Guide to the Code of Assessment – Introduction

Location of the Code

The Code of Assessment is published as Regulation 16 of the ‘University Fees and General Information’ chapter of the University Regulations (formerly known as the University Calendar). It contains most but not all of the regulations relating to assessment.

If in any case an explanation or illustration in this guide appears to contradict the terms of the Code itself, the Code takes precedence.

Key changes for 2019-20

No significant changes have been made to the Code itself but there are a couple of related changes to be aware of:

1. Expression of Grade Point Average (GPA) in degree regulations

   Degree regulations refer to various grade point averages as required for progress and for award. In previous versions of regulations GPAs were stated as an integer (e.g. ‘the candidate must have obtained 240 credits at a GPA of 9’) and sometimes an equivalent alphanumeric grade was also referred to (e.g. ‘the candidate must have achieved a GPA of 15 (equivalent to B3) in the 180 credits completed on the programme’).

   The Code of Assessment requires that GPA is calculated to one decimal place (§16.34(a) of the Code) and therefore it has been agreed that greater clarity is achieved by expressing the GPA to one decimal place throughout. The reference to equivalent alphanumeric grades was also potentially confusing given that such grades reflect grade points being rounded to an integer. Such references have therefore been removed.

   The examples cited now appear in the following form:

   ‘The candidate must have obtained 240 credits at a GPA of 9.0.’
   ‘The candidate must have achieved a GPA of 15.0 in the 180 credits completed on the programme.’

2. Generic Regulations for Postgraduate Programmes delivered by Online Distance Learning

   A new set of generic degree regulations has been introduced to cover programmes delivered by Online Distance Learning. The requirements for progress and award largely mirror the requirements incorporated in the existing generic regulations for Taught Masters Degrees and Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas, but there are some differences reflecting the distinctive features of ODL delivery. It is therefore important to refer to the correct set of regulations for the programme of study in question.

A reminder of areas where there were changes for 2018-19:

1. Penalties for the Late Submission of Coursework – §16.25-16.28

   The Code previously permitted extensions for late submission (or exemption from late penalties) to be approved by the course convener or equivalent where the delay in submission was up to three working days. This was amended in 2018-19 so that deferrals
of up to FIVE working days can now be approved locally. While this is a significant change, the regulations are explicit in requiring the length of any deferral to be ‘commensurate with the nature of the relevant circumstances’. A deferral of five days should not therefore be regarded as a ‘default’ position and each request should be treated on a case by case basis.

Where the requested deferral in submission is more than five working days students are required to submit a full Good Cause claim, supported by appropriate documentary evidence. Such claims will be considered by Head of School (or nominee such as Honours Convener, Head of Year, Programme Convener, or the holder of another similar senior role) and Assessment Officer. A facility specifically geared towards such claims is now available in MyCampus, but the advice remains that students should alert a member of staff such as their Adviser of Studies/Advising Team or Assessment Officer to the claim so that it may be considered promptly. The regulations note that students should make claims as soon as possible and that: ‘Where a claim is submitted shortly before the submission deadline it may not be possible for the candidate to be advised of the outcome of the claim before that deadline.’ No specific timescale has been given for claims to be considered but the ‘outcome shall be notified to the candidate as soon as reasonably practicable’.

2. Incomplete Assessment and Good Cause §16.46

The regulation includes the following statement: ‘Good cause refers to the sudden onset of illness or adverse circumstances affecting the candidate. It is not intended to apply to chronic or persistent illness or to long-term adverse personal circumstances. Where there is a chronic medical condition good cause shall only be established where the candidate’s performance in assessment has been compromised by a sudden severe episode of the illness.’

An additional footnote has been included in this section sign-posting that where the circumstances do not fall under the definition of Good Cause alternative procedures or sources of support should be considered:

‘A candidate experiencing chronic or persistent illness or long-term adverse personal circumstances is encouraged at as early a stage as possible to contact appropriate sources of support such as their Adviser of Study/Advising Team and the Disability Service. The Fitness to Study Procedure may be used to consider how best to support any such candidate in their studies.’

3. Award of Merit and Distinction on PGT Masters programmes

The Guide sets out the guidelines for the operation by Boards of Examiners of discretion in awarding merit and distinction for Masters degrees. The Guidelines themselves have not changed. However, the rules concerning whether students should come within discretionary consideration have changed. These are set out in the generic Masters degree regulations (College of Arts; College of MVLS; College of Science & Engineering; College of Social Sciences).

Eligibility for the award of merit and distinction is now defined primarily by reference to a combined grade point average calculated across the taught courses and independent work. However, minimum standards still also apply to both the taught courses grade point average and the grade achieved in the independent work. The changes allow awards to be made to students who have demonstrated strong performance across the programme as a whole but whose performance in either the taught courses or the independent work has fallen marginally short of the previous standard. Eligibility for discretionary consideration similarly depends on a combined grade point average across the taught courses and independent work.
The amended regulations took effect for all award decisions made from session 2018-19 onwards.

Other assessment regulations

The ‘University Fees and General Information’ chapter of the University Regulations contains further Regulations relevant to assessment which are not part of the Code and are therefore not included in this Guide. These Regulations are:

- Instructions to candidates on their conduct in written examinations (Regulation 17)
- Use of a computer in an examination (Regulation 18)
- Use of dictionaries by students in examinations (Regulation 19)
- Use of electronic calculators by students in examinations (Regulation 20)
- Invigilation (Regulation 21)
- Rules of invigilation (Regulation 22)
- Appointment of external examiners for taught courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level (Regulation 23)
- Examination and other assessment arrangements for disabled students (Regulation 24)
- Code of practice for exceptional international examination arrangements (Regulation 25)

The essence of the Code

Assessment is an integral part of the process by which the University makes awards to students who have completed their programmes. The regulations which comprise the Code of Assessment are intended to deliver transparently fair and consistent outcomes in all student assessment. It is the pursuit of transparency which has imposed most demands on the design of the Code and on examiners.

Consider the case of an able and hard working student who received a mark of 67% for a very good essay. We may take for granted that this mark was fair and reflective of consistent standards. We therefore assume that students who had performed as well in previous years might also have got 67%, and, within this student’s own cohort, those students whose essays were less good were awarded less than 67% and those (very few) who had written better essays achieved marks (only a little) higher than 67%. But this model of fairness and academic rigour has two weaknesses:

- Its range of consistency is very limited – students in other subjects who had demonstrated as thorough a grasp of their course content might have scored 87% or even more.
- It is meaningless beyond the function of ranking students – the essay was a very good one and yet it scored only two thirds of the way up the implied scale of 0 to 100.

The object of the Code of Assessment is to make assessment outcomes as consistent as possible across all taught disciplines within this University, and to provide a clear statement of the learning that each student has demonstrated.

Chapter 1 of this Guide discusses intended learning outcomes (ILOs). ILOs tell students what they are expected to learn, and all universities are required to publish these. One of the things the Code of Assessment does is make an explicit connection between ILOs and the assessment of each student’s performance. Thus employers (and anyone else) may determine what the grades reported in a student’s transcript actually mean.
Chapter 2 explains how this connection is made by a set of grade descriptors, in which each grade is described in terms of a student’s achievement of ILOs. What the examiner has to do is determine which grade descriptor best matches the student’s performance. The University’s main assessment schedule (Schedule A) uses eight grades, A to H, and the bands into which these grades are divided allow the marker 23 discrete scores from A1 to H. The chance awkwardness of this number confirms that a student’s performance is being assessed against grade descriptors, not as a ratio of right answers to questions asked.

University awards are not made on the basis of a single assessment. The Code must, therefore, provide a way of aggregating grades from all summative components. The simplest and most readily transparent method of combining grades is to convert them into numbers, and Chapter 2 explains how this should be done and how the final score should be translated to a course result or a classified degree. The Code acknowledges the danger that these calculations will suggest a precision which may be deceptive. For Honours and Taught Masters Degree classification it therefore requires that Examination Boards look afresh at the position of students for whom the aggregation process delivers a marginal result (the Code defines these ‘zones of discretion’).

Other aspects of the Code

As noted, it is an objective of the Code to deliver fair and consistent outcomes in all student assessment. Consistency across the University requires regulation; fairness calls for sensitivity, on the one hand, to the individual student – recognising when their circumstances justify special provision – and, on the other, to the integrity of the University’s awards. These issues are never far from the surface in the rules governing reassessment (Chapter 3) and incomplete assessment resulting from good cause (Chapter 5). Course credits represent a transferable currency – this University will recognise credits gained by students in other institutions just as other institutions will recognise the value of credits awarded here – and students must accumulate course credits in order to qualify for a certificate, diploma or degree. Chapter 4 is concerned with setting minimum standards for the award of credits. Chapter 6 is about making the whole thing work, and sets out the responsibilities of Heads of Schools and Research Institutes, assessment officers and examiners, both internal and external.