

Timetabling of the main examination series – Contextualisation

Background:

The University main examination series is a significant event that impacts on the University community: taught students, most of whom will have a number of examinations to sit; academic staff who must set papers and assess student performance; professional services staff who provide support for the process.

It is important that the University keeps the management of examinations under review and a key element of the delivery of examinations is the approach to their scheduling. In March 2015, a most unfortunate failure in the third-party software client used by UEA (and a number of other universities) to timetable examinations required the University to issue a second exam timetable to all students.

The ensuing dialogue with academic staff, students and their representatives touched on various issues relating to timetabling; a number of which were not directly related to the system error itself (such as the proximity of submission deadlines to the exam period), but which merit further discussion.

The following information is intended to help provide a framing context for the discussions of the Student Experience Committee and to assist members in their deliberations regarding a strategic approach to examination timetabling.

Facts and Figures:

Examination papers produced per annum: Circa 650

Students sitting examinations per annum: Circa 8,000

Length of examination period: Currently 6 weeks, but reducing to 5 weeks in 2015/16 and 4 weeks in 2016/17

Constraints:

Examination period is fixed in advance of the academic year in question

Length of examination period cannot be extended

The volume and length of examinations is determined in advance of the academic year

The availability of suitable rooms is limited and the proportion of students with individual requirements increases annually

Modules may be taken by students from a range of courses and Schools of study adding complexity to the process of ensuring clashes are prevented

The total volume of examinations will need to reduce to accommodate the shortening examination period

Student Focused Commitments:

Examinations on Saturdays abolished

No student to sit more than one examination per day wherever possible

Examination timetable to be released in good time to allow effective revision

Rooming arrangements designed to minimise disruption due to multiple end-times in a single exam room

Options for change:

Members may wish to discuss a number of possibilities for developments in relation to the timetabling of examinations including the following:

The introduction of a requirement that submission deadlines are not set any later than 'N' days prior to the published University examination period – providing the benefit of a singular focus on exam preparation for students, but the potential negative impact of reducing time available for the completion of assignments

The introduction of a staggered timetable such that year one student examinations fall earliest in the series, followed by year two examinations and lastly final year student examinations – providing the benefit of maximising revision time for finalists, but reducing preparatory period for those new to Higher Education

The introduction of a staggered timetable such that examinations are scheduled in a banded way by School or Faculty – providing the benefit of greater advance knowledge for students of the timing of their examinations, but potentially creating a disadvantage for certain student groups

Earlier publication of timetable - providing the benefit of more advance information for students, but with the significant disadvantage that this could only be achieved by reducing the time allowed for student to switch module enrolments

When considering possible options for change members may wish to consider the inevitably competing and often contradictory preferences of individual students in relation to examination scheduling. A number of students would prefer their examinations to be concluded as early as possible while others would prefer examinations towards the end of the period allowing for more revision. Similarly, while a number of students would prefer their examinations to be evenly spread across the examination period, others prefer their examinations to be contained within a narrower window. One advantage of the current randomised approach to the scheduling of examinations is that no particular preference group gains a relative advantage.