



Fair Assessment at university during the COVID-19 pandemic

Every higher education institution in Scotland offers its students the reassurance that a criterion of fairness in assessment will be applied across the board.

Universities want to take the opportunity to reassure students at all levels of study, that fairness will be the underpinning feature of decisions on assessment at every institution.

The details of assessment policy are different in each institution – and within an institution, there may be differences for levels of study or subjects of study.

Universities need to maintain the integrity of their qualifications and that means that certain academic thresholds have to be met in order for students to progress. Some professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) have certain requirements that students must complete in order for the PSRB to recognise the degree. It is also in students' interests to progress only when they have the skills and knowledge to succeed at the next level.

Each university meets the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Quality Code requirements for assessment and academic standards in higher education, but within the scope of the Code, universities have different systems and processes for assessment so it is not possible, nor desirable, to operate the same process for assessment under COVID-19. The QAA has published [Thematic Guidance](#) for supporting student assessment in response to COVID-19. It advises that *"irrespective of the model providers' use for grading, they should focus on ensuring that the classifications students will ultimately be awarded are fair, valid and reliable."*

Every higher education institution in Scotland offers its students the reassurance that they are doing everything they can to ensure that a criterion of fairness in assessment is applied across the board.

Scotland's universities have each published details of how they will ensure fairness in assessment on their own websites (or extranet sites) and shared this with their student communities as quickly as possible, often with a detailed set of frequently asked questions.

Examples of fairness in assessment in practice

The following examples, from four different higher education institutions across Scotland, help to illustrate the specific details of new academic regulations, adapted due to the circumstances created by the pandemic. In each case a strong commitment to fairness is driving the changes although the arrangements and how they are described are different.

The details below are only summaries and/or extracts of what are highly detailed and lengthy policies belonging to each institution. Students should consult the academic regulations policy, in full, at their own institution rather than rely on the details here.

Fair assessment during COVID-19 at Abertay University

- The University's assessment boards review student performance at module level. They will review the mean and standard deviation of the marks and compare results to previous cohorts. If the results are lower than expected, the board has the power to scale marks for the entire cohort.
- For this academic year only, every student will be allowed to condone one 20 credit MF (Marginal Fail) this academic year and it will be classed as a pass. In this context, the word condone means that a marginal fail grade in a module will be treated as a pass and credits for that module will be awarded.
- If an undergraduate student in years one to three has a marginal fail in two 20 credit modules, they will be allowed to condone one and the other will be carried over to be retaken the following year. For fourth and fifth year (final year) students, one module will be condoned and an opportunity will be created to undertake a reassessment for the marginal fail. The Student Progression Panel will determine the outcome of individual modules.
- There may be some courses, with professional body requirements or programme specific rules, which will not permit a condone in some modules due to pre-requisite requirements for study in the following year. Examples include the JMB for engineering and the Nursing and Midwifery Council for those careers.
- If a student's personal circumstances mean they are unable to study for, or complete assessments effectively, the student should contact the University directly as it may be possible to make further adjustments on a case-by-case basis.
- Full details can be found [here](#).

Fair assessment during COVID-19 at the University of St Andrews

- Assessment and examination formats have been modified to match the different circumstances, and in some modules examinations have been replaced with additional items of coursework. In some pre-honours modules the examinations have been cancelled altogether.
- Guidance has been issued to all staff involved in assessing students' work to remind them to make fair allowance for the changed assessment format when grading students' submissions.
- Overall module results will be analysed against the historic record in order to detect any anomalies and to allow for appropriate adjustments to be made if necessary.
- The University has introduced new sets of regulations to apply to undergraduate students and taught postgraduate students for this semester only.
- The University has offered students in the third and fourth years of undergraduate study and taught postgraduate study the option of retrospectively S-coding any module result. S-coding is a

process through which allowance is made for special circumstances. Where a module is S-coded, the student retains the credits but the grade is not included in the calculation to determine degree classification. Where a student has failed a module and it has been S-coded, there is an opportunity for further assessment in the module as if for the first time.

- S-coded module result(s) will not be used for the calculation of the degree classification if they have a negative effect on the class of degree awarded. Any module S-coded in this way will not count against the overall maximum number of S-coded credits available to students in other semesters and for other reasons. Students must still pass all of the modules required for their chosen degree.
- Full details can be found [here](#).

Fair assessment during COVID-19 at University of Strathclyde

- In establishing its position, the University is seeking to make decisions which are supportive and student-centred, within our wider commitment to support the student experience. Further, the University recognises the need to ensure consistency where possible and to establish a position of managed difference where variations need to apply, particularly in respect of awards where Professional Accreditation and recognition are core.
- Academic staff will draw upon the marks that students have received for assessments over this academic session as part of their review of students' performance. These marks provide a good indication of a student's performance under 'normal circumstances'.
- Students will still need to pass modules to be awarded credits, and the University's 'no detriment' policy helps to mitigate any potential drop below a student's normal performance level and any subsequent impact this may have on degree award classifications.
- Where a student has not achieved a pass for a particular module impacted by Covid-19 given the exceptional circumstances, the Board of Examiners will automatically apply an attempt discount. This will allow a future attempt at the module in the next exam diet, as if a first attempt, without a fail appearing on the academic transcript for this attempt.
- The exception to this case is where students would otherwise receive a compensated pass. In this case the student will be awarded the compensated pass but will retain the option to have this removed and an Attempt Discount applied.
- In practice, 'no detriment' is applied once a student has completed all assessments as outlined by their Department/School and concerns how the University treats performance when a pass is achieved in a module.
- Any assessments undertaken after 16 March (when on campus teaching was suspended) will not have a negative impact on a student's final mark. Any assessment completed from 16 March may improve a student's mark, but it will not reduce a mark.
- Where alternative assessments for accredited programmes have been designed, this has been done in alignment with requirements and consultations with PSRBs.
- Full details can be found [here](#).

Fair assessment during COVID-19 at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

- Undergraduate progression and final assessment at the Conservatoire depends, in large part, on significantly-weighted performance and oral exams, which are very challenging to replicate virtually or remotely.
- The Conservatoire has worked closely with Heads of Department/Programme and with other performing arts institutions, to achieve a workable approach to assessment that will appropriately enable students to demonstrate that they have met learning outcomes. These measures include the provision of online (video-recorded) practical assessments and online production of plays coupled with a 'no detriment' approach to calculating degree outcomes. This will ensure the best possible outcome for each student when awarding degree classification. Both third-year and final honours students will benefit from this approach.
- In addition, the 'no detriment' approach has been further extended to term 3 practical assessments which have had to be adjusted. In these cases students will get the top grade within their three point grade band (i.e. B, C, D...), thus ensuring the best possible student outcomes for these assessments.
- All modules were evaluated for moving online, and where necessary, adjustments to content, learning outcomes and assessments were approved by the Academic Board via an Extraordinary Academic Framework to cover the remainder of AY 2019-20.
- Some one-year postgraduate programmes that run for four terms (September-August) have moved entirely online for term 3, with the main components of assessment due in term 4 due to happen in-person (but potentially delayed into AY 2020-21) and whilst maintaining safe physical distancing measures as appropriate.
- Full details can be found [here](#).

ENDS

