

Academic Policies to Support Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed every facet of higher education. Lockdowns, movement control order or circuit breaker, regardless of the term used, have resulted in campus shut down and forced teaching and learning to continue online. Before COVID-19, most universities in Malaysia prescribed to blended learning, but the uptake of this was low and variable. Yet, the move to go online has been abrupt, ad-hoc and implemented as an emergency response. While online learning may seem to be a convenient response to the restriction of movement and physical gathering in campus, the switch to online learning quickly posed many challenges such as availability of tools for teaching and learning (T&L) activities, internet access (including connection stability, bandwidth, and cost) as well as adequate space and conducive environment for learning and teaching from home. Many students who have relied on peer support, either for personal and/or academic struggles, suffer from feelings of being lost and disconnected.

Disruption to Teaching and Learning

In addition to the more obvious challenges in the switch to 100% online learning, there are also other equally pertinent challenges due to this drastic change to T&L activities. A clear result of this is that final written and timed examinations, i.e. strictly invigilated exams worth 50-60% of total course marks traditionally held in large examination halls, are no longer feasible. While some courses maintain a small percentage of marks for an online timed final examination, most course assessments were converted fully into coursework, resulting in unprecedented numbers of assignments, quizzes and tests. While many students appear to struggle with this change, ironically, the switch to 80-100% coursework has also resulted into grade inflation and increased passing rates. This may be due to the fact that most coursework such as essays and reports, being intended as formative assessments, are graded using rubrics resulting in higher marks.

Conversely, final exams, being intended as summative assessments, are often graded according to stricter point-by-point marking schemes. This raises two salient points: 1) that final exams cannot simply be replaced by coursework, and 2) that regardless of whether students continue with 100% coursework or still face written final examination (in person or online), they face unprecedented levels of stress coping with academic commitments in this challenging pandemic period. This stress may be enhanced for students preparing for high-stake final examinations that involve professional certification and/or those that affect graduation grades.

In consideration of these challenges that many students face, this edition of Updates on Higher Education summarises three

ways in which different universities have introduced new measures or strengthened existing measures to better facilitate and support students in this difficult and challenging COVID-19 pandemic.

A Special COVID-19 Grade

La Trobe University implemented a 'V' grade specifically for the COVID-19 pandemic, where a 'V' grade will be applied for all students who fail a subject, replacing fail grades. A fail grade will not be recorded on the academic transcript and will not be included in the calculation of their grade point average. Hence, students who do not achieve a passing grade will not be permanently affected from the failed grade. However, it is important to note that subjects which obtained the 'V' grade cannot be replaced, and if they are pre-requisites, students will need to retake the course or apply for "Special Consideration". This special grade will also not apply to cases of academic misconduct or for courses related to clinical or industry placement.

Extensions to Submit and Special Circumstances Procedures

Apart from the special 'V' grade, La Trobe University also articulates a policy to consider extensions and special circumstances for students. Under this policy, students facing difficulties with their studies or those who could not submit assessment tasks (usually worth more than 15%) by the due date, have the opportunity to chat with the subject coordinator in the first instance and re-negotiate the due date(s) of assessment(s) submission. There are two appropriate online application submission procedures with supporting documentation [before the due date and/or after the due date of assessment(s)] that students need to fill in.

One, if the application is made prior to the assessment due date, students need to submit an online 'Request of an Extension of Time to Submit an Assessment Task' with supporting documentation (i.e., Medical Statement, Medical Certificate etc.). Subject coordinator then will approve the extension request with flexible deadline agreed by the student and the subject coordinator. Two, if the application is made after the assessment due date, students need to submit an online 'Special Consideration' form with appropriate documentation (i.e., Medical Statement, Medical Certificate etc.) within three working days of the assessment/exam. If a special consideration is granted, a special exam, alternative assessment task, extension or other appropriate options are provided to the applicant. At times, a redistribution of assessment weightage may also be possible.

University of Edinburgh, in a similar way, also has a Special

Circumstances Policy to take into account exceptional situations outside of a student control, which has had an adverse impact resulting in underperformance in an assessment or non-attendance/non-submission for a scheduled assessment. These circumstances include but are not limited to short term or worsened long term physical or mental illness, and traumatic incidents including death or illness of loved one, relationship breakdown, natural disaster and etc), which has had an adverse impact on their studies. While the policy was in place before COVID-19, this policy re-emerged into the spotlight where students who are affected by COVID-19 are encouraged to apply for special circumstances if they have been ill with the virus, experienced prolonged exposure to a difficult/challenging home environment, or prolonged technical issues preventing access to learning and assessments.

The policy defines what constitutes special circumstances, setting out the guiding principles for the consideration of special circumstances, the role of the Special Circumstances Committee and the role of a Board of Examiners and their possible actions in response to special circumstances requests. In order to apply, students are required to complete an application for specific assessments of specific courses within seven calendar days after the final assessment date of the semester, along with details on the nature of the special circumstances, a personal statement and impact statement (including outcomes desired) and any available supporting evidence. Students are encouraged to confer with their personal tutors, course coordinator and any counselling before applying. Finally, the Board of Examiners has the jurisdiction to determine outcomes such as (i) offering the opportunity to repeat assessed work, or a whole course; (ii) disregarding late penalties for a particular piece of work; or (iii) disregarding a particular mark from the calculation for a course, or for a progression or classification decision.

Safety Net Policy

The special 'V' grade is an initiative in an academic system that adopts the grade point system. However, in universities that use a weighted average classification system, a different mechanism is required. University of Oxford, for instance, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and disruption, introduced the Safety Net Policy for the term in 2020 for the final year students of their undergraduate programmes as well as postgraduate programmes with final examinations.

The Safety Net Policy applies to subjects for which remote assessments, such as open book examinations or extended essays/assignments, are conducted in the affected term. The aim of the policy was to reduce the risk that students might be disadvantaged by the conditions under which they prepare and sit for examinations during the COVID-19 pandemic. For students who had completed more than 50% of their assessed work in the previous term, assessments in the current final term before graduation will only count towards their degree classification if it improves the overall result. Conversely, if less than 50% of the work has been completed in the previous term, other adjustments to benefit the student, such as increased weighting of earlier work or discounting of lowest marks would be undertaken.

Simultaneously, students who are unable to complete the remotely assessed work due to exceptional circumstances, may opt to graduate with a 'Declared to Deserve Honours' status or return to sit for the written examination the following year. Notably, University of Oxford announced that the Safety Net Policy would not be implemented in 2021 and shall remain as a

one-off policy specifically to address the situation in 2020.

Concluding Thought

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to higher education globally. Social distancing measures have forced institutions to be creative in responding to this unique situation. As such, there is a need to balance supporting their students (and staff) through exceptional circumstances while maintaining the quality and rigour of academic work. There is no one particular response that other institutions can copy and adopt, but instead, each response requires careful consideration according to the circumstances and contexts of the institution, staff and students. The unprecedented disruption also created an opportune moment to re-think conventional T&L and assessment practices. Questions include: do we still require the practicality and usefulness of timed written examination that forces students to write what they know without reference to other materials? Should the campus continue to be the only site where T&L can happen?

A significant part of higher education, especially the educational processes and environment, has remained relatively unchanged for more than a century. For instance, lectures in large hall, tutorials, and written examination with pen and paper continue to be the dominant mode of T&L in higher education. Although we may have been discussing on how technology is going to change and disrupt T&L for years, it seems that the COVID-19 virus has become the real disruptor, forcing us to rethink and change. The ability of universities and higher education institutions to adopt, adapt and change in the New Normal era, without losing sight of its role and purpose, will be crucial determinants of their sustainability in the future.

Postscript: On 27 January 2021, Universiti Sains Malaysia announced the implementation of a Special Policy on Students Assessment during COVID-19 pandemic, whereby students affected by disruptions to their learning and assessment have the flexibility to apply for consideration to improve their grades or reduce the impact on their overall performance. Students have the option to repeat a course, request for special grade (V) that will not count to the overall grade, and final year students to re-sit the examination.

Bibliography

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