



Managing assessment in an emergency scenario

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1. Introduction and principles

Northumbria University is committed to upholding academic standards as determined by Academic Board. In an emergency scenario, e.g. a pandemic or industrial action, where assessment is affected the first response of the University will be to seek to ensure that academic standards are upheld. As a result, it may be necessary, exceptionally, to vary normal academic protocols.

Emergencies can apply to individual cohorts – e.g. if there is an emergency that affects a particular partner organisation. The University does not hold a definitive list of circumstances in which changed regulations may be applied, however it is expected that the application of these regulations will be rare and reserved for extreme occasions.

The overall objective in any variation is to ensure that students are not disadvantaged because of circumstances beyond their control whilst also assuring quality and consistency of decisions for University awards. This paper summarises the University's normal mechanisms for dealing with assessment within an emergency scenario, based on regulations in force for 2022/23. The University, via the Pro Vice Chancellor (Education) (PVC E) / Academic Registrar, will ordinarily confirm the emergency and the need to consider steps noted below to mitigate the impact on students.

Programme Assessment Boards (PABs) are expected to operate with fairness and consistency to implement the underlying principles. Programme Assessment Boards (PABs) will not make a decision they have grounds to believe is academically unsafe. Where sufficient doubt exists, no decision will be recorded.

The underlying principles are:

1. Wherever possible normal assessment protocols (i.e. assessment regulations, assignment release, assignment submission, moderation etc.) should be followed.
2. Adjustments to assessment protocols must be carefully considered and balance the need to protect standards with the desire to ensure that students are not unduly affected by circumstances beyond their control.
3. Wherever possible, students should be able to graduate or progress from one stage of their degree programme to the next.
4. Where there is no doubt about a student's level of attainment, either because all or sufficient marks exist for a sound academic judgment to be made about the student's overall level of attainment, then the normal regulations should be applied and results determined accordingly.
5. Where marks are missing, and adjustments are considered essential, there must be consistency and fairness in the application of this guidance to student cohorts; however, this guidance cannot be applied if it conflicts with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements.

In an emergency, in the first instance some delay in normal processes may be necessary. Only if the emergency results in a protracted delay and/or there is limited prospect of resuming normal processes, will the provisions in this guidance apply.

2. For Taught Programmes

Technical Extenuating Circumstances, Discretion and Programme Assessment Board authority

Technical Extenuating Circumstances (TECs) are the University's primary mechanism for varying normal academic protocols in an emergency scenario. A TEC is a non-personal circumstance that relates to a student or more commonly a group of students. TECs can be raised by exam invigilators or staff on behalf of students. TECs are normally considered by senior staff in the department as part of the preliminary moderation of module results – in an emergency scenario the Head of Department (HOD) would normally consult the Deputy Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) (DFPVC(E)) at an early stage. The department makes recommendations to adjust the management of the assessment, including a change of marks. Recommendations arising from TECs are considered and confirmed at the Programme Assessment Board.

TEC adjustments are dependent upon evidence and the establishment of facts. Normally TECs are individually documented for each module (or assessed component as appropriate), this is not, however, expected for a University wide emergency scenario.

Where assessments are missing, the HoD or designated senior colleagues will evaluate whether it is possible to enable students to take additional or late assessments in a manner which does not disadvantage them. Such decisions must be taken in the context of: available information; the module intended learning outcomes; the discipline and level; the time of year; any professional requirements. Such decisions must also be taken in the context of the likely response of the discipline Programme Assessment Board (PAB) and guidance from the University or DFPVC(E). Actions may depend on whether the student is/is not at the final stage of the programme.

The role of the PAB is to confirm the progression/award status of students based on their confirmed marks and University regulations. Northumbria University assessment regulations apply to all students but in exceptional cases, a PAB has the right to exercise discretion in the interpretation and applications of assessment regulations. Ordinarily, use of discretion is extremely limited. In an emergency scenario, however, discretion may be applied to ensure that students are not disadvantaged. As far as possible the External Examiner should be consulted on such decisions made at a PAB.

PAB decisions must be taken in the context of: available information; the programme intended learning outcomes; the discipline and level; the time of year; University regulations; any professional requirements. Decisions may depend on whether the student is/is not at the final stage of the programme.

If the student is not at the final stage (typically a level 4 or level 5 undergraduate), the PAB may have a presumption that progression will be permitted in the absence of marks, therefore:

- If assessments have been completed as normal, standard decisions will apply.
NB: Marks missing as a result of a student's failure to complete/submit a

coursework assessment or to sit an examination that was held will be treated in the normal way.

- If some assessments (module components) have been completed but not marked, PAB action may be constrained to noting the missing marks and progressing decisions at the earliest possible date (normally by Chair's Action).
- Determining module results (marks) based on partial completion of the module assessment requirements.
 - Where modules are missing component marks, module marks may be extrapolated from component to module level, with the restrictions:
 1. up to a maximum of 40 credits at levels 5, 6 & 7, if a minimum of 50% of marks are available in the module overall;
 2. up to a maximum of 60 credits at levels 3 & 4, if a minimum of 25% of marks are available in the module.
- If assessments have not been completed by students due to the emergency PAB action may be to confirm, in consultation with the HoD and/or DFPVC, a future assessment that does not disadvantage students¹.
- Permission for students to proceed notwithstanding missing module results. This will require action as soon as results are available – see below on post emergency recovery. The presumption of progression is the normal response, excepting where an individual student's mark profile would suggest that the student may be at risk of failure if progressed. For PSRB programmes, progression may be PSRB conditional.
- Exceptionally, to delay progression decisions where missing results relate to core, pre-requisite or PSRB requirements. This will require action as soon as results are available – see below on post emergency recovery.

The above adjustments may disadvantage a student at the final stage of their programme - typically level 6 undergraduates or final stage level 7 postgraduates or other circumstances as determined by the Chair of the PAB in consultation with the FPVC. Therefore, in view of the emergency, PABs have the authority to determine overall module results (marks or other relevant decision) notwithstanding missing assessments. PAB decisions may include:

- Standard decisions where assessments have been completed as normal.
- Determining module results (marks) based on partial completion of the module assessment requirements.
 - Where modules are missing component marks, module marks may be extrapolated from component to module level, with the restrictions:
 1. up to a maximum of 40 credits at levels 5, 6 & 7, if a minimum of 50% of marks are available in the module overall;
- Exceptionally, when no or limited assessments are available and cannot be recovered, the PAB may nevertheless deem a student to have completed the module to a satisfactory standard – i.e. to record a pass mark or award a mark

¹ Options will vary by discipline and factors noted above but, for example, could include a take-away paper or untimed open book examinations at the start of the next academic year.

equivalent to the remainder of the profile for the module². Unless approved by the PVC Education this would not be applied to more than one module (normally 20 credits excluding project/dissertation) in the level. This cannot be applied if marks have already been extrapolated within the level due to missing component marks.

- Confirm an award or degree as required subject to any classification being confirmed at a later date - Award with classification TBC³. This will enable the student to graduate and will require action as soon as results are available to confirm the classification.
- Confirm a classified award or degree based on an adjusted rubric which discounts module results which have been deemed to be a pass based on a TEC response to the emergency or based on module results allocated that are equivalent to the remainder of the profile. Potential examples are noted below.
 1. For one Year Degree (Hons) Programmes: The student normally studies 120 credits at level 6 and the classification is determined by the average mark of the best 100 credits at level 6. Therefore, if 20 credits is deemed a pass as a result of the emergency this will be discounted and the classification will be based on the average mark of the remaining 100 credits in level 6.
 2. For three Year Degree (Hons) Programmes: The student normally studies 120 credits at levels 4, 5 and 6 and the classification is determined by the average mark of the best 100 credits in levels 6:5 weighted 60%:40% or the average of the best 100 credits in level 6. Therefore, if 20 level 6 credits is deemed a pass as a result of the emergency this will be discounted, and the classification will be based on the average mark of the remaining 100 credits in levels 6:5 weighted 60%:40% or the average mark of the remaining 100 credits in level 6.
 3. For Honours Degrees: The student normally studies 120 credits at levels 4, 5 and 6 and the classification is determined by the average mark of the best 100 credits at levels 6:5 weighted 60%:40% or the best 100 credits at level 6. Therefore, if 20 credits are missing at level 6 due to the emergency and a mark has been allocated based on the performance of the remainder of the level, this mark can be included in the normal calculation for classification.

² A note will be placed on the student record/transcript and HEAR to indicate that unusual circumstances outside of the student and the University's control prevented assessment but the student was deemed to have passed the module.

³ A note will be placed on the student record/transcript and HEAR to indicate that the award is confirmed but classification is to be confirmed. This note will be replaced as soon as possible by the actual classification.

For clarity: Students may be permitted to graduate with an incomplete set of marks. The University does not prescribe the minimum number of marks/credits required to reach a judgement as this may depend on the specific discipline. However, as a guide, extreme caution must be exercised if less than half of the possible marks are available (e.g. 60 missing marks/credits out of 120) and the PVCE must be consulted in this circumstance.

In all instances of PAB adjustments made in response to an emergency scenario, students must be informed of how their marks will be handled and the implications noted elsewhere in this guidance drawn to their attention.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

Members of the Programme Assessment Board (PAB)

It is the collective responsibility of members of all PABs to protect academic standards and also to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by an emergency scenario.

The expectation is that HoDs will ensure marks are prepared and will also convene and Chair PABs in the normal manner. In an emergency scenario it is possible that members are unable to attend the board either in person and/or remotely. The Chair will therefore establish a membership which gives adequate coverage of the disciplines under review. There are no quorum requirements for PABs – it is for the Chair to determine whether attendance is sufficient to have confidence in the marks and decisions being confirmed. In exceptional cases, this could include the HoD and/or DFPVC(E) and the assigned Registrar in consultation with the External Examiner.

Heads of Department⁴ (HoD)

Heads of Department (HoDs) are responsible for the production and veracity of marks from their department. In this capacity, and as the ultimate line manager for academic staff within the Department, HoDs are responsible for ensuring the provision of marks to the PAB. If marks are not available due to the emergency, to ensure effective TEC decisions are made, HoDs have responsibility for understanding the implications for students, awards and PSRBs.

To fulfil this task, HoDs will liaise with staff in their department and with others as necessary to detail the impact of the emergency on normal assessment protocols. For all instances of modules impacted by the emergency, at the University and at partners, consideration will include:

- The appointment and briefing of External Examiners

⁴ In some instances, HoDs will delegate the responsibilities noted to a senior colleague in the Departments. However, HoDs retain overall responsibility for the conduct of assessment in their Department.

- The setting of coursework and examinations
- The marking of scripts and sample moderation
- The return of marks and feedback to students
- The return of marks to the Academic Support teams and thereby the PAB.
- The preparation of TECs as required.
- Staff attendance at the PAB.

HoDs normally Chair the PAB – otherwise they will liaise with the PAB Chair.

In formulating adjustments to normal assessment practice, HoDs will have regard to this guidance and guidance from the FPVC and will consult the External Examiner/s before enacting adjustments. Approved adjustments will also be reported to the aligned Registrar. Adjustments, exceptionally, could include:

- the provision of advice, other than by the Module Leader, at the start of examinations
- making changes as necessary to the assessment
- limiting or dispensing with Internal or External moderation (subject to the experience of markers and any additional / alternate scrutiny arrangements)
- appointing and briefing alternate External Examiners (normally from the EE team)
- appointing and briefing alternate markers
- negotiation with PSRBs on the impact of missing marks
- other recommendations to the PAB in the context of the emergency and TEC procedure.

HoDs, in liaison with the aligned Registrar, are responsible for communications with students, partners etc. about module and programme (PAB) results. This will include confirmation of modules affected and unaffected by the emergency.

As discipline leads, HoDs will also have oversight of research student progression and assessment and, if a student's progress may otherwise be delayed, may suggest alternate members of progression panels or alternate examiners.

There is an expectation that HoDs will work as normal throughout an emergency scenario. In the event of a HoD being unable or unwilling to act, the Faculty Pro Vice Chancellor will appoint an alternate acting HoD.

Deputy Faculty Pro Vice Chancellors (Education)⁵ (DFPVC(E))

The DFPVC(E) has an expert role in guiding practice across the Faculty, including the use of discretion as noted above. The DFPVC(E) will lead briefings for HoDs etc. on the application of this guidance.

⁵ In some instances the DFPVC (E) will delegate the responsibilities noted to a senior colleague in the Faculty. However, the DFPVC(E) retains overall responsibility for oversight and interventions on the conduct of assessment in their Faculty.

The DFPVC(E) will have oversight of arrangements for PABs in the Faculty. The DFPVC(E) will consult the Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellor if a PAB cannot be convened or if the board has been unable to make decisions on a significant number of students.

Registrars

A Registrar is aligned to each faculty (or to specific departments within HLS) and an additional Registrar is responsible for Educational Partnerships. In liaison with HoDs and the DFPVC(E), aligned Registrars should:

- Ensure that a full record is made of any data or process gaps resulting from the emergency situation, and of approved adjustments.
- Make a report on adjustments to Faculty Executive and University Education Committee at the conclusion of the emergency and as required.
- Ensure that there is effective communication with students, partners et al during and after the emergency situation.

External Examiners (EE)

External Examiners (EEs) are expected to participate in sampling work and examination boards as contracted. In many instances this can be completed by virtual means. PABs may proceed in the absence of an EE but an EE will normally be consulted at the earliest opportunity after the Board.

If an EE declines to fulfil their contract the HoD will seek to involve an alternate EE, normally from the team of EEs for the discipline and with financial recompense. If this is not possible:

- The HoD or Faculty Executive will seek alternate independent external input for assessment boards, e.g. by agreement with neighbouring universities.
- If necessary, the PVCE will determine alternate internal arrangements for cross Faculty independent oversight – e.g. a Faculty/other Pro Vice-Chancellor with no involvement in the discipline will verify due process at a PAB.

4. For Research Programmes

Technical Extenuating Circumstances (TECs) is the University's primary mechanism for varying normal academic protocols in an emergency scenario. A TEC is a non-personal circumstance that relates to a student or more commonly a group of students. TECs can be raised by staff on behalf of students. For research students, TECs will be considered and approved by the Graduate School or the University Graduate School Committee Chair as appropriate. TEC adjustments are dependent upon evidence and the establishment of facts. Normally TECs are individually documented for each assessment (or assessed component as appropriate), this is not however expected for a university wide emergency scenario.

The University requires project approval and annual progression for research students. If this is affected by an emergency scenario, students will normally be permitted to continue on the programme and to register for the next academic year.

TECs do not normally apply to examinations but adjustments will be considered on a case-by-case basis by the Chair of University Graduate School Committee. More commonly there will be consideration of flexibility in examination arrangements – including the venue and timing of oral examinations. Every effort should be made to avoid postponement of prearranged oral examinations. In some circumstances the Graduate School Committee, acting on the advice of a Head of Department, may appoint new examiners so that the student's progress is not unreasonably delayed. In line with normal practice, students will be consulted on adjustments.

5. Other considerations

Communications

Throughout the emergency, as required, the PVCE/ Academic Registrar will co-ordinate global communications to staff, students, partners etc.

The Faculty will manage module and programme specific communication to staff, students, partners, PSRBs etc. To avoid any inconsistency, the Registrar (Educational Partnerships) will co-ordinate messages to partners.

The Registrars will maintain a record of all communications related to the emergency. The Student Success Team (within Student Engagement) will also maintain a record of all correspondence to/from individual students.

Student Complaints/Appeals

In dealing with an emergency and the impact on assessment, at all stages the University must take action that is reasonable in the circumstances at the time, balancing the need to uphold academic standards and to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by circumstances beyond their control. It is nevertheless the case that students retain their right to make complaints or appeals about the impact of the emergency and the University's response. Complaints and appeals should be handled in the normal manner with no variation in practice. The Head of Student Success will however compile a report on complaints/appeals related to the emergency, including those considered by the Student Appeals and Complaints Officer.

Post emergency actions

Following the emergency, where possible, there will be an exercise to recover missed assessments or marks at the earliest opportunity and specifically if this relates to a PSRB programme or where the number of missing credits exceeds the limits within this guidance. This is to maintain academic standards - but any delayed assessments should be completed in a manner which does not disadvantage students. The DFPVC(E) will approve recovery plans with the HoD and Registrar.

For students on taught programmes:

If missing marks become available they will be entered on the student record system and module, progression results recalculated to facilitate a PAB conducted by Chair's Action (with a subsequent report on action to the next PAB). **Where marks have been allocated to**

awarding students for missing credit using the student's performance in the remainder of the level, the award and classification are final. The University reserves the right to correct errors made during an emergency, particularly if these affect licence to practice. Ordinarily however:

- For progressing students or where an award is made and the classification is to be confirmed at a later date, where this results in a higher module mark/higher classification, the higher mark/class will be awarded.
- For progressing students or where an award is made and the classification is to be confirmed at a later date, where the marks generate a lower module mark/class, the student will have the right to retain the higher mark/class previously awarded.
- Where the incorporation of missing marks generates a failure in a module which has been previously entered as a pass under this guidance the student will be offered the opportunity to resit but will not be required to do so unless to achieve PSRB recognition.
 - The timing of the resits should be such that the student is not unduly disadvantaged.
 - Where a student chooses to undertake a resit and the resit mark is lower than the mark determined under this guidance the higher mark will stand, excepting where PSRB conditions apply.
 - Students who are unable to make good PSRB requirements through resit opportunities will be considered for transfer to alternative awards if necessary.
- Where the incorporation of missing marks identifies students who have been recommended for progression under these procedures where they would otherwise have failed, the progression decision will stand and the student will be appropriately advised. Each case will be considered individually but options include:
 - Repeating the previous level of study with or without attendance.
 - Additional reassessment of failed modules whilst continuing at the current level of study – with revision support made available and the timing of the assessment such that the student is not unduly disadvantaged
 - Changing modules and/or transferring programme.
- Where progression was PSRB Conditional and the incorporation of missing marks identifies students who would otherwise have failed, the student will be appropriately advised. Each case will be considered individually but options include:
 - Repeating the previous level of study with or without attendance.
 - Additional reassessment of failed modules whilst continuing at the current level of study – with revision support made available and the timing of the assessment such that the student is not unduly disadvantaged.
 - Changing modules and/or transferring programme.

- Exceptionally, when no alternate remedial work or assessment is possible, the student may be required to withdraw from the programme. Such decisions must be approved by the DFPVC(E) and reported to the assigned Registrar for report to Education Committee.

Reports from Registrars on actions / adjustments taken to respond to the emergency will be considered by University Education Committee. The reports will be considered alongside the report from the Head of Student Success on complaints/appeals related to the emergency. On consideration of the reports and as required, Education Committee will initiate a review of this guidance.

For students on research programmes:

If a student has been permitted to continue on their programme without project approval or annual progression reviews, ordinarily Graduate School Committee will ensure that these are completed at the earliest opportunity. If there are concerns about a student's progress the student will be counselled as to their status but will otherwise be permitted to remain on the progressed stage.

Any necessary steps in research student examination that may have been delayed due to the emergency must be promptly addresses following the emergency – e.g. the appointment of examiners. In particular, if an oral examination was postponed it must be re-arranged as a priority to prevent an unreasonable delay to a student's progress.

The Graduate School will prepare a report on actions / adjustments taken to respond to the emergency, and the report will be considered by University Graduate School Committee. The reports will include data on student complaints/appeals related to the emergency. As required, GSC will initiate a review of the PGR aspects of this guidance.