

SEN14D031

Title: *Congregation: amendment to processes*
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Issue

The University currently holds two main Congregation ceremonies: the summer “in-person” event and the winter “in-absentia” event. Over the past couple of years this has raised some challenges and concerns from graduating students and in an effort to address these we have put forward a proposal to improve what is offered. This has been discussed with the Students’ Union at their regular meeting with members of the Executive Team and whilst their preference would be for a full “in-person” ceremony in the winter they acknowledge that the proposals below go a long way towards resolving the current issues.

Recommendation

Senate is asked to endorse the following recommendations:

1. Currently students who receive a compensatory or exit award are not invited to attend the graduation ceremony. To enable Graduation to become a more inclusive event for all, it is recommended that the current policy is annulled so that all students who receive compensatory or exit awards are permitted to attend a Graduation event. We do not believe that the numbers involved will have any significant impact on the ceremony schedule.
2. All awards are formally conferred at the next available Graduation event. Graduating students are then offered one opportunity to attend the next “in-person” ceremony (which they may defer once) so that they may take part in a formal ceremony. Currently, students who opt for the “in-absentia” ceremonies are not invited to attend “in-person”.
3. An additional conferment date is added and the winter conferment date is brought forward. The proposal is for the winter conferment date to be 1 December (or the closest working date) and that the additional date is in early April (precise date to be confirmed annually in view of Easter).

Resource Implications

There are anticipated to be some additional attendees at the summer ceremonies but the additional cost is not expected to be significant given that most of the expense is incurred in the set-up. This option provides an opportunity for those who graduate in the winter to attend a ceremony in person noting that to hold an additional in-person ceremony would bring with it significant costs.

Risk Implications

There are no significant risks identified with this proposal which will lead to a more streamlined process for our graduation procedures.

Equality and Diversity

Nothing has been identified from these proposals that would impact on protected characteristics. This proposal provides more opportunity for students to attend in in-person event than are currently available.

Timing of decisions

If approved it is anticipated that these proposals would be implemented from 1 August 2015 and for all future academic years.

Further Information

Further information may be obtained from Nigel Shed (n.shed@uea.ac.uk, Ext. 2388).

Discussion

Conferment of UEA Exit Awards

Current Procedure

The current UEA policy in respect of Exit or Compensatory awards (i.e. those awards offered when a student has not achieved the award they originally registered to undertake) is that they can only be conferred in absentia, at either our winter or summer Graduation events. There are some exceptions to this:

- PhD students who receive a Masters of Research rather than a full PhD
- the BSc exit award for any medical student who fails to achieve a full MBBS award
- the BSc exit award for any student who does not achieve a full Integrated Masters award

Students in the above categories are permitted to attend a graduation ceremony in person, however all remaining students who receive an exit/compensatory award must have their awards conferred in absentia.

This policy is a concern for some students who receive such exit or compensatory awards as despite not achieving their originally intended award they do still achieve a bona fide UEA award, be it a Graduate Certificate or Diploma for post-graduate students or a Cert/Dip HE for undergraduate students. A number do query this policy as it does not permit them to attend a ceremony in person, even though they have done sufficiently well to receive a UEA award and they would like to attend a ceremony.

This policy could be seen as discriminatory against those who fail to achieve the originally intended award.

Recommendation

To enable Graduation to become a more inclusive event for all, it is recommended that the current policy is annulled so that all students who receive compensatory or exit awards are permitted to attend a Graduation event.

We do not believe that the numbers involved will have any significant impact on the ceremony schedule.

Graduation Ceremony Attendance/Award Conferment Options

Current Options

Current student options in respect of attending a graduation ceremony and conferment of awards are limited in that students can, for winter Graduation (an in absentia graduation in mid-January), opt to have their award conferred in absentia and receive their parchment by post, or defer to summer Graduation in July and attend a ceremony in person. By deferring conferment to summer they also defer receipt of their parchment to July as well.

Those who are eligible to graduate in summer have the option to either attend in person or to have their award conferred in absentia. A key issue is that the whole conferment process is voluntary and in respect of some students we have never received confirmation on how or when they wish to have their award conferred. Indeed some UEA students have never had their UEA award conferred.

Current UEA policy on conferment and attendance at a ceremony is such that once an award is conferred, (either or in absentia or in person) the student cannot then attend a future ceremony in respect of the same award. For those students who are eligible to graduate in winter this causes a great deal of angst as for many, it is a trade-off between receiving their parchment in January and being able to use it to secure employment, but then not being permitted to attend a future ceremony in respect of the same award or, deferring conferment to summer in order to attend a ceremony in person and potentially jeopardising an employment opportunity.

The Graduation Office receives a number of queries regarding this specific policy from those students who are eligible to attend winter as their first graduation opportunity. Based on current numbers approximately 1000 students (50%) defer to summer with the remainder opting to graduate in January. However, our view is that of the remainder, approximately 350/450 would like to defer to summer and attend in person but as they require their parchment early, in order to confirm employment, they opt for a winter graduation. This is particularly prevalent for far eastern cultures where the transcript letter, containing full details of their studies and eligibility for an award, is insufficient for many employers who require the official parchment as proof of an award.

Recommendation

That all graduands who are eligible for winter or summer graduation periods have their award conferred automatically. Those graduands who have their award automatically conferred at Winter Graduation would receive their parchment by post and also be given an opportunity to attend a summer ceremony in respect of the same award. Based on current numbers it is anticipated that the potential number of graduands who would commit to attend a summer ceremony in person may rise by approximately 400 although this could rise to 500, or an additional two ceremonies.

This recommendation would mean that all winter graduands would receive their parchments soon after the conferment of their awards and have greater opportunity to confirm employment prospects. It may also improve DELHE responses and returns if graduands gain employment as a result of receiving their certificate soon after conferment.

Those students who are eligible to attend a summer graduation would also have their awards conferred automatically be it in person or in absentia. For those who have their award conferred in absentia it would be also be possible for them to attend a future ceremony, although it would be a regulation of the new auto conferment process that each student would only have one opportunity to attend in person.

A consequence of this recommendation is that we would have to reconsider the procedure for giving out certificates during the summer ceremonies as there would be a mixture of previously conferred graduates and current graduands crossing the stage. As certificates are handed to

graduates as they leave the stage there could be a potential for error/delay during the ceremony, therefore it is proposed that certificates are handed out after the ceremony from a dedicated marquee venue.

The benefits of auto-conferring awards in winter and summer and permitting any previous graduand to attend a summer ceremony are;

- All graduands have their award conferred automatically, thereby eliminating the issue of non-response by students.
- Students are not disadvantaged by deferring conferment of their award
- The risk through lost employment opportunities is minimised
- Potential for improved DELHE returns
- Greater numbers of graduands are able to attend summer ceremonies to celebrate in person
- The administrative parchment production task during winter Graduation is streamlined

A proviso would be that all students would only be permitted one opportunity to attend a graduation ceremony in person. An additional requirement would be to have an "Uncollected Parchment" request service although this could be web based and feed into current parchment processes without issue, and permit requests from student at any time after the automated conferment of their award.

Conferment Dates for UEA Awards

Current Dates

Those students who complete their studies in the autumn are invited to winter which offers the option to have their award conferred in January or to defer to the summer Graduation to attend in person. However, there are some students who finish in August who must then wait six months before they can have their award conferred at our winter in absentia graduation or possibly have to wait 11 months should they wish to attend a ceremony in person.

This again is an issue if either a parchment is required early, or indeed if they wish to attend as it is significant period of time before an in person ceremony is offered.

Recommendation

Given that all autumnal Boards of Examiners have sat by end of November we would like to propose moving the Winter Graduation date forward to 1st December. An earlier autumnal Graduation date would enable us to confirm options for auto conferment to potential graduands (if the proposal above is accepted) and gather tighter information in respect of potential numbers for those who would wish to attend in person at the summer graduation ceremonies.

An additional proposal is to include an extra Graduation date in early April so that those PGR students who complete between the end of November and mid-March also have an opportunity to receive their certificates early. Again they would also have the opportunity to attend a Graduation ceremony in summer.

The summer round of Graduation ceremonies would remain as they are currently set with attendance and in absentia options, although all awards would be conferred even if we receive no response from students following the graduation invitation process. These students would still have one opportunity to attend at a later date if they so wish.

The benefits of three conferment dates are:

- Reduced waiting time for many graduates before they receive their certificate
- Workload within the Graduation Office is more evenly spread across the academic year
- Better Management Information in respect of summer ceremony scheduling