Return of In-course Assessments

1. **Background**

1.1 As part of our preparations for September 2012, the Newcastle ‘offer’ was adopted by Senate in 2011, detailing what a Stage 1 student can expect as part of their academic experience. The ‘offer’ is explicit that students will receive ‘timely and useful feedback for all assessments that feeds forward into improvement of performance’. The Student Charter for taught students in 2012 restates this principle for a student audience in terms of practical commitments: that the University undertakes to provide students with clear deadlines and timeframes for feedback on submitted work, including the receipt of marks and feedback on in-course assignments within 20 working days of submission. The four week turnaround time is not a new commitment: it is part of our existing Student Charter and parallel Teaching Code of Practice, that ‘Schools and Teaching Staff will provide marks and other useful feedback on coursework normally within four term-time weeks of submitting that coursework.’ Whilst we should not lose sight of the importance of the utility and quality of feedback, one of the ways in which we have chosen as an institution to measure ourselves is against a four week turnaround time.

1.2 In order to gather baseline data on the University’s current performance with respect to the four week turnaround time, and identify areas of focus for improvement, Internal Audit undertook a review in July-October 2011. The review examined the processes that each Academic Unit uses and the supporting documentation it retains to manage and evidence the issue, receipt and return of in-course assessments. Senate, at its meeting on 24 April, noted that Internal Audit had undertaken a review of the work process for the four week turnaround commitment, and in view of its findings asked that an action plan from University Teaching, Learning and Student Experience Committee (UTLSEC) be brought forward to the next meeting.

2. **Defining the four week turnaround time**

2.1 The commitment to a four week turnaround time has hitherto been interpreted as being four term-time weeks. As part of the consultation on feedback turnaround times undertaken when the Newcastle ‘offer’ was being agreed, and based upon evidence from student surveys and Internal Subject Reviews, it was apparent that some students have had to wait much longer for feedback particularly when an assessment deadline falls shortly before a vacation. This is not felt to be in keeping with the principles behind the specific policy commitment, namely that feedback should be timely in order for students to feed it forward into improving future performance.

2.2 UTLSEC undertook a consultation with the faculties and recommended to Senate that the current policy position be clarified in the interests of students, so that feedback on in-course assessment is provided in 20 working days (i.e. excluding closure periods and bank holidays). It is recognised that this will prove challenging in some areas of the University, but that this is the most equitable and supportive approach for students.

3. **Internal Audit Review**

3.1 The main Audit findings were as follows:

- 2/22 sampled assessments demonstrably met the four-week turnaround requirement. The performance of the remaining 20/22 assessments could not be measured/proven due to the lack of suitable documentation.
- The NESS coursework submission module has not been robustly tested
- Inconsistent treatment of late-submitted assessments
- 2/22 academic units could not provide evidence of feedback to students
On the basis of these findings a number of recommendations were made, as set out in the table below. Overall, it was concluded that expected controls were not in place and there was a significant risk that objectives may not be achieved, with resulting failure to meet student expectations and damage to reputation.

3.2 Following consideration of a draft report by Jeannette Strachan (Academic Registrar), Suzanne Cholerton (Pro-Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching), Richard Dale (Director of Finance) and John Hogan (Registrar), a final report was published on 01/02/12. At its meeting on 7 March 2012, UTLSEC received the Internal Audit Report on the Return of Assessments and agreed the actions outlined in the table below.

3.3 Each of the policy amendments has been the subject of consultation with Faculty Teaching, Learning and Student Experience Committees. The Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors have been charged by Executive Board with promoting discussion of feedback turnaround with Heads of Academic Units and formulating action plans prior to September 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNAL AUDIT RECOMMENDATION</th>
<th>UTLSEC RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. We recommend that management collectively determine and agree the minimum information to be recorded and retained to support performance against this target. This should include:</td>
<td>Following consultation with the Faculties, UTLSEC has agreed revisions to the Submission of Work policy, the main points of which are summarised in Appendix 1, for implementation from September 2012. In order to manage the workload for Academic Units, we have focused upon a core set of steps all Academic Units will be expected to have in place in 2012/13:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) the method, receipt and date of receipt of the assessment by the School;</td>
<td>• All academic units to set and publish firm deadlines for submission and the 20 day turnaround time within the first two weeks of the academic term/semester. This expectation has been articulated in the threshold standard for the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) agreed by UTLSEC at its May 2012 meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) the receipt (and date of receipt) of the assessment by the marker;</td>
<td>• Procedures to record the date and time of submission thus confirming receipt, and to record return of marks and feedback, using existing systems. The remainder of the process steps are recommended as good practice for 2012/13 where Academic Units have systems in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) the return (and date of return) of the assessment by the School Office or equivalent;</td>
<td>The University has established a Task and Finish Group for Student Data Systems which will report by September 2012 on the feasibility of using existing functionality, such as Blackboard or NESS, to record submission and turnaround electronically, and will seek to set up pilots to take place in 2012/13, with a view to rolling out electronic recording of submission and turnaround as recommended by Internal Audit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) communication to the student (and the date) that the assessment is ready for collection;</td>
<td>1 NOTE: the checklist of core requirements in the Appendix is an integrated summary of the key requirements in relation to four week turnaround, late submission and feedback on examinations and so covers items beyond the direct scope of the Audit Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) the date of collection by the student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

1 NOTE: the checklist of core requirements in the Appendix is an integrated summary of the key requirements in relation to four week turnaround, late submission and feedback on examinations and so covers items beyond the direct scope of the Audit Report
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNAL AUDIT RECOMMENDATION</th>
<th>UTLSEC RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. We suggest that Schools should not currently rely on NESS as support for course work assessment submissions.</td>
<td>The coursework submission facility in NESS works and records the data required. It is recognised that this part of the NESS system has not been documented, i.e. it is not currently sufficiently robust to be viable immediately as a corporate system, and this constitutes a risk. However, it will take time to scope and evaluate options, and it is important that we maintain existing business processes while this is done. The Task and Finish Group will explore what options the University has for this functionality and make a recommendation for the approach to be adopted across the institution in September 2013. Whichever system is selected as the corporate system for this data, it will be fully supported. Meanwhile, Academic Units will be encouraged to use existing systems, including NESS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. We recommend that the rules regarding the submission of late work are clarified, communicated and adhered to ensure consistency in the marking process.</td>
<td>The expectations regarding the submission of late work have been reviewed and clarified. Following consultation with Faculties, UTLSEC has agreed revisions to the Submission of Work policy, the main points of which are summarised in the Appendix, for implementation from September 2012. The Board of Studies and the External Examiner are responsible for reviewing records on late submission to ensure consistency and equity of practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. We recommend that documented feedback is provided to students for each assessment and that a copy is retained by the School.</td>
<td>Following consultation with the Faculties and subject to the agreement by Senate of the recommendation in 3 above, UTLSEC has agreed revisions to the Policy on Feedback on Assessed Work, the main points of which are summarised in the Appendix, for implementation from September 2012.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Communication, implementation and monitoring**

- The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) and QuILT will be responsible for communicating these expectations, for example, via Heads of Unit Forum, presentations at Faculty Teaching, Learning and Student Experience Committees and the Directors of Learning and Teaching Forum
- Heads of Academic Units will be responsible for the implementation within their units of the expectations regarding implementation and recording of the 20 working days turnaround time
- The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) and QuILT will be responsible for producing a reporting template for Academic Units, using which Heads of Academic Units will be asked to report via Faculty Executive Boards to Executive Board in March 2013 and September 2013
- QUILT will be responsible for monitoring the views of External Examiners on the implementation of the policy on late submission
- The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) and the Dean of Postgraduate Studies in SAgE will co-chair the Task and Finish Group for Student Data Systems, which will report to UTLSEC and the Digital Campus Group in September making recommendations on longer term development of systems to support these processes.

Suzanne Cholerton  
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), on behalf of Executive Board

21 June 2012
Appendix

Submission of Assessed Work, Feedback on and Return of Assessed Work
Core Requirements Checklist 2012/13

NOTE: The checklist of core requirements is an integrated summary of the key requirements in relation to 20 working day turnaround, late submission and feedback on examinations and so covers items beyond the direct scope of the Audit Report. The direct responses to the Internal Audit Report are shaded.

1. As established in the Newcastle University Student Charter, academic units must set specific and firm deadlines, naming the date and time of submission, for all summative coursework assessments. All marks and feedback on coursework must be received by students within 20 working days of submission.

2. All deadlines must be clearly communicated to staff and students within or before the first two weeks of the academic term/semester. Academic units must maintain internal evidence of deadline dates and the means by which staff and students are notified of them.

3. Academic units must have reliable and consistent procedures in place to record the date and time of the submission of assessed work and to provide evidence of submission times/dates if and when requested.

4. Requests for extensions must be managed through the University Personal Extenuating Circumstances (PEC) Application [Appendix 1] and not through module leader discretion, so as to encourage uniformity and equitability across Schools/Institutes and across the University. Academic units must have consistent and transparent arrangements in place for the submission and management of PEC extension requests, and students must be informed of the application procedure well in advance of any submission deadlines. Academic units must keep a central record of all PEC applications received and extensions granted for annual review by Boards of Studies.

5. The normal maximum allowable extension is two weeks for all full-time undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, with proportionate allowance for part-time taught students. The length of extension granted will vary according to individual circumstances as evidenced by a PEC application.

6. Academic units must record any summative assessment submitted after the published deadline as late (unless an extension has been granted or alternative procedures have been set and announced for that particular assessment). Work submitted within 7 calendar days after the assessment deadline must, for the assignment in question, be given a maximum of 40% for undergraduate modules and of 50% for postgraduate modules; work submitted after 7 calendar days must be given a mark of zero. If a student fails to submit work after an agreed upon extension date/time, academic units must record the submission as late and markers must apply the policies above. In marking late submissions, markers are required to note for internal records the mark that would have been achieved had the work been submitted on time as well as the capped mark.
7. Staff recognise the importance of providing good quality feedback on assessments in a timely manner. In some cases this may take time if a moderator is involved but we still commit to providing feedback to students early enough to influence the next assessment task and all feedback on coursework must be returned to students within 20 working days of the submission date, including non-term/semester periods but excluding closure periods and Bank Holidays.

8. We are committed to providing quality feedback on examinations. Feedback and provisional marks on examinations must be returned to students at the start of the next academic term/semester. At minimum, generic feedback must be issued to cohorts within this deadline. In addition individual feedback can be provided to students on request after Exam Boards have met. Feedback must be provided to those students who are re-sitting exams at least 4 weeks before their resits to inform their preparation.

9. Academic units should devise procedures to release provisional marks awarded on any summative assessment to students as soon as they are available and within the stated turnaround deadline. Provisional marks should be disclosed to students, whenever practicable, as an integer on the appropriate University common mark scale.

10. Academic units must maintain student confidentiality in the disclosure of marks, regardless of whether marks are distributed electronically (e.g. Blackboard, NESS, email) or physically (e.g. on scripts or mark sheets, posted in a central location according to student numbers).

11. Academic units must retain all summative examination scripts and coursework submissions for a period of one year after the award of the degree or qualification, for quality assurance purposes and in case of any appeals.

12. Boards of Studies are responsible for reviewing records of submission and feedback turnaround to monitor the consistency and equitability of practice. Heads of Schools will monitor and log the implementation and maintenance of key requirements, with Faculty-level discussion of this evidence to be considered at FTLSECS and at FEB meetings at minimum once per semester/term. A scorecard recording and commenting upon Faculty-level evidence will be submitted to EB for review.

13. Internal and external review processes will ensure that academic units have developed and are maintaining policies and practices that incorporate all applicable core requirements. Annual Monitoring and Review (AMR) processes will examine the internal evidence listed above, and Internal Subject Reviews (ISRs) will include random module checks to ensure implementation of the core requirements at the level of individual modules.