

Our Ref: VC-MC-2022 01 13 SUSU

13th January 2022

Ben Dolbear
President
SUSU

Dear Ben,

Thank you for your two open letters this week in response to the decision of the University Executive Board to continue with our plans for examinations this term. You will understand that I have wanted to ensure time for full and proper consideration of these before replying to you.

As you know from attending the University Executive Board yourself, we have given very significant consideration to the issues that you have presented on behalf of the student community. In the last 10 days alone there have been three meetings of the Executive Board, including an additional meeting on 13th January to consider both your open letters, and three meetings of the Education Silver Command group, chaired by our Vice-President Education and attended by our Associate Deans Education for each of our faculties. At each of these meetings, all the issues you have presented have been discussed at length, by colleagues who understand both the rationale for the assessment schemes that have been designed for this period and the importance of ensuring the well-being of our students.

I want to thank you for the thoughtful and open way that you contributed to the many hours of discussion on this matter, and for sharing students' views. As you know from being present at a number of these meetings, this was not a decision that was taken lightly or quickly.

Much of the content of your letters focusses on the request to move assessments and examinations online. It is important from the outset to point out that we are already running nearly 60% of our assessments online, and that where this is not the case it is as a result of significant planning and scrutiny. As you will have heard in our discussions, we have planned our examinations extremely carefully on a subject-by-subject basis. The mix of in-person and online exams has been considered at length during the autumn term at both School and University levels, to determine what is in the best interests of our students' ongoing education at Southampton. In drawing up their assessment plans, Schools have drawn on their experience of what worked well and what was less successful during the lockdown periods of last year. As such, our choices of assessment have prioritised the relevance, inclusivity and academic rigour that is expected of us, and that our accrediting bodies require.

The University certainly acknowledges the feeling in the student community as indicated in the outcome of the student vote. The student vote did lead to extensive discussion on whether any change should be made to the plans. The student vote was one of a number of important pieces of information that contributed to our decision on how to proceed this term. Given the very extensive consideration of all these factors, we do not feel there is any new information or changed circumstances which would now warrant that decision being re-considered.

Whilst we of course recognise and acknowledge the concerns of some of the student body, it is important to note that throughout the pandemic the University has always taken, and continues to take, every precaution to reduce potential risks for both students and staff. Rigorous risk assessments have been carried out, we continue to operate our unique twice-weekly saliva testing programme, and we continue to be guided by the prevailing Government advice as well as the advice of our local public health bodies. In respect of examinations, we are only using venues that have sufficient space to allow for our COVID safety measures to be put in place, we are working with our invigilators to ensure they are overseeing the safe use of exam venues we are sending direct communications to students on how to enter and exits venues safely and reminding them of their responsibilities in keeping each other safe. We are confident that both our in-person assessment and our in-person teaching arrangements are safe and compliant with the current Government and University COVID guidelines.

With this in mind, the Executive Board identified that:

- The potential risk to students through in-person examinations is being actively and properly managed, just as it has been for in-person teaching, which students have been so keen to engage with.
- The assessment design process that has been undertaken was rigorous and robust, and intended to enable our students to succeed, and recommended by those directly involved in their teaching.
- It had been clear throughout the autumn term that it was likely that we would be offering a mix of in-person and online examinations and this mix would be used if the prevailing national advice regarding face-to-face activity was the same as in the autumn term, this is the case.
- Students have known that we would be offering in-person examinations and that we announced our examinations timetable on 3rd December, enabling students to prepare for their examinations in either in-person or online format.
- Where you have provided feedback on the experience of students early in the assessment period, and other elements of student intention such as the intention not to test, we will make change. This includes improving signage at examination venues, and the provision of additional communications on the responsibilities for all to operate a safe environment and a reminder of our Community Code of Conduct.
- The e-mail that you cited relating to invigilation was simply to increase the number of potential stand-by invigilators, recognising numbers needing to self-isolate remain constant. It is quite normal for us ask for volunteers from our staff to help with student-related events, such as open days, graduations and clearing.

We fully explored the issues of anxiety which we acknowledge will be caused by a whole range of factors and indeed recognised that the prospect of sitting exams now may be daunting for some of our students. However, we remain confident that we have extensive pastoral and academic support in place for our students through our academic areas, our Academic Skills Centre and Student Services.

In the event that a student's ability to attend an in-person exam is affected by COVID or any other illness – for example, because a positive COVID test required them to self-isolate - our 'special considerations' process exists to provide an opportunity to share this and for alternative arrangements to be explored.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark E. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M'.

Professor Mark E. Smith CBE
President and Vice-Chancellor