

COVID-19
No Detriment Policy Briefing
2nd April 2020

This briefing has been written based on the information available at the time regarding 'No Detriment' and 'Safety Net' policies and how these have been implemented across the UK.

This paper has been developed as a briefing for USI members, but this version has been tailored specifically for other key stakeholders in the sector to give clarity on the advice being provided by USI on this matter.

No Detriment Policies

'No Detriment' policies, sometimes referred to as 'Safety Net' policies have been developed within some Higher Education institutions in response to the unfolding COVID-19 crisis, and the effect that this may have on student performance in assessment. **It's important at the outset to outline that contrary to how it may seem, there is no one set 'no detriment' policy within the sector.**

At its core, policy of this nature works to ensure that no student is disadvantaged at the point of assessment, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and the numerous consequences this may bring for students (encompassing students with connectivity problems, students with disabilities, students with caring responsibilities etc.)

How these policies are implemented however will vary from institution to institution. At time of writing, and based on publicly available information, whilst the approach being adopted by numerous institutions is in principle the same or similar, each institution is likely to implement this policy in different ways, based on their individual institutional regulations. As such, when approaching this conversation, it might be helpful to veer away from use of the 'no detriment' term and instead think more holistically about the approaches being taken to minimise disadvantage for students at an institutional level, and how these can best be implemented and communicated in a transparent manner for students.

We have attempted to gather together some of the approaches being taken below:

Sectoral Approaches

UK Sector (excluding Northern Ireland):

Exeter University

Exeter University have introduced a 'safety net' which aims to ensure that any student who was on course to progress/graduate based on marks obtained this year will only be advantaged by any further assignments completed i.e. the University will ensure that their final academic year average is the same as, or higher than, the average attained up to Sunday 15th March. Exeter have not yet released more information on how this will be calculated. The University are still liaising with professional bodies to explore whether this policy will be permitted to be applied on courses overseen by a professional body. See more [here](#).

The following Universities have adopted similar approaches:

[University of Southampton](#) - Available under 'Are Assessments and examinations still taking place in the summer?' *

[University of Edinburgh](#) - Broadly similar approach is being applied on the basis of a 'help not hinder' ethos.

[University of Sheffield](#)

[University of Warwick](#)

[Cardiff University](#) - Exact arrangements due to be clarified by 17th April 2020

University of Liverpool

They have taken a slightly different approach to the above Universities, making reference to another existing 'Procedure for Protecting Students in the Event of Major Disruption' which the Examination Boards will be instructed to follow closely. They have advised that students in non-award years (Years 1 and 2) who will have the opportunity to meet all the required learning outcomes at a later date, they will be offered to meet these outcomes at a later point in their degree. Extenuating circumstances will not need to be submitted in support of this, unless there are additional circumstances that aren't related to COVID-19. More info [here](#). There is also some information on supports for Disabled Students available [here](#), which might be of interest.

University Of Cambridge

University of Cambridge students in the final year of their undergraduate degree will be guaranteed to graduate with at least the same degree classification as what they obtained in their second year. This is contingent on the student sitting and achieving at least a pass in all final year examinations. This doesn't apply to students on the fourth year of an Integrated Masters programme. More <https://www.cam.ac.uk/coronavirus/students/assessment> here.

University of St Andrew's

University of St Andrew's have enabled all students to use their existing Special Circumstances policy for any modules they're concerned will be impacted by COVID-19. This policy enables students to identify Year 3 and Year 4 modules which they wish to 'S-Code' (this stands for Special Circumstances) once they have received the results for these modules. Any module that is 's-coded' will not be calculated as part of their final degree calculation (which is based on a mixture of performance across Years 3 and 4) if it would have a negative effect on the class of degree award. These modules will not count towards the maximum number of modules that students can 's code' under the existing policy. More available [here](#) under 'How will I be assessed?'

University of Glasgow

The University of Glasgow have introduced a similar 'no detriment' policy for 3rd and 4th year students, and students on Integrated Masters and Postgraduate Taught programmes, but outlined that specific arrangements might need to put in place for programmes that are heavily dependant on final examination, professionally accredited programmes etc. More info [here](#).

They have also cancelled all examinations for Year 1 and 2 students, with the exception of a small number of courses that are overseen by professional bodies. Year 1 students progress automatically to the second year, whilst second year students' progression will be based on assessment taken to date and any outstanding coursework due for submission. More information [here](#).

University College London

UCL have cancelled all first year undergraduate examinations and assessments, and replaced them with a 'Capstone assessment' which is a written reflective piece requiring students to demonstrate their learning across the programme over the year. This will be marked as a pass/fail. More info [here](#). All other year groups will continue to be assessed using alternative assessment methods.

Other approaches

Across the UK, alternative approaches are being introduced at a department/subject level including deferral, or cancellation of exams, blanket extensions on assignment deadlines, and early graduation for final year medicine students.

Note: Consistently across these institutions, reference has been made to students on professionally accredited-programmes. As these programmes are overseen by professional bodies, any change to the way their degree is calculated will need to be agreed with the appropriate professional body. This will apply to various programmes within the Irish sector.

Northern Ireland:

Queens University Belfast

All examinations will be replaced by alternative assessment, and the Board of Examiners will follow the Supplementary Regulations. In this event, students will have the choice whether or not to complete the alternative assessment (if they choose not to, they will be asked to

complete a deferral form) upon which they can be assigned a module mark if there is enough data to allow the Board of Examiners to calculate this. In the event that they cannot be assigned a mark, or are unhappy with the mark they have obtained through the alternative assessment, they can re-sit it at the next available opportunity for full marks. You can view the Supplementary Policy [here](#). The decision-tree followed by the Board of Examiners is available [here](#).

Ulster University

Ulster University will apply a similar approach to how assessments were marked in the aftermath of strike action in 2018. Further information pending.

Ireland:

To date, no Irish HEIs have announced policies under the 'No Detriment' title, but several initiatives are being driven forward to address concerns around learner disadvantage. This includes removal of caps for resit assessments/examinations, removal of fees for same, and additional flexibility within institutional policy on extenuating/mitigating circumstances.

However, it is worth noting that petitions in support of the 'No Detriment' principle have been circulated by students in various Irish HEIs. It is important that Students' Unions and institutions work closely in partnership to ensure measures are put in place, and communicated in a manner that helps to alleviate fears and address misnomers that might appear as a result of this.

QQI - As the national agency responsible for qualifications and quality assurance, QQI have released a number of documents in response to COVID-19, setting out the general approach from a QA perspective and providing some guiding principles for assessment. QQI have outlined the need for alternative assessment to be based on the learning outcomes for the programme, and have placed emphasis on considering the needs of students in an awarding-year of the programme, as well as ensuring that there is flexibility based into assessment for diverse learners e.g. learners with connectivity issues, students with disabilities etc. QQI's advice for institutions places particular emphasis on upholding the long term integrity of the awards that students achieve - something that is in the interests of all stakeholders within the Sector. Taking account of institutional autonomy, QQI will not mandate institutions to follow any particular approach when it comes to assessment and awards but will provide general advice to institutions upon request, in line with their role as the national Qualifications and Quality Assurance Agency.

FAQs

What might an SU advocate for?

At its core, **the principle behind a 'No Detriment' policy is to ask that considerations be made for students in awarding years** (this might include students in second year who have a portion of their degree determined by their performance in this year) **so as to ensure they are not disadvantaged at point of assessment by any COVID-19 related factors.** Institutions are already working to put in place arrangements to minimise disadvantage for

students - and as such an overarching policy that brings this together, or an approach to communication that clearly outlines this in its' totality might help to address some of the concerns students might currently have.

What most of the policies outlined above implement is a system where students are guaranteed to graduate with the average they have obtained up to the point that the institution closed, or better. How this is implemented will vary in accordance with the specific arrangements in the institution e.g. how much of the final degree classification is determined by performance in final year.

It's important when advocating for arrangements to be put in place that these arrangements are flexible - as it's very unlikely that a 'one size fits all' approach will benefit all learners equally. Some students may have been banking on final assessments as a way to bring their degree mark up - SUs and institutions when seeking a solution to address potential learner disadvantage will wish to ensure that these measures can only work to advantage learners. Non-awarding years, whose performance does not count towards their degree may wish for a similar policy to be implemented for them. It's helpful to also consider non-awarding year students who might be relying on their results in pursuit of an Erasmus+ mobility or internship that is awarded based on academic performance. On the whole, most institutions are working to minimise assessment for non-award bearing years to alleviate stress and allow the institution to prioritise the needs of award years.

A core consideration for SUs to work with their institutions on is that all circumstances that may affect student performance in assessment are taken into account at the appropriate board (ordinarily examinations board or equivalent) and in doing this, this is taken into account on a wider programme level rather than examining this on a module-by-module basis. It might be helpful for Guidelines for Examinations Boards to be produced in support of this principle.

Other Arrangements

Some institutions have already begun to put other arrangements in place to accommodate students such as removing the cap on resit examinations for this period, and removing the fee students are normally required to pay.

Lifting restrictions on extenuating circumstances (or equivalent) policies could also help to relieve stress for students.

What would be the rationale for an institution to implement such a policy?

Looking at the reasons outlined by institutions who have already implemented these policies, the key reasons you may wish to consider would be:

In recognition of the difficult circumstances students (and staff) face, and the effect this will potentially have on performance. Some of the factors affecting students such as poor access to wifi, limitations in accessing library resources, accessibility needs or caring responsibilities can only be mitigated against to a limited extent - some of this is outside the direct control of SUs and institutions so policies like that can act as a 'safety net' should existing mitigations (such as offline means of completing assignments) not work for everyone.

This minimises risk for the institution in a number of ways. COVID-19 is an unfolding situation and it's difficult to predict how it may impact upon students and staff over the

coming weeks and months. Having a policy in place will help to ensure that protections are in place not only during summer assessment but at a later point should things continue on into the next academic year. Some of the most traditionally risk averse institutions in the UK have been amongst the first to implement these policies. It will also help to address potential appeal cases at the lowest point of escalation - it is relatively likely that there could be a large volume of appeals lodged in the event that students do not achieve the grade they hoped to obtain.

Working on solutions together also helps to safeguard the wellbeing of students (by minimising stress), and is a good example of institutions working in partnership with their students to address issues.

Are there any limitations to bear in mind regarding such a policy?

As noted above, any policy being implemented should be flexible so it can't indirectly disadvantage some students, where it advantages others. Any algorithms that are implemented e.g. applying an average mark should only be implemented on a case-by-case basis where it would advantage the student and should not be imposed on all students. Any new policy would also need to be implemented in line with existing quality arrangements i.e. students will still need to satisfy all learning outcomes in order to successfully complete a module/degree.

Finally, as detailed below, the needs of students on professionally accredited programmes would need to be considered in conversation with the appropriate professional body.

There are also likely to be limitations on how this can apply to postgraduate students, particularly postgraduate research students.

You might also wish to bear in mind that where previous academic performance is being considered as part of any policy, this can only be applied in the event that a significant portion of assessment has already taken place.

Next Steps to Take

In the event that a petition has been started on your campus or queries have been received in relation to this, it would be good for the SU and Institutional Management to enter into discussion around arrangements that are currently in place within the institution, including existing arrangements and how these have so far been communicated to students. It would be useful for this discussion to also take place within appropriate structures such as Academic Council (or equivalent) or any academic related committees that have been created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Who is responsible for implementation?

This will need to be implemented on an institution-by-institution basis, in accordance with the academic governance arrangements within your college, in most cases approved by the Academic Council or equivalent body.

In most cases, any such policy would most likely be applied at point of award - by the Board of Examiners but again, this will be dependent on the specific arrangements within your own institution.

National Stakeholders such as the HEA, THEA and IUA are engaged in discussions on this matter at a national level alongside USI and may be in a position to advise institutions, but will not directly intervene in the decision-making processes of the institutions.

As the Qualifications and Quality Assurance agency, QQI oversees the core guidelines that institutions are expected to follow regarding Quality Assurance. They may provide advice to institutions on the implications of implementing any such policies for the statutory quality assurance arrangements of the sector but will not seek to impose policy on institutions.

For students on professionally-accredited courses, the relevant professional body would need to be consulted before any new policy could be applied to students on those programmes. As such, in the event of such a policy being introduced, alternative arrangements might need to be introduced for certain student cohorts. This can be seen with some of the UK examples above.