

Implementation of a "Safety Net Policy" for student assessment and progression

1. INTRODUCTION

Set out below is a guide for academic departments on how to apply the 'no detriment' policy that the University has adopted to underpin student progression and award decisions in the light of the current Covid-19 crisis.

The guidance is underpinned by the following principles:

- It is informed by each student's overall **cumulative performance**
- It is as **fair** as possible for *all* students, regardless of programme of study, and is in line with previous communications.
- It is **robust** in that it uses a combination of prior assessments (where available) to estimate attainment level (the 'benchmark').
- It remains **as close as possible to existing regulations** for progression/degree award calculations.
- It is **simple** to understand and apply.

Marks for individual modules will be awarded as per normal practice and the 'safety net' will be applied to performance across the full academic year. This means that a student's 'year average' for the purposes of progression and/or award may be higher than the average of their individual module marks.

It is important to note that this policy is designed to provide a 'safety net' for all students adversely impacted by the impacts of the coronavirus. It is not expected that the Safety Net will be needed by the majority of students. It is not an alternative to students engaging fully with their studies and planned assessments; it does not require academic colleagues to lower the standards with which they mark summative assessments; and it seeks to maintain academic quality whilst acknowledging the unprecedented environment in which the University is currently operating.

Where students are subject to professional regulation/accreditation, application of this policy will be subject to agreement with the relevant PSRB. Students on such programmes will be advised accordingly.

This guidance is structured as a series of prompts, complemented with a series of FAQs, and works through each level of study. It is important that the principles of 'no detriment' are followed consistently across all departments.

In the event that you require further support or guidance you should contact the relevant FDLT.

2. CALCULATING BENCHMARKS

Individual student benchmarks should be calculated in the following ways:

2.1 Undergraduate and Integrated Masters Programmes

2.1.1 University of Sheffield Levels 2 and above (FHEQ Level 5 to Level 7)

For each student, a benchmark will be calculated based **on the higher of the two following measures**:

- A. The overall average (weighted mean) based on performance on modules completed and assessed¹ between 1 September 2019 and 15 March 2020² (thereafter referred to as 'unaffected' marks), where the student has **40** or more credits of unaffected marks.
- B. 100% of the overall average (weighted mean) achieved in the preceding academic year (on the same programme³).

Where a student does not have 40 or more credits of unaffected marks, only benchmark B will apply.

The application of the benchmark is also subject to students achieving the minimum required threshold for a pass for each module.

The exceptions

- *For direct entry students to FHEQ Level 5 or above, where it is not possible to determine a benchmark based on the above, the benchmark should be determined by taking the average of the best 100 credits over the full year.*
- *For part time students the benchmarks should be applied on a pro rata basis, based on the proportion of unaffected credits taken since 1 September 2019 or since their last progression point.*

2.1.2 University of Sheffield Level 1 (FHEQ Level 4)

For Level 1 students, modules completed after 15 March 2020 (affected marks) will be marked on a pass/fail basis only and no end of year average will be calculated.

Students are simply required to have passed each individual unit (whether affected or unaffected) to progress. It is not therefore necessary to calculate individual student benchmarks.

Where students have failed to pass any individual unit, they will be required to present for subsequent examination.

¹ For clarity, this means that all teaching was completed, and the students had submitted all summative assessments associated with that module, prior to 15 March 2020. It does not require the work to have been marked by 15 March or that the results had been considered by an Exam Board.

² For the majority of programmes this will equate to completed Semester One modules

³ This includes students who may have moved between pathways or between different awards, e.g. BEng/MEng in a given subject.

Whilst there is no requirement to provide individual marks (other than pass/fail) for assessments completed after 15 March 2020. Department may, at their discretion, provide marks for individual pieces of work for the purpose of supporting student learning only.

2.2 Postgraduate Taught Programmes (FHEQ Level 7)

The Safety Net benchmark for PGT students will be set **based on the higher of the two following measures:**

- A. The overall average (weighted mean) based on performance on modules completed and assessed between 1 September 2019 and 15 March 2020⁴ (hereafter referred to as 'unaffected' marks), where the student has **60** or more credits of unaffected marks.
- B. The average based on the best **150** credits over the full year.

2.3 Foundation Level

The Safety net benchmark for Foundation Year students will be set based on the **higher of the two following measures:**

- A. The overall average (weighted mean) based on performance on modules completed and assessed between 1 September 2019 and 15 March 2020 (hereafter referred to as 'unaffected' marks), where the student has **40** or more credits of unaffected marks.
- B. The average based on the best **100** credits over the full year.

Worked examples of the above are available here:

[UG Safety Net Examples](#)

[PGT Safety Net Examples](#)

FAQs

What about programmes that did not start in September 2019?

For programmes that do not operate on the standard academic year, benchmarks should be calculated in the same way, but based on modules completed and assessed before the 15 March and since the last progression point, and the previous year's performance.

Does the student need to sit, and pass, summative assessments taken after 15 March for the safety net policy to apply?

Yes. A student cannot opt out of assessments after the 15 March and rely solely on benchmark performance. These assessments must be completed, and passed, at the minimum threshold required for that programme, to evidence that s/he has met the learning outcomes and can be awarded the associated credit.

⁴ For the majority of programmes this will equate to completed Semester One modules

In the event that a student cannot take an assessment, for example through illness, the usual EC processes will apply.

What if no summative assessment has taken place (and therefore no unaffected marks achieved) before 15 March on a particular programme?

Benchmarks (as described above) allow for these situations in the majority of cases. However, it may be helpful to note that current regulations permit departments, at the discretion of the examination board, to:

- Moderate cohort marks (where there is sufficient evidence that the current cohort is out of line with the performance of previous cohorts)
- Consider whether students who have marginal/borderline fails should be given the minimum pass mark based on previous performance.
- Make reference to students' performance before and after 15 March, including formative⁵ assessments (particularly where this is to the benefit of the student concerned) and to make a holistic judgement of their performance. However, formative assessments **must not** be used to create a benchmark.

In all cases, any decisions to adjust marks must be recorded in the record of the examination board and the reasons for doing so clearly set out.

If there are no summative assessments prior to 15 March, could formative assessments be used instead?

Formative assessments are designed for students to develop and practice their skills ahead of summative assessment, rather than to assess their performance, and therefore **should not be used in calculating their benchmark** performance. A department may however wish to refer to them as per above.

Will the benchmarks be calculated centrally, or by the academic department?

The information on affected and unaffected modules needed to calculate benchmarks is held in departments. It is therefore the responsibility of academic departments to complete this work prior to examination boards.

Individual student benchmarks must be available to the Exam Board and records should be kept.

Does the safety net policy apply to re-sit students who are assessed in the summer resit period?

Where a student has failed a module and needs to resit, the overall module result will be capped at a bare pass in line with [General Regulations for First Degrees/Higher Degrees](#). The safety net policy applies to students who have passed the assessment. The extenuating circumstances process will account for students whose performance has been affected by issues.

What about Group Work?

⁵ Formative assessments are those taken for the purpose of consolidating learning and which do not contribute to progression of award.

It is acknowledged that some students may be advantaged where the benchmark, based on 40/60 credits of unaffected assessment, included a high level of group work. In the spirit of no detriment, this is an accepted risk.

Conversely, for high performing students this may mean the application of a benchmark presents less protection, but good performance in assessments post 15 March should leave them no more disadvantaged than would have been the case had General Regulations only applied.

Are there circumstances in which the student would not benefit from the Safety Net Policy?

The Safety Net Policy is designed to support students in the current circumstances, whilst upholding standards and academic integrity. Should a student use unfair means, appropriate penalties will be used ranging from awarding no grade for the piece of work or failure in an examination through to expulsion from the University in extremely serious cases. In such cases the safety net policy would not be used to compensate for penalties applied.

To benefit from the safety net students must complete all assessments for a given module AND achieve a minimum threshold of performance to evidence that they have achieved the necessary learning outcomes to be awarded the credit. This is to ensure that students continue to engage with their studies and to ensure that minimum quality standards are maintained.

How will students know if they have benefited from the Safety Net Policy?

In the event that a student's overall year average for the purposes of progression and/or award is higher than the average had it been calculated under General Regulations (based on affected and unaffected marks) they can assume that they have benefited from the no detriment policy. Students will still receive individual module marks at Foundation Level and Levels 2 and above.

If a student has failed a module (i.e. if they did not complete all required assessments within a module and/or meet the minimum threshold to evidence they met the learning outcomes needed to achieve the associated credit) they should be counselled as to why the safety net has not automatically assured their progression or award. The safety net will be applied following subsequent examination, so long as the minimum standard has been achieved.

What if a student is taking assessments out of cycle?

The Safety Net Policy should be applied for any students who have both studied for and completed assessment on programmes since 1 September 2019, or for non standard programmes since the last progression point, who have had their study disrupted by the Covid 19 crisis.

What about students on study abroad years?

These students should be considered on a case by case basis, or by group/cohort where students are similarly impacted, taking account of:

- the nature of their studies
- the situation in the country of study
- what adjustments the host institution may have made to level/module marks locally to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19
- whether students have been able to continue their studies remotely from the UK

What about students on a placement year?

Again these students should be considered on a case by case basis, or by group/cohort where students are similarly impacted, taking account of:

- the nature of the placement
- programme regulations (e.g. some faculties apply the 38 week rule)
- PSRB and other external requirements
- The contract of employment with a given employer

What about visiting students?

Again these students should be considered on a case by case basis, or by group/cohort where students are similarly impacted, taking account of:

- the nature of their studies
- what adjustments the host institution may have made to level/module marks locally to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 to ensure to avoid students benefiting twice
- Whether students have been able to continue their studies remotely

What about students sitting modules for credit (e.g.CPD), but not as part of a full programme of study?

Where you have individual students, or groups of students in this category you should talk to the relevant FDLT in the first instance.

3. PROGRESSION AND AWARD

3.1 Calculation of Final awards

The final award should be calculated in the first instance using the University's General Regulations and those regulations specific to individual programmes of study, and based on actual module marks (affected and unaffected).

The mark determined from the above should be viewed against the student's benchmark and the higher of the two marks used to inform the final degree classification/award.

Normal practices around moderation, extenuating circumstances, etc will apply.

Worked examples of the above are available here:

[UG Safety Net Examples](#)

[PGT Safety Net Examples](#)

3.2 Progression between levels of Study

Progression between years of study should be determined, in the first instance, using the University's General Regulations and those regulations specific to individual programmes of study, and based on actual module marks (affected and unaffected) or pass/fail grades.

For progression from Foundation Year, or beyond Level 2, the weighted mean should be calculated, as per the University's General Regulations and those regulations specific to individual programmes of study based on actual module marks (affected and unaffected), and viewed against the student's benchmark. The higher of the two should be used to inform the year average for the purpose of progression, and (where relevant in future years) the calculation of the final award.

As per General Regulations, Examiners may in their discretion recommend that a student who is awarded not fewer than 100 credits at Level 2 be permitted to proceed to Level 3.

Normal practices around moderation, extenuating circumstances, etc will apply.

Normal processes for appeal will apply.

FAQs

What new/additional discretion does the Examination board have to support severely impacted students?

For students impacted by the Covid 19 crisis, Examination Boards may, in exceptional circumstances, offer one or more resit, as a first attempt at a later date, to a student (including final year students) who has had their progress severely and extensively impacted, instead of applying the Safety Net Policy, if it is felt that this would advantage the student.

Equally, should a student request it, they may be offered the opportunity to resit all affected assessments at a later date, and within one calendar year of the original assessment, but a) their mark would then be calculated under normal regulations (without the benefit of a safety net), b) they must accept that the mode of assessment may not be the same as that taken in their first attempt, e.g. where adjustments were made to support remote assessment, and c) they cannot cherry pick which affected assessments they wish to resit.

How are year averages calculated for Level 1 students?

The University has agreed that students completing Level 1, where these are not subject to external requirements such as those set by PSRBs, may be awarded a simple pass/fail for each module completed after 15 March 2020, and for the purposes of progression. So long as students have presented for all summative assessments, before and after the 15 March, and have passed all units at the minimum level required, they can simply be awarded a PASS/FAIL.

Should a student have not passed a module at the minimum level required, but is close to the PASS/FAIL borderline, the examination board may, at its discretion, use performance prior to the 15 March to give the student the benefit of doubt and to award a PASS based on the principles of no detriment.

What will appear on student transcripts?

For Level 1 students, transcripts will provide pass/fail information rather than grades for modules completed after 15 March 2020.

For Foundation Year and Level 2 and above students, transcripts will still show actual module marks achieved.

For PGT students, transcripts will still show actual module marks achieved.

4. EXAMINATION BOARDS

4.1 Information required in advance of the Examination Boards

In making arrangements for examination boards, academic departments must share full details of the Safety Net Policy with their internal and external examiners as well as all members of the examination board.

Individual student benchmarks, and the impact of these on individual student performance must be available to the examination board and set out in a way that is clear to follow. This information, and any decisions taken at the examination board, must be kept on file, including the rationale behind any decisions made, whether relating to an individual student or the full cohort.

4.2 Information the Examination Board will need

The examination board should have available to it:

For each module

- Actual marks achieved for each unaffected module (completed before 15 March 2020)
- Actual marks achieved for each affected module (completed after 15 March)

For each student

- The student's overall grade/average for the year based on performance across all modules and in line with the normal application of general and programme specific regulations
- The student's benchmark

The examination board should then be asked to use the higher to determine progression, or the final degree classification, considering any adjustments, extenuating circumstances, etc.

4.3 Borderline and Complex Cases

As per normal circumstances, there will be individual students where there is a need for examiners to review performance in detail and to consider multiple factors influencing their performance. The Safety Net Policy does not remove or diminish the powers that examination boards are afforded under the University's General Regulations. For example, departments are reminded of Regulation XV: General Regulations for First Degree, para 47 states, ***In every case, the Examiners will recommend the classification which, having regard to all the evidence before them, best reflects the overall performance of the student.***

FAQs

What does the safety net mean for programmes that include a weighted mean grade threshold for progression from Level 2 onto Level 3 of the integrated Masters track?

Where a programme includes a minimum weighted mean grade for progression, and this is achieved through the Safety Net Policy, the department should provide advice and guidance to individual students on the basis of their Semester 2 performance to guide them if transfer to the 3 year Bachelors programme may be more appropriate for them.

Does the safety net apply if a student is resitting/re-submitting their PGT dissertation?

If a student is re-submitting a dissertation for which the original piece of work was submitted before 15 March the safety net does not apply.

If however the student has undertaken a new project, significantly changed the content of the dissertation such to the extent that they might be deemed to have undertaken a novel piece of work, then the safety net should be applied, but caveated with the fact that their overall mark may be capped in line with the programme regulations and that the dissertation must meet minimum quality standards.

What about students on part-time masters programmes?

The safety net applies to all modules where teaching and/or assessment have been directly impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. For part-time students, who do not have a progression point at the end of the 2019/20 cycle, the safety net will need to be applied at the relevant, future examination board.

We teach the same module in Semester 1 and Semester 2. What if one group of students performs better than the other?

It is acknowledged that students taught and assessed on the same module may be advantaged (or disadvantaged) depending on whether their teaching and assessment took place before or after the 15 March. For example, they may have been negatively impacted by the transition to remote teaching, they may have been advantaged by a particular module forming part of the benchmark calculation, and they may have benefited or otherwise by the different assessment methods used depending on the Semester in which they completed the module. In most cases, we would expect some 'balancing out,' however examination boards should be mindful of these disparities and seek to form a judgement such that no group is unfairly disadvantaged.

In these situations departments should liaise with the relevant FDLT for guidance.

How will marks be released to students?

Further guidance will follow from Student Administration Services regarding arrangements for the release of marks to students.

This will also include details of arrangements and deadlines for the provision of module marks for entry onto CIS.

5. NON MODULAR PROGRAMMES

It is recognised that not all programmes operate to modules and semesters. This does not mean that they are exempt from the safety net policy, other than if they are subject to PSRB or other external requirements that prohibit this.

In the majority of cases, programmes can be broken down into time limited units of teaching that are subject to assessment (applied at the unit or cross unit level). If either the teaching and assessment, for these units span the 15 March date then the safety net should be applied. If units completed and assessed prior to 15 March account for a third or more of the overall programme in that year, then a benchmark can be calculated on the same basis as for modular programmes above.

For more advice, please contact your FDLT.