

Communication from Education Committee:

Assessment in 2021-22 and beyond

This circular provides information on the decisions made by Taught Degrees Panel in relation to preparing for assessment in 2021-22, preparing for assessment in 2022-23, and continuation into 2021-22 of temporary policy decisions introduced in response to the pandemic.

Action required

Divisions, departments and faculties are asked to:

- **Note** the context for assessment and key policy statements in 2021-22 provided by the panel.
- **Note** the timeline for preparing assessment for 2021-22.
- **Note** the continuation of policy provisions in relation to technical time and late exam responses agreed by the panel.
- **Note** the plans to prepare for assessment in 2022-23.

Further Information

Context for 2021-22

1. 2019-20 into 2020-21 has been a period of significant flux for assessment as the University and its departments have grappled with the challenges of the pandemic.
2. In advance of Michaelmas term 2020 many departments agreed to shift their normally in-person exams to online open-book exams of the same duration. Others made the same shift during 2020-21 when faced with the challenge of operating in-person exams at scale with social distancing and hygiene requirements in place. Some departments chose to replace in-person exams with longer duration open-book exams (e.g. 8-hour 'working day') or alternative forms of assessment including short-duration submissions (e.g. a typical 'exam' format paper completed over a week). For some courses submissions were also adapted to reflect the changing teaching and learning conditions.
3. In Trinity term 2020 WebLearn had been deployed as the operating system for online exams. During the Long Vacation 2020 it was identified that this would not be a sustainable solution for the Trinity term 2021 exam season and Trinity term 2021 saw the deployment of Inspira for all online exams. Michaelmas term 2021 will also see Inspira deployed as a replacement for WebLearn for online submissions.
4. The University must now start to consider its approach to assessment in 2021-22 in the light of:

- The need to ensure that students are informed at the start of the academic year how they will be assessed in that year or for the University examination¹ they are starting, and what the back-up plan is for any in-person assessment.
 - The desire to build on the experience of and lessons learnt from the changes in assessment required by the pandemic and to benefit from the implementation of Inspira.
 - The uncertainty regarding ongoing social distancing requirements in MT21/HT22; (although with the expectation that such requirements would not be needed in TT22).
 - The need to move towards a new steady state with the *Examination Regulations* again accurately reflecting key assessment requirements for courses.
5. The panel considers 2021-22 as a transitional year, both in terms of transitioning out of the emergency measures required in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and acting as a pilot towards the future shape of assessment at Oxford. Departments will have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of assessment and consider what if any further changes they wish to put in place for 2022-23.
6. The panel recognises that the time and capacity for innovation for 2021-22 is limited. Nevertheless, departments are encouraged to consider ongoing evolution into 2022-23 and beyond, with opportunities to continue to ensure that Oxford's approach to assessment is developed and adapted to ensure that all students have the opportunity to demonstrate their acquired skills, knowledge and understanding through flexible, inclusive and robust assessment mechanisms.

Key policy statements for 2021-22

7. The panel agreed the following key policy statements:
- Departments are **strongly encouraged to utilise online exams in 2021-22 and beyond** where they are felt to be academically appropriate. This recognises the wish to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the Inspira platform, with its associated benefits for flexible and inclusive assessment and the ease of marking typed work, and reflects the significant practical challenge of running a full suite of in-person exams in MT21 and HT22 with social distancing.
 - **Departments must be in a position to communicate to students the way that they will be assessed at the start of the academic year 2021-22** (or prior to student start if their course begins earlier or later). This applies to all forms of assessment – exams and submissions.
 - **For any planned in-person assessment there should also be an agreed back-up plan in place that would be activated if necessary.** Whilst it is hoped that there will not be the need for a shift away from planned in-person assessment, the experience this year should mean that departments in many cases already know what their back-

¹ University examination is defined in the *Examinations and assessment framework* as 'the totality of assessment required to be successfully completed in order to meet the requirements of the relevant Examination Regulations for a given part or totality of a degree or other award i.e. the First Public Examination (FPE), Second Public Examination (SPE), totality of assessment for other undergraduate qualifications, and totality of assessment for a Postgraduate Taught award.'

up option would be. The back-up form of assessment should be communicated to students at the start of the academic year or the start of their course.

- **Departments will have a choice of three options for assessment format for each paper in 2021-22:**
 - (a) Change to a different form of assessment for 2021-22 – this could be to adapt assessment to reflect the different educational experiences of new and continuing students, or to make pedagogically motivated adjustments to the 2020-21 format (such as shifting from 3hr to 8 hr exams or submitted work),
 - (b) Retain the revised form of assessment introduced in 2020-21 (unless this involved a reduction in assessment volume and/or coverage)
 - (c) Revert to the pre-pandemic assessment format

Options (b) and (c) would not require formal approval (although divisions may have their own process requirements). While recognising that option c) will be appropriate in some subjects, departments are urged only to use it when it is considered essential, ideally as part of a diverse assessment package. EPS will work with divisions to provide guidance for departments on the details of what would be considered an option (a) change and what approval might involve, with the aim of minimising the bureaucratic overhead. This will follow later in term.

- **The status of the Examination Regulations as the definitive course document remains suspended for 2021-22.** Students will be expected to rely on their course handbooks, examination conventions and communications from their department for the most up to date information on assessment. This is to allow time for the long-term changes to the *Examination Regulations* to be considered, approved, collated and updated.

Timeline to 2021-22

8. The following steps will be taken to ensure assessment is in place for 2021-22:
 - From week 5 Trinity term onwards – departments have an opportunity to begin reflecting on assessment if they wish. Departments who are already aware that they may wish to go with option (a) are encouraged to get in touch with their division as early as possible.
 - June – initial central communications to students about plans for assessment for 2021-22 focusing on the general shape (mix of online and in-person exams, submissions etc.) and when assessment will be confirmed.
 - By end of July – departments will need to confirm to their divisions, after Trinity exam boards have met, which option they intend to go with for 2021-22.
 - Late July through to September:
 - Assessment review process to take place with normal deadlines. This will also capture information on whether an exam is in-person or online and which mode of completion.
 - For option (a) changes departments work with divisions to undertake course change approval following as light touch a process as possible.
 - By end of September – approval of any option (a) changes to assessment by the division and/or on behalf of Education Committee as needed.

- MT week 0/start of course (if earlier or later) departments to confirm to students assessment details for 2021-22 including back up plans for in-person assessment.

Policy extensions into 2021-22

9. The panel has agreed that the following policy provisions in relation to exams should continue for 2021-22:
 - Provisions for technical time to remain the same, to minimise change for departments and students. For 2022-23 the panel may consider a further change to incorporate technical time within the main exam duration. This will be considered during MT 2021 so that it could be factored into *Examination Regulations* for 2022-23.
 - The current MCE process for late upload of exam responses to be retained in order to allow for continuity of practice and time to scope a more permanent solution.

Preparing for 2022-23

10. Any further assessment changes planned for implementation for 2022-23 will need to go through the normal approval process during the course of the 2021-22 academic year. Departments would need to follow this process if they did not wish to stay, for 2022-23 and future academic years, with their assessment choice made for 2021-22
11. The Centre for Teaching and Learning is keen to work with and support departments considering assessment changes and would welcome early contact in preparing for assessment in 2022-23.
12. All departments will need to review the *Examination Regulations* for their programmes during 2021-22 to ensure that the assessment that has been agreed for 2022-23 is appropriately captured.
13. More details on both course change and Examination Regulations processes to take place during 2021-22 will be published nearer to Michaelmas term.

If you have queries about this circular please contact Rachel Dearlove, Head of Taught Degrees and Student Casework (rachel.dearlove@admin.ox.ac.uk)