

30 March 2020

Covid-19: Arrangements for Exams and Assessments for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Programmes

The end of term has arrived, but not in the way that any of us expected - the last couple of weeks have been far from normal as our lives have become increasingly impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic. We have had to adapt to new ways of studying and working, and our capacity to adapt – quickly – to new demands and changing circumstances has been tested; no doubt it will be tested further. I want to take this opportunity to thank you all for your cooperation and patience, as we work through what is the right thing to do now, that is also the best for the longer term.

I wanted to write to you and outline our approach to exams and other final assessments, and in particular how we will mitigate you being disadvantaged by the current circumstances. Please do read this information carefully, as it sets out not just what we are doing, but explains why we have chosen our particular approach. It is also important for you to realise that whilst our approach might be different from that of other universities, this is what we believe is right for us.

I am aware that a petition has been launched for Brunel to adapt a grade average safety net. However, we believe that the approach outlined below is the fairest for all of Brunel's students as it does not discriminate based on the volume and weighting of assessment already completed, which is variable between programmes and levels.

In reading the details below I hope you will appreciate that our overarching principle is that we want, as far as possible, to retain a sense of normality so that you can progress or complete your studies as planned, whilst making adaptations where necessary that allow for the extraordinary circumstances we find ourselves in.

Examinations

We recognise that the forthcoming examination period might be affected by both staff and students and their loved ones being ill. For that reason we have taken the decision to focus the assessment opportunities where they matter most: for those completing their studies (final year and Integrated Masters) and those progressing into the final year. Details of all the examinations are in the exam timetable that was released on Friday 27th March. With some exceptions (mainly related to accreditation requirements), Foundation and first-year undergraduate students will take no end of year examinations, with progression decisions based on assessments already completed. MSc/MA masters students, with some exceptions, will defer their exams until the August exam period, and start (or continue) with their dissertations.

We have worked closely with professional accrediting bodies in deciding the alternative exam format and so you can be assured that the changes we have made will not impact on you achieving a professionally recognised award.

All the forthcoming April/May examinations will be conducted remotely, and as a consequence the exam formats have been modified to make them suitable for open-book, time-limited assessments. You will by now have received your examination timetable, and so you are aware of when any exams you have will take place; for some of you located abroad the time difference may mean you have to

sit the exam early or late in the day. For fairness, all students doing a particular exam will start their assessment at the same time.

For open-book, time-limited assessments, your exam questions will be released on WISEflow at the specified time, and this is also where you will upload and submit your answers. We are currently working on specific guidance for you, which will support you in successfully completing your remote examinations. This will also have details of who to contact should you experience any problems. We will share this information with you after Easter.

If you cannot sit the exams

We know that some of you will have difficult family circumstances; technology may be a challenge; or you may not feel prepared to sit the exams or complete other forms of final, summative assessments.

We do not want you to take assessments that you are not ready for. This is why we took the decision to modify the Extenuating Circumstances process so that you can feel secure that should you be unable to take some, or all, of the April/May exams then you will not be penalised. There will be another opportunity in August.

There is no need to submit extenuating circumstances or provide evidence – we know that students who are not able to engage in the April/May assessment period will have valid reasons for not doing so, and the Board of Examiners will automatically give you another assessment opportunity.

If you sit the exams and fail

The situation in the UK has got dramatically worse over the past week, and we are not in the same place as when the modified Extenuating Circumstances process was announced on 17th March. Therefore, we have taken the decision that students sitting their exams in April/May and fail one or more of these assessments, will be able to have an **uncapped** second attempt in August. We will also be suspending the maximum reassessment credits, which should give you further reassurance that you will have real opportunities to demonstrate what you are capable of.

How will Exam Panels and Boards make sure that students are not disadvantaged by the COVID-19 situation?

Many of you are now letting us know that you are anxious and wondering what happens if you don't do well in your exams.

We want to reassure you that our Senate Regulations are designed to mitigate any disadvantage as we have two levels of scrutiny of exam performance designed to detect any issues with assessment:

- The **Panel of Examiners** scrutinises the marks achieved by the whole cohort, so that any overarching issues with the assessment can be detected. Under normal circumstances this will include things such as disturbances during the exams, or errors in the exam question. The Panel will make recommendations to the Board of Examiners about what action should be taken; for example, if an exam question error makes it impossible to solve a problem, then that particular question may be discounted from the exam mark.

- The **Board of Examiners** looks at the performance of each individual student, including in the previous year(s). This is where we pick up anyone who has not done as well as expected based on their previous results. In normal times this is usually linked to extenuating circumstances, and the Board has discretion to, for example, set aside the result for that particular assessment so that it does not contribute to the module grade or award calculation.

These are not normal times. We know that you, just as all staff, are impacted by COVID-19, and the Board of Examiners will recognise that the situation we find ourselves in means that everyone is adjusting to current circumstances. Decisions made by the Board will reflect this.

August Examination Period

At this point in time it is difficult to predict what the situation will be in August. However, we hope we will be back to normal and able to deliver on-campus examinations. If this is not possible, or if there are students not able to travel to campus, we will of course make arrangements to deliver the exams remotely. We will be extending the August examination period to allow for the additional examinations opportunities for those that are unable to take the assessments in April/May; for Master students; and for anyone undertaking a second attempt.

The format of these exams will be confirmed in due course, but to ensure parity of experience for students who deferred their exams from April/May these will be conducted as open-book, time-limited assessment.

Graduation

Although there will be no graduation ceremony on campus in July, we will make arrangements for those of you finishing your studies at Brunel to receive your degree certificate and graduate from the University this summer. We also hope to make arrangements for a virtual celebration in the summer and we will be arranging a full ceremony in due course, which we very much hope that you will attend.

We hope that what we have set out above will reassure you that should your performance in the exams and other assessments be affected we will be able to determine that is the case, and mitigate against any disadvantage. We cannot of course alleviate all the anxiety you may feel at the moment, but if you let us know of your concerns then we will do our best to explain and address them - please contact your Head of Division/Department in the first instance.

Together we will get through this, stronger and wiser. Stay safe and keep well.

Best wishes,

Mariann

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