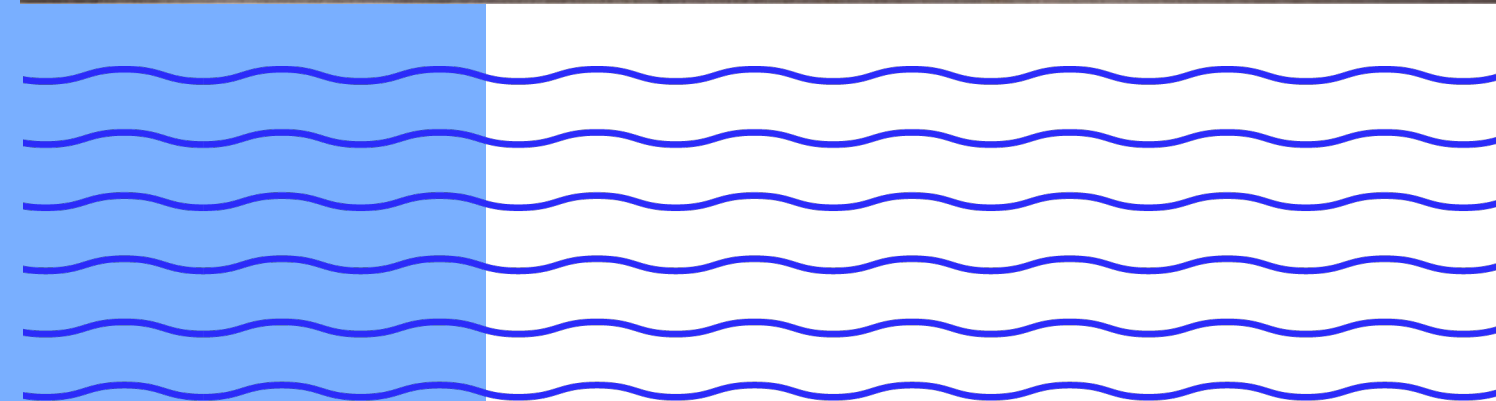


This week

Mond	Data Day Concerns
Tue	Harassment and sexual misconduct
Wed	Extenuating circumstances, safety nets, academic regs and assessment
Thu	Social capital, community and student activities and opportunities
Fri	Race, racism and closing the awarding gaps in HE



WONKHE
SUs

Extenuating circumstances and safety nets



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Co-production

- Curriculum
- Curriculum delivery
- Academic support
- Non academic support
- “The rules of the game”



Voice

Advice

Policy Campaigns

We use research and data to understand what problems people are facing and make recommendations for how to fix the underlying causes of these

Awareness Raising Campaigns

We provide information and advice around scams, energy and wider consumer issues. Get involved in our campaigns!

Campaign Successes

Find out about our latest policy wins and campaign successes



Awareness Raising Campaigns

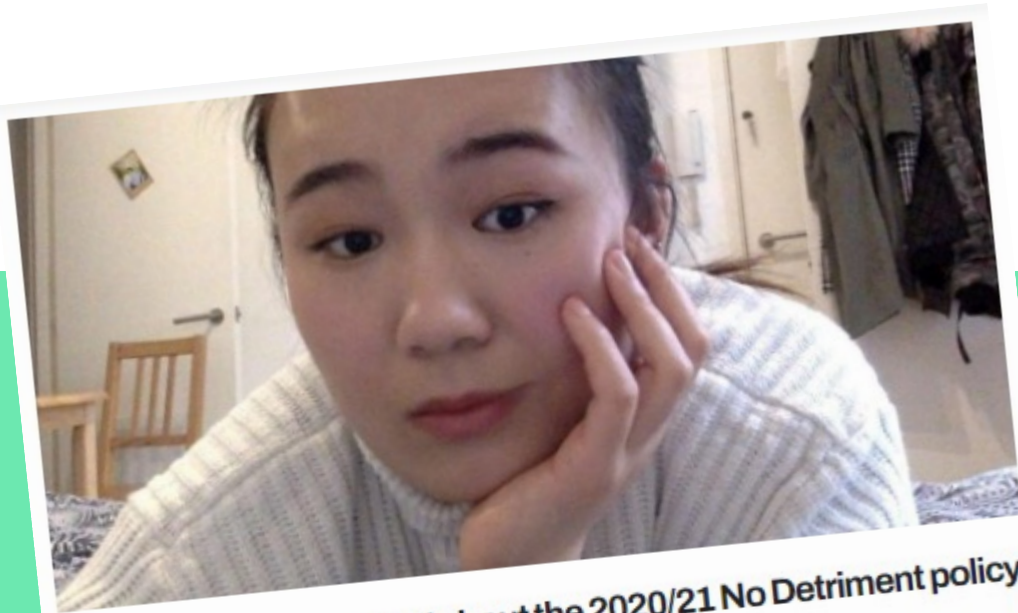
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Policy Campaigns

We use research and data to understand what problems people are facing and make recommendations for how to fix the underlying causes of these





This is how students feel about the 2020/21 No Detriment policy

"I can't believe we waited this long for practically NOTHING"

5 MONTHS AGO



Lizzie Rose | Argument
LONDON

Students feel disappointed, confused and angry. Many feel like their patience and perseverance throughout the last few, undeniably challenging, months has not been recognised by the mitigation measures announced Monday.

The 'no detriment' policy that was announced on Monday does not seem to prevent detriment at all and only benefits a very select few rather than collectively supporting the student body. The Union also raised that UCL made the decision to prioritise protecting "academic integrity" and preventing grade inflation over student wellbeing. For many students who are currently trying their best to keep their heads up, this was a huge breach of trust.

From the name through to the weaknesses of the package combined with the overarching lack of clarity, students are once again disappointed and have been left feeling disrespected by UCL.

The Tab has spoken to students about what the policy means for them and how they are feeling:

Emily, a Classics Finalist has said told us how she doesn't think the measures warrant the name 'no detriment' as many students are still liable to adverse results as a consequence of the circumstances engendered by the pandemic. She said:

"The policy in itself will only achieve no academic detriment for those who are within a fraction of a grade bound. For anyone else the policy does not take account of the lack of facilities, we've had access to or the pressing reality that online teaching IS substandard. Frankly, the policy does not warrant the name 'no detriment' at all. UCL this beyond disappointing, it's disrespectful."



To all the students out there claiming we don't need no detriment: This is why you're wrong

Grow up and realise the world does not just revolve around you and your "mostly unaffected" uni life, people need no detriment

6 MONTHS AGO



Kat Pirnak | Argument
LONDON

It only takes one glance at the submissions of UCLove, the university's anonymous confessions page, to know that students are in a state of war over the no detriment policy.

More specifically, there appears to be a vocal minority who feel that universities should not reinstate a blanket no detriment policy as it would devalue their degree.

So, to everyone claiming that the cost of a safety net outweighs the benefit, here are five reasons why you're wrong:

Mental health is MORE important than you outperforming your classmates

The Tab has already extensively covered how the pandemic and online teaching has impacted the mental health of university students. Not only are students naturally stressed due to the demands of their degree, but many are also now struggling because of: increased financial problems; isolation; the inability to access university facilities; unstable internet connection; differing time zones; and toxic or otherwise impossible learning environments. It would also be a disservice not to acknowledge the additional stresses of students with disabilities and special needs to whom online teaching is less than accommodating.

Considering that there has already been a reported increase in student suicide rates since the start of the pandemic, alleviating stress and anxiety should be our top priority as a community.

In a perfect world, this reason alone would be enough to trump all arguments against the no detriment policy.



Compare how your uni is changing exams and assessments to cope with coronavirus

See which unis are doing no detriment policies and which aren't

1 YEAR AGO



Greg Barradale | News
UK

Without classrooms to study in or physical lectures to attend, students are wondering how their assessments could possibly continue as normal. Universities are scrambling to adapt by pushing back deadlines, graduating entire cohorts early, and cancelling exams.

Students are starting petitions for "no-detriment" policies, because why wouldn't you. Thousands signed them for Sheffield, King's, Leeds, and Cardiff.

Here's what unis are doing with their assessments and exams. See how their efforts compare to what your uni is doing.

We'll update this when unis start changing their policies. If there's one not on this list, drop us a line at gregory@thetab.com

No-detriment/safety net policies

Really, the best you can hope for here is a "no detriment" policy – where your average grade you've already got is in the bag, and you can only make it go up with any assessments to come.

Edinburgh introduced a no detriment policy, telling students: "The examination (or other form of summative assessment) cannot make your mark for the course so far go down."

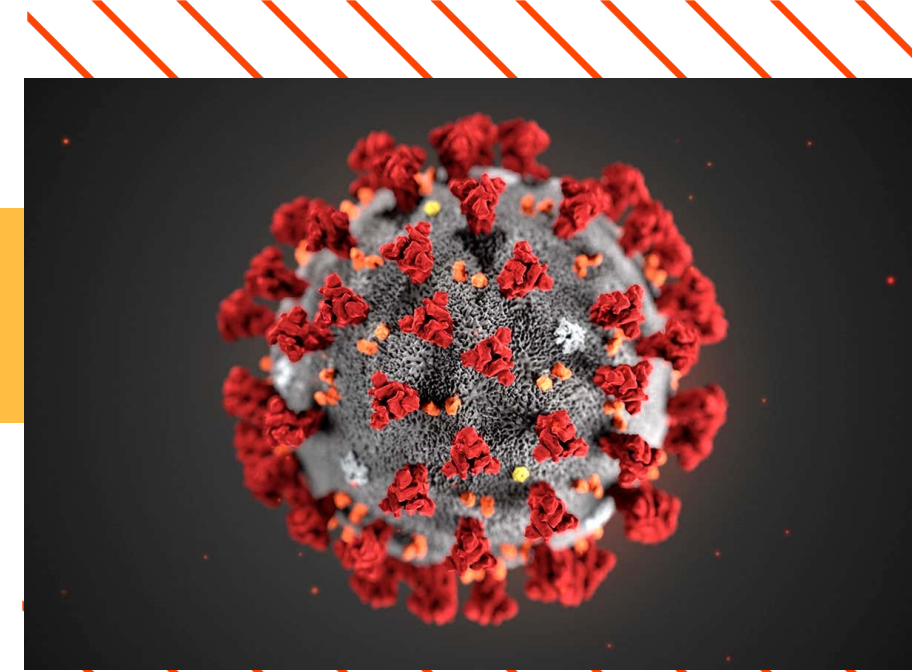
Exeter has also introduced a "no detriment" policy. As long as students actually pass their assessments, the mark they gain in that assessment cannot negatively impact their overall grade.

WONKHE

SUs

No detriment and safety nets

- Interchangeable terms
- Sweep across March, April, May 2020
- Most sought to mitigate against the impact of the circumstances by ensuring that an individual was not unfairly disadvantaged.
 - **Changes to actual marking/degree algorithms**
 - **Strategies that gave students extended opportunities to reach a given set of standards**
 - **Changing the nature of assessment itself**



Grade inflation?

- OfS never dictates what adjustments providers can make, it only looks at outcomes
- What do providers mean by a risk that assessment becomes “easier”?
- Assessment attempts or attainment?
- Evidence from end of last academic year?
- Evidence from this term/semester?



Grade inflation figures show nearly half of first-class degrees ‘unexplained’

The OfS’s latest analysis of degree classifications has been widely covered.

Last updated: 20 November 2020

Media coverage

Analysis of degree classifications over time - changes in graduate attainment from 2010-11 to 2018-19

This report sets out the results of our analysis of changes in the proportion of first and upper second class degrees awarded between 2010-11 and 2018-19. We report on how graduate attainment has changed over this period, and the extent to which these changes can be statistically accounted for by changes in certain characteristics of the graduate population. This analysis has been undertaken at both the sector level and the provider level.

Last updated: 19 November 2020

Publication



Grade inflation ‘remains a significant and pressing issue’ – new OfS analysis

The rapid increase in students receiving first class honours degrees which cannot be explained by factors which may affect attainment has slowed, new data from the Office for Students (OfS) shows.

Last updated: 19 November 2020

Press release



Why grade inflation matters

The credibility and value of the qualifications awarded by higher education providers matters greatly to students, their families, employers and other stakeholders. And it matters too for the international reputation of the English higher education sector.

Last updated: 19 November 2020

Blog post

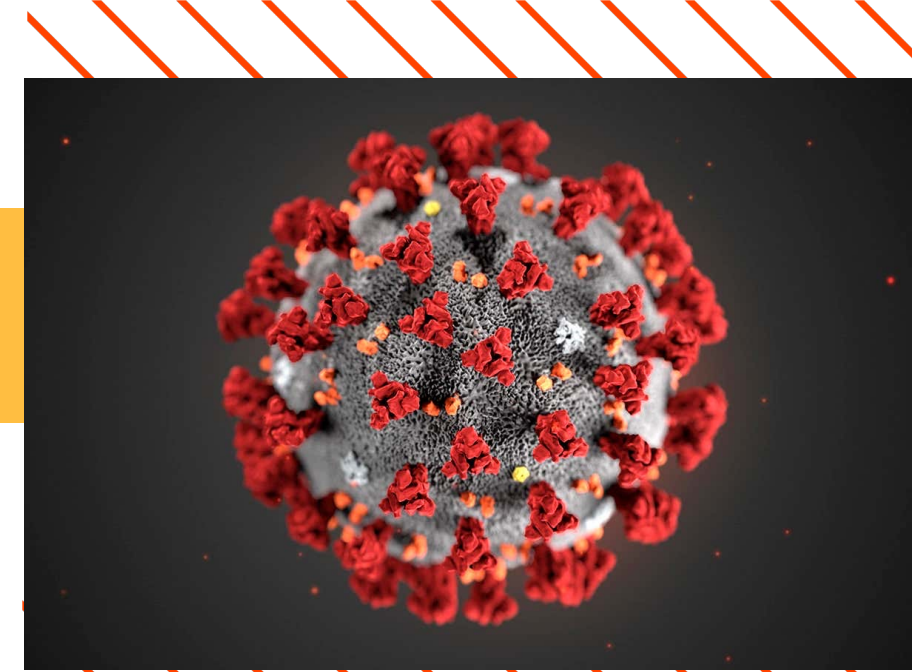
Grade inflation?

- General principle is that universities will give students extra/longer goes at reaching a standard if something unexpected hits them
- If some students did better in the pandemic, and some did worse than expected, we'll only have adjusted the latter
- Surely that guarantees grade inflation?



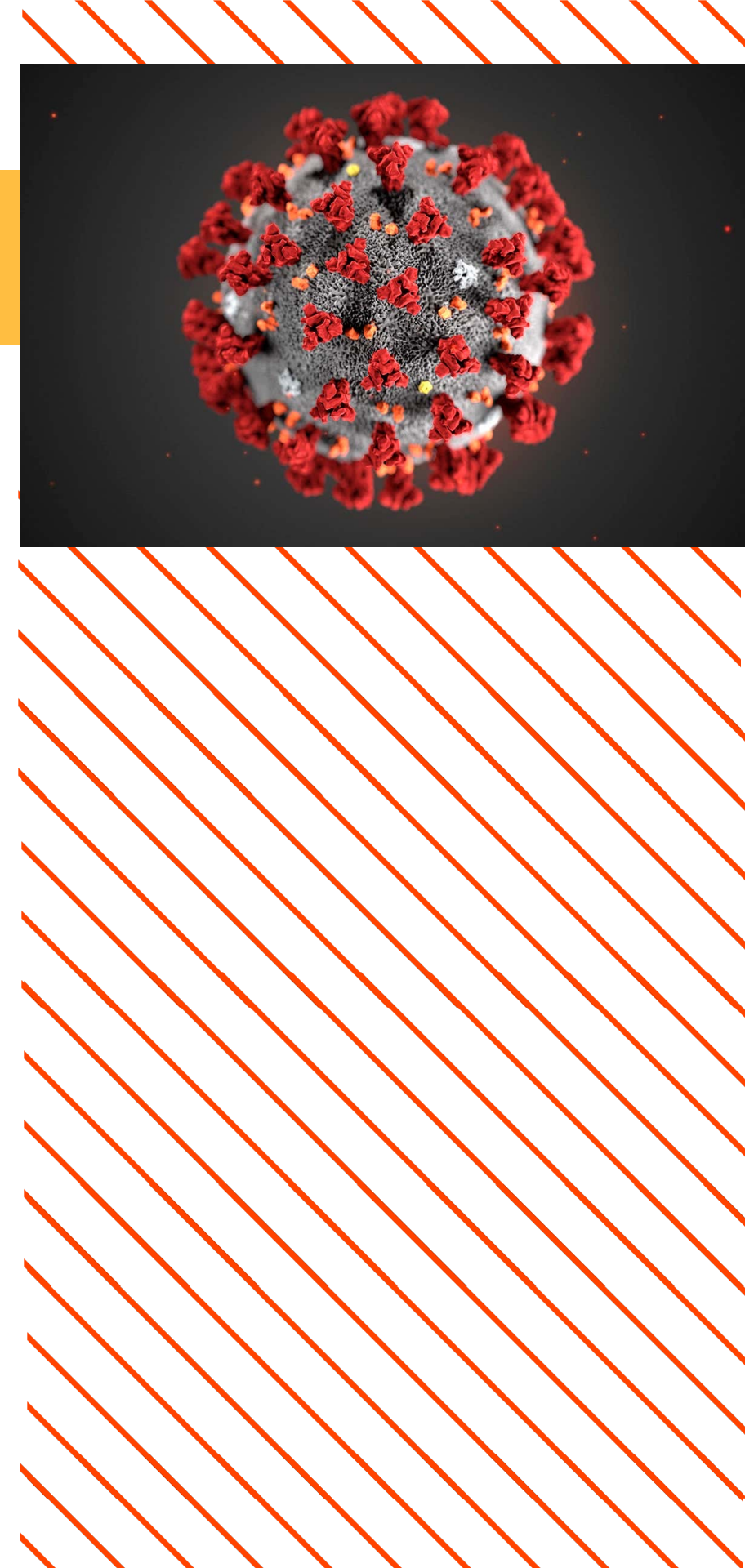
Changes to actual marking/degree algorithms

- Marks so far (but exceptions)
- Best of approach
- 2nd v 1st Semester
- Scaling by cohort
- Positive borderline nudging



Extended opportunities

- Mit circs
- Deadline extensions
- Proof eradication/reduction
- Category widening
- Cap removal
- Trailing



Changing the nature of assessment itself

- Moving away from timed, high stakes exams
- Flexibility for students
- Access
- Different assessment timings
- Research components

Mit circs

- Mitigating circumstances
- Extenuating circumstances
- Requests for special consideration

A direction of travel...

- Established 2003
- Slow shift from “did the uni follow the procedures” to “are the procedures fair”
- Engagement with SUs
- Pressure from consumer law (need to ensure that ADR is effective)
- Learning from casework generally and in wider fields (ie equalities work)
- GPF used as a default standard



oia office of the independent adjudicator

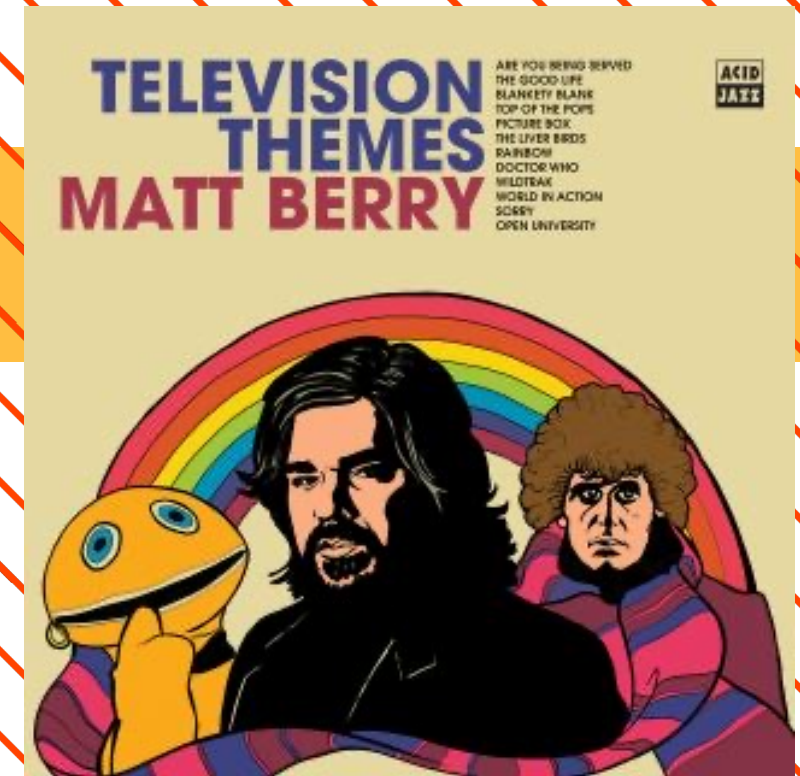
We are delighted to announce Felicity Mitchell as the Independent Adjudicator & Ben Elger as the Chief Executive of the OIA

How it works

- Everyone has a procedure
- Students have to exhaust it before going to OIA
- OIA then looks at
 - Whether the provider followed its own procedures
 - Whether those procedures were reasonable (and compatible with consumer / equality law)
 - Was the provider's final decision reasonable?
- Reaches decision and makes recommendations

Themes

- Thematic issue
- Consultation
- Advice
- Publication of advice
- Benchmark standard used in adjudication
- Slow but highly effective



Additional consideration



- Or “special” or “extenuating” or “mitigating” or “exceptional” or or “factors affecting performance”.
- Around 25% of all of OIA’s casework
- Universities have academic standards – the idea (from QAA) is that students should be given a fair opportunity to show that they can reach those standards – this is not about lowering them.
- Reasonable to expect students in general to be able to cope with “normal life events”, to “manage their workloads properly”, and to expect a “level of stress and anxiety” around assessments.

Do students game the system?

- Stakes of failure are high
- Particularly where a qualification that may be externally accredited leads to being access a profession
- A delicate balance – between scepticism and trust.
- Bar too low, gaming the system
- Bar too high makes a difficult situation even more difficult for students who may be at their lowest point – and may end up in breach of equalities legislation.
- As OIA said in its consultation, a process that focuses “too tightly on preventing some students from gaining an unfair advantage” may end up “putting those with genuine difficulties at a disadvantage”.



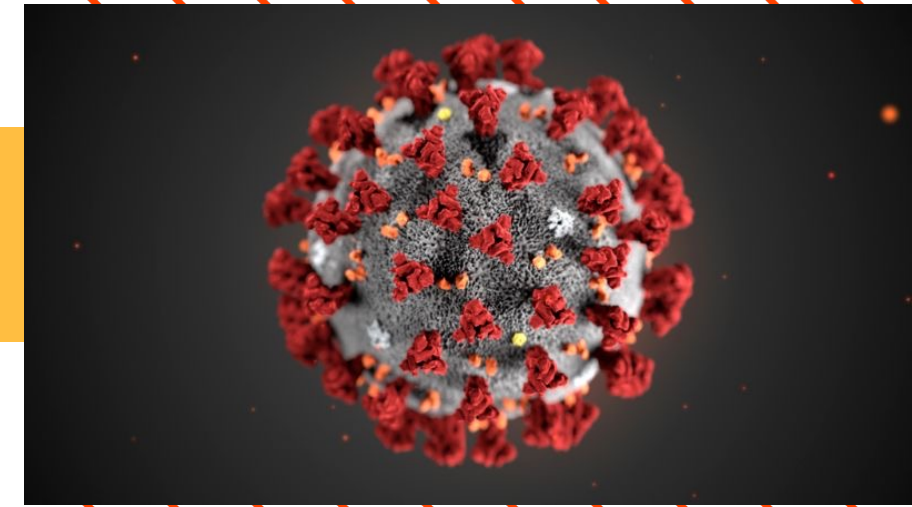
Insurance claims

- Some universities are worried that students routinely put in “insurance claim” submissions just in case.
- Does your university have the right *balance* between encouraging responsible behaviour on the one hand, and preventing students from getting an unfair advantage on the other?
- Is cynicism about a lack of understanding – is any or all of the cynicism justified?



Is Covid-19 special?

- The pandemic caused most universities to “emergency alter” their policies in two ways:
 - The “proof” requirement was significantly relaxed
 - The “definition” (list) of circumstances broadened
- Have these swung back? Did they relax in your case?
- Is your provider arguing that some of the implications of Covid-19 have now become “normal life events”?



What are we assessing?

- Whether a student has met a particular standard?
- Whether a student has met a particular standard at the same pace and given the same (or equitable) resources as other students?
- Increasing shift towards given students longer or more attempts because of Covid disruption.



When though?

- GPF chapters usually trigger policy rewrites. Officially, guidance informs the way that OIA considers complaints from the 2021/22 academic year.
- OIA notes that many providers have shown flexibility and adapted their approach to requests for additional consideration during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially around evidence required.
- The key things to remember are:
 - It's reasonable to expect students in general to be able to cope with normal life events.
 - But when illness or other unexpected events affect performance, all students should have a fair opportunity to show what they are capable of.
 - OIA also specifically says here that outbreaks of epidemic disease are circumstances that affect students generally across a provider.
 - It also says that while providers may generally exclude minor illnesses from additional consideration processes for exams, additional consideration would be needed if the student's illness prevented them from going to an exam or meant that they had to leave early, or if the student missed an exam because they were suffering from minor symptoms of an infectious disease that could be harmful if passed on to others (and therefore, by inference, if they were self-isolating even without symptoms).
 - Absolutely crucially, it says providers should not normally reject a request for additional consideration simply because the student has passed the assessment(s) concerned.



Fairness and trust

- Is easy to find, understand and follow;
- Is well-advertised, with students being reminded of the process at key points during their studies;
- Tells students where they can find advice and support;
- Sets out expectations clearly so that students understand what circumstances are likely to be considered and what sort of evidence they may need to provide;
- Is flexible and considers each case on its individual facts;
- Explains what is likely to happen if the request is accepted – and what will happen if it is not;
- Tells students how their case will be considered and how long it will normally take;
- Ends with a written decision, including reasons, being sent to the student;
- Includes a process for ensuring that decisions are consistent across the provider;
- Includes a process for identifying students who have asked for additional consideration several times and who may need extra support or advice;
- Includes an appeal route;
- Includes an internal reporting process that allows the provider to identify trends.

What's in or out?

- Most procedures give examples of things that may or may not be acceptable in a request for special consideration, and some list things that generally would not.
- OIA says that anything unexpected that is likely to have affected a student's performance should be taken into account.
- Wording of policies crucial in encouraging or dissuading complaints and in way handled.



Scrutiny of what's ruled out

- “technical issues”, “financial hardship” or “employment-related pressures”
- For some students, in some circumstances, it might actually be fair to take those difficulties into account when looking at the student's performance, non-attendance, or late submission.
- If a student faces an unexpected financial crisis (beyond ordinary budgeting difficulties), should that be taken into account?

OUT

- Holidays, house moves or other events that were planned or could reasonably have been expected
- Minor illness such as common colds or hay fever, unless the symptoms are particularly severe
- Assessments that are scheduled close together
- Misreading the exam timetable
- Poor time management
- Minor transport disruption
- Computer or printer failure where the student should have backed-up their work
- Normal exam stress
- Minor life events, unless the circumstances have had a disproportionate impact

Context of in/out

- Two students might be affected very differently by what appear to be similar events, for example, the loss of a relative.
- OIA takes the view that it is the impact of the bereavement on the individual student that is relevant, not the bereavement itself. Do your policies reflect that?

CASE STUDY 1: Considering requests on their individual facts

A student's studies were being funded by a family member, giving the student enough money to cover their tuition fees and living expenses. Shortly before the start of the student's exams, the family member suddenly withdrew funding because their business had gone into administration and they no longer had the funds available. This meant that the student couldn't pay their rent and had little money for food, causing them significant distress.

The provider's additional consideration process normally excludes financial difficulties, on the basis that students should ensure they can fund their studies financial crisis which affected their ability to prepare for their exams. and budget appropriately. However, it accepted the student's request for additional consideration in this instance because they had experienced a sudden and unexpected financial crisis which affected their ability to prepare for their exams.

Defining unexpected

- But how does your policy define unexpected (if at all)?
- Some students will start their studies with family or caring responsibilities that are likely to affect their studies. But it could be really difficult for them to judge how big an effect those circumstances will have, and their situation may change during their studies.
- Their circumstances may not be “unexpected” and may not even be “out of their control”.
- But where those circumstances are putting the student at a disadvantage compared with other students, it is likely to be unfair to shut the student out of the process. What do your policies say on that?



Expectations

To fill in a form / obtain evidence / do so by a set deadline. But:

- Students who need additional consideration may be at their lowest point - anxious, distressed or unwell.
- They may find it difficult to talk about or to prove what has happened to them.
- The situation may be particularly sensitive for some reason, perhaps to do with the student's religion or culture.



For example

- Pressures on NHS and GP appointments
- The cost of obtaining a medical certificate or letter.
- Cost of translating said letter.
- Long-term but fluctuating conditions
- School children and employees are generally allowed to call in sick, and to self-certify short periods of illness. OIA thinks it is reasonable to allow students to phone or email a designated person or office if they are taken ill on the day of an exam, so that there is a record of it.

For example

- Providers should also be prepared to accept **evidence from other sources**, such as domestic violence services, the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme, or internal sources of support such as mental health advisers and personal tutors.
- A personal tutor who has supported the student through the long-term illness of a family member, or a domestic crisis, may be better placed to comment on how this has affected the student's studies than a doctor.

For example

- Bereavement - insensitive and may be pointless to ask the student to prove the death took place.
- It may be appropriate to allow a student to self-certify that they have been affected by a bereavement when the bereavement happens, but to expect more information about the effects of the bereavement if the student makes a request at a later date.

Self certs

- Some allow a limited number of self certs (sometimes to trigger extensions) in a given year (but rules on honesty and severity still apply)

CASE STUDY 6: Limiting the number of self-certified requests for additional consideration

A provider's additional consideration process allows students to self-certify for up to two assessments in any one year. A student missed one exam in the Autumn term and one exam in the Spring term due to short-term ill health and submitted self-certified requests for additional consideration asking to defer the exams to the re-sit period. The provider accepted the requests.

During the Summer term, the student submitted a self-certified request asking for an extension to a coursework submission deadline. The provider explained to the student that, because they had already self-certified for two assessments in the Autumn and Spring terms, they would need to provide evidence in support of their request for an extension to their Summer term coursework deadline. The provider also asked the student to meet with their personal tutor to discuss their circumstances. The student was unable to provide evidence in support of their extension request and so the provider did not allow their request for additional consideration for the Summer term. But the student's personal tutor identified that they would benefit from more study skills support and so referred them to the provider's study support team.

WHO decides?

- Lots of cases are about inconsistency in dealing...
- “there should be mechanisms in place to ensure consistency of decision making across the provider, particularly where requests are considered locally”
- Understanding of the provider’s process, policies or principles.
- Decisions “academically consistent” (who’s checking) and those making them have access to previous decisions?
- Academic judgment...



What it is and isn't

- Academic judgment is NOT required when deciding whether something has happened to the student, and what impact it is likely to have had on their ability to study, or to prepare for or perform well in an assessment or exam
- Academic judgment may be needed to consider the extent to which a student's performance has actually been affected by the circumstances, whether their marks are out of line with their normal performance, whether alternative assessments might be appropriate, or how likely it is that the student would be able to complete their course

Fair?

- A “fair opportunity to show what they are capable of”.
- Marks routinely added to assessments or exams? No

Standard shopping list:

- Granting an extension to a coursework deadline or removing a penalty for late submission;
- Deferring exams or other assessments, so that the student can demonstrate their performance when they are no longer affected by their circumstances;
- Allowing the student to repeat the year or individual modules or units;
- Setting another type of assessment or giving the student an oral exam.



Fair?

- Many providers have discretion to raise the classification of students who are very near the borderline between two classifications. It may be fair to define a wider zone of consideration for students with special circumstances.

Plus

- Disregarding a mark for an individual assessment when deciding on the student's overall result for the module or unit;
- Disregarding an individual module or unit mark when deciding on the student's progression or overall degree result;
- Substituting marks for equivalent assessments in place of the affected assessment;
- Allowing examiners to place greater weight on marks that were unaffected by the student's circumstances;
- Deeming progression criteria to be met where the shortfall is very marginal;
- Making a special award for a student who has become too ill to continue with their studies (an Aegrotat award).

And

- Providers should not normally reject a request for additional consideration simply because the student has passed the assessment(s) concerned.
- It is not good practice to have an absolute limit on the number of times a student can ask for additional consideration for an exam or assessment.



You're too late

- A deadline for students who need to ask for additional consideration
- OIA takes the view that it is reasonable to have a deadline as long as:
 - Enough time for students to seek advice and to obtain supporting evidence where necessary
 - The provider tells students what the deadline is and why it is in place and reminds them about it at relevant points during the course – for example before exams; and
 - Students who miss the deadline can still have their circumstances considered when it would be unfair not to.
- And OIA takes the view that it is unfair to refuse to consider a student's circumstances just because they missed the deadline if:
 - The student's circumstances are serious, and it is very likely that their performance has been badly affected; and
 - The student gives a good reason for why they missed the deadline.

Examples

- Blanket ban on considering a student's explanation of why they missed the deadline even if they don't have medical evidence to support it?
- These could both be unfair and discriminatory
- Fit to sit fine if provider explains this policy to students and why it is in place and reminds them about it at relevant points during the course – for example before exams; and
- Students who sit an exam or submit an assessment can still have their circumstances considered when it would be unfair not to.

CASE STUDY 3: Accepting a late request

The deadline for students to ask for additional consideration for their January exams was 1 February. A student made a request on 7 February. The student explained that **their uncle had died suddenly during the exam period and that their mother had to travel abroad as a result, leaving the student in charge of their siblings.** The student said that, although they were aware of the additional consideration process, they were very distressed by the bereavement and the effects it had on their mother, and so distracted by their sudden and unexpected caring responsibilities, that they didn't think about making a request for additional consideration until too late. The provider decided that the student had a good reason for missing the deadline and so accepted their request for additional consideration.

CASE STUDY 4: Rejecting a late request

The deadline for students to ask for additional consideration for their Summer Term exams was 1 June. A student submitted a request on 15 July, after discovering they had failed two of those exams. The student, whose request related to **shoulder pain,** said that they were **unaware how seriously they had been affected until they saw their results,** and that they couldn't have made a request earlier because they **hadn't been told about the process to follow.**

The provider considers late requests for additional consideration under its academic appeals procedure. The provider noted that details of the additional consideration process were included in the student handbook, on its website and on its e-learning platform, and that the student's exam timetable included a link to the process. The student was aware of their symptoms during the exams.

The provider decided that the student did not have a good reason for missing the deadline and so dismissed the appeal without considering the impact of the student's circumstances on their performance.

This is big

OIA thinks it is unfair to refuse to consider a student's circumstances just because they sat the exam or submitted the assessment if:

- The student did not realise how ill they were at the time or were unable to make a rational decision about whether they were well enough; or
- The student knew they were ill but had good reasons for attempting the exam or submitting the work...
 - the student might have reasonably believed that they would not be able to sit the exam at the next opportunity for example because they were pregnant, or had a deteriorating health condition, or had visa difficulties.
 - Or the student might have faced serious consequences if they delayed completing their course, such as the loss of a graduate job opportunity.
 - The student reasonably believed that the provider might refuse their request for special consideration.

CASE STUDY 8: Withdrawing a "fit to sit" declaration

A provider has a "fit to sit" policy which is communicated clearly to students. Students are required to sign a form at the start of each exam to confirm they are "fit to sit". A student attends their exams and signs the "fit to sit" form. However, the student's friends are very worried about the student's mental health. They encourage the student to see their GP shortly after the exams have finished. The GP says that the student has depression which has probably been affecting them for several months. The GP prescribes medication and refers the student to counselling. The GP provides a letter to say that the student's judgment was impaired due to their depression and that they would have been unable to make rational decisions about their studies.

The provider allows the student to withdraw their "fit to sit" declaration and allows them to sit their exams later in the year as first attempts.

Proof

- Where evidence is required, this should be proportionate to the nature of the request and the outcome the student is asking for
- Providers should give examples of the types of evidence, if any, they will normally require in support of requests for additional consideration, including guidance about evidence relating to other people.
- Providers are told to look carefully at the reasons why a student might be unable to obtain evidence at the time their circumstances occurred when considering their case.

Disability

- OIA takes the view that disabled students may need to ask for special consideration in some situations, for example, where:
 - Support is not put in place, or is put in place late;
 - The student realises that agreed support is not working as intended;
 - The student has a condition which fluctuates; or
 - The student's request for special consideration is not related to their disability.

Placements

- Universities may need to follow a separate process to report absence or circumstances affecting their performance.
- OIA says that providers should explain this to students before the placement starts.
- Need for even separate procedures to remain fair in terms described above?
- New or extended placements?

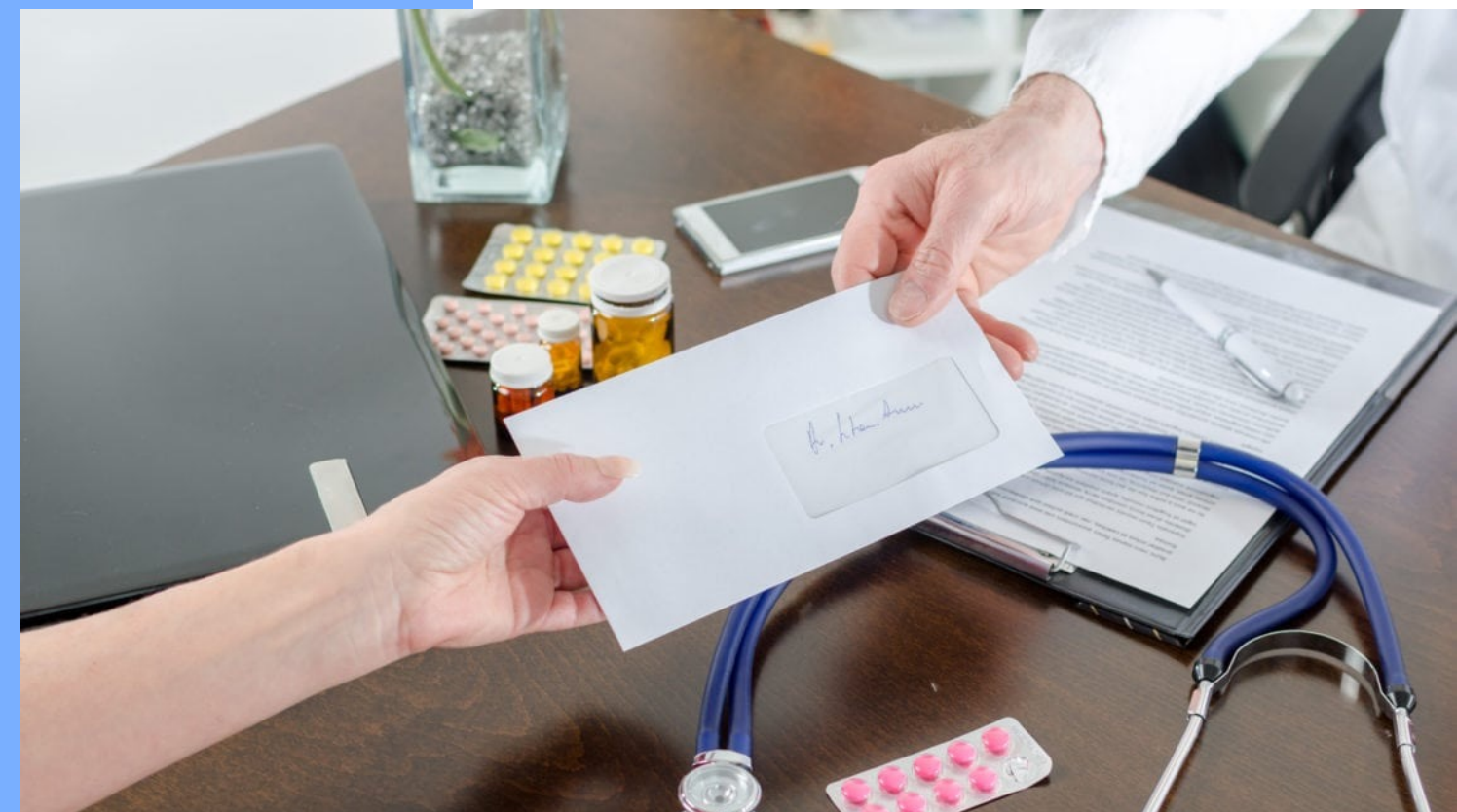
Reporting and SUs

- Providers to collect data on their additional consideration processes (maybe to assess whether certain groups of students are over- or under-represented in using the process, or whether there are changes in the types of requests being made)
- It might also be to identify if there are trends or internal cultural issues that need to be tackled such as students using the system to spread-out difficult assessments or putting in “insurance claims” in case they fail – or if there are departments or courses where there are disproportionately high or low numbers of claims.
- Good practice for providers to share this data with their student representative bodies.
- If it appears that certain groups of students are not making use of the additional consideration process when they should be, the provider may wish to take steps to address this. Providers may, for instance, work with their student representative bodies to highlight the process to students and to break down barriers preventing its use.

And finally

- Lots of student interest in this stuff
- Fundamental debates about what assessment is for and what attainment means
- Good opportunity to identify and fix institution-wide inconsistencies
- Impacts of Covid-19 haven't gone away
- As “blended” becomes permanent, do some of the shifts seen need to be permanent?

Extenuating circumstances and safety nets



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Extenuating circumstances and safety nets



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