

# COVID-19 supporting resources

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## Should Providers include a COVID-19 Statement on Degree Transcripts: Arguments for and against

### Introduction

Linked to the mitigations undertaken by the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, many providers have taken the decision to include a statement on degree transcripts to explicitly recognise that the qualifications (in whole or in part) have been awarded during the pandemic. Equally there are providers who believe that such a statement should not be included on transcripts or other formal award documentation. At the time of writing, not all providers had reached a final view. This paper outlines the arguments being proposed in the sector for and against the inclusion of such a statement.

### How does this link to ‘no detriment’ policies?

For many providers the decision to include a statement on the degree transcript is linked to their policies on [‘no detriment’](#). For example, one provider stated:

*Our no detriment procedures allow for students to gain a classification based on pre-COVID-19 achievement, unless grades achieved during this period improve the classification. It is therefore our view that the transcript should be marked to acknowledge the extenuating circumstances and to explain the difference in the degree classification and the overall grade profile.*

In this case, the ‘COVID effect’ is taken into account at the classification stage as part of the ‘no detriment’ policy but, for transparency, the provider will display the actual grade achieved by the student on the transcript. Including a statement on the transcript about the extenuating circumstances explains what could, otherwise, be a confusing difference.

Another provider indicated that they would be including a statement referencing their ‘no detriment’ policy on degree transcripts in order to ensure that the detail in the transcript aligned with the degree certificate, given their intention to record actual marks attained for each module. However, they would not include a more general marker or statement referencing COVID-19 on either the transcript or the degree certificate because the measures they have put in place relating to mitigating circumstances, extensions, deferrals, retakes and the grade average provide the appropriate mitigation for the circumstances. No further statement is necessary.

From these examples, we can see that a variety of approaches will be taken to providing additional explanatory text - in some cases it will be a technical explanation, in others it might make reference to the wider student experience of learning, teaching and assessment during the pandemic.

## What about the wider experience of studying and being assessed during the pandemic?

Universities have moved at an extremely fast pace and with considerable creativity, in some cases literally overnight, to deliver teaching and manage assessments almost entirely through digital platforms – the kind of shift that would generally have involved lengthy planning and multiple pilot projects. One university highlighted that they had been planning to run 87,000 examinations all of which had to be replaced in a matter of weeks.

Some providers and students consider that the disruption they have experienced, despite the best efforts of staff, must be recognised through the formal document that students receive with their degree certificate. Degree transcripts contain important details about the students' journey and achievements at every stage of their studies. It contains the details of the modules taken by students and their assessment results. It is argued that the transcript must recognise, and be open about, the fact that some of these individual modules and assessments will have been seriously affected by the adjustments that have necessarily been made. Typical examples of affected activities include cancelled field trips, lab-based learning, art exhibitions, and live performances in groups. These everyday learning activities and assessments have been severely disrupted since March and, although they may be replaceable, there will not be direct substitutes in place in time for the current year's assessments or recording of the assessment outcomes.

One sector colleague from a university emphasised:

*Transcripts will be compared with others from previous or subsequent cohorts where this level of disruption has not been caused part way through the year. We should recognise that. A simple, discreet statement on the transcript explaining that 2019-20 was an academic year like no other would acknowledge this reality and give our students the reassurance that we understand the impact the changes have had on their experience and enable them to explain any outlier results that appear on their transcripts.*

One student highlighted the value of having formal, institutional recognition that could be used to provide assurance to stakeholders (including graduate employers) that, despite the disruption, the student has continued to meet the learning outcomes of their course. It might act as 'testament to the resilience and fortitude that they have demonstrated in adapting to the changing world around them'. However, this view was countered by that from another student who expressed concern that including a statement would 'undermine the point of 'no detriment' and essentially return the impacts to the students.'

## Could degrees awarded in 2020 be valued differently as a result?

There is broad agreement about the disruption experienced as a result of COVID-19 but there is no agreement around the extent to which it would be helpful to record or recognise this in degree transcripts. Some arguments make a distinction between the quality of the student learning experience on the one hand and the academic standard of the award achieved on the other. For example, if providers have been consistent in their approach to awarding credit, and if they have not made any changes to the intended learning outcomes at course level, this would mean the qualifications and classifications are reliable and, it is therefore argued, it would not be appropriate to provide an indicator that might suggest otherwise. In other words, if the academic standard of the award has been achieved, there is no reason to include a statement referring to the disruption students have experienced. Furthermore, any such statement could be counterproductive.

One student commented:

*We need to avoid the Class of 2020 being characterised as the COVID-19 generation. Whilst the pandemic may have disrupted learning, the degrees that students have obtained represent the summation of years of academic study and thereby are of comparable value to those who have come before them and will come after them.*

While a statement on the transcript may indicate to potential employers or higher education providers that a student's grading could be an underestimate of how they might have performed under 'normal' circumstances, it might also imply to stakeholders that the results are unreliable. It could signal that the grades or classification are over-generous because of 'no detriment' measures being applied. As one staff member commented, 'I advise institutions to think carefully about the long-term consequences of adding any statements to transcripts. Do you really want students' qualifications to be viewed with suspicion?'

Some sector colleagues question the extent to which all students have, in fact, been disadvantaged, pointing to the efforts that have been made by providers to ensure the impact of the pandemic is minimised for their students, particularly supporting those about to complete their studies. It is emphasised that many students studying remotely have access to a very wide range of resources, materials and online lectures plus tutoring, guidance and support services, as well as having time to study. Those students who are unable to make progress for any reason, for example due to personal circumstances, caring responsibilities, illness or lack of access to technology, may be granted a deferral if they make a request to their tutor.

One sector colleague commented:

*Regarding the final grades on transcripts or the classification on degree certificates, if there are grounds for believing these are unfair, students have the right to appeal. I suggest this is a much better option than carrying a millstone with them for the rest of their life, pointing out to future potential employers that the standard of the degree is different from those awarded in other years. Why would anyone want that?*

## **Would statements be included for all students?**

Many providers intend to include a statement on the transcript for all students where 'no detriment' policies have been applied to credit awarded irrespective of the year (or level) of study. This means continuing students would also have a statement on their transcripts and therefore the practice would not be restricted to those graduating in 2020.

Some providers have considered whether the statement should only be included in circumstances where the 'no detriment' safety net has actually been implemented. For example, only for those students who do not achieve a higher grade in their final assessments than their pre-pandemic average.

Another argument expressed is that providers should consider their classification profile for 2020 against previous years and, if the classifications are in line with the previous profile, no statement is needed. However, if the awarding profile for 2020 is out of line with previous years, a statement should be added to degree transcripts in order to avoid either advantaging or disadvantaging the 2020 cohort compared to those graduating in earlier years.

## Should statements be introduced across all providers?

Some sector colleagues have argued that a consistent approach should be adopted across the sector to avoid either advantaging or disadvantaging graduates of one provider compared to those from another. Arguments against a uniform approach might include pointing to examples where there will not be a consistent approach within single providers in all cases. As mentioned earlier, some providers are considering only including a statement on transcripts where 'no detriment' measures have been implemented. There might also be exceptions for particular courses, for example where PSRB requirements mean 'no detriment' policies are not implemented.

Additional arguments relate to the fact that some students will have been more affected by the move to online provision and assessment than others, not only for individual reasons but also as a result of differences in subject requirements.

Many sector colleagues also point to the considerable variation between providers, their policies, subject mix and student populations. There are differences between those providers who have introduced 'no detriment' approaches and those who have not. Within those providers who have 'no detriment' policies, the measures have been defined and implemented in different ways. The extent of this variation, it is argued, militates against a single sector-wide approach.

Nonetheless, one sector colleague suggested:

*As a sector we may wish to consider adding additional sections to our Degree Outcome Statements regarding the approaches taken in response to COVID-19 in order to assure students and employers of the action taken to ensure the value of qualifications over time.*

## If formal statements are not provided, what else might providers do to support students?

Many staff and students recognise the positive skills and experience gained from studying during the pandemic. Several sector colleagues have highlighted the flexibility, adaptability and problem-solving skills that this particular cohort will have gained during this challenging time. Some have argued that formally recognising these skills and attributes requires more detailed messaging than would be feasible through a marker or statement on the transcript. One sector colleague suggested this could be a role for a diploma supplement, rather than the transcript, given that additional contextual detail can be included in the supplement.

It has also been noted that degree transcripts are primarily used to verify achievement and tend to be used by employers alongside other information, such as CVs, interviews, references, and samples of work. Rather than including a specific statement on transcripts, it is suggested that there could be investment in alternative approaches to support students in presenting and explaining their learning experience and achievements to future employers, for example placing a greater focus on career guidance and mentorship. Other sector colleagues have suggested collective work with employers to highlight the mitigations that have been put in place and the skills and attributes students studying during the pandemic are likely to have gained.

## The main arguments summarised

In favour of including a statement:

- Where 'no detriment' policies have been applied, it is necessary to include a statement on the degree transcript to explain any potential discrepancies between marks achieved and classifications (or credit) awarded.
- There has been considerable disruption to learning, teaching and assessment which needs to be acknowledged formally. This might benefit students who could have performed better under less disrupted circumstances.
- There is value in emphasising the skills and attributes students have gained by studying during the pandemic.

Against including a statement:

- If the learning outcomes have not been changed and providers have been consistent in their approach to awarding credit, then the academic standard of the awards will be reliable and it is unhelpful to include a statement which might call that into question.
- If the academic standard of the award is secure, there is no need to recognise differences in the student experience on the degree transcript.
- It may be unhelpful to students to have a statement which draws attention to their year of graduation, acting as a constant reminder that their award might not be equivalent to awards made in other years.

## Reflective questions

The biggest question is whether it is possible - or even desirable - to implement a statement in a fair and consistent way across providers and the sector as a whole. The following questions can be used by providers to evaluate their approach.

- Is a technical statement necessary to explain any difference between students' marks and classification? Is there institutional precedent to follow? For example, what is your previous practice for recording the marks/grades of individual students who have presented mitigating circumstances or who have received compensation?
- Beyond including a technical statement or explanation about marks and/or credit, is there an additional need or value to making a wider statement about the student learning experience, including the assessment arrangements, in 2020?
- Could including a statement be interpreted as a lack of confidence in the academic standard of the awards made in 2020? Equally, if you do not make an explicit statement, could this be interpreted as lacking transparency about any measures that you have taken, such as 'no detriment' or other forms of mitigation?
- If you include a statement on all degree transcripts, does this risk creating unintended disadvantage for some students, for example those whose grades have not been affected by 'no detriment' policies?

- If you include a statement on the degree transcripts of students who are continuing their studies (i.e. not graduating in 2020), is that proportionate, particularly for students in the early years of a course?
- Have you considered using a diploma supplement (or other media) to provide any additional contextual information about the student learning journey and achievements?
- Have you been able to consult students about their views on including a statement? If you have already reached a decision, are students clear about your approach and the reasons for it?
- How can students be supported to recognise and present their experience and achievements in a constructive way? For example, when seeking future study or employment.

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