

Examinations 2014-15: a review

Summary

This paper provides a review of University examinations in 2014-15 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

Education & Student Committee is asked to:

- i. **receive** the paper and to note where action has been taken, and where further action is being proposed.

Publication: Open/Closed/Part Closed <for closed/part closed papers state the following>
Date /event on/following which the paper may be released: <State Date/Event/Never>
Freedom of Information Act 2000 Exemption:
Reason for Closed Classification: <normally Commercial Interests/Personal Information>

Examinations 2014-15: a review

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to inform 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 2014-15 academic year, explains how these were addressed and also alerts the Committee to the most pertinent issues in the immediate future.

Strategic Context

The 'Support for Success' section in the Education & Student Strategy 2014-20 confirms that the University will "continue 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 student experience

Review

It should be noted that the following statistics focus on the three main examination periods and do not include other exams that run outside of these periods, such as Cass PG, Nursing, GDL, etc.

January 2014	Summer 2014	Re-sits 2014	Total 2013-14	% increase on previous year
19,172	25,910	5,957	51,038	1.6% increase on 2012-13 [total was 50,215]
January 2015	Summer 2015	Re-sits 2015	Total 2014-15*	
21,672	27,864	6,729	56,265	10.2% increase on 2013-14

Student numbers

The increased number of Cass UG students had a dramatic impact on candidate numbers, and is largely responsible for the increased numbers in January and May/June 2015. In January 2015 the Exams Office had to schedule examinations on each evening and on the middle Saturday during the two-week exam period. Whilst this is entirely permissible within our examination regulations, it is always a last resort to schedule examinations on evenings or Saturdays because, in addition to the inconvenience caused to students, it can also cause problems for both staff and invigilators.

Cass UG contacted the Assistant Director, Academic Operations after the January 2015 examinations to see whether some of the Cass UG exams in January 2016 could be scheduled in the first week of January, i.e. the week before the main January exam period. Discussions ensued between Cass UG (including canvassing

the opinion of the students, who were in favour of the proposal), the Exams Office and Timetabling, and it has been possible to arrange Cass UG examinations on Thursday 7th and Fri 8th (am only) of January 2016. This will mean that over 1,780 Cass UG candidates will sit an examination in the first week back after Christmas, which will go some way towards alleviating the pressure on the examination timetable in the main period from 11th-22nd January 2015 and will hopefully mean that we will not have to schedule as many evening examinations, or use the middle Saturday. The SU was informed of this development via an email on 28th August 2015 from the Assistant Director, Academic Operations.

Logistical issues

Scheduling exams in 2014-15 was particularly challenging due to the ongoing major building work across the campus. We were unable to use the Northampton Suite (capacity c.110) and had to hire an external venue, the Holiday Inn on King's Cross Road, which worked extremely well. Unfortunately, the Holiday Inn is undergoing a major refurbishment and is not available for the January 2016 exams, but we have been able to secure the use of The Crypt at St. James' Clerkenwell. We are in discussion with The Thistle, Barbican as a possible venue for the summer exams 2016.

The building work has had a particularly negative effect on the Assistive Technology Rooms (ATRs) in the Library, which the Exams Office has traditionally used for candidates who require special arrangements, such as the use of a PC with specialist software, and which were unavailable during 2014-15 due to noise. The Assistant Director, Academic Operations, secured the release of University monies to purchase equipment to set up three temporary ATR rooms which were located in Franklin Building for the main summer exams and the August re-sits. This equipment will remain in Franklin Building and all ATR-based examinations will take place there from August 2015 - August 2016 which will mean that the Library ATRs will not be needed for use in examinations. This should result in an improved student experience because using the Library ATRs has caused problems in the past due to competing demands of students who want to use the rooms for study and those who require specialist equipment in order to sit their exam. A permanent home for the Exams Office ATR equipment will be sought once the building work has been completed in September 2016.

Timetabling

Work on constructing the January 2015 timetable started on Monday 26th October 2015, so it is not possible to say at this stage that there will be no evening or Saturday examinations, but we will certainly try to avoid this wherever possible.

Understandably, students often ask why the examination timetable cannot be released earlier. Exams timetabling is done on the basis of a full set of actual student data drawn from SITS. This means that new student enrolment on modules needs to be in place in SITS before the exam timetabling process can start. At present the production of the exam timetable is therefore constrained by the timing of students' elective module choices. Earlier selection of modules, and minimising subsequent change to module choices, would enable earlier completion of module enrolment in SITS. The ability of students to select their modules earlier is, in turn, dependent on earlier and stricter deadlines for the approval of new/amended modules to run in the following academic year.

Work undertaken during PSR1 explored the establishment of an overarching framework for module operations covering module approval/amendment, information to students to support module selection, the process of module selection and module enrolment, which could enable earlier production of the timetable. The continuation of this work will now be considered as a potential project to sit within the Transformation Programme. Support for this project from E&SC would be very much appreciated.

Invigilators

Invigilators are recruited via Unitemps, which is now part of Student & Academic Services. We have c.100 invigilators on our books, of whom c.30 fulfil the role of Head Invigilator which means that they are responsible for managing the team of invigilators in their venue. Very roughly, we allocate one invigilator per 30 students in a venue, plus one Head Invigilator. All invigilators, both existing and new, are trained in December each year. We are very fortunate in having an experienced team of invigilators and only very rarely do we have to de-select someone for under-performance.

The invigilator training was completely revised for delivery in December 2014, and was very positively received by the invigilators. The training included a session on 'Student Support', and colleagues from Disability,, Mental Health and the Nursing team gave very informative sessions; feedback on these sessions was extremely positive.

Unfortunately, the Exams Office has noticed a trend towards students not respecting the invigilators and challenging them when they uphold the University's exam regulations. The situation became so bad in one subject area that the head of department had to attend the start of some exams in order to ensure that the students behaved appropriately. The Exams Office has worked with this particular School and improvements were noticed towards the end of the summer exam period 2015.

Invigilators use an EX14 form to report any incident in an exam venue, which includes issues such as alleged academic misconduct (most frequently, use of notes or having a mobile phone in a pocket) and any problems with the venue, e.g. air conditioning not working in the summer, external noise, etc.

For 2014-15, the number of EX14s completed was as follows:

January 128

Summer 170

August 80

TOTAL 378

This is a small increase on 2013-14, which was as follows:

January 113

Summer 147

August 64

TOTAL 324

Exam policy on wrist watches

Following discussions with the SU and the D-VC Education, it was decided that students would no longer be permitted to wear a wrist watch in an exam venue. This was in response to the development of devices such as Google watch that can access the internet, and which look very similar to a standard wrist watch. It was decided that it would be too onerous to expect the invigilators to be able to identify a Google watch, therefore students were asked to remove their wrist watch and to place it in the clear plastic bag in which they already place their mobile phone. Interest from other HEIs seemed to indicate that City was slightly ahead in terms of addressing the Google watch issue, and many other UK HEIs have now adopted a similar policy.

The Exams Office purchased a number of small desk clocks for use by any student who requested one, and we also purchased a number of RNIB clocks for use by special arrangement students who were visually impaired.

Reports from the invigilators indicated that the new policy on wrist watches was introduced very smoothly, with all students complying with the request.

Future issues to be addressed

Religious Observance

Ramadan 2017 is 27th May - 25th June, so coincides with the final week of examinations from 29th May – 3rd June. Ramadan 2018 is 16th May -14th June, which coincides with the entire summer exam period from 14th May -8th June.

The Assistant Director, Academic Operations, was asked by the Director of Student & Academic Services to chair a small working group to assess the impact of Ramadan on examinations, and to consider any remedial action that can be taken by the University. The Assistant Director, Academic Operations, is currently liaising with other HEIs to understand how their religious observance policy and process works in practice, with the aim of introducing a new policy and process from September 2016.

Work is also underway with regard to developing a policy on Accommodating Students' Religious Observances that would cover all aspects of University life, not just examinations. The intention is for the draft policy to be presented to the February meeting of ESC for review and comment in advance of it going to Senate.

Special arrangement examinations

The number of students requiring special arrangements for exams continues to increase, with just over 400 students currently registered with the Exams Office; this number will increase as not all new students will have completed the LEaD assessment process in order to be identified as requiring special arrangements. The Exams Office is currently working with IS to join a project initiated by LEaD that involves the use of some specialist disability support software being extended to the Exams Office. It is anticipated that the Exams Office will be using this software to manage the special arrangements process from the main Summer exams 2016 onwards. Having an automated process will mean that students are no longer required to complete a form stating which modules they are sitting, and when. This information is available within SITS, but it is not currently possible to extract it in a usable format, which is why we need the disability support software as this will link to SITS.

Exam scheduling software

The existing exam scheduling software has to handle the increasing volume of candidatures and the increasing modularity of many of our programmes. Having a wide choice of modules is clearly a very good experience for our students, but it adds a huge level of complexity to examination scheduling because we have to avoid examination clashes, i.e. where a student has two examinations at the same time. This is much more difficult to manage where students following a certain programme are able to elect to study modules from a wide variety of programmes, and it is something the Exams Office will need to keep under review.

Venues

The University has only two fairly large examination venues (Northampton Suite and the Great Hall). The continuing increase in candidate numbers means that, even when the building work has finished, external venues will be required for all future examination periods apart from the August re-sits which can be accommodated on campus.

It should be noted that none of the additional space being created as part of the University building project is suitable for use as an examination venue. Also, the hall at CitySport is not currently being viewed as a potential exam venue because its primary purpose is for student well being and broader experience. Formal consideration of this space may be required if Student & Academic Services has to justify any increased spend on external venues.

Staffing

The Exams Office is staffed by 1.8FTE permanent staff, plus a 0.7FTE temporary worker. Given the anticipated further increases in candidatures, the staffing level within the Exams Office may need to be reviewed and will be considered in the first instance by Student & Academic Services Senior Leadership Team.

Financial Implications

Given that the University has only two large exam venues, there will, be a financial impact on the University in future years with respect to hiring external exam venues as the cheaper venue hire in this locality is in the region of £20,000 for the four week summer exam period.

As noted above, the increasing modularity on offer to our students may mean that we have to review whether our exam scheduling software is fit for purpose. This area has not yet been explored in detail, but any upgrade to our exam scheduling software would have a significant financial implication for the University.

Sarah Gardner
Assistant Director, Academic Operations
Student & Academic Services
23/10/2015