

RUSU Sabbatical Officers
By Email

8 April 2020

Dear Zeid, Gemma, Molli, Fifi and Daisy,

RUSU FULL TIME OFFICERS SUPPORT STUDENT CALL FOR A NO DETRIMENT POLICY

Thank you for taking the time to share the concerns you have received from students about the University's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in your letters of 1 and 6 April 2020. We are grateful for RUSU's attendance at our Major Incident Team meetings and for your input to represent the wider student voice to inform the decisions we have made.

It has been an incredibly difficult time for our whole community, students and colleagues. We have all been worried, not just about the impact on our studies and work, but also personally – for our own health and wellbeing, as well as that of family, friends, and other loved ones.

I am proud of the way in which we have all responded together, quickly adapting to changing government advice to transition to studying and working remotely. Nothing could really have prepared us for the scale of the situation we are currently facing. We have made unprecedented changes to our governance and policies, taking the time needed to ensure we consider the many consequences of these and to limit the negative impact on our students as far as we can. And all this has been done at speed.

Understandably, there are differing views amongst students about our response. That is why I believe it is important to be open and transparent about our decision-making, and how it has been informed by feedback from students and colleagues.

Our priority has, and continues to be, to provide our students with the best possible learning experience. This means taking account of the welfare of our students, the integrity of the assessment process and the resulting marks, and flexibility to account for the current circumstances. All of these must be taken into account – ultimately, we are not fair to anyone if our student outcomes do not meet professional requirements, are not respected by employers and accrediting bodies, and do not have the same value as degrees awarded in previous years.

Please see below my response to the points you have raised in your two letters. In line with your request for a Q&A to allow students to seek responses directly from me, I also attach my answers to the questions you submitted on behalf of students where they are not covered in replying to your letters.

1. **Exams, coursework , extenuating circumstances and our ‘safety net’**

The Office for Students (OfS) last week reiterated that awards should not be made without reliable evidence of student achievement, recognising that this will mean institutions need to be flexible to accommodate different types of programme and varied module combinations. We believe continuing with take home exams and alternate assessment, combined with an individual marks safety net and flexible circumstances impact process, offers the best way to meet this requirement and give our students the best opportunity to be fairly recognised for their hard work.

The current situation will affect students in very different ways, which is why we have tried to develop a suite of measures to accommodate a range of extenuating circumstances and to mitigate the impact on our students’ academic performance.

Our own system of ‘take home’ online exams and alternate assessments has been designed to offer flexibility depending on students’ individual circumstances. They will be open for 23 hours, allowing for time differences, technical issues, or interruptions. In particular, the extended time frame allows those who would usually have special timing arrangements to take any extra time or rest breaks they need. Students who usually use assistive technology can do so on their own devices and our Disability Advisory Service will offer support for those who would normally have the aid of a scribe, reader or Oral Language Modifier (OLM).

To protect against summer term exam and assessment results bringing down students’ average module marks, we have put a marks safety net in place in direct response to student feedback. What this means is that, subject to some specified exceptions, **a student’s mark for each module will be no lower than the average they had achieved through the coursework and other assessment with an original submission date before the end of the Spring term, 27 March 2020**. This includes any extensions beyond that date as long as marking can take place in time for Summer Exam Boards. The exceptions exist where we do not have sufficient basis to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been met, which we are required to do by the OfS and some accreditation bodies.

Concern has been expressed that, because of these exceptions, the marks safety net does not help most students. In developing this for our students, we carefully interrogated our current data. We evaluated that the requirement for 40% completed assessment in a given module was the minimum we could use to award a full module mark and for that final mark to have academic credibility. Our analysis across all undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules shows that **the marks safety net applies to a majority of students at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate level**, including finalists, for some or all of their modules. But all students, particularly finalists and Masters, need to complete their summer term exams and assessment so that they can benefit from the safety net.

We have also been asked about why the marks safety net has been applied at a module, rather than programme level. We consider the module level approach better recognises different profiles of student achievement and the potential impact of current circumstances on different modules.

Our new Circumstances Impact Process (CIP), which temporarily replaces the usual extenuating circumstances policy for the rest of this academic year, allows all students to request a coursework extension, or to defer or resit an exam, for good reason and in most

cases without evidence. The new CIP is available to all students, regardless of whether the marks safety net applies to their module. In relation to re-sits, we hope to be able to run in-person exams by the August/September re-sit period, although this will be dependent on the UK government position at the time and there is a strong possibility that these will also be based around take-home exams. That is why our advice is that students should undertake their exams and/or assessments this summer as planned, where possible.

Completing the remainder of their planned assessments can only have a positive impact on a students' marks. All students should attempt their exams and assessments this summer, where possible, to be in the best position to continue or complete their studies as originally planned.

We hope these flexible measures demonstrate that we have accommodated a range of different student needs, including taught postgraduates and undergraduate finalists due to complete their studies this year.

2. Inconsistencies with other universities' policies

We recognise that other institutions have responded differently. That is to be expected based on their own assessment of their student needs, patterns of assessment, governance arrangements and operational systems. That is why the OfS guidance is not directive – it allows for universities to respond individually based on these factors. While some may see a 'blanket' policy as a simpler or fairer response, our concern is that a 'one size fits all' response risks disadvantaging students who require more flexible support.

Our focus is to deliver the best possible outcomes for our students, which includes upholding the standard of your degree qualification. We have looked at the approaches taken by other universities, but these vary considerably and there is no 'standard practice' for us to rely on. Where similar terms, like 'no detriment', are used they do not necessarily mean the same thing for different institutions.

We have deliberately avoided using the term 'no detriment' as we do not think it is possible for any institution to offset completely all the negative impacts of this global pandemic. We have instead made arrangements for the marks safety net and CIP, which is responsive to individual needs and circumstances, allowing students to demonstrate their learning while addressing individual impacts on academic performance.

3. Learning resource, including changes to teaching and learning

We are compelled to comply with government requirements that colleagues should, wherever possible, work from home and to implement social distancing provisions. In these circumstances, we have done everything we can to ensure students continue to have access to critical services. These are major changes driven by the wide-ranging impact of the COVID-19 outbreak.

All of our specialist student support services are available to students online and we have provided further information in regular emails to students about how they can access these services. Our Study Advice, Student Welfare, Counselling & Wellbeing, Disability Advisory and Careers teams are available as usual for one-to-one appointments, online or over the telephone rather than in person.

We have also continued to provide access to learning materials through our Library e-resources and on Blackboard. The arrangements we have put in place with the

Circumstances Impact Process will prevent students from being disadvantaged if they have been unable to access a particular resource.

Despite these efforts, some students may still feel that they have been disadvantaged by the changes, and that is why we have introduced a new Circumstances Impact Process and tailored complaints policy to address these impacts.

4. *Accommodation and housing issues*

We have confirmed that we will not charge students for their third term of University Halls of Residence accommodation if they are no longer resident there. Where students need to remain in Halls, we are doing all we can to ensure they receive the services that they need for their health and wellbeing.

We reached a similar arrangement with private provider, Unite Students, which runs Kendrick Hall.

For those in the private sector, I have written an open letter to all landlords asking them to follow the government advice to do all they can to support tenants at this difficult time. Many of our students rely on income from part-time work in sectors that have been significantly affected by the outbreak. I have asked landlords to be understanding to all students who find themselves in financial difficulty as a result of the current situation. Our Student Financial Support team are offering advice for any students who find themselves in this position, including eligibility for student support funds that may be available to them. I would encourage any student with concerns to contact the team for further information.

5. *Money and debt issues*

Matters relating to finance are complex and depend on each students' individual circumstances. Therefore, our consistent advice is that students facing financial difficulties should contact the Student Financial Support team to discuss their specific situation and identify the best course of action for them.

In response to COVID-19, we have increased the amount of money allocated to our student support funds and made it easier for students to submit an application for this. We have also confirmed that there will be no charge for any re-sits taking place within the main summer exam period or August/September 2020 resit periods. The same applies to students who defer their exams to autumn 2020.

6. *Student welfare and mental wellbeing concerns*

Our strong community here at Reading is something about which I am incredibly proud. We have demonstrated before that, when faced with difficult circumstances, we come together to offer one another comfort and support. This has been demonstrated again this week, when over 150 members of staff volunteered to act as a 'buddy' for our students who have continued to live in Halls. This fantastic response means we intend to offer the scheme more widely, to all students.

As outlined earlier, we have continued to offer our full range of support services online so students can continue to receive counselling or request a one-to-one appointment with our Student Welfare Team. We have kept this information updated regularly on our Essentials webpages and in emails to students. More recently, we have been promoting RUSU's

Community Facebook page and using our blogs to share student content to encourage peer-to-peer support at this time.

As this situation seems likely to continue for some time, we will continue to look for ways we can support student wellbeing, and look forward to working with you on this.

7. *Communication and clarity of University decision making*

We understand students' frustration about the time it has taken for us to communicate some of our decisions. Please rest assured that this does not mean we underestimate the importance of keeping you updated, especially at a time of such uncertainty. However, it is important that we take the time to fully consider the implications of our decisions to ensure we are delivering the best outcome for our whole community.

We have kept students updated by email and on the Essentials webpages of all major developments over the last few months. We have recently significantly updated our coronavirus webpages on Essentials, following feedback from RUSU, students and colleagues, to make it easier for people to find what they need. Copies of all emails are also saved on these webpages for students and colleagues to refer to, and we have continued to send updates to colleagues on major issues.

We have also used our social media channels to direct our students to these resources. Tailored communications have been sent to those remaining in Halls, to those on placements overseas and to our international student community, among others. We have always sought to convey information in as accessible and informative a way as possible, but there is always room for improvement.

We will continue to do our utmost, working closely with RUSU, to keep students and colleagues updated in a timely way and avoid the use of terminology that won't be easily understood.

I very much hope this letter helps show that we have listened to student concerns and responded wherever we can. We look forward to continuing to work with RUSU to offer our students the best possible support in the coming weeks and months.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Van de Noort', with a stylized flourish underneath.

Professor Robert Van de Noort
Vice-Chancellor

Appendix: RUSU Q&A

Please see below answers to questions submitted through the Q&A that are not addressed in the main letter.

Are previous past papers still relevant?

In the majority of cases, Schools have only amended their prepared exam papers slightly in order for it to be suitable for the 'take home' format. Therefore, unless students have been informed otherwise by their School, past papers will still be a useful guide to use as part of a comprehensive revision plan.

However, past papers should never form the sole basis of revision and this year is no exception. We would recommend students to contact their Module Convenor if they have any queries about specific sources to use for their revision.

Will August/September re-sits be in-person exams or 'take home' exams? If in-person, is this fair for those who cannot undertake the current open book 'take home' exams due to illness, as they will have to then sit for closed-book in-person exams?

Unfortunately we cannot yet confirm arrangements for the August/September re-sits as this will be dependent on the UK government position at the time. It is also important for us to be mindful of the needs of our international students and possible travel restrictions that may continue to be in place around the world.

Therefore, we are actively planning for various possible options, including in-person exams, 'take home' online exams, and/or a combination of the two.

In making decisions, we will ensure students are provided with an appropriate and fair assessment opportunity and we will keep everyone updated as soon as we have further information about this.

What specific arrangements have been considered for Masters students?

As outlined in my letter, we have been carefully considering the best approach for all our students to accommodate their different circumstances, including those on different types of programme and those with other specific needs.

We hope our marks safety net approach will offer all students reassurance that, subject to the exceptions, their mark for each module will be no lower than the average they had achieved through the coursework and other assessment with an original submission date before the end of the Spring term, 27 March 2020.

It is very important that finalists and Masters students, in particular, attempt their exams and assessments, where at all possible, as this will put them in the best possible position to complete their degree as planned.

Once their results are published, they will have the option to request one or more resits through the Circumstances Impact Process if they do not feel their result accurately reflects their academic potential.

We have also published detailed information about our threshold requirements on Essentials, so students can see for each type of programme (including Masters) what is required as a minimum for the award of our different degrees. We hope this will help answer many of our Masters students' queries so they can continue to prepare for their planned exams and assessments.