



Academic Decision-Making: Assessment, Progression and Award

Summary Guide for Staff

Introduction and Background

This paper sets out HWU's approach 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 has transitioned out of the pandemic, this approach represents, in essence, a return to "business as usual". However, there continues to be a need for to make provision for whole cohort mitigation, eg to account for the impact of industrial action or of adverse weather conditions.

At its meeting on 26 October 2022, the Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee (LTAOC) 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 circumstances affecting whole cohorts.

Although no policy changes were 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, together with guides for students.

The four guides (two each for staff and students) related to "Academic Decision-Making: Assessment, Progression and Award" can be found on the Learning and Teaching Policy Bank [here](#).

Related Information

The Learning and Teaching Academic Operations Committee agreed that the following key policy information should be communicated as part of the dissemination of information on Academic Decision-Making: Assessment, Progression and Award:

The list below is not exhaustive, but contains a summary of key assessment policy-related information. Please see the [Learning and Teaching Policy Bank](#) for links to all assessment policies and procedures.

1. [Making Changes to Assessment: Approvals Process](#)
2. [Types of Assessment: Policy/Administrative Definitions](#)
3. [Scheduling and Submission of Coursework \(including late submission\)](#)
4. [Exams in Different Timezones](#)
5. [Feedback on Coursework](#)
6. [Feedback on Exams and Access to Exam Scripts](#)
7. [External Examiners; Review of Assessment Tasks \(Coursework and Exams\) by External Examiners](#)
8. [Academic Decision-Making: Staff and Student Guides](#)
9. [Boards of Examiners: All Policies and Procedures](#)
10. [Heriot-Watt Assessment and Progression System \(HAPS\)](#)
11. [Assessment: School Roles and Responsibilities](#)
12. [HW Assessment Platforms: Staff Guide](#)
13. [Academic Integrity](#) ([SharePoint](#); [Website for students](#))

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.

14. [Mitigating Circumstances](#)
15. [Moderation of Assessment](#)

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) in considering exceptional circumstances in making academic judgements, can collectively be regarded as the University's approach to academic decision-making and to managing the impact of whole cohort situations on assessment, progression and award.

HWU's Academic Decision-Making Approach

The following tables summarise the key aspects of HWU's Academic Decision-Making approach, ie the steps taken to ensure that continuing and graduating students are not unfairly disadvantaged due to the impact of exceptional circumstances affecting whole cohorts. This approach also ensures that, in such situations, the University 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 pandemic² or have since become standard practice.

The University has also streamlined, standardised and automated its [Mitigating Circumstances Policy and Procedures](#), ensuring that circumstances affecting individual students can be taken into consideration when considering assessment performance and making decisions on assessment, progression or award.

All information outlined below reflects decisions taken collaboratively and in consultation with student representatives. All decisions have been and will continue to be 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 pages for students in the [UK](#), [Dubai](#) and [Malaysia](#).

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| 1. The Types of Assessment Policy highlights that, for the purposes of clarity for students and for staff involved in the management of assessment, assessment should be differentiated as one of two types: Coursework or Examination. This terminology should be used consistently in all staff and student communications and publications. Further explanation of Final Online Assessment (primarily HW Online) and Class Tests as types of Coursework are included. [Take Home Exams and Timed Online Coursework have been withdrawn as assessment types]. |
| 2. Regulation A10: Authorities in Exceptional Circumstances can be invoked in particular circumstances affecting whole cohorts of students, which permits Executive Deans 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, eg industrial action or severe weather. Additionally, Boards of Examiners will continue, as in normal circumstances, to exercise academic judgement in decision-making. Use of A10 requires SCIBE approval and is required where multiple cohorts are impacted by national-level circumstances; where cohorts are impacted by more localised circumstances, Boards of Examiners can use their existing discretion in academic decision-making. |
| 3. Deans Reps are 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 so that Directors of Learning and Teaching/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. |
| 4. 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 and the Board cannot select a grade in the range of A-E but wishes credits to be awarded, DC can be used by the Board or EC if assessment has been significantly impacted by whole cohort circumstances, eg impact of industrial action. |

² 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

5. The University's Policy on Discretionary Credits 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). The University has an additional policy – Exceptional Credits, EC - in place for the awarding credit for whole cohorts in instances where assessment has been significantly impacted, eg due to industrial action (see section 9 of the Policy on Discretionary Credits).
6. Specific guidance for Boards of Examiners and tailored briefing sessions for Chairs of Boards of Examiners and Deans Reps are provided each academic year. Boards of Examiners are 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 in previous years as part of its informed approach to decision-making
7. HWU documents all approaches and decisions made in relation to academic decision-making in exceptional circumstances through papers to relevant committees.
8. External Examiners are able to comment on the Award Board's response to particular circumstances affecting whole cohorts as part of their annual report. Schools continue to 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. Information relating to exams and the decision-making processes of Exam Boards will be issued via the Examinations and Assessment student webpages for each diet and for tailored groups of students. There will continue to be a regular series of communications to students in the run up to each Assessment and Exams Diet.
10. Alternative arrangements will continue to be put in place for students with learning profiles.
11. Centralised processes for mitigating circumstances , temporary suspension of studies , appeals , disciplinary matters to ensure decisions are reliable, fair, consistent and transparent.
12. Policies, guidance, resources and procedures for academic misconduct have been enhanced, ensuring that academic standards and academic integrity are maintained. Academic integrity resources and guidance for students and staff continue to be developed and extended.
13. 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 (this includes credits awarded through Recognition of Prior Learning), enabling students to demonstrate, through their transcript, that they have achieved in their award the full complement of credits.
14. 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.
15. Revised and updated Assessment Policy Information will continue to be provided, reflecting the University's latest policies, procedures and guidance

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 regular Staff Briefings on preparing for, and during, 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](#)