Dear Dr Bradshaw and Russell Group Vice-Chancellors,

Russell Group Students' Unions: Our response to current arrangements for assessments and grading

We are writing on behalf of over half a million students at Russell Group Universities that we represent, to urge you to take immediate action to address the challenges faced by our members. In your statement to students, the ruling out of a safety net caused unnecessary anxiety amongst the students who we represent, and it is our responsibility to address this.

We as Students' Unions, Associations, and Guilds know that the ever-changing guidance has made this academic year incredibly difficult. Plans have had to change at short notice and now many students are unable to return to campus until at least the end of February. Students now find themselves in a similar situation to that of March 2020, where they are at home unable to access certain libraries, resources, and study spaces that are necessary for many students to succeed academically.

Last year when the conversation between students and universities around no detriment policies first began, the initial understanding was that “no detriment” policies sought to mitigate against the impact of a set of unforeseen circumstances, by ensuring that an individual was not unfairly disadvantaged. It is our belief that this set of circumstances is still impacting students, which is why mitigating policies are still necessary.

We understand that having an individualised, algorithmic method this year is challenging, and unfeasible, due to the lack of data for some students to create these baseline averages. It is, however, our belief that no detriment policies are not simply about algorithms resulting from banked assessments, but are a collection of policies that ensure the full magnitude of the pandemic and its effect on education are fully considered. The integrity of all academic standards and outcomes should be upheld. No student should be disadvantaged by the impacts of COVID-19. No student should be disadvantaged by any mitigating measures introduced. All students should, as much as possible, have a level playing field to demonstrate their academic achievement.

Consequently, we are calling on Universities to recognise that all students continue to be affected by the pandemic. Any rejection of safety net policies because they apply to all students fails to recognise the aforementioned fact. We call upon universities to implement safety net policies that both apply to all students, no matter their background or course, and that take into account the individual challenges students have faced. We are asking for:
1. Universities to individually and clearly publish what mitigations they are putting in place for students. We feel that this will alleviate concerns from students who currently feel that not enough is being done to help them.

2. Universities to demonstrate how any policies implemented will take into account the different needs of all students. One policy does not automatically address the needs of students and therefore any mitigations would have to benefit students no matter their level of study, and also cater for the needs of students from different marginalised backgrounds. Any policies created should be nuanced and assure all students that they are being equally considered.

3. Universities to allow for students to self certify for mitigating circumstances and remove the burden of proof from students. It is our belief that students should not have to prove that living through a pandemic has affected them and their studies.

4. Universities to use best practice across the sector i.e. “reviewing the performance of student cohorts this year against previous years to ensure that the pandemic has not had a detrimental impact” or providing the option to “give less weight to the 2020/21 academic year in the classification calculation” such as the University of York has done or removing penalties for late submissions similar to what the University of Leeds has done.

5. Any policy to be co-developed with Student Officers and academic representatives as student representation is vital for any policy created by universities.

We hope that we can continue conversations with you on an individual basis to ensure that mitigations are co-developed with students in our individual institutions. We are excited to work in partnership to ensure that students are treated fairly and are supported through this pandemic.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Dorothy Chirwa, President and Sian Dickie, Education Officer, and Charlotte Boulton, Postgraduate Officer, Newcastle University Students’ Union

Tobiloba Adeyemi, President, University of Birmingham Guild of Students

University of Bristol Students’ Union Officer Team

Students’ Union UCL Sabbatical Officer Team

Ben Margolis, President (UG), and Aastha Dahal, President (PG), Cambridge SU

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Ellen MacRae, President and Fizzy Abou Jawad, Vice President Education, Edinburgh University Students’ Association

Sunday Blake, President, and Penny Dinh, Vice President Education, University of Exeter Students’ Guild

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Luke Mepham, President, and Megan Clarke, Education Officer & Deputy President, University of Warwick Students’ Union

Dr Purnur Altay, President, and Jane Baston, Vice-President Academic, University of York Graduate Students’ Association

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