all stakeholders as appropriate, such as the entire Global Course Teams and Programme Directors of Studies;
- should meet any PSRB and in-country accreditation requirements as appropriate.

Additionally, Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG) agreed that changes to assessment changes should be communicated to External Examiners and PSRBs.

If a Course Team wishes to make permanent or to continue for a further limited period (eg for 2021/22) any changes to assessment made temporarily for 2020/21, then the standard, School-based approval process must be followed. Assessment information provided in PAMS and in other sources (such as student handbooks) must be updated.

Changes to Assessment: Guidance from the Learning and Teaching Academy

The Learning and Teaching Academy has provided through Responsive Blended Learning (RBL), associated resources, training and sessions, a wide range of support for Schools in planning for and designing assessment in 2020/21. The LTA has also developed a Semester 2 Checklist, which contains useful information on co-ordinating and clearly communicating coursework and assessments. Additionally, there is a suite of Watt Works Quick Guides on Assessment and Feedback.

Changes to Assessment: Guidance on Communicating to Students

If assessment has been changed from the official record on PAMS, this should be communicated to students and should be updated on Vision pages and other key information provided to students. Additionally, the three Student Representative Bodies have recommended that the following guidance on assessment is provided to students:

- clarification on how assessments relate to learning outcomes;
- inclusion of descriptive criteria or a rubric each assessment;
- co-ordination of deadlines for assessments across the course and wider programme to ensure that they are reasonably spread out and students are not being over-assessed;
- clarification on submission methods and signposting to students of guidance on how to use these tools;
- promotion of academic integrity, through resources and integration into the curriculum, and availability of resources on how to properly use referencing;
- information and help on understanding assessment expectations, eg through providing exemplars or class discussion of marking criteria.
- information on feedback (date, type and method of availability) and how to engage with feedback to help with subsequent assessments.
In 2020/21, RBL has encouraged a much greater diversity of assessment than traditional face-to-face formats and additional to the Take-Home Exams format introduced as part of the emergency response to COVID in 2019/20. This diversity, including a blurring between take-home exams and coursework assessments, eg assignments scheduled for completion over a three-day period or coursework deadlines set in the weeks of the exam diet, has led to a lack of clarity over what is permitted and when in assessment.

Assessment Types in 2020/21: Existing Regulations and Policies

The University’s policies and Regulations for taught programmes (eg Reg 3, Reg 9, Reg 18, Reg 38, Reg 44, Reg 48/48A, Reg 51, Reg 53) do not prohibit diversity in form and timing, and the constraints are only as follows:

- All programmes of study shall contain a balance of written exams and other forms of assessment, unless specifically approved by the University Studies Committee;
- Exams shall be of two or three hours in duration, unless approved by the Academic Registrar;
- Written exams shall be held in a scheduled diet of exams;
- All courses shall provide opportunities for formative assessment;
- Assessments contributing to the overall final mark/grade shall assess the specified learning outcomes;
- The forms of assessment and weighting shall be specified in the Course Descriptor (this has been waived for 2020/21);

Therefore, there is scope for Schools to offer a much more diverse array of assessment through RBL without being constrained by institutional regulations or policies. For example, coursework assignments can be completed in a scheduled diet of exams; there is no restriction that stipulates that only coursework which is a substitute for a face-to-face exam can be included in the exam diet.

Assessment Types in 2020/21: Policy Definitions

Policy Statement on Assessment Types in 2020/21

For the purposes of clarity for students and for staff involved in the design and management of assessment, in 2020/21 assessment should be differentiated as one of two types: Coursework or Take-Home Exam. This terminology should be used consistently in all staff and student communications.

In 2020/21, all examinations are being run as Take-Home Exams (unless there are specific requirements from PSRBs or accreditation authorities), as approved by the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness (SCIBE). The parameters for Take-Home Exams have likewise already been approved by SCIBE as follows:

- A take-home exam is an exam taken remotely and alone by students in their own space (eg at home), by downloading the paper and uploading answers via Vision, the University’s VLE;
- Each exam is taken under “open book” conditions, meaning that students have access to notes, course material, and the internet to consult during the exam;
- The majority of take-home exams are open for 24-hours (although the exam will require the normal 2 or 3 hours of effort) between the exam paper being made available via Vision, and the deadline for submitting a completed exam script;
- A small number of exams will have a much shorter time period, eg 2 hours to complete the answer and then 30 minutes for uploading; these are known as Timed Take-Home Exams;
- Take-Home Exams contribute to the final mark/grade for a course and are held in the scheduled diet of examinations and are timetabled centrally by Registry and Academic Support.

In 2020/21, coursework comprises assignments set during or at the end of a course to assess one or more of the learning outcomes. Coursework includes, but is not limited to, the following:
• written assignment, including essay
• report
• dissertation (an extended piece of written work, often the write-up of a final-year project)
• portfolio (a collection of work that relates to a given topic or theme, which has been produced over a period of time)
• project output (output from project work, often of a practical nature, other than a dissertation or written report),
• set exercise (questions or tasks designed to assess how knowledge is applied, and analytical, problem-solving or evaluative skills).
• class tests (written or computer-based) of knowledge or interpretation that are not carried out under take-home exam conditions.

Assessment Types in 2020/21: Coursework and Tests

In 2020/21, coursework assignments can be completed in a scheduled diet of exams (weeks 13 + 14); this includes all types of coursework and is not restricted to coursework which is a substitute for a face-to-face exam (existing Regulation). In this instance, coursework will be arranged and managed exclusively by the School and not by Registry and Academic Support.

In 2020/21, coursework may be offered in a way that is very similar to a take-home exam, eg a class test/web test to be completed in a specific period of time and to be carried out using the University’s VLE. If a test of any sort is being held in the scheduled diet of exams during 2020/21, for the purposes of clarity, this should be arranged as a centrally timetabled take-home exam.

Assessment Types in 2020/21: Guidance on Communicating Assessment Types to Students

As is standard practice, Schools should clearly communicate all assessment types to students (eg via the Programme Handbook or Course Descriptors or overviews on Vision), but should pay particular attention to changed arrangements for 2020/21 which are different from the norm.

For example, students would reasonably expect the exam diet to be kept free of coursework assignment deadlines; however, with fewer exams than previously and more coursework-type assessments, it is more practical for Schools to use the full semester (including assessment weeks/exam diet) for spacing out assessment deadlines. However, Schools should take steps to ensure that any coursework assignments due for completion in an exam diet are scheduled in such a way as to minimise clashing and bunching of assessment deadlines (see separate summary on Assessment Scheduling in 2020/21).
In 2020/21, all examinations are being run as Take-Home Exams (unless there are specific requirements from PSRBs or accreditation authorities), as approved by the Senate Committee for Interim Business and Effectiveness (SCIBE) on 28 October 2020.

Take-Home Exams in 2020/21: Policy Approved by SCIBE

The parameters for Take-Home Exams in 2020/21 have already been approved by SCIBE as follows:

- A take-home exam is an exam taken remotely and alone by students in their own space (e.g. at home), by downloading the paper and uploading answers via Vision, the University's VLE;
- Each exam is taken under “open book” conditions, meaning that students have access to notes, course material, and the internet to consult during the exam;
- The majority of take-home exams are open for 24-hours (although the exam will require the normal 2 or 3 hours of effort) between the exam paper being made available via Vision, and the deadline for submitting a completed exam script;
- A small number of exams will have a much shorter time period, e.g. 2 hours to complete the answer and then 30 minutes for uploading; these are known as Timed Take-Home Exams;
- Take-home exams contribute to the final mark/grade for a course and are held in the scheduled diet of examinations and are timetabled centrally by Registry and Academic Support.

Take-Home Exams in 2020/21: Additional Parameters Approved by L+T COVID Groups

In addition to the policy approved by SCIBE, further parameters for take-home exams were approved by the Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG) at its meetings since September 2020 and by its predecessors, the L+T COVID Contingency Group and the L+T COVID Task and Finish Group.

Exam Paper Release Times
- The paper for each exam will be released at the same time globally: timings after end of BST: 09.00 UK; 13.00 Dubai; 17.00 Malaysia. Timings during BST: 09.00 UK; 12.00 Dubai; 16.00 Malaysia;
- Any changes to these release time, e.g. for PSRB timed exams, will require approval by the Academic Registrar.

Duration and Effort Hours
- All take-home exams should be designed around the requirement of 2 or 3 hours of effort, as per the University’s existing Regulations (a take-home exam requiring a longer period of effort will require approval by the Academic Registrar, as per Regulation 9);
- The 24-hour period provides sufficient time for students to access the paper, plan responses, write answers, and submit completed scripts, and allows for any technical difficulties to be resolved. Additionally, it recognises that many students might not be taking the exam in an environment where they can focus uninterrupted for 2-3 hours.
- Any take-home exams which are timed (i.e., less than 24-hours) will require approval by the Academic Registrar.

Use of Vision
- All exam papers will be released and submitted via Vision, the University’s VLE. Turnitin or Blackboard Assignment may be used for the submission process, as determined by each School; no other methods of submission are permitted (other than by email attachment in event of technical difficulties).

Results
- There is no University single release date for results of take-home exams in January 2021. The dates for release of results for graduating and continuing students in June-August 2021 will be published in due course;
- All results will be accessible via Student Self-Service.
Take-Home Exams in 2020/21: Advice and Guidance

Designing Take-Home Exams
- The Learning and Teaching Academy has produced a range of resources on designing Take-Home Exams, including adapting traditional exams to the take-home format;
- The guides include advice on what to think about when designing a take-home exam, such as assessing deeper knowledge and more complex skills; limiting the possibility of academic misconduct; providing access to supplementary material; software requirements; referencing; word counts;
- Examples used at HWU are provided to illustrate a range of different approaches;
- Tips on getting feedback on draft exam papers are provided.

Supporting Students in Preparing for Take-Home Exams
- The LTA Guide to Creating a Take-Home Exam highlights the need to clarify with students expectations of take-home exams and how they will be marked;
- The Take-Home Exam Guides provide comprehensive information for staff and students on preparing for take-home exams, including the need to revise just as for a conventional exam and how to arrange a suitable set-up for taking the exam (location and technology);
- There are references in the Take-Home Exam Guides to a range of support services and resources, such as Student Success Advisors, Effective Learning Service Advisors and Student Wellbeing Services;
- Students should be notified of the format of the exam, such a typed-up response, hand-written with photo/scan upload;
- Students are advised to practise proper academic and professional conduct, and act with integrity and honestly. Advice and guidance on types of academic misconduct, how to avoid it and penalties are contained in the Take-Home Exam Guides;
- All student communications will be issued around take-home exams, featuring key information such as: timetable; availability of Vision practice area; avoiding academic misconduct.

Individual Student Circumstances
- Advice and guidance is provided in the Take-Home Exam Guides on managing individual student circumstances such as: reasonable adjustments; mitigating circumstances in advance of, or during, the exam; dealing with technical difficulties impacting on the ability to undertake, complete or upload the exam.

Feedback on Take-Home Exams
- The University has Guidance on Feedback on Exams Performance, which includes feedback on take-home exams. The LTA has a range of Watt Works Quick Guides on Feedback on Assessment.
The University has existing policies related to the scheduling and publishing of assessment deadlines to ensure a manageable workload for students.

However, as larger pieces of coursework have been introduced and many exams have been substituted by an increased number of shorter assignments as part of RBL, the issue of clashing deadlines and bunching of assessments has arisen during Semester 1 2020/21 and has been highlighted several times at the Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG), by student representatives and by students. There have also been instances of timed coursework (i.e. where students have a specific period of time, e.g. 48 hours or 36 hours, to complete an assignment) being released at times in the day which are disadvantageous to some timezones (e.g. 11 pm). Additionally, it has emerged that not all students have received a clear schedule of assessment deadlines for the semester.

**Assessment Scheduling: Existing Policy**

At the Student Learning Experience Committee in November 2017 (Minute 114), it was agreed, in response to a proposal submitted by the three Student Presidents on Coursework Deadline Mapping, that all coursework should be scheduled by Schools so as to minimise clashing deadlines or bunching of assessment in order to provide a more manageable workload for students. It was agreed that all Schools should undertake a coursework deadline mapping exercise and communicate this to students, and that this should be introduced with immediate effect in 2017/18. It was determined that a policy was not needed as most Schools were already doing this mapping.

However, as this practice hadn’t yet become embedded, in the introduction of the Submission of Coursework Policy in 2018/19, the following was stated:

*It is the responsibility of the School to document, prior to the start of teaching, the following on the Vision Course Homepage: Date issued; Assessment submission deadline; When feedback will be issued.*

Each School will ensure that coursework deadlines are coordinated to ensure workloads are manageable for students. In light of this, it is therefore the responsibility of the student to work professionally and work towards submitting all assessed coursework by the submission deadline.

Additionally, in the Academic Management Structures, it is stated, in the remit of the Year Co-ordinator (approved for implementation with effect from 2018/19), that it is the responsibility of the Year Co-ordinator, working with the programme teaching team, to coordinate assignment submission dates across courses.

Therefore, there already exist policies on assessment scheduling and provision of this information to students.

**Assessment Scheduling in 2020/21: Restatement of Existing Policy**

At its meeting on 2 December 2020, the LTAYG agreed that a separate policy statement should be introduced as a means of supporting the management and communication of assessment scheduling during 2020/21. The following policy statement, which is a confirmation of existing policies, was reaffirmed by the LTAYG on 16 December 2020:

- As per the existing policy, **coursework deadlines should be coordinated to ensure workloads are manageable for students**;
- As per the existing policy, **it is the responsibility of the student to work professionally and work towards submitting all assessed coursework by the submission deadline**;
- As per the Academic Management Structures, it is the responsibility of the Year Co-ordinator, **working with the programme teaching team, to coordinate assignment submission dates across courses**;
- As per the existing policy, the following should be undertaken by Schools:
  - assessment schedules are presented on Vision;
  - deadlines are presented as part of an overall schedule for the semester;
  - all students receive/have access to a published calendar of assessment deadlines for all their courses each semester.
Assessment Scheduling in 2020/21: Guidance for Schools

As a means of facilitating the mapping out of assessment deadlines, the School of Engineering and Physical Sciences is introducing a *School-wide assessment scheduling tool*. It is proposed that this tool is used as an institutional pilot, with a view to wider adoption and prior to the implementation of the assessment scheduling function within the Global Curriculum Management system (PAMS replacement, due for introduction from September 2021). Other Schools may wish to contact EPS (via the Director of Learning and Teaching) regarding use of this assessment scheduling tool.

Schools can determine the most appropriate means of managing assessment scheduling across a semester or programme. The only University requirement is that the *Year Co-ordinator* is responsible for the co-ordination of assessment deadlines across a particular year group/stage of study.

In scheduling assessment deadlines, Schools should pay particular attention to any coursework assignments due for completion in an exam diet and minimise clashing or bunching around dates of take-home exams.

*The following guidance has been produced by the Student Representative Bodies:*
Well-planned assessment scheduling allows both staff and students to undertake their work and studies more effectively. When assessments are spread out across the full semester, key pinch points are removed and student effort can be distributed more evenly across all important topics. Concentration of student effort around bunched assessment deadlines impacts overall learning, as students prioritise some work, and therefore some learning outcomes, over others. Assessment throughout the entire semester enables students to reinforce their understanding of a greater range of topics rather than a small selection.

Conversely, “assessment bunching” can have a detrimental effect on student attainment: with too many assignments to complete simultaneously, students cannot concentrate sufficient effort on each one in addition to continuing their studies.

Assessment Scheduling in 2020/21: Guidance on Communicating to Students

As is standard practice, Schools should continue to communicate assessment deadlines to students and, in line with the existing policies above, should ensure that: this information is presented on Vision; deadlines are presented as part of an overall schedule for the semester; all students receive/have access to a published calendar of assessment deadlines for all their courses each semester.

In communicating assessment schedules to students, Schools should make students aware that, although assessment schedules will have been carefully planned, there will be occasions when deadlines might conflict or be close together and that exams be held on consecutive days.

It should be highlighted to students that it is part of their professional and personal development, and a key time management skill, to be able to manage conflicting deadlines, and that they should accordingly plan and prioritise their time and workload.

Schools should also bring to students’ attention the resources and support available to them (from Student Wellbeing Services, Information Services and the Student Union Advice Hub) in areas such as assessment, time management and dealing with exam anxiety.
As part of the University’s response to COVID in 2019/20, it was agreed that the standard Submission of Coursework Policy should apply to late submissions for all assessments, irrespective of the format (including take-home exams and coursework being submitted electronically) and mode of submission (L+T COVID Group, final record of decisions, 22 May 2020). This was a change of policy, as take-home exams were explicitly included.

However, there was a variety of practice across Schools regarding late submission of take-home exams, resulting in different decisions for students: no action taken and marked as per scripts submitted on time; requesting students to submit mitigating circumstances; implementation of the penalties outlined in the Submission of Coursework policy.

Submission of Coursework Policy: Current Policy

The University’s Submission of Coursework Policy was introduced in 2018/19. In a step change from previous, related policies, the scope for extensions has been removed (unless an extension has been agreed as part of reasonable adjustments arrangements1). Students have up to five working days after the published deadline to submit, but receiving a 30% penalty. Any coursework submitted after five working days of the set submission date will automatically be awarded a “no grade”, with no formative feedback provided.

Coursework submitted late is flagged to those involved in the marking/grading process. Students are encouraged to apply for mitigating circumstances if they think that they will be late in submitting their coursework. Where circumstances will result, or have resulted, in a deadline being missed, students should apply for this to be considered under the Mitigating Circumstances Policy.

Exams and webtests/class tests are explicitly excluded from the Submission of Coursework Policy.

Submission of Coursework Policy in 2020/21: Restatement of Current Policy

As stated above, the inclusion of take-home exams in the late submission process, as outlined in the Submission of Coursework Policy, during 2019/20 led to variability in practice across Schools and so variability in treatment of students. The Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG) has, therefore, agreed to revert in 2020/21 to the original policy, which excludes take-home exams and class tests/web tests.

The following sections, which confirm existing policies, were endorsed by the LTAYG on 16 December 2020:

For the purposes of clarity and equity of treatment of students, from January 2021, the Submission of Coursework Policy will apply to late submissions for all assessments (including coursework substitutes for face-to-face exams), with the exception of class tests/web tests and take-home exams.

If a student has missed a class test/web test or a take-home exam (ie there is no submission by the end of the time-limited period and there are no mitigating circumstances), then an ABS is given, as per standard, approved (ie pre-COVID) arrangements.

If technology or other circumstances prevent or delay a student from submitting a take-home exam or completing a class test/web test within the specified period of time, then the student should apply under the Mitigating Circumstances Policy for this to be taken into consideration. This course of action accords with the advice given to students in the General Guide to Take-Home Exams (including the Guide to Timed Take-Home Exams).

As per the existing policy, it is the responsibility of the student to work professionally and work towards submitting all assessed coursework by the submission deadline. Students are encouraged to manage their time and workload to enable them to submit coursework by the specified deadlines.

1. Extensions are not automatically applied for all students with reasonable adjustments. Following a discussion between a student and the Disability Advisor, an “extension to deadlines justification” will be added to their record, indicating that an extension might be required. The student will then request an extension with justification on a case-by-case basis with each lecturer. One week is the recommended extension timeframe. Students are discouraged from continually requesting extensions; rather, the Disability Advisors will work with students on developing their organisational and time management skills.
There were no particular issues identified with feedback which required discussion by the Learning and Teaching Academic Year 2020/21 Group (LTAYG). However, there had been some lack of clarity earlier in 2020 regarding feedback turnaround times and feedback on exams submitted electronically; both matters were clarified by the LTAYG. The section below summarises the agreed position on both.

**Feedback on Coursework in 2020/21: Restatement of Current Policy**

The University’s Feedback on Coursework Policy was introduced in 2015/16, which states:

*This document provides the policy framework for Schools, which should be used in the delivery of formative feedback on assessed coursework. The policy applies to students studying on all Heriot-Watt University programmes of study. This policy does not cover examinations.*

The University is committed to providing identical academic standards for students and fostering a learning environment which delivers timely formative feedback to students. This is viewed as essential in supporting learning and improvement.

*In order to realise this aim, a maximum 3-week turnaround for the return of formative feedback on assessed coursework will be in place by the start of the Academic Year 2015/2016. For some pieces of assessment, such as large-scale projects and dissertations, this policy may not apply. This is to ensure that the quality of feedback is not compromised.*

*It is the responsibility of each School to implement the policy.*

At its meeting on 21 October 2020, the LTAYG agreed to retain the current policy of a 3-week turnaround for coursework in 2020/21. However, it was agreed that this should be interpreted and actioned at School level in a flexible way during 2020/21 in light of the impact of COVID-19, the pressures on staff and students and the increase in coursework elements (including as substitutes for in-person exams).

**Feedback on Take-Home Exams in 2020/21: Restatement of Current Guidance**

At its meeting on 23 September 2020, the LTAYG approved a revised Guidance Note on Access to Exam Scripts and Feedback to Students on Exam Performance, which had been updated to include take-home exams, ie the provision of feedback on exams completed electronically. The key principle in relation to feedback is as follows:

*Students should be given the opportunity to receive feedback on examination performance (except final year undergraduate or final diet postgraduate taught programme students); this applies to students across all locations and modes of study. Each School can determine the most appropriate method of providing feedback on examination performance, depending on the discipline, cohort size, level and mode of study.*

Examples of methods used to provide access to examination scripts and feedback, as provided in the above Guidance Note, include the following:

- Examination workshops timetabled in the next semester to go through examination performance and overall learning points; this is particularly relevant for core courses.
- Provision of feedback through generic commentary for all students, highlighting learning points, posted on the University’s VLE or other University-approved means of communicating with students, or where relevant members of academic staff have an opportunity to provide group feedback. In the case of electronic exams, as students will have their own copy of their submitted script, generic feedback could be a more practical approach.
- Individual student feedback sheets relating to examination scripts, detailing how a student performed; this could also be used to assist off-campus students.
- One-to-one feedback provided by Personal Tutors or members of the Course team.

Each School should inform students (eg handbook, statement on Course VLE site) of the methods used to provide exam performance feedback.

There is no University policy or guidance on return times for feedback on take-home exams.