

From: Philippa Pattison [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, April 23, 2020 1:56:34 PM
To: SUPRA President <president@supra.usyd.edu.au>; Michael Spence [REDACTED]
Cc: Ross Coleman [REDACTED]; Susanna Scarparo [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: SUPRA's Recommendations

Dear Minran,

Many thanks for your recent letter and I am really pleased to hear of the care with which SUPRA is responding to student queries. We thank you and your SUPRA colleagues for your ongoing efforts on behalf of our students. We are also very pleased to understand students' concerns, and thank you for sharing with us what you are learning from your various sources.

As you are aware, our approach in responding to the COVID-19 crisis has been to continue to pursue our core education and research mission as safely and fully as we possibly can. To this end, we have moved the education experience online for the moment so that it can continue with as little disruption as possible and with a high level of personal safety for students and staff. Where possible, we are also continuing the research work of the University, including in those areas with direct application to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences.

As our unfolding communications have I hope revealed, we are also very concerned for the safety and wellbeing of students and we are committed to providing opportunities for students to continue to study and, ideally, to complete their studies within intended timeframes. We have therefore been keen to offer students options either to complete on time, undertake some study where available, or defer. Academic and professional staff across the University are working hard to achieve this. We have also been very mindful of the impacts of COVID-19 on students. The measures we have introduced so far include:

- **Education options.** For students unable to travel to Australia for the beginning of semester, we offered as many units as we could (500+) in a fully online mode, and many more for the initial weeks of semester, in the hope that students could travel to campus. Since the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia, we have moved quickly to offer our entire suite of educational programs online, and have committed to enabling completion of those components that cannot be offered online (e.g. placements, laboratory classes) as soon as is practicable.
- **Financial support.** A financial support package for international students who are experiencing hardship and are impacted by COVID-19 has been made available to supplement our broader program of financial support for domestic students who experience hardship. This has progressively expanded from supporting those initially impacted by travel restrictions to all international students experiencing hardship. Bursaries of up to \$2000 are available, and we are considering the need to allow students to apply for a second bursary where required.
- **Online student support.** Enhanced online support services have been established, including online academic and counselling support and a peer support advising program for international students. We have also made additional funds available to SRC and SUPRA for legal support services. Further additions to the suite of support options will be announced as they are made available.
- **Consideration for students unable to travel in Semester 1 and gain access to their full program.** For international students who were unable to travel to Australia by March 30 and therefore who did not have full access to the program in which they are enrolled, a fee

rebate of \$1500 per unit to a maximum of \$4000 has been made available for units taken online, recognising that these students will need to undertake an additional semester to complete their program. In addition, deferring students in these circumstances have been offered rebates that depend on the length of time that is added to their program (\$2,000 for a semester delay, \$3000 for a full year delay).

- Arrangements for HDR students. All HDR students have been guaranteed an extension of candidature of a minimum of one research period; all students can also seek additional extensions. All students on centrally funded scholarships (RTP, University of Sydney International Strategic, UPA) are also guaranteed access on application to 3.5 years of scholarship support; in addition, international students are guaranteed an international fee waiver for the guaranteed extension of one research period where it is required.
- Extension for research projects within coursework degrees, including Honours programs. Faculties have agreed that extensions will be offered, for a length to be determined on a unit by unit basis, to students enrolled in honours and other research projects within coursework programs; relevant unit of study coordinators and/or program directors will advise students of arrangements in their unit or program.
- Arrangements for minimising academic disadvantage in Semester 1, 2020. We have committed to a number of measures to minimise academic disadvantage during the current semester, including: changes to Special Consideration to support impacted students; greater use of special grades such as DC and RI where warranted; adjustment of marks to take account of the current context; and inclusion of an adjusted WAM on graduating students' transcripts to reflect performance outside the current semester and hence provide an official record of performance that is not affected by circumstances in the current semester.

In response to the specific questions you have raised in your recent letter:

- Broader fee reductions and financial support. Despite the difficult circumstances impacting us all, we are doing all we can in a time of crisis to ensure minimum educational disruption. We are also injecting additional resources into support for students. This has involved additional effort and expenditure at a time of reduced income, and the University is therefore not in a position to offer broader fee reductions. It is worth noting that we are offering exactly the same curriculum taught by exactly the same staff, and that, wherever possible, we are offering classes in a synchronous mode to support the collaborative and interactive forms of engagement that evidence supports as the primary ingredient of a high quality education. We recognise, of course, that the technology occasionally fails and our execution can be improved, but our aspiration for a high quality educational experience remains. Needless to say, our intention is to open the campus and restore the most impactful forms of face-to-face teaching as soon as it is safe to do so. In relation to financial support, we have now increased financial hardship support for domestic students and extended this support to all international students. The fee rebates continue to apply only to those who were unable to commence their study in Sydney because of travel restrictions; the rebate recognises that such students are unlikely to be able to complete their course on time and so need to commit to an additional semester or year of study.
- Simple extensions of up to 5 days. The University considered this proposal very seriously but quickly recognised that it would be impractical given the very significant variation in forms of assessment that might be impacted, including low-stakes weekly assessments. However, we have expanded the criteria for awarding special consideration and eased requirements for supporting documentation during the crisis.
- Quality of online courses. We would appreciate any more detailed feedback from students on their concerns, so we can address them as quickly as possible. We would also encourage you to use existing feedback channels such as staff-student liaison committees wherever possible so that the impact of feedback can be as immediate as possible. We will also utilise

feedback on Semester 1 as effectively and extensively as possible to ensure a positive experience in Semester 2.

- Census date for six week intensive courses. Given that all of the dates mentioned are now well passed, it is not practical to consider extensions to the census dates.
- Centralised and structured communication. The website at <https://www.sydney.edu.au/study/coronavirus-infection-university-of-sydney-advice.html> is intended to be a centralised and structured source of advice for students, and it updated regularly, and occasionally restructured, with the aim of ensuring it is providing the information students are seeking. Of course, faculties and schools also need to communicate with students on matters specific to courses and units, so multiple channels inevitably arise. If you can let us know of specific areas of potential confusion or uncertainty, we'd be keen to address these as quickly as we can.
- Mental health. We are very mindful of the potential impacts of the current crisis on students' mental health and wellbeing and have been steadily moving all of our services online and expanding their capacity, including for counselling and psychological services (CAPS) and student liaison officer consultations. We have had a 24/7 support line in place since 2019 and are working to ensure that eligible international students are aware of and can use effectively a safety and wellbeing app. We are also working on some additional initiatives focussed on prevention and early intervention. All of these steps are informed by our draft Mental Wellbeing Strategy developed by the PVC Student Life, Professor Susanna Scarparo, in association with a range of University experts. We do acknowledge that students have begun to seek support at much higher than usual levels, and we will do all we can to meet this demand.
- Contribution to the discussion on minimising academic disadvantage. We are very grateful to SUPRA representatives for their contribution to the discussion on minimising academic disadvantage at the UE Education Committee – we see student participation in this meeting as an important source of student input. We will not be moving to a pass/fail marking system because we wish to give due recognition to students who do well in challenging circumstances but are publishing an adjusted WAM on transcripts to allow users to make necessary allowances. While we would normally seek broader student input when making long term decisions impacting students, the need for rapid decision making during the COVID-19 crisis has made this challenging.
- Arrangements for HDR students. We are committed to making best use of available resources to support our existing cohort of HDR students. We have deliberately tried to balance the broad needs of the entire cohort with the specific needs of those who are most impacted. This is why we have taken the approach of offering a one research period extension to all students and considering further extension requirements on a case-by-case basis. For the same reason, we are using the general financial bursaries program to provide support to those students (including HDR students) most in need of financial support. We will also be in touch with HDR students soon in relation to the 2020 progress reviews; we see these as an important opportunity for students and supervisors to take stock of progress, and consider any changes in research plans that might mitigate some of the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Lobbying government. Please be assured that, along with other universities and university groups, we are advocating strenuously for government support of HDR students, not just for the importance of addressing hardships being experienced by HDR students but also because of the importance of a research workforce for the future.

We continue to welcome SUPRA engagement in these difficult times.

With thanks and best wishes,

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