

Students' Union proposal for a no detriment policy

Authored by: Ayman Benmati (Education Officer) and Jim Onyemenam (Postgraduate Students' Officer)

Summary

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students has been, and continues to be, incalculable. Despite UCL's best efforts, the loss of an entire year of traditional learning, in combination with multiple government mandated national lockdowns, this year has been a prolonged and painful disruption for UCL students. We recognise the varied factors at play; academic integrity, student wellbeing, student achievement, grade inflation, staff workloads, as well as professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements.

We are concerned that retroactively scaling results fails to address the real needs of students this year. We believe that retroactive scaling is problematic in a number of ways. The motivations for last year's no detriment policy persist and are exacerbated. Accordingly, we have written this paper to express our concerns, outlining our proposals for the no detriment policy for the year 2020/21, which we believe address the aforementioned factors, whilst putting students first.

The academic year so far

Despite the time to adjust education at UCL, the overall learning environment has not substantively changed from the end of the 2019/20 academic year. The sentiments we shared in our [Open Letter](#) (November 2020) are still true, and we are still grateful for all that UCL's Teaching Community have managed to do despite everything impeding them. However, despite their best efforts, the environment that UCL students are expected to succeed in is not conducive to wholly achieving the learning objectives or performing optimally in assessments.

- Despite significant and admirable efforts made by staff this year, a lack of face-to-face teaching is detrimental to learning, regardless of how well it is implemented. It is a far less immersive and personalised form of teaching, with fewer opportunities for high-quality feedback. Collaborative learning is also limited.
- This academic year has taken an immense toll on the physical and mental wellbeing of students. This is set against a backdrop of the longstanding mental health crisis at UCL. This has fostered a mood at UCL characterised by serious anxiety and hardship, affecting all of UCL's 45,000 students. Sadly, many have also undergone bereavement and loss of loved ones. Most students have undergone some form of self-isolation and/or quarantine during this academic year.
- A combination of three national lockdowns, and various tiered approaches has meant that access to UCL facilities has been seriously limited. Study spaces, library resources and other campus amenities which students would otherwise have access to have not been available this year. The lack of social interaction has led to a further deterioration of student wellbeing, and therefore their overall ability to learn and perform this year. In addition, our international students have particularly suffered, lacking in academic or social engagement and forced to adopt unhealthy sleep routines to attend classes.
- The use of Extenuating Circumstances, while useful, has had a limited role in supporting students through ongoing, mental and physical health issues.

The above factors, compounded, has meant that students are undoubtedly in a **far worse position academically** than that of last year. The mitigations designed by EACP *must* reflect the relative detriment facing students this year.

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Grade inflation

We consider the long-term detrimental impacts of grade inflation to perceived 'degree value' to be limited, considering the exceptional circumstances facing students, staff and society at large. A no detriment policy is a temporary measure to meet an immediate, pressing need. **We believe that our proposals do not significantly, if at all, undermine the long-run perceived value of a UCL degree.** Grade inflation is a legitimate concern. We know that there was a 20% increase in the number of firsts awarded to undergraduates this year. This is a fact that has not been disclosed to the student body and as a result, they are not fully aware of the full considerations being made. This will lead them to be even more dissatisfied by the prospect of the no detriment package currently being discussed, especially one that excludes module discounting. Nonetheless, even if the 20% increase is disclosed, we still stand by the fact that the damage to mental health and wellbeing that students have and will suffer this year due to the coronavirus pandemic and the subpar no detriment policy, **seriously outweigh the grade inflation concerns. The current proposed policy does not balance these concerns adequately.** A much better balance can be achieved -- and will be if we include module discounting.

Retroactive scaling and its issues

Understandably, UCL is concerned about grade inflation this year, and accordingly wishes to approach this year's no detriment policy retroactively. We, however, believe that this approach is seriously flawed, and we ask that EACP considers the following:

1. Retroactive scaling benefits only some students

- a. A number of students will still attain 1:1's and high 2:1's, but only at the **expense of their mental and physical health**. Students will work themselves into the ground in order to achieve the grades they deserve. Scaling retroactively does not give students the breathing space they need. UCL has a duty of care to its students. This kind of **broad-brush** approach only favours those who are best placed to ride out the pandemic.
- b. Retroactive scaling turns the assessment period into a **competition** for students. The students who are somehow still able to achieve very high results (whether through studying at the detriment of their wellbeing, or otherwise) will shift the average of the cohort upwards. It systematically shifts those who have been best placed and able to handle the pandemic to the front, while allowing those who UCL should support most to fall through the cracks.
- c. Last year's no detriment policy successfully began to close the BME attainment gap. By definition, closing the BME attainment gap *is* a form of grade inflation. Retroactive scaling will only **further entrench the attainment gap**.

2. No assurance of action

- a. Students are certain that they will underperform this year. The proposed approach will be read as **UCL not believing student concerns** about their academic performance this year. EACP is assuming that students will do well, and that these measures will be largely redundant. We find this assumption difficult to reconcile with the fact that students will have missed an entire year of conventional teaching.
- b. Many of our finalists hold job or postgraduate course offers contingent on them achieving certain grades this academic year. This approach is not sufficient to alleviate the risk to our finalists results, and only works to heighten student anxiety.

3. Emphasises grade inflation over students

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- a. Generally it is students who are affected by grade inflation, yet the student body is largely **unconcerned** about the effects of grade inflation. Students recognise that last year's NDP was overly generous, but the overall approach from last year was good.
- b. There is an ongoing trend of an increasing proportion of 1:1 and 2:1's awarded at universities at large, as well as UCL specifically. Grade inflation and the change in the distribution between classifications is an issue that affected the entire Higher Education sector. It is a hasty assessment to attribute this exclusively to the module discounting - which is what is tacitly being done when that is the only element of last year's NDP that is being removed. We do not believe that it is fitting or appropriate to attribute the entirety of last year's grade inflation to the policy that was implemented. The use of 24 hour, open book examinations are ignored in conversations about grade inflation.
- c. Retroactive scaling does nothing for student mental health and wellbeing. It does not alter the landscape students are working in in the run up to assessments. A no detriment policy has to reduce stress pre-assessment - this proposal fails to do so on all fronts.

Some students, despite the circumstances, may well perform highly this assessment period. Such students will suffer ultimately - they will come out with better grades, deteriorated mental health, and with nothing done for them by UCL because, due to their better performance, they would not trigger any of the planned retroactive scaling. And despite the "improved" academic performance, that will be a shameful failure by EACP, and UCL as a whole as it is a categorical decision to exclude proper consideration of students' mental health and wellbeing.

Student testimonies

In keeping with our duty to represent students, we have collected numerous testimonies from students. These testimonies represent various departments and levels of study, and were collected through our network of academic representatives.

“Grading on a curve is just another insult to students like me who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and a favour to those that can still live a semi-normal life.”

“We’re students, not data points that UCL can manipulate however they please.”

“Grade inflation would just be an unfortunate consequence of a good no detriment policy.”

“We should not have to sacrifice our academic success in the hope that this will be recognised retrospectively. This is a concept that for a driven and intelligent cohort comes with severe emotional consequences, on top of mounting personal issues everyone is suffering as a result of this pandemic.”

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“The moral path to safeguarding the wellbeing of our cohort and the student body is painfully clear: Scrap retrospective curve-grading, implement a transparent credit-mitigation no-detriment policy to ease crippling anxiety, offer proper student wellbeing support, provide special considerations for those stranded 4 abroad – such as myself, and explore the option of partial refunding of tuition fees in a glorified £19,000/year of YouTube.”

Proposed model for a no detriment policy 2020/21

We therefore consider the following adjustments necessary for implementation this academic year, and request that EACP recognises the immense challenges facing students - something which cannot be addressed through retroactive, piecemeal action.

We propose that, in a similar fashion to the mitigations of last academic year, UCL discounts a proportion of a students lowest credits. We also propose a reweighting of marks for students in second year and above such that the academic year 2020/21 carries a lighter weight in the calculation of overall degree performance.

Failing to recognise the need for this will have long-term consequences for students, who through no fault of their own, have had to adapt to these exceptional circumstances. Indeed, education would not be a 'great leveller' but another obstacle to social mobility and meritocracy.