

Response to the Guild Survey on the Final Year 'no detriment' approach in the Emergency Framework for Graduating Cohorts.

Response from the University of Birmingham's Senior Education Team

22nd April, 2020.

We are appreciative of the strong support and guidance that the Guild continues to offer students during these exceptionally difficult circumstances. As always, it is important that students have the opportunity to provide feedback on their learning, and we would like to thank the Guild for taking the initiative to generate this survey. We address each of the Guild recommendations below and, in particular, highlight where the Emergency Framework meets (or even exceeds) the Guild recommendations.

Guild Recommendation 1: We recommend, based on students' feedback, that a safety net is introduced to ensure students do NOT graduate with a classification less than their trajectory.

Our policy has been developed carefully to try to ensure that every student graduates with the degree classification for which they were on track. At the same time, we have to recognise that unlike other universities, some of our students have very few final year assessments available so it would be unacceptable to base a so-called 'safety net' on 2nd year marks alone (worth only 25% in our degree algorithm). This would not help the long term credibility of a Birmingham student's degree with employers.

We are also mindful of the very difficult home situation in which many students find themselves, and the real difficulties some students would face in completing numerous exam-style online assessments. So, for UG students, we are taking the best 80 credits from the final year as well as looking across each student's total marks profile from all years of study at exam board. In particular, we are able to mitigate if we see negative impacts on the project/dissertation and also any coursework that was submitted after the disruption. Importantly, by including the project/dissertation in the initial calculation, we are able to demonstrate with confidence that students have covered a wide range of programme learning outcomes, thereby reducing the number of online exams that are required (to zero in many cases).

In other words, we aim to ensure that if (for example) a student has a strong 1st Class Honours profile with all the credits they have completed, they will graduate with a 1st Class Honours. We would not allow them to lose a 1st Class Honours on the basis of marks that are outliers compared to the rest of their profile. We have stated that we will always take the most positive approach to each student when arriving at the final degree classification and this will happen through consideration of each individual case at exam boards.

2. Many students were relying on the Summer exam period to improve their grade and still want this opportunity. This is currently incredibly inconsistent across the University and central action is required to offer every student the same opportunity. We recommend allowing students to still have the opportunity to submit work to improve their grade, even if they have already completed the necessary 80 credits.

We are mindful of the unprecedented stressful situations that students and their families are experiencing. We are also aware that not all students will be able to submit all of their remaining coursework due to these stressful situations, or undertake 'exams' to the best of their ability. In our recent individual communications to students we have said, firstly, that students can submit all their remaining coursework if they so wish and are able to do so (i.e. this is coursework they will already have started). Secondly, for many students and in order to reduce pressure, we have determined that once they have successfully completed all outstanding coursework and the project/dissertation, and taking into account marks from previous year(s), we will have sufficient evidence that students have met their programme learning outcomes and our emergency threshold. We are, therefore, reducing the overall credit requirements needed to complete the degree. Thirdly, this strategy also reduces to a minimum the number of inclusive online assessments (to replace exams) that are required by those students who don't fall into the category above. We anticipate that in many cases, no more than one or two of these assessments will be required. Importantly, where they are required, these assessments will be designed in recognition of the difficult circumstances in which many students are attempting to study. Moreover, as stated above, we will always take the most positive approach to each student when determining degree classifications. If students are unhappy with their degree outcome, they can use the appeals process as usual. We will make this as easy as possible.

3. Students are concerned about their ability to complete their dissertations to the same standard as usual and the impact of this on their overall grade. We recommend the university add to the 'No Detriment Approach' by introducing a 5% increase for all dissertation marks to allow for the increase in value and disruption, including at Postgraduate Taught level which will be impacted more by Covid-19 in the uncertainty that awaits.

We are keen that as many students as possible complete their dissertation because it covers so many programme learning outcomes and it is often the piece of work that students feel most proud of in the future. Clearly, if these crisis circumstances make it too difficult for students to complete work to their normal high standard, we will take that into account. We have said this in our FAQs <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/coronavirus/your-studies.aspx>

As the timing of submission and the weighting of projects/dissertations varies so much across subjects, a single 5% increase is unworkable. Some students would gain an advantage even though they have not been disadvantaged (i.e. they submitted before the disruption) and others (at an individual level) may require additional mitigation that goes beyond 5%.

4. We recommend expanding the grade boundaries by 0.5% for all students graduating in 2020 (including PGT). This protects the integrity of the degree and minimises the chances of grade inflation, but allows for greater flexibility and compromise during the situation.

As stated in the previous responses our approach carefully considers each student's marks over all their years with us. We have made provision for separate examination board processes for completing students so there will be careful consideration of each student's grade profile. A blanket 0.5% is not an appropriate mechanism to protect academic integrity.

Informed profiling will enable us to ensure that students achieve an appropriate outcome based on their profile and trajectory.

5. We recommend ensuring that RAPs are still considered for all online assessments. In addition, across the university, wellbeing officers set up bookable online calls with students, as students are currently struggling to access essential support.

The online replacement assessments have been designed to be inclusive. Students will have a longer period of time in which to complete the assessments and they can be completed in non-exam conditions. For a small number of students, it may not be possible to complete an online assessment due to the current circumstances. As noted in our original communication, in these cases programme teams are working with each student to identify reasonable alternatives so they can meet the required number of credits, and work is ongoing with students with a Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) to offer an alternative assessment type where our arrangements for an inclusive online assessment are not practical.

While we have suspended all of our in person support, the Wellbeing Officers in all Schools and Colleges are still working remotely to answer queries. Our Mental Health & Wellbeing Service is suspended at the moment but the team are continuously developing new resources to support students remotely and our new webpages provide helpful links to finding services near students' homes, and access to our self-help guides. Our PAUSE Mental Health partners have just launched a new telephone service for UoB students if students need to talk to someone about their mental health; see the latest information here <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/coronavirus/Wellbeing.aspx>. The service will be operational between the hours of 10am – 6pm, 7 days a week and is open to anyone who requires help. The SHOUT Text Service is available for anyone who needs immediate help 24/7.