

MEMORANDUM



To: Associate Professor Bridget Kool, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education)

From: The AUSA Student Council

Re: COVID-19 Response and Academic Support at the University of Auckland

Date: 24th September 2021

Background:

On Friday 10th of September, AUSA sent an email to Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dawn Freshwater, on behalf of the student body which expressed the concerns we have heard directly from students regarding the University of Auckland's COVID response, and decisions made about academic support in the wake of the COVID outbreak in Tāmaki Makaurau. Based on the feedback from the AUSA Student Council, as well as the broader student body, we included a list of support options we wanted the University to consider, and in some cases - reconsider. Just over a week after the initial email was sent, we received a response from the Vice Chancellor which stated that the following requests were denied:

- A universal grade bump will not be applied. The reason being that the 2020 grade bump created a number of “unintended consequences” where students graduated or progressed to their next level of study without having sufficient skills
- The request to have the option of retaking any failed courses, without charge was also denied. The reason given was that the initiative “caused confusion” because of the Government's Fees-Free regime
- The request for a waiver of aegrotat and compassionate consideration fees was denied. The reason given was that such an initiative would “overwhelm” the service, with outcomes being delayed.

Since the University released their statement on Monday, the feedback we have received has been telling; students are outraged by the decisions made, and rightfully so. Similar to decisions made earlier in this Lockdown period, it is undeniable that this outcome has heavily favoured staff, with little empathy shown towards students who have persistently been communicating their concerns to the University since the beginning of the level 4 lockdown.

This sentiment was echoed in a meeting of the AUSA Student Council this week.

During this meeting, we had the opportunity to hear about the challenges students are facing within faculties directly from student leaders who have been working tirelessly to

support our students. The majority of the discussion focused on academic support, as we know that this is the area in which students are feeling the most pressure. We also had the opportunity to discuss welfare and wellbeing support options, in addition to having an important conversation about the Inpera Smarter Proctoring software.

As a result of these discussions, the AUSA Student Council strongly urges the University to consider taking action on the following recommendations:

Academic Support

- **Universal Grade Bump:** Students still have to work extremely hard for the initial grade they receive, prior to a Grade Bump being applied. For example, a student that receives a B- has to put in a lot of effort to achieve this grade, bumping this up to a B simply recognises the additional work that could have been produced under 'normal' circumstances. Therefore, the idea that "some students were progressing into their next level of study without having gained sufficient knowledge and skills" is difficult to accept, which is why we urge you to reconsider this decision.

Additionally, the University stated that the decision was also aligned with other Universities across the country who were in unanimous agreement that a Grade Bump should not be applied. Not only did the University commit to this without consulting with students, but this decision does not acknowledge that students based in Auckland have been considerably more disadvantaged. The University of Otago offered a five mark grade bump for assessments completed during the initial lockdown period. Despite the impacts being severe for students in Auckland, a similar approach was not taken by the University of Auckland which is disappointing.

As a compromise, we are requesting a 2.5% grade bump be applied instead. This way, there is some form of recognition given to the impacts on academic performance, while easing some of the concerns raised about students progressing "without having gained sufficient knowledge and skills".

- **Flexible deadlines for assessments:** The University is aware that the inconsistent and ineffective processes for applying for extensions has been an issue for students long before the COVID outbreak. Despite this, little has been done to address these issues which have been illuminated again during the recent lockdown. While some students have communicated that they have received adequate support from their faculty and have had no issues with gaining an extension, there are a plethora of students who have shared their stories both online and directly to us that paint a strikingly different picture. From inconsistencies between faculties, to a lack of compassion shown by teaching staff that has left countless students disadvantaged, it is evident

that something needs to change. Considering this, we will continue to advocate for a streamlined process to be adopted. This process should be created with the intention of treating student requests fairly, equitably, and above all - with compassion.

- Retaking a failed course with no charge: We *strongly* urge the University to reconsider your stance on this. Ultimately, the explanation that the initiative caused “confusion and complaints from domestic students because of the Government’s Fees Free regime for first-year students already in place” is one that is difficult for us to understand. There are *many* ways to alleviate confusion about this. Clear and concise communication is a good place to start.
- Waiver of Aegrotat and Compassionate Consideration fees: It's apparent that charging students a set fee to apply for compassionate consideration and aegrotat is a means to deter students from applying in the first place. Considering the financial impacts students are currently facing, in addition to the barriers they may be facing when applying for compassionate consideration and aegrotat, we strongly recommend that the fee for these applications be removed.
- Allowing students to use spaces (alert levels permitting): We are aware that some students have been told that they will not be able to access particular workshops and spaces, regardless of alert levels. This particularly affects students in Creative Arts and Industries (schools such as Architecture), who are still unable to access special equipment and resources which they need in order to complete assignments and final assessments. We encourage the University to have more oversight when it comes to accessing these resources as many students will be disadvantaged by this.
- Fees free extension for postgraduate and doctoral students: Based on our understanding, Honours students have been given a 1-month extension, Masters students a 2-month extension, and Doctoral students a 4-month extension as a result of the recent disruptions. There is a call from Honours students who have asked for their extension to be extended once again given that we have been in alert level 4 for over a month. Honours students are having to fit research, specific courses, and a dissertation into the space of two semesters. Their inability to access labs and research resources has added to the growing pressure. Allowing honours students the two-month extension would be an acknowledgement of this, in addition to providing them with an equal opportunity to produce dissertations.
- Compensation for “lost” parts of course: Many students from the Faculty of Education and Social Work and the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences have had their practicums cut short, students in Science have also had major practical laboratory components cut completely. As a result, students do not have access to

many of the physical resources that they are still expected to pay full price for. Not only does this have a financial impact, but many students have been left feeling worried about heading into the workforce without having exposure to major components of the practical training needed. Consequently, we urge the University to consider compensation for such losses, we are happy to discuss how this could look.

Inspira SmarterProctoring

Further to the recommendations above, we strongly ask the University to reconsider the Inspira Smarter Proctoring system for invigilated exams. As more students are becoming aware of the use of this tool, there have been growing concerns around safety and accessibility. Here is a brief summary of what we have heard:

- Students feel this programme is an uncomfortable and invasive breach of privacy. The idea of sitting an exam with a webcam recording every move is understandably very disturbing to many. Having to complete an exam at home already comes with a range of barriers, being recorded through your device will add to the immense pressure students are already under.
- There are particular system requirements that this software needs in order to operate which some students do not have access to. This software may require, in some instances, students to update their existing technology or to download other software that may not be compatible with their device. This has led to concerns that the upgrade could potentially lead to a system crash, which poses further financial implications. Considering this, the question of “does the University have the capability to deliver to *all* of these students who may need such support?” has been raised.
- Neurodiverse students have also communicated their concerns about the use of the software. We have heard, for example, that a student with ADHD may not be able to stare at their screen for the entirety of their exam, which is something out of their control. Students were recently told by the Examination Services Manager that any “unusual activity” would be flagged, recorded, and checked. Not only does this raise the aforementioned privacy concerns, but it also does not take into account the varying circumstances students may face. We would also like to note that the use of this software was discussed at a meeting of the Vice Chancellor’s Student Consultative group which does not have any representation for disabled students, despite AUSA advocating for the inclusion of their voices in decision making.

- We understand that the University's main reason for using this software comes as a result of the widespread academic misconduct which occurred during semester one last year. However, it is our belief that a lot of this misconduct could have been avoided if the University had adequate and informative academic misconduct training in place, in collaboration with the student body.

To conclude:

We appreciate that a lot of progress has been made to include student voice in decision making at the University. With the University's new Strategic Plan and Curriculum Transformation Project acknowledging the need to work with students as partners, now is an opportunity to put that aspiration into action. Our goal has always been to work openly and collaboratively with the University when it comes to decision making that affects students, and we hope that this will continue.

There is no doubt that this recent lockdown has had a considerable impact on both staff and students, and we understand that decision-makers within the University are currently under a lot of pressure to make choices that cater to a community of thousands with varying needs. In saying this, we have heard first-hand that the decisions made regarding teaching and learning have not provided sufficient support for students and the current feeling of disappointment and discouragement amongst our student body is an alarming cause of concern. We hope that you will consider our recommendations, we look forward to meeting with you to discuss this further.

Nāku, nā

The AUSA Student Council

Signed on behalf of:



Anamika Harirajh, *she/her*

AUSA President, 2021



Alan Shaker, *he/him*

AUSA Education Vice-President, 2021