Communication to STAFF from UL Academic Planning Group in relation to assessment for all Taught Programmes

Dear Colleagues,

The University of Limerick Academic Planning Group has been meeting regularly and, amongst other items, discussed the issue of how the University cope with the impact of the immediate campus closure, the uncertainty at national and local level over the possibility and timing of reopening, and our assessment procedures. It is fair to say we are in uncharted territory and the Academic Planning Group has explored multiple options as to how we maintain academic integrity, provide assessment for our students to enable timely completion of final awards, and provide the flexibility that will be required during the COVID-19 pandemic to enable all of our students to either progress to their next academic year, or graduate.

We, as an institution, cannot underestimate the challenge here. The institution ratifies approximately 70 000 grades each semester for our 16 000+ students. Each grade requires the involvement of many stakeholders within the academic departments and our professional divisions and these result in the majority of progression decisions for taught programmes being made this semester. Those most affected by these changes will be the students themselves and the module leaders.

The Academic Planning Group is very much aware of the impacts that COVID-19 has on our society in general and on education institutions more specifically. We will remain closed until 19 April at least, and we do not expect to physically return to campus this semester, which means that we must continue and complete this academic year in online modus. We do know this will impact our students in many, many different ways. As an institution that supports diversity in our student population, we need to consider this impact and the (in)ability of all our students, regardless of their personal situation, to participate in an assessment at a predetermined time in the near future while dealing with the likely impacts of COVID-19. We are very proud of our diverse student population and this diversity necessitates a level of flexibility never required before. When children are at home as schools and creches have closed, when home caring necessities increase, while financial situations worsen, while unemployment increases, while family businesses struggle, and ultimately, as our students, their friends and families suffer with COVID-19, we cannot be sure that our students will have a suitable physical, or emotional place to participate in a time-bound centrally scheduled exam at a predetermined time.

The Academic Planning Group is aware that there is technical functionality in our core virtual learning environment (VLE; Sulis) that could theoretically be used to deliver an online time-bound and centrally scheduled exam. However, and in addition to the reasoning above, we must appreciate that our students would be accessing the VLE from different geographical locations, with vastly varying internet connection speeds, on widely varying different types of devices with different processing speeds and different internet browsers leading to the possibility of unintended and unacceptable inequity. In addition, we are unsure of the ability of our VLE to handle the simultaneous load during each of the calendared exam periods.

The Academic Planning Group recognises and acknowledges that it normally takes time to experiment and reflect on delivery and assessment modes within modules to attain the correct balances in workload; this reflects the depth of our expertise. Much of what we have had to do in recent weeks has led us to a place where we cannot benefit from such time to experiment and reflect.

In order to manage staff workload and to ensure that we can be fully prepared for other unexpected COVID-19 related demands over the coming months, we are encouraging all academic staff to carefully critique the demands of their alternative assessment requirements. This will help to protect staff from overcompensating with heavy demand assessment tasks that impact adversely on them as well as our students. From an institutional perspective we are aware that such demands may lead to a significant increase in applications for I grades and ultimately increase the repeat examination requirements; both of which will impact on all academic departments and professional divisions.

The Academic Planning Group has endeavoured to create a dynamic and robust solution that will withstand, as much as possible, the predicted impact of COVID-19 on our students whilst remaining true to the academic principles of the University. The Centre for Transformative Learning (CTL) has already developed and circulated guidance on 'Alternative assessments to end of term exams' and 'Moving to an alternative, remote end-of-term assessment' – these are also available at https://www.ul.ie/ctl/ and at https://ul.topdesk.net/.

Of course, it will be challenging to deliver remote assessments to reflect what we typically do on campus but, given the demonstrable collegiality across the campus community in the past few days, this is a challenge that we know we can address.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- All terminal exams arranged at the institutional level for May through Academic Registry (via the MERCS system) will no longer go ahead.
- All other on-campus assessments, either planned or scheduled to occur later this semester, will no longer go ahead.
- To ensure we maximise the opportunity for all our students to complete assessment points, all remaining assessment points (including any replacement for a terminal end of semester exam) should be redeveloped where applicable and made available on the VLE and/or distributed to the students via e-mail, by Monday 6th April.
- If required, this communication should also state that the module assessment information provided at the start of the semester is being amended. In addition, if the format of the repeat assessment has changed, information related to the format of the altered repeat assessment mode should also be included. The University is planning to offer institutional exams in August but alternative modes should be considered in this period of great uncertainty.
- The final deadline for the submission of any altered assessment point by a student will be Friday 15th May – the final date of this current semester. This provides students with a six-week window (6/4 to 15/5) in which to complete all required assessments.
- It should be noted that due to the issues pertaining to equity and unpredictability of the impact of COVID-19 any interim deadlines for submission for individual assessments (i.e. a date before

15th May) must be flexible and allow submission up to, and including, the final submission deadline. The students should be advised that there will be no penalty for late submissions up to and including May 15th. This should be managed at modular/departmental level in a way that minimises the impact on both the staff and the student.

- As remote learners tend to benefit from a scaffolded structure to guide them through a module, we strongly encourage module coordinators to create a recommended work plan including the interim deadlines for submission for their modules to guide student effort and endeavour.
- All grades should be submitted for consideration by the extended module grade entry (MGE) deadline of Tuesday 9th June.

SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES

Terminal Assessment Points

- All terminal exams arranged at the institutional level for May through Academic Registry (via the MERCS system) will no longer go ahead.
- There is no option available to provide a time limited proctored examination, either online or in person
- An alternative assessment point, or points where appropriate, should be created which can be completed by all students remotely; this should have an equal contribution to the overall module grade as the original terminal exam.
- The assessments should offer equivalent validity, reflect high standards, and address the learning outcomes as any award-related assessment ordinarily conducted on campus.

Continuous Assessment Points

- All continuous assessment points already completed will be assessed, if not done already, and contribute to the final grade for the module.
- All continuous assessment points due for completion between now and the end of the semester will continue to be offered via a remote option where possible. Any deadlines that applied to these assessment points will stand but flexibility in submission dates is expected.
- Where it is not possible to offer the original assessment remotely an alternative assessment point that can be completed remotely should be offered; this should contribute to the overall module grade.
- The assessments should offer equivalent validity, reflect high standards, and address the learning outcomes as any award-related assessment ordinarily conducted on campus.

Final Year Project and Dissertation Assessment Points

- All final year projects and masters dissertations due for completion and submission between now and the end of the academic year will be offered remotely.
- The format of the project or dissertation may need to change where the original plan of work is not possible due to the restrictions related to COVID-19

- For masters programme dissertations occurring over the summer, we will replicate the multiple Module Grade Entry processes in a similar way to AY 18-19 and facilitate a full Winter exam board.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INCOMPLETE (I) GRADES

Clearly, during the COVID-19 pandemic the requirements for I grades is highly unpredictable. As such, we will continue to operate the I grade process as outlined in section 4.2.3 of the University of Limerick Handbook of Academic Regulations and Procedures. However, there are two significant changes in how the process will operate –

1. In the case of illness – students will be able to provide self-certification where third-party certification is not possible; we are acutely aware that we cannot add any extra burden to the health services within Ireland at this time.

2. In the case of a COVID-19 related impact that is not covered within our current regulations a special (fourth) category will be facilitated. Our objective is to ensure that no student will be penalised for a COVID-19 related issue and at the same time maintain academic standards and quality. For example, this category may cover students with a change in any home care arrangement, an inability to engage in remote assessment due to a change in personal circumstances, inability to access LENS related learning supports remotely, students who lack access to a digital infrastructure with no alternative assessment mode – this list is not exhaustive.

More information related to the practical aspects of how and when to submit documentation in support of an I grade will follow in due course but this solution will be based around our current I grade platform and processes.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE UNIVERSITY CALENDAR

As outlined above, the extension of the module grade entry period to facilitate assessment of remote assessment points will impact on the University Calendar. This will impact the processes and/or committee meetings outlined below; it should be noted that these dates are provisional and are dependent on the impact of COVID-19 and containment measures on students and staff. Additionally, further changes to the AY 19-20 and AY 20-21 calendar may be required.

End of semester two occurs on Friday 15th May as per original calendar

- Module Grade Entry deadline is to be rescheduled from 26th May to 9th June
- Academic Council Grading Committee is to be rescheduled from 5th June to 19th June
- University Exam Board is to be rescheduled from 11th June to 25th June
- Availability of results to students is to be rescheduled from 22nd June to 6th July
- Opening of the two-week recheck process is to be rescheduled from 22nd June to 6th July

- Script Viewing days (online if necessary) are to be rescheduled from 30th June & 1st July to 14th and 15th July
- Student Status Committee is to be rescheduled from 1st July to 15th July

MEMBERSHIP OF THE ACADEMIC PLANNING GROUP

Vice President Academic Affairs and Student Engagement (Chair); the Deputy President, Chief Operating Officer and Registrar; the Associate Vice President Academic Affairs; the Associate Vice President Student Engagement; the Associate Vice President Academic Systems and Deputy Registrar; the Deans and Assistant Deans (Academic Affairs) from each faculty and the Dean of Graduate and Professional Studies; Director International Education Division; Director Cooperative Education and Careers Division; Director Information Technology Division; Head of the Centre for Transformational Learning; Director of Strategic Projects and Transformation.

UL Critical Operations Team and Executive Committee