Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy Suite Feedback

INTRODUCTION

RUSU's feedback is structured into three sections tied to policy suite workshops hosted by the ARG for ease of consolidating information (Academic Progress, Assessment Adjustments, Design of Assessment and Exams). A final fourth section will cover other topics.

RUSU believes that this policy suite review is an opportunity to reframe many key elements of assessment at RMIT. Changes to the delivery of teaching in higher education, adopted during the covid 19 pandemic, and the rise of generative AI require new approaches to learning and assessment. The rise in the number of students studying with a disability and the focus on equity enrolments outlined in the University Accord Final Report will require RMIT to strengthen and expand access to reasonable assessment adjustments through the Equitable Learning Service (ELS) and Special Consideration, as well as providing a robust early intervention academic progress process.

This is the time for the University to embrace innovative changes to assessment practice, aligned with the principles of universal design, and allowing students flexibility in showcasing their understanding of learning outcomes. Assessment adjustments need to be re-established as functions of inclusion and recognised for their importance in driving equity in assessment practice. RMIT can be sector leading in defining a new, innovative approach to assessment, captured in the next iteration of the Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy Suite.

The Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy Suite is central to the smooth execution of all assessment and academic progress processes at the university. It is so closely tied to the university's central mission that RUSU would like to see the policy suite review include a review of the existing policy suite with the university's Sustainability and Equity Evaluation (SEE) Tool and for the revised policy suite to take measures to overcome any gaps flagged by the SEE review. This would also ensure that the university can meet its obligations as a defined entity under the *Gender Equality Act 2020* by completing a gender impact assessment as part of the wider SEE review.

ACADEMIC PROGRESS

RUSU believes there is potential for significant uplift in the current first stage at risk process, to one that provides students with a greater range of tools to improve their academic performance, strengthens the university's documentation in relation to the administration of eCoEs and, through the introduction of mechanism to remove the consequences of being placed first stage at risk, reduces the mental toll on students going on to demonstrate satisfactory academic progress.

Re-thinking first stage at risk

The first stage at risk process is supposed to be a process that provides early identification of students in need of academic support and an intervention that facilitates their return to satisfactory academic progress. However, students feel it is one step away from exclusion. Once placed first stage at risk the consequences of that academic classification remain with students for the duration of their degree, regardless of future academic success. However well they perform academically after being placed first stage at risk, they remain one poor semester away from possible exclusion. This can have a significant negative mental health impact on students.

A robust and holistic APIP that supports students to succeed

RUSU would like to see the introduction of a more thorough Academic Performance Improvement Plan (APIP) process that is largely online and self-guided (with educator intervention at the discretion of the academic teaching staff of that program).

A new APIP process would involve a self-directed survey encouraging students to identify areas where they need further skills development or personal support. Students would then be directed to a selection of compulsory online modules, to build learning skills, and optional referrals to student services, to provide support.

A well developed and fully online APIP process could create more opportunities for students to enhance vital skills for learning, as well as creating more thorough documentation to support granting eCoEs. Participation in the APIP process would be mandatory for any student who wanted to be considered for 'good standing'.

Academic progress and good standing

In re-thinking current first stage at risk processes, RUSU proposes the introduction of a mechanism for students who go on to demonstrate prolonged satisfactory academic progress, after being placed first stage at risk, to return to a classification of academic

'good standing'. A classification of good standing would mean that if a student was found to have subsequent poor academic progress they would return to being placed at first stage at risk and would undertake a second APIP process, rather than progressing to final stage at risk and being required to show cause. Participation in the online learning sections of a more stringent APIP would be a requirement to be eligible for good standing.

Allowing students the opportunity to return to good standing is commonplace in Australian universities. Attachment 1 outlines the two main mechanisms for returning students to good standing and how they are implemented at the top ten universities in Australia (based on the Times Higher education world rankings for 2024. It also details the structure of each university's APIP process and if they have rules in place to cap the number of times students can fail the same course before being automatically referred to show cause/exclusion.

Students should get the opportunity to demonstrate that they deserve to have the consequences of being placed first stage at risk removed. For the thousands of students who are likely placed first stage at risk each year but do go on to graduate, this would have a significant positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing throughout their studies.

Suspension as an alternative/complement to exclusion

Students whose show cause submissions are not accepted and are recommended for exclusion might benefit from a shorter break from their studies than a full twelve-month exclusion. There are many students for whom a single six-month break, similar to a Leave of Absence, would be sufficient break for them to successfully return and complete their degree. RUSU would recommend the introduction of a six-month suspension as an option for Program Assessment Boards reviewing show cause submissions and the UAC considering exclusion appeals. Unlike an exclusion, a student would still have access to their university email and selected university services during their suspension to ensure they continue to feel connected to the university and are more likely to successfully transition back into their program at the end of the suspension period. Suspended students would also not be required to reapply to their program after their suspension has ended. A suspension would recoginse the intention of the university to reintegrate a student back into study after allowing them a period of recouperation.

ASSESSMENT ADJUSTMENTS

Equitable Assessment Arrangements

Students with disabilities continue to face systemic disadvantages compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Reasonable adjustments, as required by the *Disability Standards for Education* (DSE) are designed to enable students to achieve their maximum potential within a framework of academic standards and should assist a student with a disability to participate in a course or program on the same basis as a student without a disability.

RUSU remains concerned by reports that students with Equitable Learning Plans (ELPs) are not having the adjustments to assessment recommended in the ELPs applied in courses of study. Subsection 49B(1)(e) of the *Higher Education Provider Amendment (Support for Students Policy) Guidelines 2023* requires higher education providers to report on "how the provider undertook assessment and assurance activities to determine that the available support services for students, as detailed in the provider's support for students' policy, are appropriate and effective." When the recommendations of an ELP are not applied at a local level it increases the volume of special consideration applications. Where a student with an ELP cannot evidence an exacerbation of their condition, they are not eligible for special consideration and will ultimately receive no adjustment to assessment in relation to their disability. Supporting academic staff to implement the recommendations of ELPs will prevent the increased flow of workload to the special consideration team and reduce incidences of non-compliance with the DSE.

Students also need the option to have their ELPs regularly reviewed by Equitable Learning Services (ELS) staff to ensure that throughout the course of a degree program the adjustments to assessment recommended for a student registered with the ELS continue to provide equitable access to education.

During peak periods for ELS registrations there can be a sizeable wait time before an ELP is finalised and reasonable adjustments are put in place. Given that these adjustments can change the way a student participates in learning and teaching activities (lectures, tutorials etc.) as well as formal assessments, students can go through the majority of a semester without the support they need to participate equitably in their studies. RUSU would recommend the university consider the introduction of interim/temporary ELPs that students can access while they wait for a formal ELP to be approved or an increase in resourcing to the ELS to ensure impacted students are able to access adjustments in a more timely manner.

RUSU recommends that the University provide greater support to academics to implement assessment adjustments recommended in ELPs and to collect data on non-compliance. This will allow the University to target support in areas of greater non-compliance. ELPs should be regularly reviewed for effectiveness.

Extensions

A simple improvement to support administration and decision making around extensions would be to provide academics and students with clear and detailed examples of circumstances that would be considered eligible for an extension, as well as suggestions

for documentation that would be accepted in support of an extension request and the level of detail required. Academics would still be free to act outside of these guidelines to ensure discipline specific flexibility, and students can still request an extension for issues not included in the guidelines, but this simple change would have a number of benefits:

1. Greater consistency of decision making across programs, schools and colleges
2. Reduction in decision fatigue for academics managing high volumes of requests
3. Students are aware of what evidence they might be required to provide prior to making an extension request and can therefore make complete requests
4. Academics are less likely to receive extension requests with too much information protecting the privacy of students and of academics from potentially receiving extension requests containing traumatic details

The guidelines should also include possible internal referrals to support services for academics to use based on student reasons for requesting an extension.

Another option to achieve positive extension request outcomes for both students and staff is for academics to allow for automatic approval of extension requests in the extension request tool. Academics could choose to turn on automatic approval for any requests up to a specified number of days. Students would need to be made aware of the availability of automatic extensions in canvas or their course guides to ensure they understand not all assessments have automatic approval of extension requests.

Special Consideration

As with extensions, RMIT's approach to special consideration could be significantly strengthened by providing both students and staff with clear and detailed examples of circumstances that would (and wouldn't) be considered eligible for a special consideration application, as well as suggestions for documentation that would be accepted in support of an application and clear instructions on the dates evidence will need to include in order for the application to be approved. Clearer guidelines prior to application would significantly increase the number of complete applications and reduce workload involved in chasing up documentation.

Working with Schools to create sets of discipline specific (or even program specific) guidelines would also be useful, flagging assessments for which must be in a set format, for which alternative assessments would not be available, or must be held at a specific time, for which extensions would not be available. This information should also be provided to students in their course guides.

RUSU would recommend that the University adopts the direction in the *Support for Students Policy Guidelines Consultation Paper* of introducing proactive special consideration. Students who have experienced particularly distressing life events would apply for special consideration with suggested evidence, when necessary, and have their application automatically approved. It is suggested that for these students the required evidence is kept to a minimum of easily attainable documentation, that does not necessitate students making further disclosures to external organisations. This program could be expanded for short periods of time to groups of students who are collectively experiencing unusually challenging circumstances, such as geopolitical turmoil or war in their home country or First Nations students during the referendum. Students in these extreme circumstances would still be required to apply for special consideration, but their application would be approved if the trauma they have experienced requires no further documentation or investigation.

RUSU's advocacy staff continue to work with students who experience lengthy special consideration application processes. These students will engage in multiple communications with the special considerations team as they tailor and refine the evidence they are providing to the requirements of the special considerations team. This could be avoided by providing clearer instructions to students about evidence, particularly around the dates evidence should cover, and also by accepting a wider range of evidence, specifically statutory declarations.

Our advocacy staff have also noticed a large knowledge gap in first time special consideration applicants (particularly first time, first year applicants). Many students are unaware special consideration exists, this knowledge is less likely to be present in peer groups in first year too. Our advocacy team has supported many students whose first application for special consideration was rejected due to lateness. These are students with genuine compassionate and compelling circumstances who did not have the knowledge or experience of the special consideration process to make a successful application. RUSU would recommend that the five-day application deadline be extended to twenty-one days first time applicants.

Finally, RUSU would recommend the inclusion in the Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy Suite of a procedure that allows students to be able to stipulate their preferred form of special consideration and for special considerations decisions to include discipline/assessment design specific details that outline why a specific assessment adjustment has or has not been granted. Where students are granted a form of assessment adjustment that differs from their preferred outcome with no discipline or

assessment design specific rationale to support that decision, students should be allowed to appeal that special consideration outcome.

A note on inclusion vs integrity

RUSU would support this policy review reexamining what adjustments to assessment at RMIT should be achieving and creating an ethos or a set of policy principles to support those goals.

Adjustments to assessment are a function of inclusion, allowing students to participate equitably despite their circumstances. However, the administration and management of assessment adjustments often seems to be focused on integrity, preventing students from claiming an adjustment to which they are not entitled, rather than inclusion, ensuring that students who need help get it. This does not align with RMIT's IDEA Framework and its goal of embedding the principles of universal design across the University. The Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy Suite should explicitly state the role that adjustments to assessment play in ensuring equity and inclusive assessment practice as part of an organisation-wide change in attitudes towards strengthening access to education, particularly for equity groups.

Adjustments to assessment, academic progress and language

RUSU has already flagged our concerns around the use of overly bureaucratic language in communications to students involved in adjustment to assessment and academic progress processes. We are pleased to be working with the university to develop new email templates to try and overcome some of the challenges students face engaging with these communications. Attachment 2 provides a brief overview of the issues with current communications templates, the impact this style of communication has on students and a list of recommendations for their improvement.

RUSU would recommend that RMIT provide academics with template responses for students requesting adjustments to assessment, as well as reviewing special consideration communications.

DESIGN OF ASSESSMENT AND EXAMS

There has been much discussion of the role of generative AI in higher education, the need to teach students how to use generative AI in discipline specific ways and the potential for its misuse by students.

The threat generative AI poses to learning and teaching in Australian universities is based on the learning and teaching goals of higher education institutions. Memorising and summarising information, which is then verified through exams and essays is threatened by generative AI; and attempting to secure assessment will become a continual battle between assessment design and AI advances.

However, the goal of higher education should be so much more than the transfer of discipline knowledge. Our graduates need to foster a transformative engagement with knowledge that helps them view the world and their role in it. Problem solving, team work, critical analysis, communication and leadership are all essential skills for transfer to industry and students need assessments that allow them to demonstrate these skills among others to ensure they are ready for life and work. To achieve this we need to move away from exams towards transformative assessments which are not only more likely to develop graduate skills alongside discipline knowledge but to also be more secure, with fewer incidences of academic misconduct.

Drawbacks of examinations

Numerous studies demonstrate that exams can undermine long-term knowledge retention by prioritising one-time rather than successive learning and extrinsic motivation to succeed (Ryan & Deci, 2000 and Kuhbandner et al., 2016). The tightly controlled environment of in-person examinations does not provide reliable protection from academic misconduct; a 2019 survey of Australian universities revealed that students engaged in undetected cheating during supervised exams more frequently than any other form of cheating, such as contract cheating in written assignments (Bretag, 2019).

A major limitation of exams is their inability to develop and assess a broad range of skills and knowledge. They often promote superficial learning, where students are simply required to memorise and recite facts rather than gaining a deeper understanding of how ideas and concepts connect and apply in a broader context (Kuhbandner et al., 2016).

Examinations have faced criticism for their poor reliability, specifically their capacity to yield consistent and trustworthy results. Various factors can contribute to this low reliability, including issues with the examinees, the examiners, the subject matter, the test questions, and the scoring process (Mason, 2007 and Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019).

Exams are often linked to psychological stress and anxiety (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019). Recently, this concern has gained more attention due to a growing emphasis on how curriculum and assessment design impact student mental health. Whilst the negative

mental health implications are concerning in and of themselves, the stress and anxiety caused by examinations also affects their reliability as a measure of student learning. Higher levels of anxiety are linked to reduced concentration and poor examination performance (Baik et al., 2019).

There are also equity implications involved in assessing by examination. It is suggested that examinations put Indigenous students at a disadvantage (Preston and Claypool 2021), as these assessments often favor Western intellectual schemas and reinforce the idea that knowledge is something that can be given, accumulated, and assessed in a linear way. Recent research on inclusive assessment design also suggests that examinations do not adequately address the needs of diverse student populations, particularly those with disabilities (Nieminen 2022).

RUSU strongly believes that RMIT should continue with its move away from exams and towards more innovative and authentic forms of assessment, based on the three underlying principles below:

1. Prioritise ongoing feedback and developing skills for learning

   Where not prevented by accreditation requirements, RUSU is strongly supportive of a first year of study that focuses on developing the skills necessary for learning in higher education environments, creating a strong base of content knowledge on which higher level learning skills can be based. During this year students should work to create a portfolio of work that allows them to assemble evidence of their progress towards learning outcomes, guided by ongoing and constructive feedback from educators.

2. Offer choices in assessment
   Assessment should encourage individuality and allow students to choose how they demonstrate their learning. This approach helps students meet their personal and professional goals.

   Standardized assessments, such as exams or essays, can be prone to cheating and fail to teach students how to adapt to different work environments. Providing assessment choices can also alleviate anxiety and boost confidence by aligning tasks with students' personal interests and goals.

Where possible, students should be able to select assessment options that allow them to showcase their strengths while demonstrating learning outcomes. A choice of assessment options would also promote greater inclusion in the assessment process, better supporting our students with disabilities. It would also help to reduce stress and anxiety linked to assessment, as well as the number of students seeking adjustments to assessment through extension requests and special consideration.

3. Ensure inclusive assessment through universal design

   Assessments must be designed to minimize additional challenges for students with disabilities or learning differences. Universal design for assessment is one way to achieve this, incorporating various formats for instructions, resources, and submissions.

   When implemented consistently, inclusive assessment practices can enhance the learning experience for a diverse range of students, not just those who are aware of and comfortable asking for accommodations due to disability.

Finally, RUSU would like to express concern regarding how much of the workshop discussions around adjustments to assessment, assessment design and exams has been driven by workload. Academics do not appear to be resourced to meet the university's obligations to provide reasonable adjustments under the Disability Standards for Education. They also appear to feel insufficiently resourced to deliver non-traditional assessments at scale. Ensuring academics have the time and resources to provide inclusive learning and high quality, secure and innovative assessment should be a key objective for the university.

OTHER

Hearings and appeals

RUSU has noted an increase in the number of appeals under this policy suite being pre-screened and as a result a dramatic decrease in the number of hearings students are awarded. The pre-screening process relies heavily on a contractually based set of template responses, prioritising administrative considerations over the university's values and the use of academic judgement.

Slow processing times for appeals can lead to students having multiple cases stacked on top of each other, a lengthy and unresolved special consideration appeal can create a separate academic progress process for a student to undertake which is then retracted when the original special consideration appeal is resolved. This erodes trust between students and the university and can lead students to feel they are being unnecessarily targeted or unfairly treated.

Pre-screening and rejecting appeals without the full enquiry of a hearing and the administrative/investigative processes that support them, increases the risk of the university failing to identify patterns poor quality hearings/decisions at a school level or poorly designed assessments and eliminates a key internal quality control mechanism.

RUSU would like to see the policy suite expanded to include informal types of adjudication in early decision making, particularly school level assessment appeals, show cause submissions, and special consideration decisions. In these circumstances every student would be able to make a written case and then attend a hearing if they request one to talk through their case with the university. The hearing would be focused on consultation and co-creating a solution rather than discipline. Academics would be invited to participate as part of a problem-solving team working out the best way to meet the university's compliance requirements, make decisions which align with the Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy and provide the student with the support they need to continue their studies (even if that includes an initial break from study, a change of program or deciding on an end result that is not the students preferred outcome).

This process will be most successful if the university creates a shared consensus amongst decision makers under the assessment and assessment flexibility policy suite about the university's values, what the purpose or goals of the suite are and what the university's priorities are in its execution. It will also reduce the number of students going into the UAC appeal system by having assessment appeals that are good quality, a more robust first stage at-risk process and better ELP compliance

Finally, this approach naturally builds in the principles of inclusion by design. This creates a number of benefits including ensuring disclosure pathways are safe and supportive for students with serious issues. There will always be complex student cases that do not

neatly fit processes under the policy suite. Processes designed with consultation and inclusion at their center, will ensure that all student cases are managed compassionately and appropriately, regardless of complexity. This does not necessarily mean that all students will get the outcome they were hoping for, but it will ensure that for the whole process students feel confident that they can trust the university to make decisions based on fairness and equity. Allowing students to speak openly, and without fear, about the experiences impacting their study is an important part of this process.

Safer pathways for situational disclosures of SASH related problems

Whilst there will be cases of gender-based violence within the university community (i.e. involving a combination of students and or staff), many students will experience GBV outside of the university community but will still require flexibility and support to continue their studies.

Often, for these students, the first point of disclosure is a request for special consideration, late special consideration or as part of an academic progress process. These processes are not designed to respond to students in a trauma informed and victim/survivor focused way. They are often complex and bureaucratic, with an emphasis on disclosure rather than support, at worst they are hostile and re-traumatising to students.

After experiencing a traumatic event, students are more likely (in the short term), to approach their university to deal with the impact of the trauma on their studies, through one of the processes listed above), than manage the ongoing impacts of the trauma itself (through a report to Safer Community, RMIT Counselling or similar).

University responses to these early approaches and requests for academic support are a way in which the student will evaluate whether it is safe to make fuller disclosures within the university. RMIT should undertake analyses of whether these initial contacts are supportive and how they affect the trajectories of students who have later made disclosures is important to driving future quality assurance. Monitoring how the university responds to these initial disclosures and ensuring that students are supported in a way that makes them feel safe to make fuller disclosures is critical to the university's ongoing response to gender-based violence.

Privacy
RUSU remains deeply concerned about the university's collection of students' personal

information through a range of processes covered by the Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy suite. Processes within this policy suite require disclosures of a highly personal nature and the university's generic privacy statement does not give students sufficient information about how their information will be used and circulated. A more thorough privacy statement is required at each point of disclosure.

There are also multiple informal points of disclosure which are not well regulated for compliance with privacy policy requirements (requests for adjustments to assessment, assessments which involve sharing personal information e.g. reflections etc.). These informal collection points carry the dual risk of the university being unable to ensure the responsible management of personal information and the risk of staff being negatively impacted by unnecessarily receiving traumatic information from students.

Effective compliance with privacy obligations starts before collection with the consideration of what information should be collected for a specific function of the university. RUSU believes that for many of the processes that sit under the Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy the university requires an unnecessary amount of detailed personal information from students, which is invasive of their privacy. University staff should be directed to only collect information necessary to make a decision that is in the spirit of the policy suite without the need to require increasing personal and intrusive details to evidence hardship, compassionate and compelling circumstances etc. As mentioned above this is particularly important for students who have experienced gender-based violence or severe trauma where multiple disclosures and/or detailed disclosures perpetuates the traumatic incident(s) and risks further deterioration of mental health and wellbeing.

Thousands (if not tens of thousands) of students will, each year, make a disclosure including personal and/or health information to the university as required by processes that sit under the Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy. This is a huge volume of information for the university to effectively collect, store, manage and destroy. Given the inherent risks built into such a high volume of disclosures and the likelihood of disclosures including details of violence, trauma, gender identity, sexuality, disability status, race or religion; RUSU would recommend an external review of compliance with privacy obligations of all processes that sit in the assessment and assessment flexibility policy suite. For this review it would be essential to consult with all major stakeholders including students who have negotiated these processes and members of the Student Union Council as representatives of the student body.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

RUSU remains concerned that a number of functions of the university that sit under this policy suite have minimal quality assurance processes to underpin continuous improvement and review of internal decision making.

Without vital internal review the university is forced to use complaints and appeals as its primary mechanism for process improvement. This can have a significant impact on student experience and increases the risk that frequent poor quality decision making, particularly at local levels, is not captured and managed appropriately. RUSU would recommend the introduction of internal reviews of decision making under this policy suite with a focus on consistency, alignment with policy purpose and RMIT strategic frameworks, and quality – would this decision withstand appeal, is it supported by sufficient evidence, was the student able to make informed choices about how to participate in processes prior to a decision being made, has the decision been made in accordance with the principles of natural justice etc.

CONCLUSION

RUSU's feedback highlights the need for a transformative approach to assessment and assessment flexibility at RMIT, particularly in light of changes stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and advancements in generative AI. With a growing number of students with disabilities, it's crucial to enhance equitable access through the Equitable Learning Service and Special Consideration. Effective early intervention strategies will also play a critical role in student retention and success.

RMIT has the opportunity to lead in innovative assessment practices rooted in universal design, ensuring flexibility for students to demonstrate their learning. This review of the Assessment and Assessment Flexibility Policy Suite should integrate the Sustainability and Equity Evaluation Tool to address existing gaps and fulfill obligations under the Gender Equality Act 2020. By doing so, RMIT can reaffirm its commitment to equity and inclusion in academic assessments.

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ATTACHMENT 1

Overview of academic progress processes at Times 2024 top 10 Australian Universities.

At these universities there are two main mechanisms for assessing student academic progress and returning students to a form of academic good standing.

1. After being placed first stage at risk (or equivalent), students are returned to academic good standing after demonstrating satisfactory academic progress for a defined time period (two semesters, 12 months etc.)
2. Academic progress process include a range of different academic classifications (up to six in the case of UNSW), from satisfactory academic process to exclusion. Students' academic progress is calculated based on your current performance at the end of a semester applied to your level from the previous semester. Satisfactory academic progress in their current semester would move a student one level back towards good standing, and unsatisfactory academic progress in their current semester would move a student one level closer to show cause and exclusion.

University	APIP	Return to good standing	Maximum n° of times you can fail a course
University of Melbourne	Online self-help tool	Yes - method 1	Yes
UNSW	Students can see an academic advisor but it is not required	Yes – method 2*	Yes
ANU	Students are advised of the academic and professional assistance available	Yes – method 1	Yes
UQ	Students are advised of the academic and professional assistance available including an online Back on Track module	Yes – method 2	Yes
Adelaide	Self-reflective survey	Yes – method 2**	Yes
UWA	Students are encouraged but not required to make an appointment with the Student Advising Office	Yes – method 1	Yes
Macquarie	Online self-guidance tool	Yes – method 1	Yes

UTS	Students on academic caution are required to attend workshops	No	Yes
Monash	Online my progress and support tool	No	Yes
USYD	Students are advised of the academic and professional assistance available and may be offered an appointment with an academic advisor	No	Yes

*UNSW has good standing, risk level 1, risk level 2, risk level 3, suspension and then exclusion

**Adelaide has good standing, academic risk level 1, academic risk level 2 and unsatisfactory/show cause but you can only return to good standing from risk level 1

ATTACHMENT 2

RUSU Feedback on Academic Progress Communications

Introduction

The RMIT University Student Union is grateful for the opportunity to provide input into a refresh of current academic progress communications. In this feedback document we would like to set out some of the challenges students face interpreting and actioning the current student facing academic progress communications, as well as the impacts these communications can have and some recommendations for improvements. We understand that the university's communications around a topic as complex as academic progress must contain certain information for compliance purposes and must communicate to students the importance of acting in response to the communication. We also consider it of central importance that the university widen the scope of its consultation in this area to include Ngarara Willim, the Equitable Learning Service (ELS), the RMIT Respect team and the RMIT Counselling Service as they can give very specific insight into the impact academic progress communications can have on First Nations students, disabled students/students with a disability and students with mental health conditions.

Challenges

Students struggle with the following when interpreting and actioning academic progress communications from the university:

- For first stage at risk communications, the academic progress process is often brand new to students. This will be the first time they are encountering information about this process.
- Template communications around academic progress often use complex and bureaucratic language that students struggle to understand. The information provided is dense in content which impacts its readability. This is particularly true of students with dyslexia and/or other learning challenges, students suffering from anxiety and some students with English as a second language.
- Whilst the 'first stage at risk' process is supposed to be one that supports students to get back on track, academic progress communications are largely disempowering and judgemental in tone.
- Emails are poorly labelled/titled and are lost in inboxes.

- Digital accessibility of communications. Can they be read by screen readers? Can they be clearly read on a mobile device? Are students directed to versions of this information in accessible formats?
- Lack of privacy information provided in communications including a lack of information about how information will be used, limits to use, who will access it etc.
- Communications are not tailored to specific support services e.g. students already registered with the ELS are not specifically referred to the ELS for additional support.
- No links to learning resources that could help students in the future

Impacts

The impact on students who receive these communications is clear. The majority feel overwhelmed, disempowered and fearful. This is partly due to the structure of the academic progress process, which is out of the scope of this review, but the language and communications used by the university do not help. With 'first stage at risk communications' the style of communications is very much in conflict with the idea that this initial stage of the academic progress process is supposed to be a supportive one, with 'final stage at risk' the university is asking for such a significant level of disclosure from students, and it does so with no compassion.

Often students who receive these communications have been experiencing significant life events or are living and studying with severe illness or disability, these will have a negative impact on their information processing capacity and therefore their ability to interpret and action these communications, yet the communications they receive contain complex and dense content.

For 'final stage at risk' in particular the academic progress process is requesting a 'disclosure of last resort' which can often cover details of sexual assault and sexual harm, mental health issues and other traumatic life events. The situations students experience that may have led them to have poor academic progress already put them at risk for psychological distress. The current communication used can lead to an escalation of that risk.

Recommendations

- Reframe the entire purpose of the communications to one of supporting students through potentially difficult transitions. Not all students are going to remain in their program after this process has concluded, and many have experienced significant life events that have severely impacted them, treat them with empathy and compassion in communications.

- Practice universal design principles in the drafting of these emails templates. Design the communications to be inclusive and accessible to all students. Draft communications that all students can find, read, understand and action.
- Ensure students are directed to support services as part of these emails and where possible specifically link them with support services relevant to the student e.g. a First Nations student would be directed to seek support from Nagara Willim.
- Ensure communications can be accessed on mobile devices, by screen readers and consider linking to resources in accessible formats.
- Consider alternative formats to presenting information – videos (closed caption and with a transcript), flow charts and diagrams (that can be read by screen readers), microcredentials or short explainers/courses that they can review and go back to etc.
- Specifically, provide students with an easy-to-understand visual flow chart at all stages of academic progress communications, clearly showing the process, including timelines, where their private and personal information is going, and who is making decisions. Most students have no idea how stages 1 and 2 work, how long they can expect to receive an outcome, or who is making the considerations of their show cause and what happens afterwards.
- Provide links to study tools, study planning, learning lab etc.
- Send students SMSs to direct them to their inbox when academic progress communications have been sent (at school and university level).
- Ensure schools are following up on APIP requests and embracing a supportive role in working with students to progress their academic attainment.
- Destigmatise seeking support for mental health.

ATTACHMENT 3

List of RUSU recommendations included in this feedback document:

Academic Progress

- The introduction of a more thorough Academic Performance Improvement Plan (APIP) process that involves a self-directed survey encouraging students to identify areas where they need further skills development or personal support complemented by a selection of compulsory online modules, to build learning skills, and optional referrals to student services, to provide support.
- The introduction of a mechanism for students who go on to demonstrate prolonged satisfactory academic progress, after being placed first stage at risk, to return to a classification of academic 'good standing'. Meaning that if a student was found to have subsequent poor academic progress they would return to being placed at first stage at risk and would undertake a second APIP process, rather than progressing to final stage at risk and being required to show cause. Participation in the online learning sections of a more stringent APIP would be a requirement to be eligible for good standing.
- Introduction of a six-month suspension (with similar conditions to a Leave of Absence) as an additional outcome to show cause and exclusion appeal processes.

Adjustments to assessment

- Support for academic staff to implement the recommendations of ELPs
- Regular review of ELPs by Equitable Learning Services (ELS) staff to ensure that throughout the course of a degree program the adjustments to assessment recommended for a student registered with the ELS continue to provide equitable access to education.
- Introduction of interim ELPs or additional resourcing for the ELS to ensure timely creation of ELPs during peak periods.
- Collect data on non or partial implementation of recommendations for adjustments to assessment in ELPs.
- Provide academics and students with clear and detailed examples of circumstances that would be considered eligible for an extension, as well as suggestions for documentation that would be accepted in support of an extension request, the level of detail required and the details of relevant support services that could assist students.
- Allow for automatic approval of extension requests in the extension request tool

- Provide both students and staff with clear and detailed examples of circumstances that would (and wouldn't) be considered eligible for a special consideration application, as well as suggestions for documentation that would be accepted in support of an application and clear instructions on the dates evidence will need to include in order for the application to be approved.
- Create sets of discipline, program or even course specific guidelines on assessments where specific types of assessment adjustment will not be available because of the nature of the assessment or barriers placed on assessment by accreditation requirements etc.
- Extend the five-day special consideration application deadline to twenty-one days for first time applicants.
- Accepting statutory declarations in support of special consideration applications and exclusion appeals.
- Reframing adjustment to assessment as a function of inclusion rather than focusing the administration and management of these adjustments on integrity.
- Ensuring communications around academic progress and adjustments to assessment are written in clear and easy to understand language avoid the use of bureaucratic language where possible.

Exams and Design of assessment

- RMIT should continue to move away from exams (except where required by program accreditation requirements) and instead develop innovative and authentic assessment based on the following principles:
    - Prioritise ongoing feedback and developing skills for learning
    - Offer choices in assessment
    - Ensure inclusive assessment through universal design
- Resource academics to provide reasonable adjustments and authentic assessments at scale

Other

- Expand the policy suite to include informal types of adjudication in early decision making, particularly school level assessment appeals, show cause submissions, and special consideration decisions.
- Undertake analyses of whether students reporting SASH through pathways outside of Safer Community are supported and if the management of these initial disclosures goes on to affect the trajectory of potential future disclosures.

- Monitor how the university responds to these initial disclosures and ensure that students are supported in a way that makes them feel safe to make fuller disclosures.
- Undertake an external review of university compliance with privacy obligations of all processes that sit in the assessment and assessment flexibility policy suite. For this review it would be essential to consult with all major stakeholders including students who have negotiated these processes and members of the Student Union Council as representatives of the student body.
- RUSU would recommend the introduction of internal reviews of decision making under this policy suite.