

12th January 2022

Dear Mark,

I hope you are well. As you know, we have had robust discussions around the way in which the University assesses its students this month, given the surge of the Omicron variant. The number of Southampton students self-isolating has, in recent weeks, risen to well over triple figures. As the student who launched our successful petition on in-person exams says, "[w]ith case rates as high as they are, infections in the exam hall are not only likely but inevitable; this will endanger vulnerable students, add additional pressure to the NHS during an already strained time, and prevent people from learning as effectively at the start of the second semester. This requirement also endangers members of University staff who invigilate and organise the exams, who are potentially exposed to infection". Not only this, but the number of students having to miss their examinations due to self-isolation is likely to be disruptively high. As such, we are expecting the University to receive a surge of special considerations requests, appeals, and calls for no-detriment mitigations, all of which will require significant resource from the University in coming months.

As you know, this petition reached the threshold of 250 student supporters in under ten minutes and, when put to an All-Student Vote, garnered over 7,000 votes, 95% of which were in favour of moving January exams online. Students have given me the clearest of mandates to lobby the University to change the way they assess students in January, and it has therefore come as no surprise to me that students are deeply disappointed and distressed that the University has not conceded that a change of approach might now be appropriate. This is despite repeated assurances from the University that if the Covid situation were to change dramatically, the method of assessment could be reviewed. I have valued playing a role in our conversations of the past few days, but I think that it is regrettable that we stand as a stark outlier among our Russell Group colleagues in not recognising the real and perceived risks that students are feeling in relation to in-person examinations.

In addition, a number of our student members have been in contact with one of our local MPs, Dr Alan Whitehead, who has provided us with the following statement:

"I have been contacted by a number of students and their representatives who are worried about the policy of having exams in person this January. With cases of Covid-19 as high as they are right now this decision will mean that many students are not able to sit exams if they are isolating and those that can will be at greater risk of contracting the virus.

I am worried about the wellbeing of Southampton students in light of this decision and I understand that a vote has been taken with the majority asking for exams to be moved online. I was impressed at the turnout of this vote having been once involved in student votes myself and I think it shows the strength of feeling on this issue.

I would urge the decision makers at University of Southampton to think again about moving to in person exams at what is the height of covid-19 cases. I understand we are all eager to get back to some semblance of normality but I think this move is being made at the wrong time."

I very much hope that the University is able to recognise the strength of feeling among the student community, and agrees to the necessary change to January assessments that I am requesting on their behalf.

Yours sincerely,



Ben Dolbear
President of the University of Southampton Students' Union