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# Academic decision-making for taught degrees

How we make academic decisions in order to award our degrees, and the actions we took in light of COVID-19 disruption in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years.

On this page we provide information about how we make academic decisions in order to award our degrees. We also provide information

## On this page

- [Rule-based assessment regulations](#)

about the actions we took in light of COVID-19 disruption during the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years.

We offer a range of courses and awards, some of which are accredited by professional bodies. The great majority of our students follow undergraduate programmes that lead to bachelor or master awards. Most postgraduate students follow taught programmes that lead to master awards.

- [Our Boards of Examiners](#)
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This description is about how we assess taught programmes at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It does not cover the individual assessment of students for research degrees such as Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

## Rule-based assessment regulations

Decisions about students' progression, their ability to remain on a programme, their eligibility for an award, and their award classifications, are made on the basis of our rule-based assessment regulations and appropriate levels of academic judgement.

In some of our programmes, it is important to pass the individual units. In other programmes, we tolerate minor amounts of failure. This allows a student to try out an area of study without having to pass in every item.

We therefore govern our programmes and awards by sets of common assessment regulations that take these differences into account. For example, the type of a degree award and its professional accreditation status will determine precisely which set of rules we follow. However, we have designed these regulations to form a coherent whole. This approach makes us confident of graduate standards that are appropriate to each type of study and award.

The full sets of assessment regulations are available on [our website](#).

We have arrangements for when something goes wrong for a student. We have provisions to allow students to suspend their studies if they are ill or otherwise unable to study for long periods. We can grant extensions for coursework deadlines if, for example, a student is ill for a period leading up to the normal submission date. We have the means to consider “Individual Mitigating Circumstances” (IMCs), when these temporarily prevent a student from undertaking assessment or significantly impair the student’s performance in assessment.

The mitigating circumstances arrangements are available on [our website](#).

We have an internal complaint process. We also have an Academic Appeals regulation (Regulation 17) that allows students to appeal against academic decisions on clearly specified grounds. Students who remain dissatisfied with the outcomes of these processes may be able to appeal to the external Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

## Our Boards of Examiners

We use three levels of academic decision-making to assure standards, following the setting and marking of assessments that have been reviewed by External Examiners:

- The Boards of Examiners for Units (BEU) look at individual units and determine the marks for the students taking each unit. They also ensure that the assessments provide an appropriate level of academic challenge, and that the marks awarded are an accurate reflection of the standards achieved by the students.
- The Boards of Examiners for Programmes (BEP) make decisions about students' progression and make decisions about awards to students registered on programmes under their academic authority.
- The Boards of Studies consider the recommendations, and will give final approval to

decisions on progression and on the making of awards.

## COVID-19 and academic decision-making in the 2019/20 academic year

In academic year 2019/20, we made sure that there were appropriate online study opportunities to replace on-campus activity for the period of the COVID-19 disruption. Assessments taken in semester 2 and the summer of 2020 were adapted to the online environment. Both the alternative study and the assessments were designed to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Where appropriate, we also gave extra time or support for students who needed it.

As at many other universities, our highest academic decision-making body, Senate, also agreed measures for our students on taught programmes to take into account COVID-19 disruption to semester 2 and the summer of academic year 2019/20. The [no-detriment measures](#) aligned with regulatory guidance produced by the [Quality Assurance Agency](#) and the [Office for Students](#).

The measures ensured students would suffer no detriment to their learning or assessment simply because of the pandemic and its effects. Building from our strong, existing regulatory framework, we

aimed to give our students the best chance to complete the academic year 2019/20, and where appropriate, to gain their award, while maintaining the standards of our degrees.

In practice:

- We maximised opportunities for students to undertake their semester 2 2020 and supplementary assessments with as little disruption as possible. We allowed students to defer their assessment attempts so they could take assessment as if for the first time. If they failed a unit taken in semester 2 2020 we allowed students to attempt the assessment again as if for the first time.
- Our New Framework for Assessment (NFAAR), assessment regulations and Individual Mitigating Circumstances & Assessment (IMCA) regulations remained the baselines for academic decision-making about student outcomes.
- Our BEUs used an evidence-base to determine whether the cohorts' unit assessments from semester 2 in 2020 had been unduly affected by COVID-19 disruption. They were permitted to scale cohort results, if appropriate, using normal techniques for assuring the alignment of marks and standards.
- Additional parameters for decision-making about individual outcomes were also available to BEPs. Here, we used rules normally only accessed

through valid Individual Mitigating Circumstances (IMCs), without first requiring a specific and valid IMC claim against a particular assessment. This was used in light of unavoidable and generalised COVID-19 effects on study, assessment, and normal processes. Students were also able to apply for IMCs if they wished to indicate a particular disruption to assessment, but the discretionary powers were already open to the BEP for all students. We waived the normal (often medical) evidence requirements in order not to add to the pressures on health services during the COVID-19 disruption.

- Overall stage or programme averages were not changed through no-detriment measures. However, their consequences were carefully considered so that underperformance by an individual due to COVID-19 disruption was accounted for and mitigated as appropriate through academic judgement. This means that a student's classification or progression decision may not correspond with the averages normally associated with those results.
- We used a classification safety net with eligibility criteria. The safety-net provisions differed depending on the type of taught study being undertaken, and the year of study. Classification safety-net calculations for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students were designed to take the impact on performance in semester 2 in 2020 into account (and, where appropriate, any

impact during summer 2020 assessment too). We based our method on the calculation of an alternative award classification that gave higher weight to previous (undergraduate) or overall (postgraduate taught) performance. Eligible students had both the normal and safety-net classifications calculated, with the better class being awarded.

We are satisfied that our 2019/20 no-detriment measures allowed an appropriately wide scope for mitigating action, while remaining evidence-based and robust in terms of academic decision-making.

## **COVID-19 and academic decision-making in the 2020/21 academic year**

For the 2020/21 academic year our no-detriment policy was developed for a different learning and teaching context from the 2019/20 academic year. The aim remained to ensure students would suffer no detriment to their learning or assessment because of the pandemic and its effects, and to maintain the standards of our degrees.

The following provisions for study and assessment were retained in the 2020/21 academic year:

- We made sure that there were appropriate online study opportunities to replace on-campus activity



for periods of COVID-19 disruption (e.g., lockdowns).

- Assessments, including exams, were taken in an online environment.

We introduced specific provisions for the 2020/21 academic year, namely:

- We made coursework extensions and exam deferrals more flexible by removing barriers to their use.
- For claims for Individual Mitigating Circumstances we continued to waive medical evidence requirements in order not to add to the pressure on health services, and extended the deadlines for submitting claims.

For our decision-making:

- The New Framework for Assessment (NFAAR) and Individual Mitigating Circumstances & Assessment (IMCA) regulations remained the baselines for academic decision-making about student outcomes.
- We continued to allow our Boards of Examiners to use the rules normally only accessed through valid Individual Mitigating Circumstances (IMCs) for any student it deemed academically appropriate to do so.

- In the 2020/21 academic year BEUs were obliged to consider performance against previous years' averages to ensure that a cohort was not unfairly disadvantaged by the impacts of Covid-19. They compared the results for 2020/21 assessments against results from the three years prior to the pandemic, and they were permitted to scale cohort results, if appropriate, using normal techniques for assuring the alignment of marks and standards.
- The 2019/20 safety-net classification was applied to some students' award classifications in the 2020/21 academic year if they were eligible to be considered and their 2019/20 outcomes contributed to their award.

We are satisfied that our 2020/21 no-detriment measures allowed an appropriately wide scope for mitigating action, while remaining evidence-based and robust in terms of academic decision-making.

## How we display student results

We provide a student's results in two formal formats: a summary transcript commonly issued alongside the degree certificate, and a more detailed record of assessment available to students to download from our student record system.

You can find out more about the University's transcript on our [website](#).

All changes to assessment, to deliver it online from semester 2 of academic year 2019/20, were approved through formal processes within the University. Where it wasn't possible to fully record the change to the method of assessment (for example an exam changing to coursework) the record of assessment may only show the original method for units taken in 2019/20. From 2020/21 the method of assessment is accurate.

The formal transcript does not show that level of assessment detail.

## Further information

- [Quality assurance code of practice](#)
- [New Framework for Assessment regulations for taught students](#)
- [Individual Mitigating Circumstances \(IMCs\) and assessment](#)
- [No-detriment and assessment guidance 2020/21](#)
- [No-detriment and assessment guidance 2019/20](#)

If you would like further general information about academic decision-making or degree standards, please email [Academic Registry](#).

*Page updated 29 June 2021*

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