Protocol for PGT Boards of Examiners Meetings Autumn 2020

This guidance is based on the Framework for Assessment and Progression of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Graduating Cohorts, which set out the principles and methodology to be implemented for the assessment, progression and graduation of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students in 2020, in accordance with the University of Birmingham 2019/20 Regulations for Emergency Situations.

These emergency adaptations to assessment and progression were based on the principles that, wherever possible, students should not be disadvantaged by the situation in which we all find ourselves, and that the academic standards of everyone’s degree should be maintained.

In order to ensure that all students met their Programme Learning Outcomes and to assure the academic integrity of our degrees, we required PGT degree students to have marks available from across their taught modules to the equivalent of 80 credits of successfully completed work, and in addition must have marks from the project or dissertation. For a Postgraduate Diploma or Graduate Diploma – the requirement was for students to have successfully completed the equivalent of 80 credits out of the 120 credits of taught modules. For a Postgraduate Certificate or Graduate Certificate – students needed to have successfully completed 40 credits out of the 60 credits of taught modules. The approach was designed to ensure ‘no detriment’ and also ‘reduced pressure’.

The principles we have adopted for determining degree/programme classifications (see section 3 below) have been adapted appropriately from our current regulations in order to be relevant to the Framework outlined above. We recognise that the approaches we have taken may not align with those at the home institutions of our External Examiners, but this is because of differences in programme structure and also that our academic teaching year has one opportunity for examinations in May/June (although we are moving to a fully semesterised model with two exam periods in 2020/21).

1. Timing and Deadlines

1.1 It was recognised ahead of the summer Boards of Examiners meetings that flexibility with the normal deadlines would be helpful, particularly so that Boards could focus on the most urgent task of confirming marks and awards for final-year students. The normal deadlines were therefore adjusted, but Board meetings for PGT graduating students will take place in October as normal. Relevant dates are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Proposed Deadlines for Autumn 2020 - Approval of final awards (Masters) and, where appropriate, decisions on resubmission of dissertation/taught modules</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Release of resit assessments through Canvas to relevant students</td>
<td>Monday 3 August</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission of resit assessments through Canvas</td>
<td>Friday 21 August</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline for marking resit assessments</td>
<td>Weds 2 September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Release of new End of Session functionality in BIRMS to calculate degree classifications in accordance with</td>
<td>Thursday 3 September</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. Role of Boards of Examiners

2.1 The role of Boards of Examiners will need to be moderately different in autumn 2020, as they were in summer 2020, to reflect the Emergency Frameworks for assessment, progression and graduation.

2.2 As normal, PGT Boards of Examiners meetings in autumn will focus on confirming dissertation/project marks, any resit marks, and final awards. The fundamental role of Boards also remains the same, i.e. oversight and confirmation of marks, progress decisions and awards, in accordance with QAA guidance:

“For awarding bodies, it is your responsibility to make sound judgements about the circumstances in which credit and qualifications may be awarded. In some circumstances it may be appropriate to make such awards even where students have not completed all planned learning and assessment. Awarding bodies will need to judge the extent to which there is sufficient evidence to determine that outcomes at the appropriate level have been achieved and this may be different for different courses and students. Where a decision is taken to award credit or qualifications to students who have not completed all planned assessment, the awarding body should record the basis for that decision.”

2.3 Module marks: As normal, the Board should approve all module marks. This year, module marks (if not already confirmed at June Boards) may incorporate the marks allocated to any additional assessments students have been required to complete in order to meet the minimum credit requirements and the Programme Learning Outcomes. (Note that in some
cases the marks for the additional coursework will be allocated to a standalone (dummy) module.

2.4 **Degree classifications**: Every student’s profile of marks will be considered in determining the degree classification (i.e. Pass, Merit or Distinction).

2.4.1 It is also important to note that we will not allow a student to lose a particular degree classification on the basis of one or two marks that are very different from the rest of their profile. We have stated that we will always take the most positive approach to each student when arriving at the final degree classification, and this will happen through individual consideration at Boards of Examiners meetings.

2.4.2 See section 3 below for further detail regarding the calculation and determination of degree classifications.

2.5 **Extenuating circumstances**: Boards should consider and approve ECs recommendations as normal, but should be aware that ECs Panels have been advised to balance the need for flexibility regarding availability of evidence with the need to ensure that ECs decisions are taken in the context of maintaining academic standards (refer to section 9 of the EAPF PGT Examination Board guidance and resources for information about ECs). In addition, it is recommended that programme leads highlight any particular COVID-related issues that may have affected student performance more generally.

2.5.1 For PGT dissertations/projects, markers and moderators have been encouraged to take account of the impact of the pandemic at the point of marking, with reference to the *Guidance on Moderation*. This is to ensure that students are not unfairly disadvantaged by having completed their work during the pandemic period.

2.6 **Recommendations ‘Notwithstanding Regulations’ normally referred to Progress & Awards Board (PAB)**: The principle of Notwithstanding Regulations is replaced this year with the principle of ‘Notwithstanding Emergency Frameworks’ (where the latter supersede Regulations). PAB will be scheduled to take place virtually to consider any individual cases as appropriate. Advice on individual cases can be sought from Registry as normal (see also 3.4 below).

2.7 **Programme sign-off forms (‘Determination of Students’ Eligibility to Graduate 2020’)**: Completed forms should be received and ratified by the Board (June or autumn meeting), and confirmed as such in the minutes. There is no need for approval of these forms by other School or College committees.

2.8 **Chair’s Statement**: The Chair (and external examiner) will need to sign off a statement as normal to confirm that the Board has operated appropriately and all degree classifications have been agreed by the external examiner. A revised statement will be provided by Registry to reflect the current arrangements.
3. Determination of Resit Assessments at the Board of Examiners

3.1 Students who have passed fewer than 80 credits of taught modules (i.e. fewer than 140 credits overall, including the dissertation/project) will have had the opportunity to resit their failed assessments. Timings of resit assessments during August are set out in section 1, above.

3.2 Resits are expected to be capped at the pass mark as normal. Uncapped ‘first sits’ can still be offered as a result of ECs (but not on a ‘blanket’ basis to all students).

3.2 The ‘best 80 credits’ approach will be applied following the resits to determine students’ degree classifications.

4. Calculation and Determination of Degree Classifications at the Board of Examiners

4.1 Marks will be calculated based on the Emergency Framework and process set out below to determine an initial overall weighted mean mark that will be used to determine the final degree classification.

4.2 The module marks profile will need to be reviewed for each (anonymised) student to determine:

(i) whether there is evidence of a negative impact on marks gained for work submitted after the COVID-19 disruption compared to marks gained for work submitted pre-disruption;
(ii) whether there is evidence of a negative difference between the final year marks awarded post-COVID-19 disruption and marks from previous years (for PT students);
(iii) whether there is evidence of a negative difference in the mark for a dissertation submitted post-COVID-19 disruption compared to the rest of the marks profile;

4.3 This information will then be used to inform decisions on degree classifications, particularly for those students who fall into borderline categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pass</th>
<th>Merit</th>
<th>Distinction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Postgraduate Masters degree</strong>&lt;br&gt;A Registered Student must achieve all of the following:</td>
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<td><strong>Postgraduate Masters degree</strong>&lt;br&gt;A Registered Student must achieve all of the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 50% in the 80 taught credits being used for the award;</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 55% in the 80 taught credits being used for the award;</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 65% in the 80 taught credits being used for the award;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 50% in the dissertation component at level M;</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 55% in the dissertation component at level M;</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 65% in the dissertation component at level M;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 50% calculated across the 140 credits used for the award.</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 60% calculated across the 140 credits being used for the award.</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 70% calculated across the 140 credits being used for the award.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma</td>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma</td>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 50% in the 80 credits being used for the award</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 60% in the 80 credits being used for the award</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 70% in the 80 credits being used for the award</td>
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<tr>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 50% in the 40 credits being used for the award</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 60% in the 40 credits being used for the award</td>
<td>• a weighted mean mark of at least 70% in the 40 credits being used for the award</td>
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</tbody>
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Note that:

(i) The weighted mean mark of the taught components for PG Masters programmes will be drawn from the best 80 credits of successfully completed taught modules. The weighted mean mark will be drawn from the best 80 credits of successfully completed modules for PG Diploma programmes, and the best 40 credits of successfully completed modules for PG Cert programmes.

(ii) Regulation 6.1.2 (q) states that Postgraduate Taught programmes shall consist wholly or mainly of level M modules but may consist partly of credit at levels C, I or H. The maximum total number of credits from modules at levels C, I or H which may contribute to a taught postgraduate degree, postgraduate diploma or postgraduate certificate shall be as follows:

- Taught Postgraduate Degree - 30 credits
- Postgraduate Diploma - 30 credits
- Postgraduate Certificate - 20 credits

(iii) Where Level C, H, or I modules have been taken, they are included within the 80 (or 40 for PG Cert) credits required so as to ensure students are not disadvantaged by having taken lower-level modules as a legitimate part of their programme. The students have to achieve a weighted mean mark of 50% even when they have taken lower-level modules, to reflect the fact that the programme is at PGT level.

4.4 There might be situations in which a student has clearly been adversely affected by the COVID-19 situation and is not awarded a Distinction, Merit or Pass degree because the above criteria are not fulfilled. In such cases, if the Board of Examiners decides that a student should be awarded a Distinction, Merit or Pass, based on the profile of marks, an award can be made without recourse to PAB notwithstanding the Emergency Framework as long as the external examiner is supportive. In such cases, it is recommended that the overall mark obtained is 50% for a pass degree, 55% for a Merit and 65% for a Distinction; however the thresholds in marks for the taught credits and the dissertation as outlined in the above table need not apply. The decisions and rationale must be clearly minuted.
5 Role of External Examiners

5.1 While the external examiner role remains broadly the same in principle (i.e. they scrutinise and endorse outcomes of assessment processes, confirming results and progress decisions), there are some important differences this year.

5.2 Framework arrangements: External examiners are not asked to give retrospective approval to the emergency Frameworks. They have been informed of the broad approach, and their role this year, as in all years, is to quality assure the application of the Regulations (i.e. Frameworks) rather than approve the University’s legislation.

5.3 Moderation: External examiners will be required to moderate samples of work in accordance with their normal duties. This should include samples of additional coursework undertaken by students so that there is external oversight, as normal, of all summative assessment. External Examiners should not normally be expected to adjudicate between internal markers. Disagreements between internal markers should be resolved before a sample of work is seen by the External Examiner. This may be through the use of a third marker, or consultation with senior colleagues within the School. In all cases it should be transparent to the External Examiner how the final mark was decided. If, in exceptional cases, a mark has not been agreed internally, the views of the External Examiner can be taken into account in determining the final mark. External Examiners are not permitted to alter the mark of any student.

5.3.1 External examiners should be advised that, as noted above in 2.5.1, markers and moderators of PGT dissertations/projects have been encouraged to take account of the impact of the pandemic at the point of marking.

5.4 Meetings with students: External Examiners should be provided with the opportunity to meet with students, as normal, and meetings should be arranged virtually by Skype or similar.

5.5 Attendance at Board of Examiners meetings: As normal, an external examiner should attend all Board meetings (virtually) or, if this is not possible, a consulting mechanism should be in place before marks and decisions are released. If there are any difficulties with securing external examiner input, please consult with the DPVC (Education).

5.6 Degree classifications (including ‘borderline’ students) (see 2.4 and 3): The external examiner should be asked explicitly to review and endorse all degree classification decisions, following a review of the student’s mark distribution. This is essential in order to evidence the maintenance of academic standards and that students have been treated fairly and not disadvantaged by the situation. We may need to produce this evidence in response to academic appeals or complaints from students.

5.7 Annual report: External examiners will still be required to complete an annual report, but the questions will be adapted by Registry and submission deadlines postponed to reflect the Emergency Frameworks and later Boards of Examiners meetings.

6. Practical Arrangements for Virtual Board of Examiners Meetings

6.1 Virtual meetings: Meetings may held virtually using Skype for Business, Zoom, Teams, Canvas Conferencing or similar. If the meeting cannot take place face-to-face and holding a virtual meeting is problematic for any reason, Schools may wish to consider email circulation (but
should be aware of data protection and confidentiality considerations if discussion is
effectively on record through email correspondence).

6.2 **Number and timing of meetings:** Holding an earlier ‘internal Board’, without the external
examiner, is strongly advised in order to agree provisional outcomes for each student (in
particular those relating to borderline cases) and to save time at Board meetings.

6.3 **Quoracy:** The normal quoracy arrangements apply, i.e. a minimum of three academic staff
plus an external examiner (see above regarding the role of the external examiner). If this is not
possible for any reason, please consult with the DPVC (Education).

6.4 **Agenda:** For the benefit of the external examiner, agenda items should include a brief
summary of the Emergency Frameworks. A summary document will be provided by Registry,
either for circulation to members in advance, or to be read out by the Chair. The summary will
emphasise that the key principle is to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by the
situation while ensuring that academic standards are maintained.

6.5 **Student batches:** Schools may wish to separate students into ‘batches’ to aid efficient
consideration at Board meetings, although the Boards need to look at each student to ensure
no detriment; for example:

- non-borderline students who have met minimum credit requirements and PLOs;
- non-borderline students who have undertaken additional coursework and have met the
  minimum credit requirements and PLOs;
- borderline students who have met minimum credit requirements and PLOs;
- borderline students who have undertaken additional coursework and have met the
  minimum credit requirements and PLOs.

6.6 **Minutes:** It is important to ensure that Board decisions are minuted clearly and accurately, and
that minutes are returned to Registry to form part of the formal record of the exceptional
arrangements this year. Minutes may need to be used as evidence should students appeal or
complain, or should the QAA or OfS decide to scrutinise the University’s arrangements.

6.7 **Support available:** Once agreed, the various sections of this document will form part of
Registry’s ‘End of Session’ guidance pack that is issued annually at this time of year. For this
year only, in order to provide additional support for colleagues and emphasise the University’s
commitment to Quality Assurance, each College’s Academic Policy Partner (or delegate) will be
available to attend Boards of Examiners in an advisory capacity should there be any queries in
relation to the application of the Emergency Frameworks.