

JULY 29, 2021

MONSU CAULFIELD STATEMENT RE: REINSTATEMENT OF THE SFR COMPONENT OF THE ACADEMIC SAFETY NET

On January 25th 2020, Victoria records its first case of COVID-19. Since then, no student's life has been the same.

Since the first report of this virus, a global public health crisis has ensued. And, with it, an attempt to control the situation through varying degrees of lockdowns and restrictions.

For onshore students, our states have not known normalcy. We have existed in a limbo state for almost two years with the constant fear of yet another outbreak; the most recent Victorian and New South Wales lockdowns being a perfect example of how quickly the situation can change.

For our international students, hard border closures have created not only geographical distance between them and Monash campuses but a disconnection from on-campus culture, community and services. The students who chose to go back to their home countries now face the reality that the timeline for their return is uncertain and those who chose to stay in Australia have now been separated from friends and family for an inconceivable amount of time, often watching crises unfold from afar.

The impact of this pandemic extends far beyond fear of contracting the virus itself. Financial hardship, increased prevalence of anxiety and depression, sleep disturbance, loss, the list goes on. However, when the Academic Safety Net was introduced, there was some solace. The existence of this mechanism reduced student anxiety around academics - and with so many other reasons to be anxious during this pandemic, it was welcomed.

Together with the MSA, MONSU Peninsula, MPSU and MUISS, we helped to secure the ASN's extension in Semester 1 2021 and we fought for its extension in Semester 2. And it will return - partially.

While students can still withdraw fail grades from their academic transcript and sit an unlimited number of supplementary assessments this semester, they have lost one crucial component of the ASN; the Satisfied Faculty Requirement (SFR) component. This component was integral to reducing anxiety as students were able to convert all passed units to SFR grades that wouldn't be used in the GPA or WAM calculation.

The key reasons why MONSU Caulfield believes the SFR provision should be reinstated are outlined below.

VOLATILITY OF LEARNING DELIVERY

While many of our students have returned to campuses, there is no guarantee that this won't change. The most recent snap lockdowns are indicative of the volatility that has defined the University experience for two years. For students this means that the delivery mode of learning is unpredictable, and with this unpredictability comes anxiety. As stated in our submission to the Education Committee in January, transferability of content to an online platform is not equitable across all faculties or degrees. This is unavoidable.

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Additionally, for our offshore cohort, online learning is the only option and thus the same equity issues arise.

The key sentiment in the volatility of learning delivery is that it's out of students' control. With lockdowns and restrictions being imposed, students lose their academic autonomy. Not all students are able to study as effectively in an online format, whether as a result of their individual learning style or their unit or course's structure that is inherently oppositional to this format.

Given this, MONSU Caulfield understands that the SFR provision reduces domestic student anxiety surrounding underperformance as a result of the volatility in learning delivery. And for our offshore cohort, the SFR provision provides much-needed support while they continue to learn from afar.

PROFESSIONAL CONSEQUENCES

MONSU Caulfield strongly believes the impact of this pandemic is still being felt and will continue to be felt until an effective vaccine rollout has taken place. As such, we do not believe it's fair for students to potentially lose career opportunities or prospects as a result of grades that have fallen below their standard or an employer's standard during the pandemic.

The SFR provision is necessary for the protection of student employability. Students can be ineligible for job opportunities if their WAM or GPA is considered too low, or be rejected throughout the hiring process if a grade doesn't meet particular criteria.

MONSU Caulfield understands there are some faculties concerned that the SFR component may have adverse effects on employability in how an "SFR" grade is perceived by an employer. To this, we reiterate that employing this component is at an individual student's discretion and that entire cohorts should not be disadvantaged as a result.

As such, the reinstatement of the SFR component, or a variation of the component, will support students in progressing professionally. Having the SFR provision in place will allow students to convert their pass grades to "SFR" grades thus reducing hindrance to employment. Students should not have their career prospects jeopardised because they struggled academically in what is accurately described globally as an unprecedented time.

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

As the pandemic continues, so does the mental health issues affecting our students. This fact is evident in increased fatigue, anxiety, loneliness, depression, anger and confusion. Our students are struggling. And these struggles are prevalent even without the Academic Safety Net and its provisions.

As outlined above, the exclusion of the SFR component increases anxiety related to academics and subsequent employment opportunities. To remove such an integral piece of the compassionate grading policy is premature. The wellbeing and mental health of students is still being affected two years after the pandemic began and, importantly, it's not over yet.

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It is remiss of the University to overlook the impact of the SFR component's removal on student wellbeing. With so much adversity around us, students deserve to feel confident that their concerns are considered and they are supported. Becoming familiar with life during a pandemic is not the same as living a normal life. The University must recognise this differentiation and commit to supporting students fully until these mental health concerns have dissipated.

Given these issues, MONSU Caulfield proposes two solutions. First, the University reinstates the SFR provision of the Academic Safety Net. Second, the University works together with Student Representatives to develop an appropriate variation of the SFR provision that will effectively support all students in Semester 2.

The vaccine still hasn't been rolled out and until then we are still living in a lockdown or between-lockdown state. Life isn't back to normal and neither is University. Students are still in need of a compassionate grading policy, inclusive of the SFR component. Students still need the Academic Safety Net universally and in its entirety. MONSU Caulfield asks that the University considers this matter immediately.

Yours sincerely,

Anna Purtill,
MONSU Caulfield President