

## The 2020/21 No Disadvantage Guarantee and Postgraduate Taught Students Completing in January 2022

The following 'Safety Nets' introduced under the No Disadvantage Guarantee will be available to all postgraduate taught (PGT) students completing their programme of study in January 2022:

- **A positive commitment to upward scaling**
- **Additional individual adjustments, including:**
  - The option to apply for mitigation, enabling you to defer assessments, or apply for coursework extensions, without the need to provide evidence;
  - The revision of our policies on appeals, to reduce the burden of evidence required;
  - Further empowering Assessment, Progression and Awarding Committees (APACs) to take decisions and make adjustments, where justified, to account of the circumstances of individual students (facilitated by our Exceptional Circumstances application process); and
  - The expansion of our definition of the 'borderline zone' for classification.
- **Removal of the fee associated with referred assessments**

The frequently asked questions (FAQs) below provide further information, or signposting, for PGT students on how these 'safety nets' will be applied.

### 1. How will the Positive Commitment to Scaling be applied?

For whole cohorts of PGT students completing in January 2022, Assessment, Progress and Awarding Committees (APACs) in each department will take a consistent approach and will compare average marks, and the distribution of marks, achieved by each year group with the equivalent marks from previous years. They will then apply appropriate mark adjustments to correct any significant deviation.

When justified, adjustments will be made using a process called **Scaling**, which is a normal part of the process undertaken by the University's APACs. You can read more about this by referring to the [Scaling Guidance](#) appended to the [Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook](#) of the Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) Manual. This may include upward scaling, where necessary, to ensure that this year's groups will not be disadvantaged compared to those who came before, and those who will follow.

Further information on mitigation can be found at <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/students/infopoints/yourinfopointservices/mitigation/mitifaq/>

#### 1.1 What is scaling?

Scaling is the systematic adjustment of a set of marks for a module/assessment in order to ensure that they properly reflect the achievements of the students in meeting the module learning outcomes. Some of the key principals that University applies when undertaking scaling are:

- Scaling should be used only in exceptional circumstances;
- Scaling should be used to correct instances where student marks do not accurately reflect their achievement and learning outcomes;
- Scaling should not advantage students, but simply correct any unfair disadvantage or unfair advantage;
- The action of scaling should be applied equally to all students within the relevant group;

- Scaling should be applied anonymously; and
- The application of scaling must not change the rank order of students within a module.

### 1.2 What is different about the scaling to be undertaken by my APAC this year?

In **all** academic years, exceptional or otherwise, scaling may lead to grades being either raised or lowered. For students undertaking their studies during the 2020/21 academic year, including PGT students completing in January 2022, there is, however, an additional positive commitment to upward scaling whenever there is a statistically significant downward deviation in the performance of a group of students.

There may be a range of triggers that lead to scaling being considered and undertaken when justified in any given academic year. These might include:

- The distribution of marks or pattern of marks for a module is highly unusual;
- A significant difference between a cohort's performance on a module compared with average performance on other modules taken; or
- The average module performance of students is significantly different to the average of student performance in the same module taken in previous years.

For modules studied during 2020/21, there is a stronger focus on identifying and correcting any significant difference between students' performance in their modules and that of students who completed the same or closely related modules in previous non-COVID-19 impacted academic years i.e. pre-2019/20.

### 1.3 Against what previous data will my discipline's APAC compare my modules' grades?

A comprehensive reference data set has been developed covering postgraduate taught modules that were undertaken by students during 2020/21. **This specifically excludes data from 2019/20, which was also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The reference data set generates two outputs: a *historic mean*, using three years of data (where these are available), and a *composite mean* using three years of data from closely related or 'cognate' modules. Both are differentiated by the campus on which the module was studied and is weighted for the number of students who undertook a module in a particular year. The composite means provide a 'back up' if there is insufficient historic data for an individual module (for example, if it has been running for fewer than two years).

The University applied a robust statistical test to determine if there is a significant difference between 2020/21 module data and that which makes up the reference data set. The outcomes were reported to APACs to enable them to identify which modules can be considered for upward scaling and apply the appropriate corrective action.

### 1.4 How will I know if my module has been scaled?

The decision to scale a module, and by how much, is based on the academic judgement of your APAC, informed by the extensive knowledge and experience of APAC members, including specific past and present knowledge of the modules under consideration. All scaling decisions must be recorded within the minutes of the Programme/Discipline APAC and reported to the College APAC in line with the requirements of [Section 7.7](#) of the [Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook](#) of the Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) Manual.

There will not be any indication on your stage transcript as to whether or not a module has been scaled. However, as a result of the University's commitment, students should assume that, where justified, their modules have been scaled upwards to correct any significant downward deviation. In the event of a module not being scaled upward for any reason\*, for example if an External Examiner has strongly recommended otherwise on the basis of additional evidence, then you will receive a notification from your Department explaining why this is the case.

\* *Subject to the approval of the Academic Dean for Students/Dean of the Faculty of Taught Programmes*

### 1.5 How does scaling benefit my whole cohort?

As identified in the response to question 1 above, the action of scaling should be applied to all students within a cohort. This can be achieved in a number of ways; for example, by:

- The addition (or subtraction in non-exceptional years) of a fixed number of marks; or
- The multiplication of all marks by a particular factor (e.g. 1.02 or 0.97).

The same adjustment factor does not necessarily need to be used throughout the entire distribution of marks, as long as care is taken to ensure that the rank order of students is not affected i.e. no student will be able to 'leap frog' the mark of another student as a result of scaling being undertaken.

### 1.6 What if I have been more adversely impacted than the rest of my cohort?

Scaling cannot take account of individual circumstances. This is why the University has introduced other 'safety nets' for individual students in 2020/21, including

- Further empowering APACs to take decisions and make adjustments, where justified, to account for the exceptional circumstances experienced by individual students;
- The introduction of the Exceptional Circumstances process (see section 3 below) application process to enable students to make known the nature, severity and duration of the exceptional circumstances that they may have experienced during the 2020-21 academic year, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and request additional scrutiny of their individual grades/grade profiles by their APAC; and
- Expanding our definition of the borderline zone for classification (see section 4 below) for classification.

## 2. How do I apply for Mitigation?

The University has introduced a revised [Mitigation Policy for all undergraduate and postgraduate taught students](#), which brings together the best of the previous evidence-free approach to mitigation and the evidence-based approach of the Exceptional Circumstances process. This has been specifically adapted for PGT students completing in January 2022. Please follow this [link](#) for further information and how to apply.

## 3. How do I apply for Exceptional Circumstances?

This process was introduced for students studying during the 2020/21 academic year, as part of the University's commitment to ensuring your success and maintaining the integrity of your degree in the face of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In accordance with [Section 2.2 of Exceptional Years Handbook](#), Assessment, Progression and Awarding Committees (APACs,) are able to review, in a designated Exceptional Year, the impact that exceptional circumstances may have on the performance of an individual student, over and above that of the student population as a whole. Where justified, they have the power to:

- i. Offer the opportunity of a deferral on any affected assessment;
- ii. Set aside smaller elements of assessment when calculating a final module grade;
- iii. Apply a proxy mark for any affected assessment, where there is sufficient evidence of a student's performance in other assessments to ensure the validity of the proxy mark;
- iv. Request that a student undertake a subject-based Viva Voce review to assist with making a decision on whether a set aside or proxy mark would be most appropriate; and/or
- v. Adjust a student's degree classification.

The Exceptional Circumstances process provided the means by which individual students could make known the nature, severity and duration of the exceptional circumstances that they may have experienced during the 2020-21 academic year (or start of the 2021/21 for PGT students

completing in January 2022), as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and request additional scrutiny of their individual grades/grade profiles by their APAC.

### **3.1 How does Exceptional Circumstances differ from Mitigation?**

Exceptional Circumstances differ from those declared for the purposes of Mitigation by their severity and/or duration and their cumulative impact.

They will have had an impact for a significant period, cumulatively more than four weeks or for the whole of the academic year, and potentially having an impact on a number of assessments and/or examinations. Exceptional Circumstances should be situations which cannot be accounted for by our standard Mitigation processes or other University support. Evidence is required to support all applications.

### **3.2 Who is eligible to submit an application to this process?**

All postgraduate taught students (PGT) whose programme started in January 2021 and/or are due to complete in January 2022.

### **3.3 What are Exceptional Circumstances?**

Exceptional Circumstances are circumstances beyond your control, which have occurred during the 2020-21 academic year, are unique to an individual student, linked directly or indirectly to the COVID-19 pandemic and, due to their severity and/or duration and cumulative nature, have had a significant impact on your ability to study, and thus your performance in assessments and/or examinations.

This might be because you have:

- been ill with COVID-19 and experienced prolonged after-effects sometimes referred to as 'long COVID';
- experienced the exacerbation of an existing health condition, including a mental health condition, due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, including difficulties in accessing care or support;
- experienced the long-term hospitalisation of a close family relative during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which restrictions impacted on the visitation and support;
- experienced the death of a close family relative during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which restrictions impacted on the grieving process, support provisions or funeral arrangements;
- taken on exceptional caring responsibilities due to COVID-19, including supporting family members who are clinically extremely vulnerable or supporting the home schooling of young children;
- been studying part time, and have been required to carry out more paid work than usual, as a 'key worker' (e.g. in healthcare, delivery, transport);
- experienced significant financial hardship, as a result of the loss of work (not including being placed on furlough), which normally supplements your income (e.g. in hospitality and catering);
- experienced significant and prolonged IT/technical or other exceptional issues which prevented me from accessing learning opportunities and learning materials and which I was unable to resolve these via an application to the Success for All Fund; and/or
- experienced significant and prolonged disruption to my academic studies as a result of changed accommodation and/or living circumstances brought about as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When making an application for Exceptional Circumstances you chose the criterion or criteria that best fits the COVID-19 related circumstances that you have experienced.

### **3.4 What if I have already informed my Academic Personal Tutor or a member of Student Services of my exceptional circumstances?**

All marks and module grades are considered anonymously at [Assessment, Progression and Awarding Committee \(APAC\) meetings](#). The only way in which your exceptional circumstances

can be considered by your APAC is by submitting an Exceptional Circumstances Form with supporting evidence. Your APAC may then consider whether your performance across the academic year has been impacted by those exceptional circumstances over and above normal mitigation adjustments available.

### 3.5 When should I apply?

If you experience COVID-19 related Exceptional Circumstances during the completion and submission of your assessments, including the submission of your final dissertation, during Term 1 of the 2021/22 academic year, you may submit an application between **29<sup>th</sup> November and 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2021**.

You are reminded that you can apply at any time during the window that relates to your programme and APAC, but you may only apply once. Please also adhere to the guidance provided in the preceding FAQs to ensure that your application is submitted correctly and in full.

If you have any questions about these further application windows, please contact [exceptionalcircumstances@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:exceptionalcircumstances@exeter.ac.uk)

### 3.6 How do I apply?

You should apply using the [dedicated online form](#) which will require you to provide information on:

- The Exceptional Circumstances that you have experienced;
- The University support that you have already accessed or received;
- Date range(s) of the period you were exceptionally affected (this should match the dates and times supported by your evidence); and
- The corroborating evidence that you are submitting.

You will be able to upload evidence from others to corroborate the impact on your ability to study and undertake assessments and/or examinations. You will not be able to submit an application if it has not been completed in full, or evidence uploaded. Once you have successfully submitted your application, you will receive confirmation by email to your University email account.

### 3.7 What evidence do I need to provide?

Evidence is required for your application for Exceptional Circumstances to be deemed valid and to be taken into consideration by your APACs. Given that the 2020/21 academic year included periods of home study during national lockdowns, and that evidence to corroborate the impact of medical conditions may be difficult to obtain while there is an extra strain on NHS services, a wider range of evidence than usual for normal Mitigation process will be acceptable.

This can be written confirmation from:

- a GP or other healthcare professional (whether from the University or your home location) if your physical and/or mental health has been impacted;
- a Counsellor, Welfare Advisor or other wellbeing professional (whether from the University or your home location) if you have accessed such services due to the impact on your wellbeing;
- a family member, if your need to provide care and support for them has had an impact on your studies;
- your child/children's school, if you have been required to home school your children as a result of not being entitled, or able, to access in school education and care;
- your current or former employer, if the impact has been as a result of an increase or decrease in working hours;
- your Academic Personal Tutor, or Senior Personal Tutor, if they are aware of impact that your exceptional circumstances have had on your studies and assessments and/or examinations.

You may also submit official documentary evidence such as:

- a hospital admissions or discharge note, if you or a family member have been hospitalised;
- a death certificate or copy of order of funeral service for a family member, if you have experienced a bereavement; and/or
- a copy of your child/children's birth certificate, as evidence of having had to home school children.

This list is not exhaustive and other sources of evidence may be considered. Please be aware, however, that some types of evidence, such as those provided by health, wellbeing, education and other professionals, will carry greater weight than, for example, evidence provided by friends or family.

If you are not able to provide such evidence, we will not be able to consider your application for Exceptional Circumstances.

### **3.8 What happens after I have applied?**

Between the date of application and the date of the respective APAC, your application, corroborating evidence and the impact incurred will be considered by the Hub-based Mitigation Committee for your department made up of staff from Student Services, including wellbeing professionals. The Committee will review your application to determine the severity and duration of impacts, with a particular focus on the cumulative effects of multiple impacts, and make a recommendation to your APAC if they consider that your grades / grade profile should be reviewed. A representative of the Mitigation Committee will attend the APAC meeting where final decisions are considered and approved.

### **3.9 What will the APAC do if there has been an observed impact on my grades or grade profile?**

The APAC will exercise its academic judgement to determine whether there is evidence of an associated impact on your grades or grade profile. If there has been an observable impact, your APAC has the power to:

- Offer the opportunity of a deferral on any affected assessment;
- Set aside smaller elements of assessment when calculating a final module grade;
- Apply a proxy mark for any affected assessment, where there is sufficient evidence of a student's performance in other assessments to ensure the validity of the proxy mark;
- Request that you undertake a subject-based Viva Voce review to assist with making a decision on whether a set aside or proxy mark would be most appropriate; and/or
- Adjust your degree classification.

With regard to the [Classification of Awards](#), please also note that the University has also expanded the zone of consideration, within which it will apply its preponderance rules for degree classifications.

### **3.10 How will I know if an adjustment has been made and what does it mean for me?**

If you have made an application for Exceptional Circumstances, you will be notified by email as soon as possible after your results are issued as to whether or not:

- the potential for significant impact on your assessments and/or exams had been recognised and agreed by the Mitigation Committee;
- an associated impact on your grades/grade profile was observed by your APAC; and
- your APAC has, using its academic judgement and the data and information available, made an adjustment to your grades/grade profile, or recommended another course of action.

The course of action that may be recommended by your APAC are as follows:

### **No Further action**

This means that your APAC did not observe an impact on your grades or grade profile as a result of your Exceptional Circumstances and that your original grades stand.

### **Deferral**

This means that you have been given another opportunity to retake one or more elements of assessment, which the APAC have deemed to have been impacted by your Exceptional Circumstance. The grade or grades will not be capped and you will be awarded the full grade or grades that you achieve.

### **Set Aside Assessment**

This means that a small element of your assessment for a specific module, which your APAC has deemed to have been impacted by your Exceptional Circumstances, has been discounted when calculating the overall grade for that module.

In recommending this option, your APAC will have given consideration to the percentage contribution that the assessment made to your overall module grade and to the intended learning outcomes and/or competencies that it evidenced. For example, if an element of assessment is too large, or provides evidence of compulsory intended learning outcomes, it will not be possible for it to be set aside and a deferral will be recommend.

### **Proxy Mark**

This means that where one element of assessment, or one module, has been affected by your Exceptional Circumstances, the APAC has been able to use grades from other elements of assessment or other modules to calculate a proxy or substitute mark.

In considering this option, your APAC will have given consideration to how many elements of assessment or modules have been affected and whether the remaining grades provide sufficient evidence to calculate a robust proxy mark, without compromising the academic integrity of your award. If a number of elements of assessment or modules have been affected, it will not be possible for a proxy mark to be calculated and deferrals will be recommended.

### **Viva Voce**

This means that you are being asked to attend an oral examination (which may be held virtually as needed) in relation to an element of assessment or module that your APAC considers may have been impacted by your Exceptional Circumstances. The purpose is to assist the APAC in determining the most appropriate course of action.

The Viva Voce will be subject based and will not be used to further explore your Exceptional Circumstances, which are deemed to be confidential and will not have been disclosed to your APAC.

### **Adjust Classification/Grade**

It should be noted that that for the 2020/21 academic year that the University

- Made positive commitment to scaling of module marks whenever there is a statistically significant downward deviation in the performance of a group of students; and
- Expanded the definition of the 'borderline zone' by 1% to ensure that all students who are close to a degree class border are considered in detail, with a greater range of final weighted marks being considered for preponderance than in previous years.

If you are advised that your classification or grade has been adjusted as a result of Exceptional Circumstances, this will mean that your APAC observed an impact on your grade or grade profile that was not fully mitigated by the above and used their academic judgement to make an appropriate adjustment.

### Consider under Chair's Action

This means that at the point at which your APAC met, your complete grade profile was not available and, therefore, a full and considered decision on the most appropriate course of action in response to your Exceptional Circumstances could not be made. As a result, the final decision has been delegated to the Chair of your APAC to be made at such time as your full grade profile becomes available. The Chair will then anonymously review your results alongside the outcomes of the Exceptional Circumstances process. In making their decision, the Chair will have reference to decisions made in similar Exceptional Circumstances cases by the full APAC.

**Please note that in making the above decisions, your APAC will also have had regard to any Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements that are applicable to your programme of study. Where these are compulsory, recommending one or more deferrals will have been the only option available.**

#### 3.11 Will the APAC consider my marks, even if I don't submit an Exceptional Circumstances application?

APACs consider all individual student records of attainment to ensure accuracy, make decisions and identify exceptions. APACs consist of two steps. The first step considers module marks, and can scale any modules for which student performance is not as expected. In the second step, the APAC considers the results of each and every student. The APAC ensures accuracy with regards to condonement, degree titles, classifications, core modules and levels of credits. It makes recommendations to Senate around awards, progression, classification, condonement and consequences of failure, in line with University regulations. In a designated Exceptional Year it also has the power to make individual adjustments such as those presented above (i.e. deferrals, set asides, proxy marks, viva voces and degree classification changes).

#### 3.12 Do I have a right of appeal?

Yes, in accordance with the [University's Academic Appeals Procedure](#) all students have a right of appeal against the academic decisions and recommendations made by the Assessment, Progression and Awarding Committee (APAC) that affect your academic progress. If you are concerned about a decision made following the submission of an application for Exceptional Circumstances, you should follow the normal Academic Appeal procedure and submit evidence as required. Appeals should be made within 10 working days of being notified of an academic decision.

Please note, that it is a principle of the University that appeals cannot be made against the academic judgment of either an internal or external examiner of the University. You can, however, appeal if you believe that this judgment was not made fairly or according to the correct University process.

#### 3.13 I do not know what the impact on my performance has been, can I wait for my marks to be released?

If you are aware of your exceptional circumstances before your results are known then you must submit an Exceptional Circumstances application within the time window identified above. It is an important part of the Exceptional Circumstances process that you submit information about your circumstances before your results are known. This is so that the APAC for your programme can properly consider them at the point at which modules grades and degree classifications are approved, and if necessary utilise their powers to make adjustments. Exceptional circumstances that are not declared prior to the APACs cannot normally be taken into account later.

#### 3.14 What if I have questions about filling in the form or I have questions about the guidance?

We appreciate that this may be a lot of information to take in, under unprecedented circumstances, and that this may be unsettling and cause anxiety. If you have questions about the process or policy, or if you simply want further guidance or someone to support you to make a decision, please contact [exceptionalcircumstances@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:exceptionalcircumstances@exeter.ac.uk)

### 3.15 Where can I find further support with the exceptional circumstances that I have experienced this year?

If your exceptional circumstances are on-going, or if making an application for Exceptional Circumstances has resurfaced wellbeing concerns, we encourage you to reach out to the support services provided by the University and by your Students Guild and Students' Union.

If you are based at one of the Exeter campuses, there are a number of different teams within Wellbeing Services that are able to support you, including AccessAbility, the Mental Health Team, the Psychological Therapies Team and the Welfare Team. Wellbeing services can be contacted on **01392 724381** or at [wellbeing@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:wellbeing@exeter.ac.uk). Appointments are being carried out online or by telephone wherever possible to aid accessibility and keep staff and students safe. The Exeter Students' Guild also offers free, independent and impartial advice on issues that may be affecting your wellbeing and welfare and can be contacted at [advice@exeterguild.com](mailto:advice@exeterguild.com)

If you are based at the Penryn campus, Student Support, including the Wellbeing Teams, are provided by FXPlus. They can be contacted on **01326 370460** or at [student.services@fxplus.ac.uk](mailto:student.services@fxplus.ac.uk). The Falmouth and Exeter Students' Union also provides signposting to support [here](#). The FXU's Advice Service can also be contacted at [advice@thesu.org.uk](mailto:advice@thesu.org.uk)

### 4. How will the University expand the 'borderline zone' for classification?

For taught postgraduates entering the job market or applying for further study in January 2022, we will ensure students close to a degree class border are considered in detail.

Each year, Assessment, Progression and Awarding Committees (APACs) have the authority to award students in a borderline zone a higher class of degree, where at least half of the student's stage weighted credits lie in the higher class. See [here](#) for the section of the Teaching Quality Assurance Manual (TQA) that deals with the classification of awards.

In response to the exceptional circumstances experienced in the 2020/21 academic year, the definition of the 'borderline zone' was expanded by **1%, as described in the table below**.

This measure was designed to encourage all students to continue to aim high in all modules, while recognising and mitigating the risk posed by potential variability in academic performance under the exceptional circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The expansion of the 'borderline zone' aims to ensure that all students who were close to a degree class border were considered in detail, with a greater range of final weighted marks being considered for preponderance than in previous years.

During the process of calculating the 1% increase to the borderline zone, we completed numerous data modelling exercises. The modelling successfully showed that a 1% increase would create a positive impact on a significant number of student awards.

#### Updated Rules for Classification of Postgraduate Awards

	2020/21 academic year (up to and including January 2022 for PGT students)	2019/20 academic year
<b>Pass/ Fail threshold for the programme</b>	The pass/ fail threshold for the programme is a final weighted mark of 50.00%	The pass/ fail threshold for the programme is a final weighted mark of 50.00%

<p><b>Qualifies for Distinction award</b></p>	<p>A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to 69.50% or A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to <b>67.00%</b> and modules to the value of at least 50% with a module mark greater than or equal to 70%</p>	<p>A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to 69.50% or A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to 68.00% and modules to the value of at least 50% with a module mark greater than or equal to 70%</p>
<p><b>Qualifies for Merit award</b></p>	<p>A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to 59.50% or A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to <b>57.00%</b> and modules to the value of at least 50% with a module mark greater than or equal to 60%</p>	<p>A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to 59.50% or A final credit-weighted mark greater than or equal to 58.00% and modules to the value of at least 50% with a module mark greater than or equal to 60%</p>