Examinations 2017-18: a review

Summary

This paper provides a review of City, University of London examinations in 2017-18 and outlines some of the challenges faced and how they were addressed.

The paper also includes reference to some of the more significant issues to be faced by the Exams Office in the immediate future and explains how we intend to mitigate these challenges.

As Examinations form a significant part of the assessment process, it is proposed that the Committee receives a report from the Exams Office as a standing item at its November meeting.

Recommended action

Educational Quality Committee is asked to:

- **consider** the paper
- **note** where action has been taken, and where further action is being proposed
Examinations 2017-18: a review

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to advise the Education & Student Committee of the work undertaken by the University’s Exams Office in order to deliver a high quality student experience. The paper outlines some of the specific challenges faced by the University's Exams Office in the 2017-18 academic year, explains how these were addressed and also alerts the Committee to the most pertinent issues in the immediate future.

Strategic Context

The Education & Student Strategy 2014-20 ‘Support for Success’ section focuses on continuing, ‘to build a high quality student experience characterised by: Proactive and efficient services which are responsive to the needs of our students’. This paper explains how the Exams Office strives to deliver a high quality, consistent student experience that reflects ‘the needs and aspirations of our diverse student body’.

Review

It should be noted that the following statistics focus on the three main examination periods and do not include any exception examinations that run outside of these periods.

![Main Exam Period Exam Candidatures by School](chart)

**Student numbers**

Candidatures in the 3 main exam periods appears largely stable with 2016/7 and 2015/6. This does mask an increase in candidatures that have been moved to exception periods to accommodate a reasonable student timetable. For example for the first time in January 2016 UG Cass moved approximately 1780 candidatures to the two days ahead of the main period. This is now approximately 2000 candidatures. PG Cass period 2 candidatures are not included in these figures as their exams are scheduled in their own 2 week exam period ahead of the main exam period. GDL and Legal Practice law exams take place in a separate period, and a significant number of SHS exams take place outside the main examination periods.
Logistical issues

Major building works in January 2018 meant the Northampton Suite (capacity 110), the second-largest venue after the Great Hall, was unavailable. This required use of an external venue for which the Crowne Plaza was used. Although this worked well, there is a significant cost implication. The venue, hire and set-up of examinations desks and chairs, and taxis to transport the examination materials each day totalled approximately £16.5. In addition the distance requires additional Invigilator time and on the rare occasion that there is an issue with an exam and a new document needs to be delivered to venues, this distance significantly delays the resolution and impacts the examination experience. There are also wellbeing concerns if a student was to fall ill and require use of our Student Health Centre or Mental Health and Counselling Service.

Continued use of external venues will be required as student numbers increase and no new large flat spaces are created.

Timetabling

Work is underway to develop timetabling principles to set out the University’s priorities when creating the timetable. At the core of this is the student experience. There is currently a set of working principles:

- Maximum of one examination per day
- No back-to-back examinations (including 18:00 followed by 10:00 the following day)
- 10:00 and 14:30 examinations start times preferred over 18:00
- Mixed-duration exams minimised
- Timetable published at least 5 weeks ahead of the start of period 1 and period 2, and at least 2 weeks ahead of the resit period.

Benchmarking will take place to consider how these principles sit within the industry and whether any other factors should be introduced.

One element of focus will be the publication date of the timetable. Initial research suggests that we publish early in the sector, but this is understandably an ongoing concern for students. Our publication date is currently constrained by the confirmation of module choices in SITS. An earlier deadline for this consistent across all Schools would be needed in order for the timetable to be published earlier.

With consultation across the University timetabling principles are intended to be approved through Senate and published for all students and staff.

Examination Venues

It has been necessary to consider methods of making spaces useable for exams where they were previous unsuitable. In particular due to the overlap of August examinations and Clearing it was necessary to have blinds installed in the Drysdale lower-ground PC venues so that the glass walls could be blocked to make these venues exams-appropriate. These PCs proved to be more reliable than the College Building PC venues that have commonly been used in the past. Installation of blinds may be an option to enable use of other glass-walled venues.
January Examination Period

The January examination period of two weeks was extremely tight in 2018 where we saw an increase of 3.86% from January 2016/7 to 24,127 candidatures. This is an increase of 11.33% in the past 3 years from January 2014/5. This will be unsustainable if student numbers continue to increase. In 2016 particular increase in UG Cass student numbers necessitated the agreement of additional examinations days on the two days preceding the start of the main examination period. Since then student numbers have continued to increase and even with this removal of over 2000 candidatures from the main period, scheduling is problematic.

For January 2019 concerns have been raised by UG Cass students regarding returning to University after the Winter Break in time for examinations on the 3rd and 4th January as this would involve travelling on New Year or on the day before their exam. This has required removing the 3rd as an examinations day which has pushed over 1000 candidatures into the main period.

This has been reported to the Academic Year Review project.

Exam Scheduling Software

The Exam Timetabling Software update was implemented for use in the 2017/8 Period 2 examinations. This was a significant change from previous software and has required the development of new skills within the team.

This update provides a number of significant improvements in terms of efficiency and effectiveness which enables us to provide a better student experience. In particular, exams requiring reasonable adjustments are now timetabled alongside the main examinations which has created opportunities to better protect the integrity of the examination and with increasing numbers of students receiving adjustments, allows us to identify needs for additional capacity or number of venues in advance. In addition it means the same paperwork can be produced across all venues which adds consistency for both staff and students so more focus can be on the exam itself.

The addition of reasonable adjustment students does add a major piece of work of adding the adjustments to the timetabling software. The first time this was done in April 2018 this took 40 hours of work.

The software facilitates more complex settings for timetabling preferences such as the spread of exams for each student and reducing the scheduling of exams with mixed durations in the same venue. These have had a very positive impact on student experience and will continue to feed into the timetabling principles work.

There are some minor reductions in functionality from the previous version of the software. For example, where multiple exams take place under one Unit of assessment in SITS (known as ‘Supermodules’), it is no longer possible to duplicate these exams and the students registered on them. These now have to be created manually and students individually added.
Invigilators

We currently have approximately 100 invigilators, with 20 experienced Head Invigilators who manage the team of invigilators in their venue. Invigilators are recruited via Unitemps and recruitment takes place twice a year in November and April to replace invigilators who have left, usually for permanent jobs. It is rare to have to discontinue hiring invigilators due to poor-performance and feedback from Invigilators has been that compared to other London Universities we hold our Invigilators to a very high standard.

Invigilators attend starter training after their recruitment and following that at least 1 of 2 refresher trainings each year. The refresher training serves as a platform to issue reminders of process, training on new processes, sharing of best practices and general discussion. Contributions from other teams across the University have helped give the Invigilators a wider understanding of their role and the student journey. In April 2018 the Mental Health team along with one of their students who receives adjustments talked to the invigilators about the examination experience for students with Mental Health conditions. The Nurse Advisor in the Student Health Centre, Chris Barnes, also spoke to the invigilators about how to deal with common health concerns such as anxiety, and how to support candidates fasting during Ramadan. This received extremely positive feedback from the Invigilators and will be continued. We have also received positive feedback from students regarding invigilation.

Invigilator folders have been implemented to every exam. This contains quick access information for all events that are likely to occur as well as all of the forms invigilators may need. This has helped to standardise the examination experience across venues and ensure invigilators have access to the information and forms they need so situations can be resolved quickly and calmly.

Reasonable Adjustments

The number of students requiring reasonable adjustments and particularly those requiring use of an individual venue continues to increase. We currently have approximately 500 students registered to receive reasonable adjustments in their examinations. This is currently a reduced number due to the removal of graduating students and it is likely to increase to over 600 when the new students have registered with LEaD and temporary adjustments for short-term illness and disabilities are agreed by the Student Health Centre. Currently 84 student require the use of an individual venue; with 31 of these requiring assistive technology, 19 requiring the use of a PC and 11 requiring the support of a Reader and/or Scribe. 49 students require a modified paper including specific typeface, font size, coloured paper or digital. The maximum extra time currently in place is 100% for a visually impaired student. The maximum rest break time currently offered is 25% for a student suffering from a condition that causes severe skeletal weakness.

The need for a process review was identified to improve the efficiency of communicating adjustments from Maximiser, where the adjustments are logged by LEaD and the Student Health Centre, to the Examinations Office. MAfS led a project to initiate this, one outcome of which has been for the Exams Office to access Maximizer. This will improve the efficiency and accuracy of providing adjustments from one source of truth.
Exceptions Examinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Course</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>Study Abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>2 days</td>
<td>MBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>2 days</td>
<td>UG Cass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>2 days</td>
<td>MBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>Study Abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>PG Cass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
<td>Law (GDL &amp; Legal Practice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throughout</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
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</tbody>
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Work has been done to standardise exception examinations in line with the main exam periods where possible including the Exams Office receiving the instructions for the exam and the examinations paperwork. This has created a more consistent and professional examinations experience for students and staff.

Religious Observance

Ramadan has fallen during the period 2 examinations since 2016 and this will be the case until 2021. The Chaplaincy estimate this affects up to 2,000 students. In summer 2018 and in previous years, in consultation with the Chaplaincy and the Students Union we have been able to create the timetable with no 18:00 exam starts. This was a benefit for all students who understandably prefer the morning and afternoon sessions. It is the preference to continue this for future years, but will be dictated by student numbers and exam combinations. If it is not possible, consultation will take place with the aim of ensuring all students have the best opportunity to perform well in their examinations.

A need has been identified for a policy to consider absences from Examinations and other University events e.g. teaching, in-semester tests etc. There is currently a Religious Observance process for during the Examination periods, but this needs the support of a full policy. The Quality and Academic Development team (QUAD) will be leading this.

Question Papers

Currently examination papers are submitted to the Exams Office in hard-copy. These are then proof read and physically picked up by the printing company, Rapidity. At Rapidity the production takes place in two separate processes: scanning the hard copy, and then printing from the scanned digital copy. Some issues have arisen from incorrect scanning and deteriorating of quality from this process. It is therefore being investigated whether the Exams Office could receive the question papers digitally, which would then be securely sent to Rapidity to directly print from. This would also mean the Exams Office automatically have a digital copy of the paper as required for students using assistive technology. There are wider implications to consider such as how the currently physical sign-off from the departments would take place as well as ensuring clear version control. This is in discussion with the Examinations Subgroup Committee.
Technology

We have 31 students requiring use of assistive technology and 168 students requiring use of a standard PC (19 in individual venues). This represents a significant reliance on technology during the examination periods in addition to the exams that principally take place on PC. Where a student is in an individual venue without access to a printer, work is saved to a USB which is returned to the Exams Office where it is printed and a copy saved. When the candidate signs out of the PC all information is removed for security reasons. A risk has been identified with the exclusive use of USBs which can become corrupt.

Options to minimise this risk are being investigated. Initial research suggests this is likely to take the form of a Moodle submission where receipt can be confirmed by the Exams Office before the candidate leaves the exam.

Staffing

The Examinations Office has 3.8FTE.

The new Examinations Manager started in November 2017 which has enabled the team capacity to revise processes to ensure the best student experience is being delivered.

Data Accuracy

The Exams Office worked closely with the Schools to increase the accuracy of the student registration data during 2017/8. Whilst this created additional workload for the Exams Office to add or remove students as needed, this enabled us to ensure students were registered and were therefore on seating plans, creating a better student experience. Any issues of capacity could also be resolved ahead of the exam.

There are wider factors that impact this. In August 2018 a significant number of exams were run where students did not attend. This is a particular resource concern for students in individual venues where it removes the availability of a venue from others and an invigilator is required to wait one hour for the student to arrive. Instances of these were followed up with the relevant School at the beginning of the August exam period but they were unable to confirm whether the student will be attending any future examinations in the same period. On three occasions examinations that were exclusively requested by PG Cass in the evening to accommodate students whose normal teaching time would be after work day, had no students attend. This required resource to have the Examinations Office staffed late, and the hiring of several invigilators. Discussion with Schools indicated that this is due to optionality offered to students who have approved ECs or resits, and further improvement may not be possible without change to these regulations.

Assessment Review

A project to consider the assessment of students has taken place and any reduction in examinations will be seen in 2018/9.

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