



Quality Assurance Report to Board of Trustees:  
for the 2019/20 Academic Year

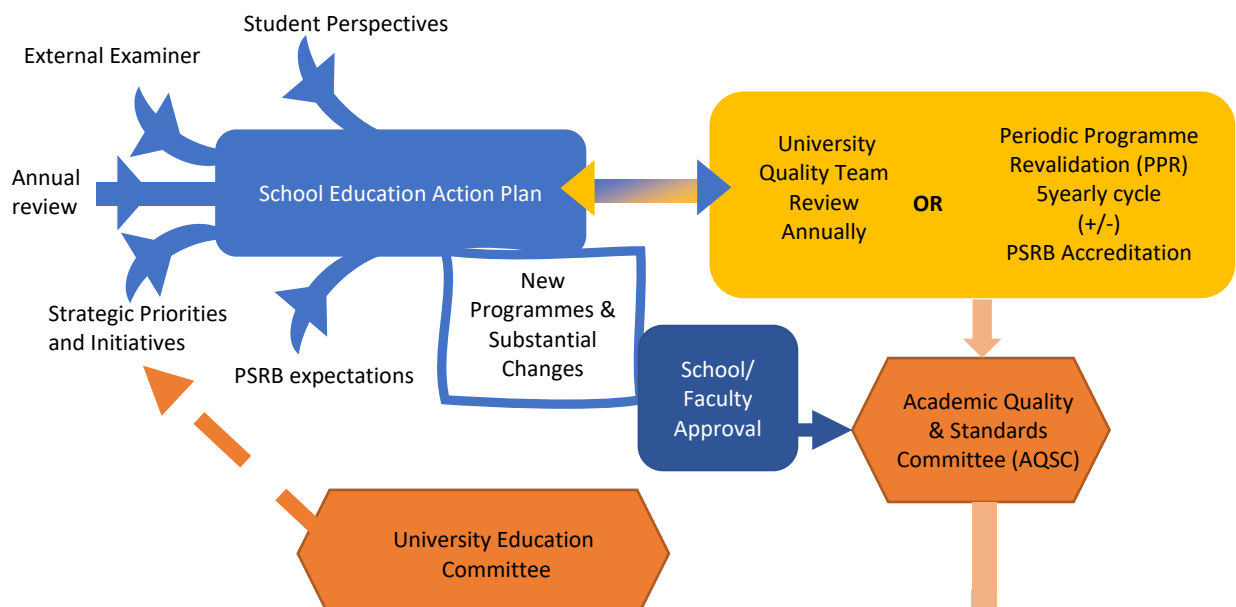
1. Introduction

1.1 The 19/20 academic year saw the launch of a refreshed quality framework across the University. This provides scrutiny of all educational provision offered by the Institution together with enhancement activities. Novel aspects of this new framework were:

- Standardisation and central delivery allowing greater oversight and comparison across our provision
- A partnership model for delivery involving academics, professional service staff and students
- Annual light-touch review of all provision together with a more in-depth periodic programme revalidation process on a rotational basis.

1.2 These aspects combine with existing features of the framework, such as education action plans, external examining etc, (see Fig 1 for detail), to ensure we have confidence we are meeting the conditions the [Office for Students](#) (OfS) stipulate for continued registration. These encompass: a high-quality academic experience for all (Condition B1), support throughout the student’s journey necessary for all to succeed (Condition B2), successful outcomes for all (Condition B3), qualifications that hold their value (Condition B4) and conform to sector standards (Condition B5).

Fig 1: Diagrammatic representation of our quality framework illustrating how key quality assurance inputs feed into a School’s education action plan and how review and oversight of quality assurance activity occurs within our governance system. Abbreviations: PSRB - Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.



1.3 The 19/20 academic year has presented the Institution with significant challenge. University and College Union (UCU) arranged industrial action occurred over 14 specific days during February and early March 2020. The resultant disruption to education varied between Faculties and disciplines and hence the impact was felt variably across our student population. This disruption was quickly followed by outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency move of educational provision to an online environment in

March 2020. Not surprisingly this resulted in considerable educational change for all students (see Section 3 below), but, with hindsight, we hope it may also offer significant opportunity.

- 1.4 As an Institution we have needed to capture these changes, both as a means for assuring quality and standards but also to aid identification of what elements of online/blended delivery could be retained when 'normal' social interactions are possible. In doing so, we have balanced supporting students to ensure that they are not disadvantaged, either individually or collectively, with the need to maintain academic standards and protect the value of students' qualifications in comparison with those from other cohorts and those from other institutions.
- 1.5 This report outlines the operation of this new framework during 19/20, highlighting key outcomes and plans for the future.

## 2. Quality Activity in 19/20

2.1 All education provision was reviewed for quality assurance purposes during the 19/20 academic year. At the outset of the academic year, **39** University Quality Team (UQT) reviews and **8** Periodic Programme Revalidations (PPR) were planned. Prior to the start of emergency measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, **27** UQT reviews and **4** PPRs had been completed. Following the requirement for all work to move online during March 2020, UQT processes were initially paused to allow colleagues time to focus on the immediate emergency situation, before being moved to online delivery with minimal need for revision of process. It was decided that the four remaining PPRs would be transferred to UQT activity to allow School staff to focus on the delivery of learning and teaching as an online provision. The remaining **16** UQT reviews were undertaken following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section provides a summary of the outcomes from this quality assurance activity.

### 2.2 *Use of Education Action Plans (EAP)*

The School EAP is a central element of the quality framework and is where both strategic and operational actions are recorded. It should be used as a 'live' document where progress against actions is updated at regular periods through the academic year. Actions entered onto the EAP arise from all elements of the quality framework, as illustrated in Fig 1, aligned with strategic plans from the University, Faculty or School. During the 19/20 academic year 652 actions were added to EAPs across the Institution. The most common actions were in relation to either assessment and feedback (29%) or teaching (21%), with support (academic or student) contributing 14% of actions. The remaining actions covered student voice (8%), preparation for employment (6%), student engagement (6%), learning environment (5%), skills training (2%), programme changes (1%) and other (8%).

### 2.3 *UQT - summary of themes, actions and any impacts.*

The outcome of a UQT review is a concise report provided to the School, normally within a week of the review, which highlights areas for commendations together with specific recommendations to be added to the School's Education Action Plan as appropriate. The common themes/outcomes arising from UQT reviews were referred to the University Learning and Teaching Committee if relating to UG or PGT programmes or the University PGR Committee if relating to PGR provision. Otherwise, the UQT review panels will, in the 2020/21 cycle, check on the progress of the recommendations in its previous report to ensure action and monitor impact of improvements. The University-level actions arising from the reports are recorded and progress against them monitored by UAQSC.

### 2.4 *Periodic Programme Revalidation (PPR)*

The PPR process is designed to be strategic, undertaken by each School at subject level as part of a rolling programme to review the quality, validity and viability of academic

provision (across taught programmes) and the educational experience. The process serves to revalidate taught programmes, subject to any recommendations in the report being satisfactorily addressed. The impact of each of the four PPRs that occurred during the 19/20 academic is summarised below:

Physics (undergraduate): this review focused on the number of assessment deferrals and the non-progression of students, which inter alia had been raised by a recent visit of their accrediting body: the Institute of Physics (IoP). Good progress has been made in resolving this with significant changes having been made to improve the distribution and overall workload for students, together with diversification of assessment methods. The IoP has since removed the conditional status of their accreditation (in June 2020). Good progress has also been made in implementing a curriculum review with the School engaging with the University's Curriculum Enhancement Project during the 20/21 academic year. The Faculty and AQSC will continue to monitor progress against the outstanding recommendations from the review report.

Anthropology and Archaeology: satisfactory progress has been made against the recommendations from the PPR. This included engaging with TESTA (Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment), improving consistency in marking and moderation processes and improving student cohort communities. On this basis, UAQSC revalidated these programmes, with an additional follow-up by the University Quality Team in 2021 in order to monitor continued progress on the outstanding recommendations.

Medicine (taught postgraduate): the panel was impressed with and commended the School on the quality of the learning and teaching on these programmes and the positive student feedback. The nine programmes under review were revalidated with no conditions attached as a conclusion of the PPR.

History (undergraduate): good progress has been made as to the conditions placed for revalidation of the programmes, with improved collaboration between the Department and the student society and establishing effective and consistent application of personal tutoring for their students. A further update will be provided to AQSC in 2021 before revalidation is confirmed.

## 2.5 PSRB visits

Across five of our six Faculties, **32** accrediting bodies act to provide professional accreditation to **186** programmes (see Table 1 in Appendix for further detail). Such accreditation has brought additional yet varied challenges for programmes in the context of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. 141 of these accredited programmes are undergraduate, 44 are taught postgraduate and 1 is a postgraduate research programme. In total 50% of our taught students (57% of all UGs and 21% of all PGTs) are on accredited programmes. In 2019/20 one school (Dental School) underwent an interim accreditation visit which reviewed 2 programmes. One school (School of Physics) submitted an interim report covering 19 programmes, which successfully met the conditions of accreditation and further, the bachelors level exit awards are also now accredited. 48 programmes were successfully reaccredited through an annual desk-based confirmation process.

## 2.6 External Examiners reports

In 2019/20, **135** UG external reports were received and no extraordinary reports submitted. PGT reports are due in December 2020 but for the 2018/19 year, **133** PGT external reports were submitted and no extraordinary reports were received. Actions resulting from recommendations within externals' reports are captured in EAPs and UAQSC monitors common themes arising from them and University-level actions in response.

A large proportion of UG External Examiner Reports contained positive comments about the measures put in place by the University to address Covid-19 disruption (as detailed in section 3). It was felt that the amendments to University regulations provided for a consistent, fair and appropriate measurement of student achievement and that the processes in place were commendably clear and easy to apply in a way that was transparent and rigorous. An example is below:

*“The University and the Course Organisers responded quickly and effectively to the pandemic and made good and clear decisions on how assessment arrangements were to be changed. The swift move to Open Assessments with Extended Deadlines with the back-up of the Safety Net was the right response to make. The new arrangements were discussed with me as External Examiner and then effectively communicated to the students. I would classify this as Exemplary Practice.” (Wilkinson – Biochemistry)*

Only 5% of reports (7 of 135) commented on potential ‘grade inflation’; these concerns have been considered by the relevant schools and will be further investigated as part of the analysis work relating to the annual degree outcomes statement.

## 2.7 Appeals and complaints

The occurrence of both significant industrial action and a global pandemic in a short period of time has resulted in a significant increase in the number of formal complaints received during the 19/20 academic year. In contrast, the number of academic appeals has remained largely constant for the year. As for previous years a report discussing the granularity of both appeals and complaints is being prepared by the Secretary’s Office and will be submitted to the Board of Trustees for review subsequently.

## 2.8 Programme Changes

**37** new programmes were approved during 2019/20. Eight were taught postgraduate programmes and 29 were new undergraduate programmes, 14 of which were approved at Faculty level under the low-risk approval framework. Two major curriculum reviews were approved at University-level: one at undergraduate level (Computer Science) and one taught postgraduate (Management). [Guidance](#) for Committee Approval of New Programmes and High-Risk Programme changes was developed and published. 10 programmes were withdrawn and 19 suspended during this academic year.

## 2.9 Plans for 20/21 based on lessons learned from year 1.

During late Spring/early Summer 2020 feedback on the new quality framework was requested from all academic and professional services staff who engaged with either UQT or PPR activity during 19/20, including externals who sat on PPR panels. This feedback highlighted a number of significant positive attributes of the new framework:

- Provided staff time to reflect on educational provision in the context of ‘external’ input
- Developed a shared sense of ownership on programme developments within the School/Department/Centre
- Was more time efficient with workload savings over previous models
- Operated on a more granular programme(s) level which was felt to be a useful, focussed approach and appreciated by staff in the School.

A number of minor changes have been made to the framework for 20/21 following suggestions made during this review process but it is important to note that these changes are aimed at improving operational efficiency and will not alter the basic premise of our quality assurance and enhancement processes. Detailed guidance for completing the Education Action Plan was developed, building on feedback through operation of the UQT reviews. There were minor revisions to the EAP template to improve usability and allow space for the Faculty to comment on the school’s plans. In Schools where there are

multiple individual departments EAPs may now also include a departmental tab to provide more detailed plans at this level.

### 3. Measures to Mitigate Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and their Outcomes

3.1 Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the University introduced a series of measures to:

- account for the extraordinary disruption that all students had experienced in their studies and undertaking assessment
- ensure the conditions and support were in place to enable students to complete their degree in a timely way
- ensure the value of our degrees were maintained.

3.2 In summary, measures put in place were designed to ensure that a student's final academic outcome was not disadvantaged by the general disruption of the initial onset of the pandemic.

- For taught (UG and PGT) programmes a common set of [governing temporary regulations](#) were applied, apart from a few recognised exceptions for programmes that had professional accreditation considerations, which had their own specific regulations. This included the establishment of a 'safety net', determined for each undergraduate programme, whereby marks from any assessment affected by the initial onset of the pandemic (after 27 March) would only contribute to the student's degree classification (in 2019/20 or future years) if it improved classification.
- For research students (PGR) our [contingency arrangements](#) outlined regulatory changes together with steps to further support individuals. Table 3 in Appendix 1 provides detail of the changes that were made in practice. It is important to highlight that our approach is consistent with other Russell Group universities, as identified through peer sector networks.

Table 2 in Appendix 1 provides detail of the changes that were made in practice.

#### *Impact upon degree classification*

3.3 The Academic Quality and Policy Office have undertaken analysis and monitoring of degree outcomes to understand the effects of mitigations made in response to the pandemic and to assure the quality of the degrees awarded. The planned analysis began following the release of results from the first set of award boards following Assessment Period 1, at which the majority of undergraduate awards are made. Analysis of Postgraduate Taught classifications is scheduled for later in the academic year, following their release.

3.4 Our approach for ensuring that students had a fair opportunity to demonstrate their academic ability amidst the initial onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (as outlined in Appendix 1) contained an expectation that we would observe some increase in degree attainment as a consequence. By its very nature, the mitigations around degree classification suspends the downward component of any natural variation in a student's marks. As anticipated, the proportion of first-class degrees, on average, has moderately increased as a result.

3.5 Our classification ratio has seen a small upward trend across the five-year period, although below sector and in line with Russell Group norms, as set out in our published [Degree Outcomes Statement](#). The proportion of First-Class Honours awarded has increased from 28% in 14/15 to 32% in 18/19, whilst the proportion of Firsts awarded in 19/20 has further increased by just over 5pp to 37%. 11% of Firsts were awarded due to the safety net policy, which accounts for just over 4pp of the 5pp increase since 18/19.

The proportion of 2:1s awarded is down by nearly 4pp compared to the previous year. In total, under 8% of 19/20 awards invoked the safety net.

- 3.6 We therefore have confidence that, whilst the changes implemented have affected the profile of degree outcomes, this effect has been limited and proportionate to the justifiable circumstances and have not resulted in a dilution of the value of a Bristol degree. Similar analysis will be employed for PGT degree outcomes when the data is available.

<b>Classification</b>	<b>18/19 profile</b>	<b>19/20 incl. safety net (<math>\Delta</math> to 18/19)</b>	<b>19/20 excl. safety net (<math>\Delta</math> to 18/19)</b>	<b>% awarded due to safety net</b>
First	31.9%	37.2% (+5.2)	33.1% (+1.2)	11.0%
Upper Second	58.5%	54.6% (-3.9)	55.9% (-2.7)	5.3%
Lower Second	8.4%	7.7% (-0.7)	10.1% (+1.7)	6.3%
Third	1.1%	0.5% (-0.6)	0.9% (-0.2)	12.5%

- 3.7 It should be noted that the effects from 19/20 will continue to ripple forward for intermediate year undergraduates for the duration of their studies; the safety net will determine the treatment of their 19/20 marks within future degree classification calculations. The greater weighting of final year marks means that this effect will be less pronounced in future years and the impact on future degree outcomes of intermediate year undergraduates will be lesser. Whilst we do not yet have access to sector comparator data, we anticipate that many, if not the majority of, providers will have been similarly affected. Benchmarking will take place when sector data becomes available.
- 3.8 Our intention when enacting the measures detailed in Table 2 was to ensure students were supported in progressing through and completing their programmes whilst continuing to meet the required academic standards. This has been successful, although we will provide additional support for students on intermediate years, where it is needed, to ensure all students are in a position to succeed in their programme.

#### 4. Opportunities and Challenges for 20/21

- 4.1 It likely that the challenges presented by a global pandemic will continue through most, if not all, of the 20/21 academic year. The first term has been beset with difficulties in relation to outbreaks of COVID-19 infections, self-isolating students/staff and a campus that is designed for traditional face to face delivery of education to large groups. Our new intake is composed of individuals who have faced severe disruption to the final part of their secondary education, and we will need to be agile and responsive to providing them with the support they need in order to thrive.
- 4.2 The coming year is likely to be one of significant change in terms of the external environment in relation to quality assurance. A number of consultations are in progress, with more suggested for 2021, in relation to the work of the Office for Students (OfS). Whilst this is suggested, by the OfS, to be aimed at reducing bureaucracy there are concerns across the Sector that the proposals may weaken links with the designated quality body (Quality Assurance Agency - QAA) and whether this could be viewed negatively internationally. Likely areas of significant changes include:
- National Student Survey – it is unclear if this will continue and if so in what format. However, our strong commitment to work closely with our student population to respond to the student voice remains unchanged.
  - New definitions for quality and standards which will result in a clearer articulation of the series of OfS risk-based conditions for registration (currently referred to as B Conditions) in relation to quality and standards.

- The use of numerical baselines to set expectations in relation to conditions linked to student outcomes. Significantly these are likely to be higher than at current, more granular and not benchmarked.
- Clarity regarding the composition of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in assessment of an HEI's educational provision and experience.

As an Institution we will need to be agile in terms of our data provision and its interrogation in order to ensure these changes inform our quality framework.

4.3 Despite these internal and external challenges, it is important to remember the opportunities 19/20 has presented and consider how we can integrate these into an improved 'business as normal' model. As an Institution we showed an ability to pivot rapidly to online learning and have integrated the best elements of that into a blended learning offering for 20/21. Mid-term survey data suggests that some students are finding online synchronous and asynchronous learning well-structured, engaging and helpful for learning and this view is supported by early UQT reports in TB1. Significant educational innovation has been illustrated by staff across the Institution and it will be important for us to capture this as part of our quality review work in order to feed it into the enhancement arm of the quality framework. As an Institution we will need to decide what aspects of our blended learning experience we retain as we move out of the COVID-19 pandemic and towards the 21/22 academic year.

**Appendix 1: Further Detailed Information to Support the Quality Assurance Annual Report to the Board of Trustees.**

Table 1: Detail of where accredited programmes are offered across the University of Bristol in 19/20.

	Number of Accredited Programmes	Number of Professional Bodies
Faculty of Arts	0	0
Faculty of Engineering	44	11
Faculty of Health Sciences	13	6
Faculty of Life Sciences	9	1
Faculty of Science	55	8
Faculty of Social Sciences and Law	65	10

Table 2: Description of the steps taken in taught programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic and confirmation of where decisions were taken.

Activity	Local Authorisation	Policy Development and Central Oversight
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>		
Review of learning opportunities to ensure delivery of materials essential for attainment of intended learning outcomes (ILOs).	FEDs, supported by UEDs (Quality)	FEDs via Faculty COVID-19 education group.
Accredited programmes consulted with PSRB to determine acceptable changes to teaching and learning provision and assessment plans. Specifically, for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science some clinical learning and assessment was rescheduled to later in the programme without affecting continuation from one year to the next.	Programme Directors, FEDs, supported by UEDs (Quality)	FEDs via Faculty COVID-19 education group.
Where teaching at a partner university was cancelled, students on study abroad placements were given the option of continuing with their studies online or to engage with online teaching in Bristol to ensure the missed learning opportunities were not missed and students could progress in their programme.	FED, SED and Programme Directors	
We were in close contact with industry partners and worked with our students to ensure those on industry placements could continue to benefit and learn from their work experience, even	FED, SED and Programme Directors	



where the placement had to cease in March due to the pandemic, such that they could progress in their programme.		
In a number of programmes either current students were suspended (n=1) due to reliance on practical skills that were not available during the pandemic or new recruitment was halted (n=6) because the pandemic was affecting the ability of applicants to engage. The OfS were notified of these as per registration requirements.	FED, SED and Programme Directors	Associate PVC (Quality & Standards)/AQSC and Registrar.
<b>Assessment</b>		
Review of assessments resulting in format changes, often to 'open-book', and reduced volume. A core element of our approach here was consideration of assessment design so that assessments were more inclusive and suitable for the circumstances in which they were to be taken.	Programme teams, FEDs, supported by UEDs (Quality)	Associate PVC (Learning & Teaching) via ULTC & PVC (Education) via UEC
Students were able to defer summer assessment to August/ September, if they felt they were not in a position to take them at that time.	Programme Director and School Exam Boards, followed by Faculty Exam Board and FED.	Associate PVC (Quality & Standards) via AQSC,
The University deadline of dissertations in PGT programmes was extended by 14 days.	Programme Directors and School Education Directors	Associate PVC (Learning and Teaching) via ULTC & PVC (Education) via UEC.
If a student failed an assessment from the summer and did not meet the criteria for progression then they were permitted to re-sit the assessment in August/ September for an uncapped mark	Programme Director and School Exam Boards, followed by Faculty Exam Board and FED.	
Students were permitted three attempts to meet the standard to progress, as standard (normally there are restrictions on students being permitted a third attempt)		
<b>Progression Requirements</b>		
For first year undergraduates, the summer assessments were modified to be formative learning exercises and progression was based on the student engagement with the learning to demonstrate that they had met the intended learning outcomes for this stage of study.	Programme teams, FEDs, supported by UEDs (Quality)	Associate PVC (Quality & Standards) via AQSC,
For undergraduate students on intermediary years, progression was based on achieving an overall pass mark in assessments taken in the year and demonstrating that programme learning outcomes relating to that year of study were met, including passing any units that were essential to the subject (designated as being 'must-pass') and or required for professional accreditation.	Programme Director and School Exam Boards, followed by Faculty Exam Board and FED.	Associate PVC (Learning and Teaching) via ULTC & PVC (Education) via UEC.

<p>Additional thresholds for progression on placement and undergraduate integrated masters programmes were waived.</p>		
<p>Progression within a taught postgraduate Masters degree programme was as outlined above, but with an additional requirement of achieving at least 60 credit points.</p>		
<p><b>Award of Degrees</b></p>		
<p>Requirements for the award of a qualification were modified to enable students to graduate in the normal timeframe whilst also taking account of the impact of the initial onset of the pandemic and ensuring minimum standards for awarding a qualification were met. This was: <i>achieving a pass mark in the final year of study overall; achieving a pass mark in any 'must-pass' units that were designated as essential to the subject and meeting the learning outcomes for the programme.</i></p>	<p>Programme Director and School Exam Boards, followed by Faculty Exam Board/FED.</p>	<p>Associate PVC (Quality &amp; Standards) via AQSC, Associate PVC (Learning and Teaching) via ULTC &amp; PVC (Education) via UEC.</p>
<p>For PGT degrees, the requirement to achieve a pass mark in the dissertation was unchanged given its importance; however, re-submission was permitted where a student failed at the first attempt (normally a mark of 45% is required at the first attempt for re-submission) without penalty.</p>		
<p>If a summer assessment was failed and the criteria for a degree to be awarded was not met, a re-sit of the August/ September assessment for an uncapped mark was allowed.</p>		
<p>Students were permitted three attempts to meet the criteria for the award of the degree or other qualification, as standard (normally restrictions exist on permitting a third attempt).</p>		
<p><b>Classification</b></p>		
<p>A 'safety net' was established, determined by each programme, whereby marks from any assessment affected by the initial onset of the pandemic (after 27 March) would only contribute to the student's degree classification (in 2019/20 or future years) if it improved classification.</p>	<p>Programme Director and School Exam Boards, followed by Faculty Exam Board/FED.</p>	<p>Associate PVC (Quality &amp; Standards) via AQSC, Associate PVC (Learning and Teaching) via ULTC &amp; PVC (Education) via UEC.</p>
<p>Undergraduate students were able to request an opportunity to take any assessment missed due to the circumstances caused by the pandemic, notwithstanding them qualifying for a degree under the temporary regulations, in order to improve their classification or enhance their transcript.</p>		
<p>A general quantitative classification safety net was not applied to PGT programmes, as a minimum number of marks were required to form a reliable estimate of academic performance. Given the variety of our PGT offering, schools used discretion to determine whether a quantitative safety net was appropriate. Otherwise, exam boards had discretion to award a higher classification where it judged that the impact of missing or affected marks had brought the student's marks from their taught units below the threshold for a classification.</p>		

<b>Student Support</b>		
Access to automatic 14-day extensions to coursework deadlines due to circumstances around COVID-19 (normally evidence is required)	Schools and Programme Directors	Associate PVC (Learning and Teaching) via ULTC & PVC (Education) via UEC.
Evidence to accompany extenuating circumstances requests for an exam board to take into account when considering a student's progression or the award of their degree was relaxed.	Extenuating circumstances panels	
Personal tutoring continued in an online forum with tutors being asked to make regular contact with tutees.	Senior Tutors and UED (Personal Tutoring)	PVCs (Student Experience) and (Education) via UEC.

*Table 3: Description of the steps taken in research programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic and confirmation of where decisions were taken.*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Local Authorisation</b>	<b>Policy Development &amp; Central Oversight</b>
Granting extensions to the student's date of normal Annual Progress Monitoring activity.	School and Faculty PGR Directors	Faculty PGR Directors
Granting of extensions to the student's period of study.		Associate PVC (PGR) via UPGRS, Associate PVC (Quality and Standards) via AQSC and PVC (Education) via UEC
Online supervision with supervisors asked to contact their students on a weekly basis to provide support.		
Submission of dissertations for research degrees moved to a wholly online format.		
Acknowledgement that the requirement to hold vivas within four months of submission might not be possible.		

<p>Vivas for our research degrees moved to an online format and an additional 'online Chair' was required to attend to safeguard student wellbeing and provide additional support in the event of technical difficulties.</p>	<p>Faculty PGR Directors via Appointment of Examiners form.</p>	<p>Associate PVC (PGR) via UPGRC and UEC</p>
<p>Granting of extensions for students to undertake corrections.</p>	<p>Research degrees exam board (RDEB) chaired by Associate PVC (PGR)</p>	
<p>Including standard Covid-19 statement on disruptions to research activities in theses.</p>	<p>School and Faculty PGR Directors</p>	<p>Associate PVC (PGR) via UPGRC</p>