1 Digitisation Policy of the Georg Agricola University of Applied Sciences

The Executive Board of the Georg Agricola University of Applied Sciences adopted the following Digitisation Policy in its meeting of 15 April 2025. (This is a translation. The German version of this policy is authoritative.)

1.1 Introduction

Since 2006, "e-learning" has already been part of the methodological repertoire at the Georg Agricola University of Applied Sciences (THGA), and since 2008, all activities relating to digital support for teaching have been coordinated by an e-learning unit. Since then, the online learning platform has been a fixed component of the IT infrastructure. By now, hardly any teaching takes place without being accompanied by an online course on the platform.

According to the Higher Education Act of North Rhine-Westphalia (HG NRW), digital components had until recently only been permissible as supplements to face-to-face teaching (§ 3 (3) sentence 2 HG NRW). Since March 2020, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, further formats of digitally supported teaching were established in the so-called "online semesters" and beyond: alongside the use of various video-conferencing systems, experience was gained with live-streaming and recording of lectures, as well as with diverse media-based and digitally supported interaction formats. Several phases of examinations also included so-called "online examinations".

With the entry into force of the "Regulation on Digital Teaching and on the Conduct of Online-Based Elections of Higher Education Institutions and Student Bodies (Higher Education Digital Regulation – HDVO)" in September 2023, the State Government of North Rhine-Westphalia made use of the authorisation set out in § 3 (3) sentence 3 HG NRW to specify further details concerning online teaching and online examinations by means of statutory regulation.

The present Digitisation Policy (DP), in accordance with § 12 (1) sentence 1 no. 1 HDVO, defines for THGA the scope, organisational anchoring and design of teaching formats that are not delivered exclusively as face-to-face teaching.

1.2   Commitment to Face-to-Face Teaching

THGA is a face-to-face university. The loss of in-person participation in teaching, as well as of direct contact between students, teaching staff, other staff members and fellow students during the pandemic-related closures, has clearly demonstrated how important such forms of personal interaction are for study and teaching.

Nevertheless, the Executive Board of THGA wishes to enable additional teaching formats alongside face-to-face instruction under certain conditions. These formats, having proved their relevance at the latest since the online semesters, offer significant advantages through their temporal and spatial flexibility. They improve the compatibility of study with family responsibilities and/or employment, while also benefiting participants in international degree programmes or those commuting from beyond the immediate region.

1.3   About this Policy

This policy provides a framework within which future teaching at THGA may be organised. Teaching may take place in face-to-face settings, as online-based self-study, or through digitally supported transmission.

The policy seeks to offer binding guidance as to how THGA positions itself with regard to digital or digitally supported teaching. It defines different forms of teaching, opens up the possibility for digital examinations, regulates the conditions that must be fulfilled, and makes recommendations on the evaluation of such teaching and examination formats.

1.4   Forms of Digital and Hybrid Teaching

The HDVO distinguishes between face-to-face and digital teaching, and its official explanatory memorandum also refers to hybrid formats. THGA adopts both the terminology and definitions of the HDVO and supplements these, on the basis of § 13 (2), with further details:

a) *Face-to-face teaching* (§ 12 (1) no. 3 HDVO) refers to any university teaching with the simultaneous physical presence of teachers and learners in the same place. In accordance with § 12 (2) HDVO, this includes all courses in which at least 75% of the total course time over a semester is conducted face-to-face. Up to 25% may be carried out using methods of digital teaching (see below). Accompanying a face-to-face course with an online course on THGA's learning platform, e.g. for the distribution of learning materials, remains, of course, at the discretion of teaching staff in accordance with § 3 (3) sentence 2 HG NRW.

b) *Synchronous hybrid teaching* (according to the explanatory memorandum on § 12 (2) HDVO) is a form of face-to-face teaching (see above) supplemented by the possibility of simultaneous (= synchronous) online participation. Such live transmission is possible at

THGA via video-conferencing or video-management systems. As in face-to-face teaching, a maximum of 25% of course time may be carried out using digital methods. This format requires appropriate technical equipment for transmission (either mobile or permanently installed).

c) *Asynchronous hybrid teaching* (according to the explanatory memorandum on § 12 (2) HDVO) refers to courses in which part of the time is delivered face-to-face and another part as digitally enabled self-study. As the HDVO does not stipulate a minimum face-to-face share, the Executive Board sets this at 50%. The other half may be organised through synchronous or asynchronous digital methods. In this model, formerly referred to as "blended learning", face-to-face sessions may be combined with video conferences and online courses. Courses with less than 50% face-to-face teaching are categorised as asynchronous digital teaching.

d) *Mixed hybrid teaching*, which combines synchronous and asynchronous hybrid formats, meaning that the face-to-face component is additionally offered as a live-stream online.

e) *Synchronous digital teaching* (§ 12 (1) no. 4 a) HDVO) refers to courses conducted entirely online (= digital), with teachers and students meeting simultaneously (= synchronously) via video-conferencing technology, without physical presence at the same location. THGA provides a video-conferencing system offering interactive and participatory functions (chat, video and audio transmission, screen sharing).

f) *Asynchronous digital teaching* (§ 12 (1) no. 4 b) HDVO) refers to online-based self-study courses, which students can use autonomously and at their own pace (= asynchronously). At THGA, this typically involves online courses on the learning platform, which may include recorded lectures, explanatory videos, scripts, slides, self-assessment tools, interactive elements, and more. Asynchronous interaction and communication options are recommended, so that students can engage with teaching staff and fellow students. The platform offers tools such as discussion forums, polls, wikis, and many more.

g) *Mixed digital teaching*, combining synchronous (video conferencing) and asynchronous (online course) digital teaching.

Some of the above formats require approval (see below). The following table provides an overview of the seven teaching formats in total:

Teaching Format	Location / Technical Implementation	Teachers on site?	Students on site?	Permitted without restriction?
Face-to-face teaching	Simultaneous physical presence ≥ 75%*	Yes	Yes	Yes
Synchronous hybrid	Simultaneous presence with transmission (Zoom, Panopto) ≥ 75%*	Optional	Optional	Yes

Teaching Format	Location / Technical Implementation	Teachers on site?	Students on site?	Permitted without restriction?
Asynchronous hybrid	Part face-to-face, part self-directed (Moodle) ≥ 50%*	Yes (face-to-face sessions)	Yes (for face-to-face sessions)	Subject to §5c
Mixed hybrid	Part face-to-face with transmission (Zoom, Panopto), part self-directed (Moodle) ≥ 50%*	Optional	Optional	Subject to §5c
Synchronous digital	Via video-conference (Zoom)	No	No	With consent of the respective Digitisation Committee
Asynchronous digital	Self-directed (Moodle)	No	No	With consent of the respective Digitisation Committee
Mixed digital	Via video-conference (Zoom), part self-directed (Moodle)	No	No	With consent of the respective Digitisation Committee

1.5 Conditions for Digital and Hybrid Teaching

Not all teaching formats are suitable for all groups of students in all study formats. Moreover, the HDVO grants affected university groups certain co-determination rights. The different formats are therefore subject to specific conditions:

Face-to-face teaching and synchronous hybrid teaching are, in principle, permitted without restriction following the publication of this Digitisation Policy.

a) Forms of digital teaching[1], due to the lack of face-to-face components, require a degree of independence and self-directed learning on the part of students. For this reason, the Executive Board only permits these formats for:

- full-time bachelor's degree courses from the 4th semester onwards,
- part-time bachelor's degree courses from the 3rd semester onwards, and
- master's degree courses from the 1st semester onwards.

b) In line with the provisions of the HDVO, all forms of digital teaching[1] at THGA require the approval of the "Digitisation Committee" for the relevant academic department (WB) as described in section 6 of this policy. During the introductory/pilot phase, applications for digital teaching may initially only be submitted for individual or several courses within a degree programme and only for the duration of a single semester.

c) The overall share of courses delivered in digital teaching[1], asynchronous hybrid teaching and mixed hybrid teaching within a degree programme should not exceed 25% of modules in full-time programmes and 50% of modules in part-time programmes, in order to safeguard personal encounters between teaching staff and students.

d) Exceptions to conditions a)–c) may be granted in well-founded individual cases with the approval of the department head and the Digitisation Committee.

[1] In synchronous, asynchronous and mixed digital teaching, neither teachers nor students are physically present on site.

1.6   Digitisation Committee

a) In accordance with the guiding principles of the HDVO regarding parity-based decision-making bodies and the requirement for student committee approval, THGA establishes a Digitisation Committee for each academic department (WB).

b) The Digitisation Committee decides, on application and on the basis of this policy, whether and to what extent digital teaching may take place. Its decisions may apply to individual or multiple courses, or to a digital teaching concept for a study format or degree programme, and may be limited in time. The formats of digital teaching are asynchronous hybrid teaching, mixed hybrid teaching and digital teaching. All teaching staff are entitled to submit applications.

c) The Digitisation Committee consists, on one side, of the head of the respective academic department as chair and the programme directors, and on the other side, of students. Each degree programme within the academic department must be represented by at least one student. In addition, one member from the group of academic staff and one from the group of technical/administrative staff in the area of course management are appointed as advisory members. Student members and the academic staff member are appointed by the head of the academic department. The term of office is one year for student members and four years for the academic staff member. Should an insufficient number of students be available at the start of a term, the responsible department head will seek prompt replacement.

d) The Digitisation Committee generally meets twice a year, prior to the start of the lecture period. Meeting dates and deadlines for the submission of applications must be publicly announced within the university by the chair.

e) The Committee adopts decisions by simple majority.

f) The course management representative has the right of veto if organisational implementation cannot be guaranteed. The veto must be exercised at least four weeks before the start of lectures, communicated to the chair, and is binding, rendering the relevant decision invalid.

g) The decisions of the Digitisation Committee must be made publicly available within the university by the chair. Courses approved as asynchronous hybrid teaching or digital

teaching may alternatively be conducted as synchronous hybrid teaching, at the discretion of the lecturer, but not as face-to-face teaching.

1.7 Forms of Digital Examinations

In addition to forms of teaching, the HDVO also regulates various forms of digital examinations. At THGA, oral digital examinations conducted by video conference are already regulated in accordance with the examination regulations, and these rules remain in force. Beyond these permitted exceptions, digital examinations are not currently planned at THGA.

So-called computer-based examinations (examinations in electronic form conducted on campus or under invigilation) are not regarded as digital examinations under § 16 (4) HDVO and may be allowed, depending on requirements such as examination systems, number and availability of computer workstations, etc.

In the event of unforeseeable developments, e.g. renewed pandemic-related university closures, the conduct of digital written examinations may, however, become necessary. Digital examinations may be permitted in accordance with § 17 (1) in conjunction with § 18 HDVO, even if not stipulated in examination regulations, based on a resolution by the faculty council with the approval of the student committee. At THGA, the above-mentioned department Digitisation Committees may also serve as decision-making bodies in such cases.

The HDVO closes a gap in the existing legal framework, which had previously made video invigilation of digital examinations at THGA impossible. In future, video invigilation will be possible under certain conditions, including minimal intrusion into private spaces, and full transparency on the processing of personal data during invigilation. Provisions include authentication via photo ID shown on webcam, the option of a technical check, and further details regulated in the HDVO.

Extensive room surveillance of candidates and automated analysis of video/audio data (so-called "proctoring"), however, remain prohibited.

The Executive Board reserves the right, in the event of unforeseeable developments preventing face-to-face examinations, to instruct the Senate or a Senate commission to adopt corresponding regulations in accordance with the HDVO.

1.8 Monitoring and Evaluation

§ 25 HDVO provides for monitoring of digital teaching formats and examinations. The Executive Board therefore requests THGA's evaluation office to prioritise the evaluation of courses delivered in digital and hybrid formats over face-to-face courses by means of course evaluations. The same applies to examination evaluations.

This is intended to ensure that teaching quality is not impaired by the teaching format. Long-term evaluation results will be regularly presented to the department Digitisation Committees in order to support their decision-making.

1.9 Stakeholders and IT Systems

The THGA Computing Centre – in cooperation with the Information Management of DMT-LB – operates the Moodle learning platform, examination platforms as required, provides the Zoom video management system, offers technical support for hybrid room technology, and organises the provision of mobile hybrid equipment.

The e-learning office administers the learning platform, manages the video management system, supports and advises all users of teaching-related systems and infrastructure, and assists with the expansion of hybrid room technology.

The course planning office organises the allocation of teaching rooms as required and feasible, taking into account decisions on applications for digital teaching.

The university marketing and press office integrates the new teaching formats into public relations activities and highlights the benefits for students.

The evaluation office supports quality assurance of teaching through targeted student surveys, with a focus on hybrid and digital teaching provision.

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