Dear students,

Start of term updates usually include a summary of new developments, activities and forthcoming events. Given the profound changes we have faced in recent weeks, I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on what to write in this email. COVID-19 has, temporarily at least, completely changed the way we live, work and study, in a way none of us could have thought possible just a few months ago.

The last few weeks have been challenging for us all. While the University has remained ‘open’, in a very short space of time, we have scaled down almost all on-campus activity, transitioned to online teaching and assessment, and made significant changes to our governance, policies and procedures. I recognise that this will have brought anxiety for some, despite efforts to limit the disruption as best we can.

Given the pace of this change, and the number of emails you have received recently, I wanted to take this opportunity to draw your attention to some particularly important points.

Our Circumstances Impact Process and marks ‘safety net’

In direct response to student feedback, we have put a marks ‘safety net’ in place. This means that, subject to some specified exceptions, your mark for each module will be no lower than the average you had achieved through your coursework and other assessment with an original submission date before the end of the Spring term, 27 March 2020. This includes any extensions beyond that date as long as marking can take place in time for Summer Exam Boards.

As outlined in my recent letter to the RUSU Officers, the exceptions exist where we do not have sufficient basis to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been met, which we are required to do by the Office for Students (OfS) and some accreditation bodies. The requirement for 40% completed assessment in a given module was the minimum we could use to award a full module mark and for that final mark to have academic credibility. Our analysis across all undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules shows that the marks safety net applies to a majority of students at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate level, for some or all of their modules.

Alongside this safety net, our new flexible Circumstances Impact Process (CIP), allows all students to request a coursework extension, or to defer or resit an exam, on reasonable request, and in most cases without evidence. How those resits take place will inevitably depend on that status of government restrictions, but we will update you as soon as we can.

Advice for undergraduate finalists and taught postgraduate (Masters) students

For undergraduate finalists and taught postgraduate students, I must emphasise the particular importance of completing your summer term exams and assessment. This is to ensure that you meet the individual threshold requirements for your programme, so you can then benefit from the marks ‘safety net’, as applicable, and put yourself in the best possible position to complete your degree as planned.

We understand that some students will be facing particularly difficult circumstances that mean it is impossible to do exams and assessments at this time. If you find yourself in this position, you should use the Circumstances Impact Process to defer your exams and/or assessment.
Advice for postgraduate research students

We have published specific advice for postgraduate research students on Essentials. If you have any queries about your current circumstances and how they may affect your studies, please speak to your Supervisor or the Graduate School and they will be able to help.

Supporting you

My colleagues and I are very aware that this will be a challenging time, both personally and academically. We remain committed to providing you with the support you need.

We were recently overwhelmed with responses from more than 150 members of staff in just two days following a request for volunteers for our ‘Support our Students’ scheme. This scheme gives you the opportunity to be matched with a fellow student or staff member for online support, whether that is a cup of tea and a video chat, or answering questions by email.

In addition, our full range of expert academic and pastoral support remains available online, including Academic Tutors, Study Advisers, Careers Consultants, Student Welfare Officers and many others as listed on Essentials. Please do not hesitate to contact them with any queries.

I would also encourage you to take a look at our Student Services News blog, for tips on studying effectively at home, and our Student Stories blog, for advice from current students about how they are transitioning to this new way of life. RUSU’s Community Facebook page also provides a space for you to share ideas and information with your fellow students.

#wearetogether: working with the NHS and our communities

I have been so proud of our University community in the past few weeks. Everyone has come together to offer support and comfort to one another at this strange time.

Furthermore, our colleagues and students have also made a valuable contribution to support our local community and the NHS. Together, we have made significant food donations to support the most vulnerable in the local area, as well as donating medical supplies and providing both specialist equipment, expertise and volunteer time for the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading. There are many other activities in the pipeline and I would like to sincerely thank all those involved for helping us to play our part to support the efforts to prevent the spread of the virus.

You can read more about all this work on our #WeAreTogether webpage.

Re-opening campus in the future

We are preparing for many different scenarios for the coming weeks and months and will continue to be guided by the UK government advice to protect the health and wellbeing of our community. All teaching and assessment will continue to be delivered online for the remainder of the current academic year. We are hoping to be able to resume campus activities as normal in time for the start of the new term in September, but this will depend on the government position at the time.

It is very likely that we will implement a phased return to on-campus activities, once government restrictions are eased, and we will not scale up all on-campus activity at once. As we saw when the restrictions were introduced, the government may give little notice when they decide to relax these.
Therefore, it is very important that you continue to check your emails and our Essentials webpages for the latest information and especially before attempting to travel to campus.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to thank you for your patience and understanding. We have not always been able to answer your questions as quickly as we would like to and I recognise that this will have caused some frustration. Our overarching aim has been, and will continue to be, to provide you with the best possible learning experience in the current circumstances.

I hope you and your loved ones are keeping safe and well and wish you the very best for the term.

Kind regards,
Robert

Professor Robert Van de Noort
Vice-Chancellor