

# IMPROPER, UNETHICAL, OR BOTH? - REFLECTING ON OPPORTUNISTIC QUESTIONABLE ACADEMIC PRACTICES DURING COVID-19 BY HE STUDENTS

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### Introduction/background

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has severely affected the learning and teaching activities of higher education. Research has shown that the Higher Education sector was not ready to provide alternate learning and teaching approaches in a 'lock-down' situation (Scherer et al., 2021). Yet, educational organisations worldwide hurriedly focussed mainly on emergency remote teaching (ERT) to effectively deliver their programmes to maintain student satisfaction (Gamage et al., 2020; Joshi, 2021; Rapanta et al., 2020; Yeo et al., 2021). Many new and potentially 'innovative methodologies' for programme delivery, alternative assessment strategies and other drastic measures to minimise the detrimental effects of Covid-19 (and other) related physical and mental challenges of the students (Khan et al, 2021; Yu et al., 2021). Several universities have introduced 'no detriment policies' (also known as a 'student safety net') and put in place actions to provide extra pastoral student support. These measures include (a) online assessments provisions replacing traditional invigilated, timed examinations to un-invigilated assessments with a broader window of duration to complete, (b) marks adjustments to reflect the students' overall ability based on their previous performances and attainments, (c)

relaxed rules for extenuating circumstances (late submission requests) without the need to provide evidence etc. The aims of the 'no detriment policies' of many institutions are not entirely clear, but most of them aimed to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' attainments. Their term of reference includes "to ensure students obtain at least their average (or better) grade based on comparative overall performances throughout the year(s)" (National Union of Students-UK, 2020, para. 5).

From the point of view of students, the measures taken, such as no detriment policies, generally did address the problems faced by those who were either affected by the direct or indirect impacts of the pandemic that interrupted their engagement with their studies. In fact, a plethora of authors have reported that these flexible approaches did help student engagement, providing justifications for these types of approaches (Aladsani, 2021; Almendingen et al., 2021; Eaton & Turner, 2020; Gourley, et al., 2021; Koob et al., 2021; Yeo et al., 2021). However, through academic conversations with their counterparts, the authors of this workshop have also noticed an increase in fraudulent activities amongst a group of students (also named as "opportunistic

offenders”) (Arie & Jacobs, 2021; Comas-Forgasa et al., 2021; Day, 2021).

These were detected by many academics in different academic institutions worldwide. Academic institutions have reported an unusually high number of late submissions requests (LSRs) (Giusti et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Some of these were found to be in unusual circumstances, formats, or excuses. These include students claiming Covid/non-

Covid related illness of distant relatives affecting students’ anxiety levels. These were also observed/reported in the institutions that are directly linked to the authors (as collaborators and/or external examiners). Whilst the extenuating circumstances claims may be true in many cases, the lack of vetting processes makes it impossible to understand how many claims were valid.

## Workshop aims

The workshop aims to generate an open and honest discussion amongst the attendees reflecting on their experience in implementing the safety net policies, expanding on what went well? What did not work? (their experience with ‘opportunistic offenders’) and how these can be

addressed in any future situations like this?. By having these conversations/sharing experiences we would like to take advantage of the good experience and propose corrections to those measures that were not fruitful.

## Intended methodology for discussion

We will begin the workshop by providing some sample no detriment activities noticed and/or reported. We will also detail how some of these safety net policies have directly affected the students, providing opportunities to take advantage of these policies. For example, some LSRs included photos of positive lateral flow test (LFT) without any identification of the subjects. These types of claims have surfaced after the introduction of the home LFTs. Again, it is impossible to verify these claims and therefore students are usually given the benefit of doubt. The ‘no detriment policy’ in the form of mark adjustment has itself affected some (especially international) students. For example, one university introduced a safety-net measure of ‘scaling-up’ marks using so-called “marks bands”. Applying this rule, those students who had marks within a mark band between 68 to 75% were awarded as 75% as their overall mark, with an additional note stating, *‘grades are adjusted according to safety net policy’*. Although this seems to be an appropriate action under Covid-19 restrictions, this has disadvantaged the students whose overall mark was already 75%. Their potential employers started querying whether their attainment is

truthfully reported (or due to the application of Safety Net policy).

Interestingly, from an operational point of view, implementing the ERT practices should require considerable changes to the curriculum, including assessment practices. However, not every institution or lecturer was ready for such a huge transformation; therefore, moving online simply meant using the same course content in an online environment for some lecturers especially where there was no institutional experience and/or support available regarding distance education. Finding themselves lecturing in front of their laptop cameras, inexperienced lecturers encountered difficulties in encouraging their learners to actively participate. Under ERT circumstances, compulsory attendance to the courses has been changed to optional attendance to online lectures, as learners were supposed to watch the recordings of the lectures at any time depending on their time zone and availability. Likewise, considering the principles of distance education, some institutions enabled much shorter sessions for ERT classes. For example, 45-minute sessions of face-to-face instruction were replaced with 25-minute ERT sessions. In

practice, some institutions simply shortened the length of courses without any further changes. Apart from instructional issues, these retrofitted ERT courses were problematic also with regards to assessment practices. Disregarding the requirements of online assessments, some lecturers did not hesitate to declare multiple-choice questions as their favourite assessment technique in ERT mainly because of the simplicity of grading. These lecturers wrongly assumed that providing time restrictions such as thirty seconds to answer each question should establish exam security. This expectation was, of course, too naive, as students were using some sharing platforms such as Discord and tutorial sites such as Chegg, during online exams to discuss and reveal the correct options for questions. Thus, such assessment practices did not evaluate whether or not the learners met learning outcomes.

Scientists fear that infectious diseases crossing from animals to humans (zoonosis) are going to rise in the future, therefore there is a high probability for future pandemics like this. It is imperative to think and plan effectively to deliver HE programmes whilst maintaining academic integrity during any potential pandemics. Authors hope these examples of safety-net linked issues/‘fraudulent practices’ would generate a lively discussion amongst the attendees. We believe in reflecting on ‘mistakes’ is vital for proactive planning for the future. We also need to openly discuss the negative implications of the safety net policy. Having this open discussion amongst academics/researchers and students from different disciplines would provide directions for future planning for proactive preparedness in situations like this.

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