



University of Essex

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Student Protection Plan

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Table of Contents

University of Essex Student Protection Plan	1
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What is the Student Protection Plan?	1
Who is covered by the Plan?	1
What is covered by the Plan?	1
1. We are no longer financially sustainable	1
2. Changes to/discontinuation of your course	2
3. We close the Department in which your course is being offered	4
4. The location or campus at which your course is being taught is closed	4
5. Our IT infrastructure is not sufficient for the delivery of your course	5
6. We don't have the staff to teach your course	5
7. Our buildings or campuses are not able to accommodate teaching events	6
8. We lose the right to offer the qualification for which you are studying	6
9. We lose the right to teach international students	6
10. Risks are not well managed at the University of Essex	7
Refunds and compensation	7
Communicating with our students and applicants	7
How would the Student Protection Plan be implemented?	7
Publication of the Plan	7
Notification and communication	7
Consultation with students in the development of the Plan	8
Complaints and questions	8

University of Essex Student Protection Plan

What is the Student Protection Plan?

The Student Protection Plan is a document, approved by the Office for Students, which every university must have in place.

It explains how the University manages risk in relation to the education we deliver, and the actions that we would take if a risk to the continuation of your studies arose. It also describes how we would communicate with you and support you if these events should happen.

This plan should be read alongside the Terms and Conditions of the offer you have accepted for your place at our university.

Who is covered by the Plan?

All applicants who have firmly accepted their places and current students at the University of Essex are covered by this Plan, at all levels of study.

What is covered by the Plan?

The University considers risks to the continuation of the delivery of education at least termly. It maintains a strategic risk register, and reviews the content thoroughly across the year, identifying updated threat levels and new mitigations. The University's Audit and Risk Management Committee, a sub-committee of our Council, is actively involved in monitoring risk and receives and scrutinises reports of our risks at the same frequency.

The risks we have identified that could result in a failure to provide the University's students with a fully transformative educational experience are described below. These are risks that we consider regularly and, as such, we have in place mitigations to help to reduce the impact on students in the unlikely event that these things were to happen.

1. We are no longer financially sustainable

The risk that the University of Essex is unable to operate because of financial problems is very low. Our past financial performance has been strong. We operate within a clear financial framework to help us remain in a sustainable position. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused us to recalibrate some of our

activity; however, our plans are robust and the application of our framework has placed us in a good position to maintain financial health into the future.

The framework comprises five requirements, performance against which is carefully monitored by the University Council, our Policy and Resources Committee and our Audit and Risk Management Committee and are outlined below:

- to achieve an annual minimum cash surplus of 5.5%;
- our earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation should always be at least 2 times annual debt servicing (interest and principle) costs;
- minimum liquid funds at least equal to 60 days of expenditure;
- all Departments/Schools of the University required to generate a cash surplus or have in place a recovery plan to ensure that they returned to break even within 3 years;
- projects would only be funded from external borrowing where servicing costs could be met from additional income or savings.

While travel and other restrictions arising from the COVID 19 pandemic may temporarily impact upon the University's capacity to achieve some of these requirements, it will, crucially, still be able to meet the requirement to maintain minimum liquid funds available for financial sustainability. We have tested out financial sustainability against a worst-case student numbers scenario. This has also enabled us to maintain our education and research capacity in support of the mission of the University. The University also does not intend to take out any additional external borrowing in the foreseeable future.

We continue to monitor our financial performance very closely.

2. Changes to/discontinuation of your course

The University regularly reviews its academic provision through its Annual Review of Courses and Periodic Review processes, in order to maintain academic standards and to ensure our courses keep up-to-date. Such reviews may result in changes to course provision, and the University has procedures and agreed timescales in place to inform you of such changes, and where appropriate, consult with you.

The risk that we decide to discontinue your course before you are due to complete is low as we would plan such a change to allow current students to complete their studies. In the unlikely event that you were not able to complete your studies at the University, we would agree a programme of advice and support to enable you to transfer to an alternative provider. In a case of last resort, this could be commissioned by the Office for Students.

The University will make every effort to provide the required teaching, supervision and academic facilities for applicants who have firmly accepted their place at Essex, as well as current students. However, the University cannot guarantee that teaching or supervision will be provided by a particular

named individual. After you have accepted an offer, the University will only make changes to courses, or close courses in the following limited circumstances:

- Where changes are in students' overall interests, for example because of new teaching or assessment practices, new technology or changes to the University's premises or structure
- Where a key member of staff becomes unavailable (through resignation or illness, for example) and suitable alternative teaching or supervision arrangements cannot be provided. This might be where the staff member has a particular specialism which cannot adequately be covered by other members of staff, or by other methods (such as temporary staff) which the University would normally use
- Where a teaching location becomes unavailable for reasons outside the University's control, for example because of flooding
- Where regulatory or government requirements mean that changes have to be made. For example, this might happen where changes are appropriate to ensure compliance with a professional body's requirements where a course leads to a professional qualification or there are changes to the immigration rules or other laws or regulations, or where the Office for Students requires the University to take specific actions.
- Where external, unpredicted events mean that teaching or assessment in the expected way is no longer possible (for example, as a result of a pandemic/epidemic, terrorism or war).
- Where the University is reliant on teaching or another element of educational delivery (such as a required placement) from an external organisation which is no longer viable, and where there is no suitable alternative. We would expect this circumstance to be extremely unlikely as we would offer alternatives wherever possible.

Examples of changes include changes to the content or structure of courses, to the location, method or mode of teaching or assessment or to the type of award.

If a course change or closure is proposed in such circumstances, the University will take all reasonable steps to minimise disruption to you. We would:

- inform you of the changes in advance;
- explain the reasons for the changes;
- outline the impact that the changes will have for you;
- and offer you options, with a view to avoiding as far as possible any adverse effects.

A course would only be closed in exceptional circumstances.

3. We close the Department in which your course is being offered

The risk that we close the Department in which your course is being offered is very low. The performance of all our departments is monitored through an annual review process against an agreed set of key performance indicators, which cover education, research and financial performance measures. Additional support is put in place for those departments for which a specific support need is identified.

The University regularly reviews its academic provision and organisational structures which may result in changes to how courses are organised and delivered; this could include a course moving into another department within the University to ensure that the interests of students can be safeguarded. In all cases, the University will seek to ensure that all students are able to complete their course and that the impact on their studies is minimised. If you are likely to be affected by such a change, the University has procedures in place to inform and consult with you, in partnership with our Students' Union.

4. The location or campus at which your course is being taught is closed

The risk that the location or campus at or from which your course is being taught is closed is very low. This risk rating is closely associated with our financial sustainability.

Our financial viability is the biggest risk here; however, our strong past financial performance means that all three of our campuses are able to flourish. We also review and scrutinise our finances regularly to ensure that our activities across all campuses remain viable.

Another reason for us having to close one of our campuses, perhaps temporarily, could be a safety or security incident. We have extensive Health and Safety policies and procedures and active fire risk management. We have also undertaken a major review of the health and safety of the University's estate and have embedded health and safety risk analysis into all relevant operational risk registers. In the unlikely event that an incident occurs, the University's Crisis Management Plan is brought into effect, complemented by local business continuity arrangements. This is regularly reviewed.

The University also has comprehensive insurance cover in respect of all risks, including property and business continuity, to ensure that it has sufficient resources to sustain the provision of education in the event of a serious incident at any of its campuses.

It is possible that one of our campuses may need to be closed, perhaps temporarily, because of events outside our control. Examples of these sorts of events include pandemics, epidemics, war, terrorist threats and changes required by the Government. The University would always follow guidance provided by the Government and the Office for Students. We put the safety of our community as a top priority. We would, in these circumstances, find an alternative way of providing you with the teaching you would need to achieve the learning outcomes of your course.

As well as the financial, insurance and safety measures that the University has in place to help prevent any of these things from happening, the COVID-19 pandemic has given the University the opportunity to develop ways of delivering teaching in different ways, including online. If the space in which you would expect to be taught becomes unavailable, even if only for a short period of time, the university has proven capacity to deliver your education remotely. We would always prefer to teach you using the method and in the place you would expect; however, if things do change, we are ready to move to a different mode of teaching. The options we would give you would depend on the circumstances of each change.

We would not expect any of our campuses to close; they are home to our students and we support you in living and studying there. If we were required to close your campus, however, albeit temporarily, we would tell you about this as far in advance as we could, explain why it was happening, outline the impact on you and offer you options to take. We would also keep the Office for Students informed about any changes that would affect our regulatory obligations.

5. Our IT infrastructure is not sufficient for the delivery of your course

The risk that you will be unable to complete your course due to a failure of IT infrastructure is low.

The University has an approved Information Supporting Strategy. We have operational, tested and robust IT business continuity arrangements in place, with dedicated staff members reviewing cyber risks. We run IT crisis simulation exercises regularly to ensure that we can deal efficiently with risks to the continuity of our systems which may arise.

We also run a continuous programme which reviews and maintains our ICT resilience and information security.

6. We don't have the staff to teach your course

The risk that we do not have the staff to teach your course is very low.

The University will make every effort to provide the required teaching, supervision and academic facilities; however, the University cannot guarantee that teaching or supervision will be provided by a particular named individual.

We are successful in recruiting talented staff to teach on our courses. We deliver talent development programmes internally to support and develop our staff and we have exceeded our target for ensuring that our teaching staff have teaching qualifications.

Full consideration of teaching needs is an explicit part of the University's processes for approving new courses and new modules. This links to a robust, annual planning process where we consider teaching requirements based on courses to be offered and numbers of students. This means that we are able to identify and take action where we might need to recruit new staff well in advance of the start of a new academic year.

For research students, in cases where your academic supervisor leaves the University, the University's priority will be to support you to complete your degree. A replacement Essex-based supervisor will be appointed for the remainder of your study and we will explore whether it would be possible and appropriate for your original supervisor to act as an associate supervisor, alongside your newly appointed Essex-based supervisor. The University's Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Degrees (or equivalent for Professional Doctorates) sets out the relevant requirements and responsibilities.

7. Our buildings or campuses are not able to accommodate teaching events

The risk that we will not have the physical infrastructure available to continue to teach is low.

The University's Capital Investment Plan provides investment to support a long-term maintenance programme of work and to build new on-campus facilities that are modern and fit for purpose. We are a growing university, and we undertake feasibility studies where required to ensure that we have space to grow and support diverse educational experiences.

8. We lose the right to offer the qualification for which you are studying

The risk that you are unable to complete your course due to the University losing the right to offer the qualification, due to, for example, loss of essential external accreditation or failure to comply with the standards set by the Office for Students, is very low.

The University of Essex was rated Gold in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) 2017 and our most recent QAA Higher Education Review confirmed that the University meets all the expectations required of higher education providers and commended the University's enhancement of student learning opportunities.

The University has robust procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of its courses, which are monitored through the University's academic governance structures. A number of our courses are accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies, which regulate entry to a particular profession. This accreditation is maintained by periodic reviews of the quality and standards of our courses by the relevant professional body.

9. We lose the right to teach international students

This risk applies to our ability to recruit, monitor and support international students who come to the UK on a Tier 4 visa, and our status as a Tier 4 sponsor.

The risk to our losing our Tier 4 Sponsor Licence is low. We underwent a Home Office audit of our compliance with visa rules in 2017 which received a positive outcome.

10. Risks are not well managed at the University of Essex

This risk is very low.

Risk management processes are embedded thoroughly in all areas of our operations. This covers the risks outlined above, as well as strategic and operational risks, which receive prominent attention in our decision-making.

We report termly on our strategic and operational risks to our Risk Management Group, to the senior executive group of the University and to our Audit and Risk Management Committee.

Refunds and compensation

Our Compensation and Refunds Policy describes the ways in which we would compensate you if any of the risks identified above came about.

Communicating with our students and applicants

How would the Student Protection Plan be implemented?

The Plan would only be triggered if your course of study could not continue. The reason for this could be one of those described above, or for another reason that may be entirely out of our control.

Publication of the Plan

The Plan will be published on our website.

Applicants will be directed to the Plan through the applications and admissions processes.

We feel that it is equally as important for staff to be involved in, and aware of, our Student Protection Plan. Staff are briefed on the details of the Student Protection Plan, and details of the Plan are taken into account when we review our policies and procedures, and monitor our risks.

Notification and communication

The University has established procedures for consulting with existing students on planned changes and emergencies. Where changes are planned that may have an impact on our course provision, all affected students will be kept informed and consulted, as appropriate, throughout the process. The procedures used will differ according to the nature of the change and the type of response that would most effectively engage with the affected students. They include information shared through and requested via several media (email, social media, SMS), face-to-face groups, consultation via student representatives (such as course representatives), as well as community surveys.

If any of the risks we identify in this plan happen, we will act swiftly and, as part of our response, offer you suitable and appropriate advice and support. The nature of the advice and support will vary from risk to risk and will depend on the impact on you. We will develop our response in consultation with our Students' Union. In doing so, we will give you as much notice as possible in the circumstances to inform you about what would happen and when and to explain why it was happening, the expected impact on you and options that you could take. You would also be able to raise issues or queries through your course representatives or individually, through the range of established communication channels in place.

In the event of emergencies that impact on students, communications would be managed through the University's Critical Incident Management Plan and local business continuity plans. In all cases, the University will work in partnership with our Students' Union.

The University's plan for dealing with the closure of a course of study also includes appropriate provision for communicating with applicants who have accepted a place on a University course. Applicants who have accepted a place at the University of Essex on a course which is then closed, but who have not yet commenced study on the course, will be offered advice and support to help them decide whether or not to apply for a different course at the University of Essex or to seek a suitable alternative.

We want you to be confident and comfortable with the way we would manage any changes – no matter how infrequently these may happen. You will also have been given some information about this when you applied to university.

Consultation with students in the development of the Plan

We review and update our Student Protection Plan annually, and take the results of this to Council in the Summer Term of each year. The President of the University of Essex Students' Union is a member of University Council.

Our students are involved in this review through formal consultation with our Students' Union prior to the submission of the annual review documentation to Council.

This Plan has been shared with and reviewed by representatives of our Students' Union.

Complaints and questions

Our complaint handling practices are clear, accessible and fair. If you have any concerns about this Plan, which you would like to register as a complaint, please follow our student concerns and complaints procedure which is available at: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/voice/complaints>.

Applicants to the University may register complaints using: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/-/media/documents/admissions/complaints-policy-for-applicants.pdf>.

Any questions about the Plan should be directed to the Registrar and Secretary (registrar@essex.ac.uk).