

## Statement from MDXSU on No Detriment and wider support measures

### Introduction

As we close-in on nearly a year of the global pandemic, it is important that we reflect on the real and significant impact this virus has had on our students and our university community. We, including our students, have lost loved ones. We, including our students, have been caring for loved ones and trying to navigate our work and learning around the needs of our families and teaching our children from home. We, including our students, are locked in our homes with limited connection to others.

The impacts of this pandemic do not simply become easier to navigate because time has passed. The difficulties and challenges faced by our students remain impeccably similar to the challenges and difficulties they were facing in the very first lockdown. We used our power as a Board to make the right decision to implement a No Detriment Policy and set of Safety-Net Measures that supported our students when they needed us most. And we have the same responsibility to do it again.

### Impact

We continue to hear from students about the very real impact this pandemic is having on their studies. Our parent and carer students have told us just how difficult it has been for them to juggle the responsibilities they have with studying, without a chance to access a quiet peaceful space or do work whilst their children would normally be at school.

Our international students tell us just how difficult it has been for them to be studying whilst abroad, in a different time zone with restricted access to the very same resources. Our students still living in halls tell us of the difficulty of being stuck in a tiny room all day whilst trying to study and having restricted contact with others.

Our students impacted by the digital divide tell us of the difficulties of accessing technology or attending a class whilst their internet dips in and out. Our students unable to work and without the support of the government furlough scheme have told us of the mental health impacts of worries about their finances and hardship.

The all Covid survey conducted by the University and Students' Union last year found that 21.9% of students reported having unreliable internet or limited data access, 9.9% respondents did not have access to a laptop and computer, and 33.1% of students disagreed with the idea that they could study productively in the current environment. And whilst we recognise the significant work that has gone in to support students struggling from the digital divide or working environment, it would be naive to suggest that we have either been able to reach all students effected or that we have been able to respond to all of the causes of a difficult studying environment. Furthermore, the University's January mental health quick poll saw **40% of students rate their overall mental health as poor**. It is clear that students need us to act with compassion and an understanding that this is far from a normal year where performance can even be expected to be close to their norm.

### Response to the accepted Recommendations

We would like to thank Edel (Academic Registrar) and colleagues from the Faculties, Registry, AQS and CAPE for taking the time to look through these recommendations and in providing a preliminary assessment.

MDXSU put together 10 recommendations (a-j) that could be implemented to provide real support for our students. These recommendations ranged from extensions (b), changes to extenuating circumstances (c, e and f), and appropriate assessment design (d) to the reintroduction of the no-detriment algorithm (a) and a call to financially support students who have to resist as a result of the pandemic (i). All 10 of these recommendations are aimed at understanding the conditions and impacts our students are experiencing and are wholeheartedly supported by the Students' Union.

The proposal of 7.3 clearly responds to 8 of the 10 recommendations (b, c, d, e, f, g, h and j) and we are in full support of the plans outlined within. Below we have provided a more detailed response and reasoning for recommendations (a and i) which academic board have been invited to discuss.

### **Response to Recommendation a) (No Detriment Policy)**

As outlined at the beginning of this paper, the Academic Board previously introduced a No Detriment policy that provided a more generous Covid degree algorithm for finalists (Best of 120 across Level 5 and 6). This response was seen as a one-off with an understandable belief that the experience of the pandemic would be very different moving forward. However, it has become clear to many of us that simply has not been the case.

Furthermore, it is worth acknowledging that when approving the Best 120 credits, the board were presented with a model which suggested that 28% of students would have gained a higher classification, whilst the true figures have suggested only a 20% overall increase (with only a 15% increase in good awards).

**The Students' Union therefore recommends that the Board approve the return of the Best 120 Credit Covid algorithm to support finalist students.** It should be expected that a failure to approve the same measure as previously received will be met with extreme disappointment from current 3<sup>rd</sup> year students who will have no understanding of why they have not been supported in the same way as the cohort before them. They will rightly highlight that their experience has been rather similar, and the effects of lockdown have been felt by them for longer and therefore impacted more of their studies than the cohort previously.

Nonetheless, if the Board feel that the risks of grade inflation is too high then the Students' Union would recommend the introduction of a Best 180 Credits (across Level 5/6) Algorithm that would go to assessment boards alongside their Level 5 and Level 6 profiles. The assessment board should then award students the highest profile between the three profiles: Best 180 Credits, Level 5 Only, Level 6 Only. Alongside this the rule, that means students who have grades in the 3<sup>rd</sup> class could not be awarded the higher classification if they are borderline, should be removed. This would recognise the potential for inconsistent performance as a result of the pandemic.

### **Response to Recommendation i) (Waiving Charges for Repeat Study)**

One major concern for students is the fear of failing as a result of their inability to perform during the pandemic but not being able to afford the costs of undertaking an additional (resit) year of study. These costs will of course manifest in a variety of ways including tuition fees, additional course materials, living costs and the lack of earning opportunity.

Whilst it may not be possible for the University to offset all of these costs, we are calling on them to do everything within their responsible means. This pandemic experience is not what students

signed up for and they should not face financial detriment as a result of not being able to perform as expected.

We would not expect the waiver to be offered to all students but would recommend it be offered to any student who fails or is unable to progress from this academic year to the next and are therefore required to resist the year or semester. This is a chance to really consider and negate the impacts on our students who need us most: the parents and carers looking after their children or the shielding, our international students trying to engage from halfway around the world, or those that simply aren't coping during a global pandemic.

### **Request for Academic Board Approval**

We therefore request that Academic Board formally accept the proposals set out in 7.3 of this paper, approve the return to the Covid Best 120 Credits algorithm for final year students, and implement a system for fee-waiving for students who are required to re-sit as a result of problems caused by the global pandemic.