

13th January 2022

Dear Mark,

I hope you are well. I am reaching out to you as a follow-up to the open letter that I sent to you yesterday, to which I have yet to receive a response. Since my initial letter, further information has come to light, which I think it appropriate to bring to your attention when considering the University's position on in-person assessments this month.

Firstly, the Students' Union has been made aware of an email which has been circulated among postgraduate research students, asking them to be made available to invigilate assessments for undergraduates. This is because University staff have dropped out of invigilating due to, "worries about Omicron, or supporting family members in providing care for their dependents, as well as higher-than-normal sickness absence". It is acutely saddening to hear that, while the University recognises the real and perceived risks to invigilating staff whilst our region is in the peak of a surge of Covid cases, it seemingly does not recognise the same risks which face our students. Given the shortage of invigilating staff, students believe that it would be fairer to protect the safety and wellbeing of all members of our University community, as opposed to prioritising that of casual staff, employed through Uniworkforce.

Secondly, I have been contacted by students who have reported that they and their peers intend not to test themselves for Covid-19 prior to sitting exams. This is because of the uncertainty surrounding the consequences of a positive test, or requirement for self-isolation, for those being assessed. There is a real fear among our members that their academic progression, or final classification, will be delayed, if they fail to attend an examination. If students fail to test prior to in-person assessment, the University could see a surge of Covid cases, self-isolation, and further disruption to teaching and learning.

Furthermore, it has been reported that the University will not accept anxiety, or other mental healthrelated Covid concerns – or, indeed, the desire to protect vulnerable relatives – as a valid reason for failing to attend an in-person assessment. If students wish to submit a special considerations request, weeks of further anxiety and uncertainty will inevitably follow, while the exam boards deliberate. You will understand - from my communication shared with yourself and other members of the University Council yesterday – that levels of student anxiety are already high. Such foreseeable disarray could be avoided were the University to agree to move all possible exams online, a situation for which all academic staff have been asked to prepare.

Thank you, as ever, for your partnership with me, and I look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely,



Ben Dolbear

President of the University of Southampton Students' Union