

COVID-19 supporting resources

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'No Detriment' Policies: An Overview

Introduction

In the [QAA COVID-19: Thematic Guidance](#) published in early April 2020, it was recognised that many providers were introducing 'no detriment' or safety net models in response to the coronavirus pandemic; and those who had not yet announced such policies were coming under pressure from student bodies and others to do so. This paper seeks to provide more information about what 'no detriment' policies aim to achieve and outlines some of the measures providers can put in place to ensure that the academic standards of awards remain secure, while also recognising the challenging circumstances for students. The final section includes a series of reflective questions providers can use to evaluate their approaches.

What is 'no detriment'?

A quick search of 'no detriment' policies returns varied perspectives on what these do and do not entail. Among the variety of potential definitions, some common themes emerge.

A 'no detriment' policy seeks to mitigate against the impact of a set of circumstances, by ensuring that an individual is not unfairly disadvantaged by a requirement to change rules or regulations, in session. Most commonly this translates into calculating and evaluating two outcomes:

- the outcome as it would have been if the changes had not been implemented
- the outcome after implementation of the changes.

Under a 'no detriment' approach, the outcome that is more favourable to the individual is retained. These approaches are usually applied in a blanket fashion, for a set period of time in response to the widespread impact of a specific event where it would be impractical to undertake individual case-by-case mitigations.

In practice, for many higher education providers, 'no detriment' means students are guaranteed that their final grade will be no lower than their average academic performance in advance of the pandemic. For some, this guarantee is dependent on the student achieving (at least) a pass in the assessments taken during the pandemic.

Some providers have been reluctant to use the term 'no detriment' because they are not applying a guaranteed 'safety net' to students although they may be introducing other measures to avoid students being disadvantaged by the changes in learning, teaching and assessment that have arisen due to the pandemic. For example, they may be adjusting the format of assessment and/or allowing additional time for sitting exams which are taken under different circumstances from usual. They may also be including consideration of past academic performance in arriving at a final grade.

What does 'no detriment' mean in my university?

Providers have established their own policies and students should refer to those for details about what precisely applies to them. In some cases, students will not have to sit all of the originally scheduled assessments, with academic performance to date being used to determine their grades. In other cases, there will be changes to the assessments - such as reducing the number of assessments or adjusting their format - while still ensuring all learning outcomes are assessed. Many providers are applying a combination of approaches, for example, adjusting the nature of assessment and taking past performance into account in determining the final grade.

Even where providers have 'no detriment' policies, there may be some exceptions. For example, it may not be possible to apply 'no detriment' to courses which have to meet professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB) requirements.

This may seem complex but there are very real differences between providers, for example, their student populations, the structure and dates of their academic year, the learning and teaching approaches, curriculum content and assessment regimes. It is important that the policies applied recognise these differences.

Why introduce 'no detriment'?

Awarding bodies have a responsibility to protect the academic standard of the qualifications they award. They also have a duty to their students, and providers adopting 'no detriment' (or related) arrangements have highlighted that their aim has been to protect their students' interests in the exceptional circumstances created by the global pandemic.

It is unreasonable to base final classification decisions on student performance if that performance has been impacted negatively by serious personal or medical circumstances beyond the student's control. 'No detriment' (and related) approaches work at the level of a cohort in the same way that some approaches to handling mitigating or extenuating circumstances work at the level of individuals, focusing on actual rather than potential achievement.

By introducing a 'no detriment' (or related) approach, the intention is that students are free to focus on their learning and realising their academic ambitions rather than worrying about risks to their academic outcomes due to matters that are beyond their control.

Have students been consulted?

Providers and regulators have emphasised the importance of engaging student sabbatical officers in the development of policies and in taking time to explain the thinking behind the approaches being adopted. One provider highlighted the partnership model between the staff senior team and their student executive which had resulted in finalising their no disadvantage policy, including the decision to continue assessing students at all levels of study.

Clear communication to the whole student body is also fundamental. Providers highlighted approaches including direct messages to all students individually and FAQ pages on university and student union websites, with additional information and materials being made available on their virtual learning environments.

What about academic standards?

Alongside the need to ensure that students are not disadvantaged, awarding bodies also need to be confident - and able to demonstrate - that graduates in 2020 are not advantaged compared to their peers in previous years; and also that they are not disadvantaged in future years by being known as the 'COVID-19 generation', whose degree classifications are not considered reliable.

There are many ways in which providers can ensure that any disadvantage to students is limited. Some 'emergency', time-limited changes to academic regulations or classification algorithms may be required. Some providers have expressed the view that such changes should only seek to eliminate any disadvantage, rather than reframing the whole assessment process for this student cohort. To be effective and fair, a sophisticated approach is likely to be needed which differentiates between different situations, and potentially between different disciplines (especially those with PSRB accreditation). While a whole-institution approach is simpler, it could create unfairness. There will be some students for whom the pandemic has had more significant impact, for example, those who become ill, who have particular caring responsibilities or who have pre-existing specific learning plans. Providers should work to ensure these students are not disadvantaged further by policies which apply across the whole cohort.

The [QAA COVID-19: Thematic Guidance](#) states that, irrespective of the model providers have in place, they should 'focus on ensuring that the classifications students will ultimately be awarded are fair, valid and reliable. The arrangements put in place, including any adjustments made in response to the current circumstances, should be clearly documented and communicated to students.'

Providers whose approaches involve assessing all the intended learning outcomes and ensuring that students achieve a pass (at least) in those assessments, are able to have confidence that the academic standards of the awards are secure. Other arrangements that providers have been following include: retaining existing marking criteria (other than where adjustments are required due to, for example, moving to open book exams); gathering significant volumes of evidence relating to students' prior attainment; and providing training for staff including those involved in assessment boards where prior achievement is being considered.

Reflective questions

The following reflective questions can be used by providers to evaluate their 'no detriment' (or related) policies.

- 1 Do you have reliable evidence that the student has achieved the intended learning outcomes? (If there is no requirement that a student passes any outstanding assessment, can you be confident that this learning has been achieved?)
- 2 What arrangements do you have in place to ensure that specific skills (such as oral examination for modern languages) or outcomes relating to specialist pathways will be assessed and reflected in the final classification?
- 3 Will 'no detriment' policies apply to assessments completed (or mostly completed) prior to the social distancing arrangements relating to the pandemic? For example, dissertations where the majority of work should have been completed earlier in the academic year.

- 4 In some cases, students will have completed a proportion of the work for a module, for example, the coursework may be complete but the examination has not taken place. Is it legitimate to base the final mark on the work already undertaken? Are you confident that the learning outcomes have been tested by the work that is already completed? And are you able to take students' preferred assessment formats into account?
- 5 If you are changing the final method of assessment, or if grades or classifications are calculated on the basis of previous academic performance, to what extent have you taken into account the format of the previous assessments? For example, to account for a position where students perform better in one assessment format than another, such as coursework compared to examinations.
- 6 How reliable is the evidence you are using to base a classification on the student's academic profile to date, particularly where their final assessments result in lower grades than their previous average? Equally, are you able to take into account the phenomenon of 'exit velocity' where, under less disrupted circumstances, many students perform better in final assessments than in their earlier work?
- 7 Do you need to revise your classification algorithm? Many algorithms identify the volume of credit to be achieved in each classification band. How should this be interpreted in the current situation?
- 8 Will there be an impact for continuing students of any changes in assessment approach, for example, where your classification algorithm includes marks from earlier levels of study? Will adjustments be required for these students?
- 9 How will you record the marks for any outstanding assessments on student transcripts? In the event of a student achieving a lower mark in their final assessment than their previous average grade, will the transcript show the average grade or the actual mark achieved?

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