GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT IN THE 2019-2020 ACADEMIC YEAR DUE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The COVID-19 health crisis has had an enormous impact on the academic activities conducted at universities since the Catalan government suspended face-to-face university teaching at Catalan public universities. This decision was later ratified by the Spanish government through Royal Decree 463/2020, of 14 March, declaring a state of emergency, which suspended face-to-face university teaching and provided that, during the suspension, educational activities were to be continued via distance formats wherever possible.

Faced with these exceptional circumstances, and through the efforts of the entire university community without exception (academic management, teaching staff, administrative and service staff, and students), the University of Barcelona has responded responsibly, rapidly and flexibly to ensure the continuity of its training activities by adapting its courses to distance formats without lowering its quality standards.

On 3 April, the rector of the University of Barcelona, by agreement with the Catalan president, the Catalan minister of Business and Knowledge, and the rectors of the other Catalan universities, decided to suspend face-to-face teaching for the second term until the end of the academic year. In the resolution, the rector tasked the Governing Council’s Academic Committee with developing and approving general teaching guidelines for the remainder of the academic year, and with taking the necessary measures to ensure the learning and assessment of all University of Barcelona students, to be approved by the Governing Council. Subsequently, the state of emergency was extended by Spanish Royal Decree 487/220, from 10 April until 26 April. Based on the information received, additional extensions cannot be ruled out.

BACKGROUND

Before the state of emergency was declared on 14 March 2020, in anticipation of the temporary suspension of face-to-face teaching, the University of Barcelona’s governing team
provided the UB’s schools and faculties with the document *Guidelines on teaching and assessment in light of the temporary suspension of face-to-face academic activities due to COVID-19* (in Catalan). On 16 March, it sent the schools and faculties another document, entitled *Teacher support tools*. Since that day, communication with the faculties has been fluid, and several channels have been set up to manage the information and facilitate synergies and best practices amongst the schools and faculties in the face of the initial fifteen-day lockdown.

On 27 March 2020, a meeting was held with all schools and faculties to register their concerns, needs and contributions and, subsequently, provide solutions and convey proposals to the various meetings of the Inter-university Council of Catalonia (CIC) and the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE). Additionally, at the meeting, three resolutions were adopted for all the schools and faculties, and a written document was then drawn up and unanimously approved.

The first resolution provides for the option of allowing students to request a single assessment until the end of the teaching period. Each school or faculty may manage this option autonomously, flexibly and agilely, determining the processes to be followed in accordance with the specific characteristics of each degree course. The resolution further stresses that students must be duly informed.

In the second resolution, it is agreed to ensure that the volume of activities, exercises or papers assigned by the teachers of the various subjects students are taking for their group/track/academic year is balanced to prevent excessive workloads. In the current sudden distance-teaching context, there is often a tendency to assign students more work to compensate for the absence of the planned face-to-face teaching. Likewise, students should bear in mind that teaching staff are also adapting to the new unanticipated distance-teaching situation and are more exposed to continuous queries, tutorials, and more intense personalized attention.

In the third resolution, it is agreed to provisionally maintain the planned teaching and assessment calendar and to wait and see how the exceptional situation evolves before taking any decisions to modify the academic calendar, as recommended by the Catalan Directorate General for Universities (DGU) and the CRUE.

The present document was developed to meet the various needs that have been identified since the first day of the state of emergency via different channels and tools, including the analysis of data from the Virtual Campus, the questionnaires designed by some schools and faculties, and the experience of all groups involved in the academic sphere of suddenly having to adapt planned face-to-face teaching to a distance format. Each school and faculty should adapt these general guidelines as flexibly and rigorously as possible to the specific characteristics and needs of each degree course in terms of the academic calendar, teaching, assessment, and subjects with special requirements (i.e., bachelor’s or master’s degree theses and internships).
GENERAL ACTION PRINCIPLES

1. **Training quality.** The changes adopted as a result of the state of emergency must not affect the training quality standards required by the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU).

2. **Transparency and documentation.** The changes made to the planned teaching and assessment must be approved by the department directors and the head of studies or master’s coordinator and must be documented in order to provide certainty and confidence to the university community, ensure legal certainty and facilitate the progress reports and renewal processes for the accreditation of the degree courses.

3. **Information for students.** Students must be informed of all modifications made to the content and adaptations of the teaching methodology and assessment methods through the Virtual Campus (or other channels that ensure the students receive the information) far enough in advance to allow them to properly follow the teaching, prepare for the assessment tests, and plan their time.

4. **Inclusion, flexibility and rigor.** Care must be taken to ensure that the adaptations to distance formats do not exclude students who, due to a lack of technological resources or specific needs, have difficulty following distance learning. Flexible alternatives must be offered in the teaching and assessment formats to meet the needs of these students without lowering standards in terms of the required learning outcomes.

5. **Maintenance of the planned academic calendar.** One objective of the adaptation process is for students to be able to take the subjects in which they are enrolled and be assessed on the dates stipulated in the academic calendar without experiencing delays in the completion of the current academic year or having to transfer subjects to the next academic year.

In accordance with the framework calendar for the academic year 2019-2020, the continuous and single assessment periods end on 30 June. However, exceptionally, the periods for both types of assessments will be extended until the end of July, with the possibility of scheduling resits in September, given that the university is not in session in August.

Each school or faculty will have to determine the procedure for the approval and subsequent publication of the necessary modifications made to its academic calendar. All such modifications must be included in the school or faculty’s progress report and must be conveyed to the Governing Council’s Academic Committee via Academic Management by 30 April.

Those training activities that cannot be adapted to a distance format may be rescheduled for July or September, where possible, or, in the case of long-term external
placements, even October and November. Regardless, they will be considered to have taken place in the current academic year 2019-2020, without the need for students to re-enrol.

The extension of the academic calendars is subject to the applicable regulatory provisions or instructions adopted by the competent authorities.

GUIDELINES FOR ADAPTING TEACHING

• Any adaptations that need to be made to the content, teaching methodology, bibliographic resources or any other section of the course plan must be reflected in an addendum and must ensure that the students acquire the corresponding competences. If necessary, the teaching staff will make the corresponding adaptations to their teaching schedule and will inform students of these changes as soon as possible and, in all cases, by the end of April.

• The governing bodies of the schools and faculties will monitor distance teaching to gather information on how it is progressing.

• Practical or experimental teaching may be adapted to distance formats that enable learning outcomes similar to those planned in the degree course. Possible alternatives include the use of practical simulation programs commonly used in face-to-face teaching through a virtual connection (via a VPN) to the computer rooms where the programs are hosted, or programs offering licences for student practicals, that allow students to install them on their own computers, etc. In each case, the idiosyncrasies of each degree course must be taken into account. All modifications to the course plan must be included in the document to be approved by the department’s management and the head of studies or master’s coordinator, as well as in the faculty or school’s progress report for quality assurance processes.

• In cases in which the face-to-face activities already carried out have allowed students to achieve a reasonable volume of learning outcomes that ensure sufficient acquisition of competences, the learning may be completed with other assessable types of activities (projects, reports, training programmes, etc.).

• If it is not possible to acquire in this academic year any specific competences from a subject that are needed for subjects in subsequent academic years, a specific support plan may be developed for the next academic year, to be included in the course plans for the affected subjects.

In those exceptional cases in which it is not possible to adapt practical teaching to a distance format, the subject may be rescheduled for once the health authorities allow face-to-face teaching again and may be taught intensively in July or September, where possible.
• In this unforeseen situation, the teaching staff have had to adapt, gradually and in accordance with their interactions with students, various teaching methodologies to technological contexts. This may have been done synchronously or asynchronously, as the transition to distance teaching does not necessarily entail assimilating face-to-face teaching with synchronous teaching, which requires planning appropriate synchrony adapted to the emergency context within the teaching schedule assigned to the enrolment group. To support the teaching staff, the CRAI Teaching Unit is offering materials, resources and tools to facilitate teaching, such as files, questionnaires, tasks, forums and chats. Additionally, the offices of the vice-rectors for Teaching and for Academic Planning and Quality have developed a new website called Information, recommendations and resources for distance teaching activity.

GUIDELINES FOR ADAPTING ASSESSMENT

• We have switched from a face-to-face teaching format to a distance format with all the challenges that the rapid adoption of new ways of managing this teaching entails. Nevertheless, we have kept the continuous assessment paradigm. Therefore, teaching staff must find ways to interact with students synchronously or asynchronously to regulate their learning, depending on the specific characteristics of each subject. These activities must be scheduled and explained to students in advance. Teaching staff must take care to prevent overlap or excessive workloads for the assignments given to students in the different subjects for an academic year, and the activities that students have to complete must be proportional to the number of credits for each subject.

• Because of the pandemic, students may have experienced very different situations. Deadlines must thus be relaxed to allow them to request the single-assessment option in order to ensure as much as possible that they can be assessed.

• The assessment methods and criteria to replace those originally planned must enable assessment of the acquisition of competences and of the learning outcomes for each subject.

• Any adaptations that need to be made to the assessment, such as new weightings for the continuous assessment and the final assessment test or the various distance final assessment alternatives, must be included in the addenda to the course plans. Teaching staff must inform students of the adaptations as soon as possible and by the end of April at the latest.

• With regard to reassessment, teaching staff should be as flexible as possible and not limit the minimum mark required to sit them or make sitting them conditional upon having sat the previous assessment.
• If face-to-face assessment activities cannot be carried out, as far as possible, a systematic assessment should be developed that can be performed online so as not to prevent students from being assessed and, thus, from earning a final mark. The fact that teaching has had to be delivered in digital formats despite not having originally been planned that way also means that the means of assessment should be modified and adapted to realistic alternative means.

To this end, the recommendations for preparing distance assessment tests made by the inter-sectoral working group set up by the CRUE for this purpose (secretaries general, teaching, ICT, and student affairs) and the working group formed by the CIC’s Access and Student Affairs (CAAE) and Academic Planning and Organization (CPOA) committees should be taken into account. Regardless, the university will ensure that all students have access to the technical resources required for the chosen assessment method.

• Students retain the right to have their marks reviewed. When announcing the marks, teaching staff will indicate the date and time for the review, as well as the mechanisms to be used to carry it out.

• To support teaching staff, the CRAI Teaching Unit is offering materials, resources and tools to facilitate assessment, such as questionnaires, tasks, forums and chats. Similarly, the offices of the vice-rectors for Teaching and for Academic Planning and Quality have developed a new website called Information, recommendations and resources for distance teaching activity that includes a specific section on assessment. In the coming days, a document will also be published with recommendations and resources for online assessment, in accordance with the agreements of the CRUE and CIC CAAE-CPOA working groups. The latter group has studied and proposed possible assessment measures for a distance context and is offering the entire Catalan university system various online resources, always subject to the notion that the content of the tests must be adapted to students’ current lockdown status.

SUBJECTS WITH SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

Practical activities that need to be postponed due to the state of emergency may be carried out in September, October and November, within the current call, without the need for students to re-enrol and with flexible measures to enable the continuation of studies next academic year.

Guidelines for the defence and assessment of bachelor’s and master’s degree theses (TFG and TFM)

• The defence of bachelor’s and master’s degree theses may be adapted to an online format and, in all cases, identification of the student and the public nature of the defence will be guaranteed. Efforts will be made to allow students to defend their projects on the planned calendar dates, unless it is not possible. In that case, the defence and assessment dates will be rescheduled. Therefore, consideration should be given to extending the assessment period, where necessary, to September, October and November.
• The academic councils or bachelor’s degree thesis committees may decide to substitute the public defence with the submission of written reports when technical difficulties interfere with the creation of online evaluation committees, except where prohibited under the regulations governing the degree course.

• The thesis supervisors must ensure appropriate follow-up of the student’s work by scheduling tutoring sessions via the communication mechanisms available to the student.

• Experimental theses or those requiring placements or field work will be dealt with according to the guidelines established for curricular external placements.

• Should the submission of theses be subject to completion of practical activities or external placements, and should those activities or placements need to be postponed due to the impossibility of adapting them to a distance format within the planned dates, the student will be allowed to submit and defend the thesis even if the curricular placement period has not been completed and passed. The transfer to the student’s transcript of the mark obtained for the thesis will be subject to successful completion of the placement. Other assessment activities for passing such placements may also be designed in accordance with the teaching and assessment sections of this document.

Guidelines for the completion and assessment of curricular external placements

• As a general rule, the requirement for external workshops to be assessed will be to have completed at least 50% of the established hours.

• In this assessment process, and to allow students to reach the required minimum percentage of hours, competences and learning outcomes acquired in the context of professional and volunteering experience, as well as in the extracurricular academic placements, may also be recognized, especially for students in their final academic year. The academic director of the training plan, by agreement with the coordinator of each study course, school or faculty’s placements, will study each case individually and will decide whether to recognize the experience and, where applicable, will record it in the supervisor’s report.

• The placement coordinator will make the changes to the assessment of external academic placements needed to make it possible to compensate for the placement hours that could not be completed. The process for validating and publishing these modifications in the course plan will be the same as that followed for the rest of the subjects.
Additionally, in the case of compulsory placements for degree courses qualifying graduates to practice regulated professions, the applicable rules established by the Spanish government and the proposals agreed by the conference of deans from the respective area must be followed.

The assessment of placements will be carried out on an open and individual basis so that it can be done as soon as the minimum requirements for assessment are met and by the maximum deadline for closing the assessment period of 30 November 2020.

Any modifications made to the training plan (dates, distance learning format, rescheduling of tasks, etc.) must be included in the report from the external supervisor at the company or the academic supervisor’s report.

FINANCIAL ASPECTS OF ENROLMENT

In light of the continued validity of the resolution annulling the article of the regulations concerning temporary suspension due to non-payment and the non-generation of surcharges when payments are reactivated, ratified by the Board of Trustees’ Economic Committee, and the resolution suspending face-to-face teaching in the second semester, as well as the statement explicitly stating ‘In this frame of exceptionality, we are also working to respond to the different economic situations of the students and urge the competent authorities to adopt exceptional measures in the Decree of fees of the Catalán Government and the conditions of the General grant of the Ministry’, and following a careful analysis of the situation in which the effort to maintain active distance teaching is almost total, it is agreed as follows:

1. To maintain the validity of Articles 34, 35 and 36 of the financial regulations for enrolment, concerning modifications and cancellations of enrolment, changing the deadline for second-term applications, set in Articles 34.7 and 35.7, from 6 March 2020 to 15 May 2020.
   In this regard, and in light of Article 34.3 (’Notwithstanding the terms of the previous paragraph, if the causes of the modification are not attributable to the student, or are the result of a duly accredited serious illness of the student, the amount paid for the cancelled or modified credits may be refunded’), the academic factors that could justify modifications or cancellations of enrolment due to a material impossibility to perform the activities should exceptionally be carefully evaluated and studied in accordance with the protocol set out in the regulations. Furthermore, those cases related to health issues that might also justify such requests should also be studied, as such circumstances are especially relevant in the current context.

2. In case of students who have had to leave Barcelona due to the health crisis, schools and faculties should prioritize distance assessment options over enrolment cancellation options, even if on an individual basis, whilst waiting to see how the overall situation evolves with regard to this issue.
3. In this context, the validity of both the BkUB call, for which the application deadline has been extended in accordance with the rector’s decision of 14 March, and the ConnectaUB call should be recalled and highlighted for the dual purpose of making it possible to respond, first, to problems concerning the payment of enrolment fees and, second, to problems related to access to technology.