Dear students,

Thank you for your continued patience this week while we have been finalising the arrangements for ‘take home’ exams and alternate assessments this summer for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. In this email we outline how our approach has evolved, taking into account a wide range of views from students and colleagues, as well as looking at wider practice in the sector.

It is an understatement to say that the last few weeks have been enormously difficult for everyone, and we share your disappointment that this situation has had such an impact on your university experience. We do not, in any way, underestimate the difficulties or worry that many students are facing in adapting to these very different ways of studying. Our priority has always been to support your wellbeing and minimise this impact as far as we reasonably can.

We want to be open and transparent about our approach and why we have made the decisions we have. We have heard your feedback this week and listened to RUSU’s advocacy on your behalf. We have also explored and noted the approaches taken by other universities, which vary considerably. It is worth noting that even where similar terms, like ‘no detriment’, are used they do not necessarily mean the same thing. How universities respond will depend on their own unique student population, their governance arrangements and their operational systems.

There is a great deal to cover and this is another long email, at the end of a challenging week. Please do take the time to read the information carefully. We are not describing our approach as ‘no detriment’ – we simply do not think it is possible for any institution to offset completely all the negative impacts of a global health pandemic that has fundamentally changed how we live our lives. Instead, we are describing our arrangements as a ‘safety net’ that is responsive to individual needs, allowing you to demonstrate your learning while addressing individual impacts on academic performance.

More detail will be available on the Essentials coronavirus pages early next week. Here we set out:

- our guiding principles for our position
- the framework for ‘take home’ exam process and how this takes account of challenges arising from the current circumstances
- an outline of our ‘safety net’ arrangements to address the concerns raised
- an outline of the new circumstances impact process, which temporarily replaces the extenuating circumstances policy.

Our guiding principles

To develop our approach to exams and assessments this summer, we have been guided by the following principles:

1. to be fair to all students, providing a full opportunity for students to consolidate their learning, demonstrate their academic achievement and gain the full benefit of their studies
2. to ensure that all students are reliably assessed, and that awards achieved by students meet sector and professional requirements, are respected by employers, accrediting bodies and other stakeholders, and have the same value as degrees awarded in previous years
3. to support students to complete the academic year and undertake their assessments, allowing flexibility and reflecting the diverse needs of our students and the different circumstances that they find themselves in as a result of the current situation

4. to enable students to achieve their degree or to progress to the following year in accordance with the normal schedule, as far as reasonably possible.

‘Take home’ exams

In line with these principles, we believe that assessment should go ahead, although in an adapted format, and we expect all students to take these alternative assessments wherever possible. This will enable as many students as possible to complete the academic year according to their programme’s planned schedule while making reasonable changes to original programme assessments to manage the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.

The majority of exams will therefore go ahead as ‘take home’ online exams, or another form of alternate assessment, allowing you to receive the credit for your learning this year.

A ‘take home’ exam is an open-book, time-limited exam that you can take in your own environment. Some important elements are built in to account for the current circumstances.

- It can be done with access to lecture notes, internet and other resources.
- It will be released at 10am (UK time) on Blackboard, to take best account of time differences.
- The take home exam will normally remain open for 23 hours, to allow for things like time differences, caring arrangements and any interruptions or technical difficulties. You are not expected to spend 23 hours actually doing the exam and suggested timings for completion will be provided.
- You will not have more than one take home exam in a day.

Your exam timetable for summer 2020 is now available on RISIS and the Exams Office will send an email later today with further information about how to access it. Please check your timetable and if you have any issues, including if it appears that you do have more than one exam in a day, please contact your Support Centre or email take-home-exam@reading.ac.uk.

We will be giving you the opportunity to try out a practice take home exam during the week commencing 14 April. This will allow you to get used to the system and test your internet connection. Further details about this will be sent to you soon.

We have reviewed submissions by the RUSU Disabilities Officer, and for students registered with our Disability Advisory Service (DAS) we will be updating our online FAQs with questions you may have about how your adjustment can take place. The extended 23-hour window to complete an exam allows those who would usually have special timing arrangements to take any extra time or rest breaks they need. You will also be able to use your assistive technology at home and, if you normally have the aid of a scribe, reader or Oral Language Modifier (OLM), your family or members of your household can perform this role for you. If you normally have a scribe, reader or OLM, your Disability Adviser will be in touch to check if you are able to access this support at home. If you have other needs that cannot be met, please contact your Support Centre in the first instance.

We will publish further information and frequently asked questions about ‘take home’ exams on Essentials early next week and these should answer the majority of questions you will have.
Individual ‘safety net’ arrangements

The feedback we have received this week has highlighted the diverse needs of our own student community and the differing options for how we can or should respond. As a result, we have revised our approach and introduced an individual safety net, which will be tailored for each student, depending on individual performance.

In normal circumstances, your full assessment mark for each module is usually made up of:
- marks from coursework and other assessment undertaken over the course of your module in the Autumn and Spring terms
- your marks from exams or any other form of assessment undertaken in the Summer term.

The safety net means that, subject to certain important exceptions, your mark for each module will be no lower than the average you had achieved through the coursework and other assessment submitted before the end of the Spring term, 27 March 2020. If you do better than this average in the Summer term exams or assessments your module results will go up. Your final module marks will be used to calculate progression or your degree award in the normal way at the end of the take home exam period.

As a result of this safety net, completing the remainder of your assessments can only have a positive impact on your marks.

There are a number of circumstances where the safety net cannot apply and therefore it is especially important that you complete the remainder of your assessments:

- where the assessment already taken for Autumn and Spring modules accounts for less than 40% of all assessment for your module, as there is not sufficient basis to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been met. In these cases, your final module mark will be based on your full assessment in the usual way but the Circumstances Impacts Process outlined below will still apply.
- where, on the basis of a full set of marks prior to adjustment, a finalist has not achieved the requirements for the award of an Honours degree at the threshold for Third Class on their programme or where a postgraduate taught student has not achieved the requirements for the award of their qualification at the level of “Passed”.
- where programmes are subject to professional regulation we may not be permitted to apply the safety net. We will explain this directly to those affected as quickly as possible, and in most cases by the end of next week.

If you cannot submit work for all required assessments due to coronavirus, our Circumstances Impact Process outlined below will apply.

Circumstances Impact Process

We understand that not everyone will be able to complete the take home exams in a way that accurately reflects their academic progress. For example, some students may be affected by illness, internet restrictions, access to learning materials, or caring responsibilities.

These circumstances will vary significantly for different students, which is why we are introducing a new, flexible extenuating circumstances process, called the Circumstances Impact Process, for students to use if they feel they have been disadvantaged. This will temporarily replace the standard Extenuating Circumstances process.
This new process will allow you to choose how best to proceed with your studies, depending on your individual situation. As announced on Monday 30 March, we will:

1. issue extensions for coursework and dissertations on reasonable request and with no requirement for evidence of the reason for the request
2. permit any student to defer exams to August or September on reasonable request, again with no requirement to provide evidence of the reason
3. following publication of results, permit any students to retake assessments on reasonable request in August or September without penalties or capping of marks, if you should feel that the outcome does not reflect your ability.

Some of these decisions could mean that your work cannot be marked in this academic year, for example, if you request an extension past the re-sit exam board. This may affect your ability to progress into the next academic year. We will do all we can to advise you on how best to proceed – and this is why it will be important for you to stay in touch with us and seek advice if unsure how to proceed.

We will be publishing full guidance about this new process, along with frequently asked questions, on Essentials early next week. We are also making some adjustments to our student complaints process to make it easier for you to raise concerns about these changes to your assessments or the University’s response to COVID-19. We will publish details about this next week as well.

Supporting you

The exam and assessment period can often cause anxiety for students, even under normal circumstances. It is understandable that the uncertainty of the current global pandemic, alongside getting to grips with online exams, will be worrying for many of you.

Now that we have outlined the wide range of measures that we have put in place to accommodate the potential negative impact of COVID-19 on your academic progress we hope that you will be assured that our priority is to support you to be successful in these very difficult circumstances. We hope that the vast majority of students will be able to take their end-of-year exams or assessment in the Summer term with the knowledge that the safety net policy will safeguard your interests.

Please remember that our wide network for specialist support services outlined in Patricia Woodman’s email on Wednesday, including Academic Tutors, Study Advisers and Student Welfare Team, continue to be available to offer advice and guidance. The Disability Advisory Service can advise students registered with them.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message. We really do hope that it helps to reassure you that the steps we have taken have been with the best interests of our students at heart. And, of course, we wish you well for all your upcoming assessments!

Kind regards,
Professors Elizabeth McCrum and Julian Park
Pro-Vice-Chancellors (Education and Student Experience)