

14th January 2022

Dear Mark,

I firstly want to thank you for your considered response to my two open letters. For both of us, the past week has been an intensely busy week, and for you to get back to me with your thoughts is greatly appreciated. I also want to acknowledge my understanding and appreciation of the fact that members of the University Executive Board have put a great deal of thought into the decision to continue with a large minority of assessments in-person.

However, there remains a great deal of concern in the student body about the University's decision, and I do not believe that there is a window of opportunity for us to agree a path forward today, and I set out my rationale for this below.

In your response to my letter, you state that students have had adequate time to prepare for in-person assessments. However, this does not recognise that the University has repeatedly assured students that, were circumstances to change significantly, measures were in place to move assessments online. I now strongly believe that such conditions for change have been met.

A significant number of students have contacted my colleagues and myself over the past few days to express two chief concerns. Firstly, assurances from the University that the physical conditions of in-person assessments are safe do not match with the lived experiences of students who have already sat their exams this week. Students have reported a lack of social distancing, crowding in corridors, no checks on testing, and visibly symptomatic peers coughing in their proximity. Secondly, students have reported that they and their peers are actively declining to test for Covid-19 prior to attending in-person examinations on campus because of the lack of clarity from the University on special considerations mitigations. Many are concerned that, if required to isolate and retake their exams, they will be unable to progress or graduate in the summer with their friends and coursemates. This is creating a real health risk to students and staff in the exam hall, with potentially damaging consequences for the wellbeing of students, and the reputation of the University.

I understand that it is now impractical to alter the method of assessment for students due to take their exams next week. For this reason, I am now calling on you to urgently delay the January assessment window by one week, to provide University colleagues with sufficient time to finalise Plan B preparations – for those exams which can possibly be moved online - and to communicate the shift to online assessments to students. This would, of course, mean either compressing two weeks of teaching in Semester One, or pushing the last teaching week of Semester One to after the spring vacation.

I believe that this is a reasonable compromise, and would enable us both to reassure students that their health and wellbeing is of the utmost importance to the University, and that the student voice is listened to by the University executive.

Yours sincerely,



Ben Dolbear

President of the University of Southampton Students' Union