Protocol for UG Boards of Examiners Meetings Summer 2020

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

These emergency adaptations to assessment and progression are 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 meet their Programme Learning Outcomes and to assure the academic integrity of our degrees, we required that UG students need to have marks available from across their final year modules to the equivalent of 80 credits of successfully completed work, which must include the marks from the project or dissertation. The approach was designed to ensure ‘no detriment’ and also ‘reduced pressure’.

The principles we have adopted for determining degree classifications (see section 3 below) have been adapted appropriately from our normal practice and 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 While Schools may already have set dates for their Boards of Examiners meetings in summer 2020, it is recognised that flexibility with the normal deadlines would be helpful, particularly so that Boards can focus on the most urgent task of confirming marks and awards for final year students. The normal deadlines have therefore been adjusted as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Activity Deadline for summer 2020 (FINAL YEAR STUDENTS)</th>
<th>Deadline for summer 2020 (NON-FINAL YEAR STUDENTS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Release of additional assessment (final year) or bridging coursework (non-final year) details to relevant students</td>
<td>Monday 4 May</td>
<td>Friday 15 May</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline for unconfirmed marks entry in BIRMS</td>
<td>Friday 5 June</td>
<td>TBC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boards of Examiners meet</td>
<td>Week commencing Monday 22 June</td>
<td>September (precise dates TBC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline for release of marks and recommendations from BIRMS into Banner</td>
<td>Monday 29 June</td>
<td>TBC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline for any recommendations outside the Framework to be returned to Registry for consideration by PAB</td>
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2. **Role of Boards of Examiners**

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

2.2 The fundamental role of Boards 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 may incorporate the marks allocated to any additional assessments that students have been required to complete in order to meet the minimum credit requirements and the Programme Learning Outcomes. In some instances, the marks for additional assessments will instead stand alone and will be allocated to a ‘dummy’ module. The best 80 credits will be made up of completed modules and partial credits from incomplete modules.
2.4 **Degree classifications and ‘borderline’ students:** The usual profiling system will not apply this year, and every student’s profile of marks will be considered in determining the degree classification. In exceptional cases where a student is on a classification borderline, there is evidence of COVID-related negative impacts on the final year marks profile, and further insights are required to make a judgment, this should include consideration of year 1 marks (not previously taken into consideration at all). In these cases, the 1st year marks can only be considered if they support the judgment of an increase in the classification for that individual student.

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 in the final year 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 Board of Examiners meetings.

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

2.5 **Progression Marks for Non-final year students:** In accordance with the Emergency Progression Framework, all non-final year students will be progressed automatically to the next year. The Board will need to approve the pre-calculated Progression Marks for students progressing from year 2 or above. Students who have fails in more than 50% of the modules they have attempted should be provided with tutorial advice so that they can prepare effectively for the following year and/or consider whether it is in their interests to repeat the year or resubmit assessments (either in August (TBC) or in 2020/21 as an external student).

2.6 **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 10 of the guidance document for more information). In addition, it is recommended that programme leads highlight any particular COVID-related issues that may have affected student performance more generally.

2.7 **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 5.2, below).

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

2.9 **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. Calculation and Determination of Degree Classifications at the Board of Examiners

3.1 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.
3.2 Each UG/Integrated Masters finalist student to be graduated will be required to have (in addition to marks from previous years) marks for at least the equivalent of 80 credits of successfully completed work from the final year of their programme, including the dissertation/project, and sufficient evidence that they have met the overall Programme Learning Outcomes. Their degree classification and overall weighted mean mark will use their best final year marks to make up the 80 credits of successfully completed work (which must include the project/dissertation marks).

3.3 The module marks profile will need to be reviewed for each (anonymised) student, including final year marks (and Stage 3 for MSci students), second year marks, and first year marks (if appropriate), to determine:

(i) whether there is evidence of a negative impact on final year marks gained for work submitted after the COVID-19 disruption (i.e. from 20 March 2020, when the University moved to Restricted Campus Operations) 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 the marks from previous years;

(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 year 2 and 3 (or stage 3) marks profile.

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

3.5 For students on a 3- or 4-year BSc/BA/BEng (4 year degrees include a year abroad or a placement): The final degree classification is based on marks that are weighted at 75% from the final year (the marks of the best 80 credits including the dissertation/project) and 25% from stage 2 (i.e. year 2 for students on a 3 year degree and years 2 and 3 if a student has undertaken a year abroad in their 3rd year).

For students on a 4-year MSci/MEng: The final degree classification is based on marks that are weighted at 40% from the final year (the marks of the best 80 credits including the dissertation/project), 40% from the 3rd year and 20% from the 2nd year.

3.6 The Board of Examiners will apply the following principles and criteria to decide on the degree classification of individual students as follows (note: this example is for the award of a 1st class honours degree for a BSc/BA/BEng); the same principles apply to the other degree classifications (apart from a 3rd Class degree, in which case only ‘Notwithstanding the Emergency Framework’ should be used for students with <39.49% overall), and these are detailed in Appendix K.1). These principles and criteria have been designed to ensure that there is consistency in the determination of degree classifications for individual students in a cohort and between different cohorts.

(i) If a student has obtained an overall weighted mean mark of at least 70% they will be awarded a 1st Class Honours.

(ii) If a student achieves <70% (68.0-69.49%), in order to take into consideration that some marks in the final year may have been affected by the COVID-19 situation, an award of a 1st Class Honours will be made if all of the following conditions are met:

- at least 68% has been achieved overall (and not just in the final year);
• at least 50% of the module marks in the final year (based on the best 80 credits, i.e. completed modules and partial credits and including the dissertation/project) are 1st class standard;
• the remainder of the module marks in the final year are 2.1 standard;
• at least 80 credits of marks from Stage 2 are 1st class standard.

(iii) Alternatively, if a student achieves <70% (65.0<69.49%) overall, and in order to take into consideration that some of the work in the final year (e.g. the project/dissertation) may have been particularly adversely affected by the COVID-19 situation, and are out of line with the other marks, a 1st Class Honours will also be awarded if all of the following conditions are met:

• at least 65% has been achieved overall (and not just in the final year);
• at least 50% of the module marks in the final year (based on the best 80 credits, i.e. completed modules and partial credits and including the dissertation/project)) are 1st class standard;
• all other module marks in the final year (pertaining to the best 80 credits) are at least 2.2 standard;
• at least 100 credits from stage 2 are 1st class standard OR at least 80 credits from stage 2 and 60 credits from stage 1 are 1st class standard.

(iv) There might be situations in which a student has clearly been adversely affected by the COVID-19 situation and has an overall mark of <70%, but is not awarded a 1st class degree because the above criteria are not fulfilled. For example a student may have obtained all 1st class marks in the final year, but just misses out on a 1st because of a poorer 2nd year performance; or a student just fails to obtain the required number of credits at 1st class standard in years 1 or 2. In such cases, if the Board of Examiners decides that a student should be awarded a 1st Class Honours, based on the full profile of marks across all years of study, including module marks (completed or partial) in the final year outside of those comprising the best 80 credits (that includes the dissertation/project), an award can be made (without recourse to PAB) Notwithstanding the Emergency Framework as long as the external examiner is supportive. The decision and rationale must be clearly minuted.

4 Role of External Examiners

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 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 final year students so that there is external oversight, as normal, of all summative assessment. There is no need for externals to review samples of Bridging Coursework completed by nonfinal year students, given that this coursework is formative rather than summative. 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.

4.4 **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.

4.5 **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).

4.6 **Confirmation of module marks, checking standards and determination of degree classifications (including ‘borderline’ students) (see 2.4 and 3):** External examiners should check on standards by scrutinising module marks statistics and degree statistics to confirm that they are not seriously out of line with previous years and that standards have been maintained. The external examiner should be asked to endorse all degree classification decisions, following a review of each student’s mark distribution at the Board of Examiners meeting. 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.

4.7 **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.

5. **Practical Arrangements for Virtual Board of Examiners Meetings**

5.1 **Virtual meetings:** Meetings should be held virtually using Skype for Business, Zoom, Teams, Canvas Conferencing or similar. If 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).

5.2 **Number and timing of meetings:** As indicated in the timescales above, Schools may wish to hold separate Board meetings for non-final year students given that these are less urgent. However, beyond this, it is not envisaged that there will need to be an increase in 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.

5.3 **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).

5.4 **Agenda:** For the benefit of the external examiner, agenda items should include a brief summary of the Emergency Frameworks. A template for the Agenda as well as 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.
5.5 **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 final year students who have met minimum credit requirements and PLOs;
- non-borderline final year students who have undertaken additional coursework and have met the minimum credit requirements and PLOs;
- borderline final year students who have met minimum credit requirements and PLOs;
- borderline final year students who have undertaken additional coursework and have met the minimum credit requirements and PLOs.

5.6 **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 (note: a template for the Minutes will be provided by Registry).

5.7 **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.