

Guidelines for Boards of Examiners on implementing HWU's Academic Decision-Making: Maintaining Academic Standards



QUALITY ASSURANCE



ACADEMIC ENHANCEMENT



ACCREDITATION AND ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS

Summary

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 that there continues to be a need for to make provision for whole cohort mitigation, eg to account for the impact of industrial action.

The approach to Academic Decision-Making: Assessment, Progression and Award is outlined in a summary guide for [staff](#) and in versions designed for students ([student summary](#); [student guide](#)). The role of Boards of Examiners is critical to the implementation of the University’s approach to Academic Decision-Making, as is set out in both the staff and student versions.

This paper provides additional, more detailed guidance for all Boards of Examiners in implementing the approaches to Academic Decision-Making to ensure that students are not disadvantaged, but also to ensure that the quality and academic standards of HWU’s provision (including awards) are maintained and the value of qualifications over time is secured. This “Academic Decision-Making: Maintaining Academic Standards” Guide is located [here](#).

This guide also provides advice on “grade/good degree class inflation”, ie where emerging assessment results indicate a significant increase in graduate attainment in comparison with that of preceding, pre-pandemic years.

Background: External and Internal: Managing Grade/Degree Class Inflation

As has been acknowledged across the UK, mitigating the impact of the pandemic resulted in a higher proportion of “good degrees” (1s and 2.1s) than pre-COVID, particularly for the 2020 graduating cohort, reflecting the introduction of “No Detriment” policies ([OfS press release](#), 28 January 2021). The OfS simultaneously highlighted the need to retain the value of qualifications and not “bake in” further grade inflation through “temporary changes”. A similar position has been emphasised by the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA UK](#), including in its analysis of increasing attainment and grade inflation prior to the pandemic.

Similar to the OfS and QAA, Heriot-Watt University is keen to ensure that the increase in “good degree classification” effected by the emergency response to the pandemic does not become the norm and that temporary mitigating measures do not continue or become standard practice, leading to a devaluation of qualifications over time.

The percentages of 1’s, 2.1’s and enhanced first degrees at HWU are as follows: 2020/21: 81%; 2019/20: 86%; 2018/19: 79%; 2017/18: 78%; 2016/17: 78%; 2015/16: 77%; 2014/15: 76%; 2013/14: 74%. The more recent data places HWU in the middle of the sector when ranked with other Scottish HEIs. The one-off, more substantive increase in the percentage of “good degrees” for the 2020 graduating cohort was comparable with the rest of the UK sector, reflecting the concern to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

An analysis undertaken in March 2022 by the University Committee for Learning and Teaching highlighted that the overall summary related to “Good Degree Classification” was positive and demonstrated that grade inflation was not a major area of concern for HWU, as confirmed by the fact that this was not raised as an issue in External Examiner Reports. The post-pandemic data represented more of an alignment with pre-COVID levels, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Academic Decision-Making approach in maintaining academic standards. The UCLT agreed, however, to keep under review the matter of grade inflation as part of its annual review of the University’s Learning and Teaching KPIs.

Decision-Making by Boards of Examiners

The following guidance is provided to Boards of Examiners to assist them in their decision-making and in maintain academic standards, and to put in place an equitable, transparent approach across the institution as a whole.

This guidance applies to all taught provision (foundation, undergraduate, postgraduate taught) and is applicable to taught programmes delivered across all modes and locations.

Decision-Making by Boards of Examiners

Although [Regulation A10: Authorities in Exceptional Circumstances](#) remains in place in 2023/24 due to the five-day industrial action in September 2023 (as approved by SCIBE, September 2023¹), there has been (to date), no further periods of industrial action and no Marking and Assessment Boycott. Consequently, Boards of Examiners should reach course grade decisions and decisions on progression and award, as per the established University policies and processes related to academic decision-making. Information is provided the [Guidelines on Examination and Assessment](#).

In reaching such decisions, Boards of Examiners will continue to ensure that no student, irrespective of programme, degree, location or mode of study, will be academically disadvantaged or penalised due to the circumstances under which assessments were taken or due to any disruption to studies (types of disruption include industrial action).

The University's policies and procedures have been devised to accommodate such considerations: 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, securing academic integrity and preserving the value of qualifications.

Approved by LTAOC, 16 November 2022. Factual accuracy updates, 2 August 2023. Further updates, March 2024

¹ The University has in place a [Policy on Mitigating the Impact of Industrial Action on Assessment, Progression and Award](#).

Process for Decision-Making by Boards of Examiners

The following section summarises the existing remits of Boards of Examiners (Assessment, Progression, Award), as outlined in the University's [Regulations](#) and in the suite of documentation comprising the [Guidelines on Examination and Assessment](#). Additionally, it includes examples of practice used currently across HWU – and more detailed guidance on the role of the (Course) Assessment Board - to support consideration of matters related to grade inflation. This Guide is a synthesis of existing policies and procedures.

(Course) Assessment Boards

(see Regulation A5, para 4: Course Assessment Boards; see also Section 1 of Exam Guidelines: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Assessment Procedures)

(Course) Assessment Boards consider and confirm the results of course assessments, across all modes and locations; they comprise the staff involved in the teaching and assessment of the course.

The following diagram illustrates the (Course) Assessment Board process.

Process

Marking and Consideration of Results by Course Teams

Once marking is completed and CMLs (Course Marks Lists) produced and checked, the Course Leader and Course Team consider the results across all modes and locations.

In its consideration of results, the Course Team focuses on marks which contribute to the overall, final mark, ie summative assessments. The term "summative assessment" is not restricted to end-of-semester assessments, but applies to all marks contributing to the overall mark, including those from assessments which took place during a course and which may have already been returned to students.



Consideration of Results and Comparison with Performance in Previous Years

The results may be accepted as being fair and accurate, or adjustment may be recommended by the Course Team where marks seem unusual compared with previous years.

Results should be compared with those of preceding years. Results are not required to be adjusted to be identical to those of preceding years; rather, the data is there to provide a benchmark for discussing and recommending any adjustment.

The Strategic Planning and Performance Office will continue to provide course data for the preceding five years to assist with this benchmarking.

The recommendation for adjustment or no adjustment will be part of the Course Review Report to the (Course) Assessment Board, which is held after each semester or after completion of assessment and is typically discipline-based, considering all related courses.

Key Information

Key feature of HAPS and University Regulations:

- All assessment decisions are formally returned as grades;
- Marks are not usually adjusted in mapping to grades, but rather the raw mark remains and grades are adjusted to reflect the recommended decisions of the Course Team.
- The University's Regulations permit the adjustment of marks by Course Assessment Boards as well as the adjustment of grades (Reg A5, para 4.5).
- in order to address the impact of any disruption affecting a whole cohort, marks may be adjusted in order to provide fair, equitable and comparable results.
- In the case of marks adjustment, the mapping is from raw mark to adjusted mark (and corresponding grade);
- A justification for any usual mapping of marks to grades or for adjusted marks ("scaling") must be recorded in the Course Review Report and (Course) Assessment Board Minutes.

Unusual Results which warrant further consideration, PART ONE:

- For marks-based profiles, cohort performance is 5% or more above or 5% or more below the average in each of the preceding years.
- For new courses, where no prior data is available, comparable course data or average stage performance may be used as a benchmark as per above.
- Cases where there is a high level of absenteeism, where there is excessive bunching of results (low standard deviation), differences between modes/locations or other features of the results which cause concern.

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR MORE SPECIFIC THRESHOLDS

PROCESS CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE

(Course) Assessment Boards (cont.)

The following diagram illustrates the (Course) Assessment Board process.

Process (cont.)

The **Course Review Report** (or equivalent) typically includes:

- The marks and grades for all cohorts
- Commentary on student performance, incl. proposed action for students whose performance has not met expectations
- Commentary on any unusual results and whether these are fair and accurate or whether an adjustment is recommended
- Recommended adjustment of grades (ie unusual mapping of marks to grades) or of marks (ie raw marks to final marks)
- Justification for recommended altered marks/grades and proposed action
- Commentary on Mitigating Circumstances across the course
- Commentary on any other aspect of the course as relevant to the (Course) Assessment Board

Mitigating circumstances policy and student guides are [here](#).



Decisions on Marks/Grades Adjustment by (Course) Assessment Board

The (Course) Assessment Board, as a Board of Examiners, takes the final decision on, and approves, all marks and grades.

In reaching a decision on any results adjustment, the recommended results should be compared by the (Course Assessment Board) with those of prior years. Results are not required to be adjusted to be identical to those of preceding years; rather, the data is there to provide a benchmark for discussing and agreeing any adjustment.

In relation to marks/grades adjustment, the (Course Assessment Board), because it is a Board of Examiners, can take one of the following decisions:

- Approve the recommendation of the Course Team that no adjustment is required;
- Approve the scale of adjustment recommended by the Course Team;
- Reject the recommendation of the Course Team that no adjustment is required;
- Reject the scale of adjustment recommended by the Course Team.

If a rejection is made, the (Course) Assessment Board should agree and approve at the meeting the adjustment or alternative adjustment to be made. The Board should not delegate this decision for ratification to the Course Team (Reg A5, 4.6ff).



If the (Course) Assessment Board has agreed and approved an adjustment to the results, then the Board should further agree:

- action to be taken to mitigate against future adjustments, eg, in marking, type of assessment, teaching approaches, syllabus etc

In other aspects of decision-making, the Board may also agree:

- any support or other arrangements to be provided prior to re-assessment;
- specific actions in relation to individual students, eg mitigation measures where MCs have been accepted;
- recommendations related to mitigating circumstances (as part of review of MCs applied across whole course)

All decisions made by the (Course) Assessment Board should be recorded in the Minutes of the Board or in the Course Review Report appended to the Minutes.

The (Course) Assessment Board should confirm that the finalised results can be released to students and can be presented, in due course, to the Progression or Award Board.

Key Information

Unusual Results which warrant further consideration, PART TWO:

For grades-based profiles: as part of the operational aspects of HAPS, if the %E+F grades for a course exceeds a given threshold or if the %A+B is less than a given threshold then the results should be considered further. The threshold for each stage of study is as follows:

Stage	Maximum %E+F	Minimum %A+B
1	10%	45%
2	10%	45%
3	10%	45%
4	10%	55%
5	10%	55%

Adjustment of Grades or Marks

The processes of adjusting grades or marks and of comparison with previous years – moderation – are key aspects of maintaining academic standards and the value of results and qualifications over time.

A justification for any usual mapping of marks to grades or for adjusted marks (“scaling”) must be recorded in the Course Review Report (recommended adjustment) and (Course) Assessment Board Minutes (approved adjustment).

Whatever approach is used in reaching a final decision (ie through adjustment of marks or grades), all results are reported formally as HAPS grades and so the (Course) Assessment Board needs to confirm the final grades for each course.

Academic Judgement and Academic Standards

The process for the (Course) Assessment Board ensures that student performance is considered fairly and transparently, and that academic judgement informs outcomes; it is not a mechanistic calculation.

This robust process ensures that quality and academic standards are maintained, and that students receive results which reflect their capabilities in spite of the impact of any disruption affecting the whole cohort.

Consequently, students do not receive a grade lower than they deserve (academic disadvantage), nor do they receive a higher grade than would be merited (grade inflation).

Provisional Course Results

Even after confirmation by the Course Assessment Board, course results released to students are still provisional until ratified by a Progression or Award Board.

Students should be made aware that all course results are provisional at this stage.

Voting at Course Assessment Boards

On any matter requiring a vote, all members of the Course Assessment Board shall be entitled to vote at meetings of the Course Assessment Board. The Chair shall have a deliberative vote and a casting vote

Progression Boards

(see Regulation A5, para 5: The Progression Board; see also Section 1.5: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Assessment Procedures). Regulations set out the composition and function of Progression Boards.

Progression Boards consider and confirm the results recommended by (Course) Assessment Boards, across all modes and locations, and make decisions on progression, reassessment (and, where appropriate, repeat) and intermediate awards.

The following diagram illustrates the Progression Board process.

Process

The Progression Board considers each student's performance over the whole academic year across all (typically eight) courses, and takes into account individual mitigating circumstances (based on recommendations from the Mitigating Circumstances Board) as well as circumstances affecting the whole cohort such as the impact of a particular disruption.

Performance is reviewed across different modes and locations, and is also compared with previous years.

The Board will also consider student performance close to grade boundaries for core or pre-requisite courses, given that this will impact on the overall decision in relation to progression, reassessment or intermediate award.

Where such information is available, the Board may also consider the performance of individual students in the earlier stages of their programme.

The Board will be informed by the specified SCQF credit and level requirements for progression, as well as any programme-specific requirements.



The Progression Board considers the information* from each Course Assessment Board as well as the profile of all results for each student. (* each School can determine the format of the information presented, provided it includes marks and grades).

The Progression Board confirms the marks and grades proposed by the (Course) Assessment Board. Only in exceptional circumstances can these marks/grades be altered; adjustment (either as an increase or a decrease) may be undertaken in order to, for example, mitigate the impact of whole cohort disruption on overall decisions.

The Board will be mindful of maintain academic standards in making any adjustment to marks or grades.



The Progression Board returns a decision for each student on progression, reassessment (and, where appropriate, repeat) and intermediate awards, as per the University's Regulations.



The Progression Board's signed Assessment Results Report is submitted by the specified date. Minutes are produced (using the University template), recording the justification for any changes to marks/grades and any factors influencing the Board's decisions. Minutes are collated centrally by the Academic Operations team.

Key Information

Key feature of HAPS for Progression Boards:

- The Progression Board confirms the marks and grades put forward by the (Course) Assessment Board;
- Only in exceptional circumstances can the marks and grades recommended by the (Course) Assessment Board be adjusted and the justification for any modifications must be recorded in the minutes/formal record of the meeting.
- The Progression Board can use [Discretionary Award of Credits \(DC\)](#) to facilitate the progression of *undergraduate* students (note the criteria under which DC can be applied) to the next stage (DC cannot be used for progression in PGT programmes). There are additional arrangements for [DC being used in cases of whole cohort mitigation](#).

P Grade withdrawn:

- The use of P grade as a part of the rapid response to COVID-19 in 2019/20 has been withdrawn
- P grade cannot be used for individual or whole cohort performance
- If credit is to be awarded, a grade A-E or DC should be selected.

Results which warrant further consideration:

- For marks-based profiles, average cohort performance is 5% or more above or 5% or more below the average in each of the preceding five years.
- For progression decisions based on grades, where there is an unusual pattern of grade profiles, eg bunching at higher or lower grades, compared to preceding years.
- Student performance is at the grade boundary on core or pre-requisite courses.
- Student performance has not met the specified progression requirements in terms of level or number of credits.
- Cases where there is a difference between modes/locations.

Voting at Progression Boards

- On any matter requiring a vote, all members of the Progression Board shall be entitled to vote at meetings of the Progression Board. The Chair shall have a deliberative vote and a casting vote

Award Boards

(see Regulation A5, para 6: The Award Board; see also Section 1.5: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Assessment Procedures). Regulations set out the composition and function of Award Boards.

Award Boards consider and confirm the results recommended by (Course) Assessment Boards, across all modes and locations, and make decisions on awards.

The following diagram illustrates the Award Board process.

Process

The Award Board considers each student's performance over all stages contributing to award, including weighting of/contribution from non-final year courses. The Board also takes into account individual mitigating circumstances (based on recommendations from the Mitigating Circumstances Board and Course Assessment Board) as well as circumstances affecting the whole cohort such as the impact of a particular disruption.

Performance is reviewed across different modes and locations, and is also compared with previous years, including the three years prior to the pandemic, and also during the pandemic.

The Board will also consider student performance close to degree classification boundaries (as per the University's policy), given that this will impact on the overall decision in relation to award.

Where such information is available, the Board may also consider the performance of individual students in the earlier stages of their programme.

The Board will be informed by the specified SCQF credit and level requirements for award, as well as any programme-specific requirements.



The Award Board considers the information* from each (Course) Assessment Board as well as the profile of results for each student. (* each School can determine the format of the information presented, provided it includes marks and grades).

The Award Board confirms the marks and grades proposed by the (Course) Assessment Board. Only in exceptional circumstances can these marks/grades be altered; adjustment (either as an increase or a decrease) may be undertaken in order to, for example, mitigate the impact of whole cohort disruption on award decisions.

The Board will be mindful of any potential "good degree classification inflation" in making any adjustment to marks or grades. The views of the External Examiner and Deans Rep may be helpful in this context.



The Award Board returns a decision on award for each student, as per the University's Regulations, and by the specified dates.



The Award Board's signed Assessment Results Report (ARR) is submitted, and the Minutes produced (using the University template and returned centrally), recording the justification for any changes to marks/grades and any factors influencing the Board's decisions.

The Minutes should document how the Award Board has managed potential "good degree classification inflation".

Key Information

Key feature of HAPS:

- The Award Board confirms the marks and grades put forward by the (Course) Assessment Board.
- Only in exceptional circumstances can the marks and grades recommended by the (Course) Assessment Board be adjusted and the justification for any modifications must be recorded in the minutes/formal record of the Award Board meeting.
- The Award Board can use [Discretionary Award of Credits \(DC\)](#) where UG or PGT students have insufficient credits for the recommended award (note: limit on number of DCs and specific criteria for its use). There are additional arrangements for [DC being used in cases of whole cohort mitigation](#).

P Grade withdrawn:

- The use of P grade as a part of the rapid response to COVID-19 in 2019/20 has been withdrawn
- P grade cannot be used for individual or whole cohort performance
- If credit is to be awarded, a grade A-E or DC should be selected.

External Examiner and Deans Rep:

- The External Examiner and the Deans Rep should be made aware of the Board's process for ensuring that students are not academically disadvantaged or advantaged by the impact of any disruption.

Results which warrant further consideration:

- For marks-based profiles, average cohort performance is 5% or more above or 5% or more below the average in each of the preceding five years
- For award decisions based on grades, where there is an unusual pattern of grade profiles, eg bunching at higher or lower grades, compared to preceding years.
- Student performance is at the classification boundary.
- Student performance has not met the specified award requirements in terms of level or number of credits.
- Cases where there is a difference between modes and/or locations.

Classification Profiles

- The Award Board should pay particular attention to the emerging classification profile and any potential indication of "degree inflation" in comparison with preceding years.

Voting at Award Boards

- On any matter requiring a vote, all members of the Award Board shall be entitled to vote at meetings of the Award Board. The Chair shall have a deliberative vote and a casting vote.