![Queen Mary University of London logo]

Senate

Paper title	**Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2021**
Outcome requested	The Senate is asked to **note** the report and to **consider** approaches for the reduction of situations resulting in suspensions.
Points for Senate members to note and further information	A summary of suspensions of regulations requested during the period 1 October 2020 to 30 September 2021. Members are reminded that the 2019-20 statistics, which have been included for information, should not be used as a meaningful benchmark against other years as Queen Mary relied on the suspension mechanism to make rapid changes to its academic governance and academic provision. This applies to common themes as well as to total numbers – the Covid-19 suspensions will have masked or removed the need for 'routine' suspensions where there were already errors with the delivery of assessment schemes. Despite this, the total figures for 2020-21 *exceed* those of 2019-20 and cover many of the same themes – foremost among them issues with the delivery of approved assessment schemes.
Questions for Senate to consider	• How can the number of suspensions be reduced? • Why do some schools/institutes have disproportionately high numbers of suspensions caused by error? Should action be taken on this? If so, what?
Regulatory/statutory reference points	The paper concerns exceptions granted to the standard application of the Academic Regulations (the main regulatory document for the management of quality and standards in relation to our academic provision), programme regulations, and module regulations.
Strategy and risk	Security of academic standards and quality relies upon the approved frameworks being applied consistently. There should be no exceptions. This paper details action taken to address those exceptions that did arise.
Reporting/ consideration route for the paper	1. Considered by the Education Quality and Standards Board. 2. Senate to consider.
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Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2021

Background

A report on suspensions of regulations is submitted annually to the Education Quality and Standards Board and to the Senate. Suspension may be requested where a situation arises in which the normal application of the regulations would either be manifestly unfair to one or more students, or where a situation has arisen that was not foreseen by the regulations (that is, where a change to the regulations is needed, but action is required on behalf of the current cohort). These cases should be extremely rare, and the situations leading to them are normally avoidable.

In practice, numbers are high and the EQSB and the Senate have repeatedly expressed concerns over the number and nature of cases. Numbers had been gradually falling, but more than doubled between 2017 and 2018 and have remained high. 2019-20 was an exceptional year, as many additional suspensions were required to deal with the impact of the coronavirus (and the data for that year cannot be used as a meaningful benchmark), but at the same time the need to make significant changes to modules and in some cases programmes that year will have masked additional cases (notably where the original assessment scheme was not delivered, without good reason), that would otherwise have become visible through suspension. In 2020-21, the number of suspensions reached a record highpoint, exceeding even the figures of 2019-20, and without the same justifications that applied last year.

To obtain a suspension requires support from the appropriate Subject and Degree Examination Boards for assessment issues, or the Head of School/Institute/Directorate for other issues. Approval is given by the nominees of the President and Principal: the Academic Registrar (for taught programmes) and the Vice-Principal Research (for research programmes). All requests are passed through ARCS, and screened at that stage, so the vast majority of cases that reach the stage of a formal request are approved; those that would be rejected seldom reach the stage of formal consideration, following discussion with the proposers.

This report covers 1 October 2020 to 30 September 2021. Tables showing a breakdown of requests by faculty and school/institute are provided, and a summary of common themes has been included.
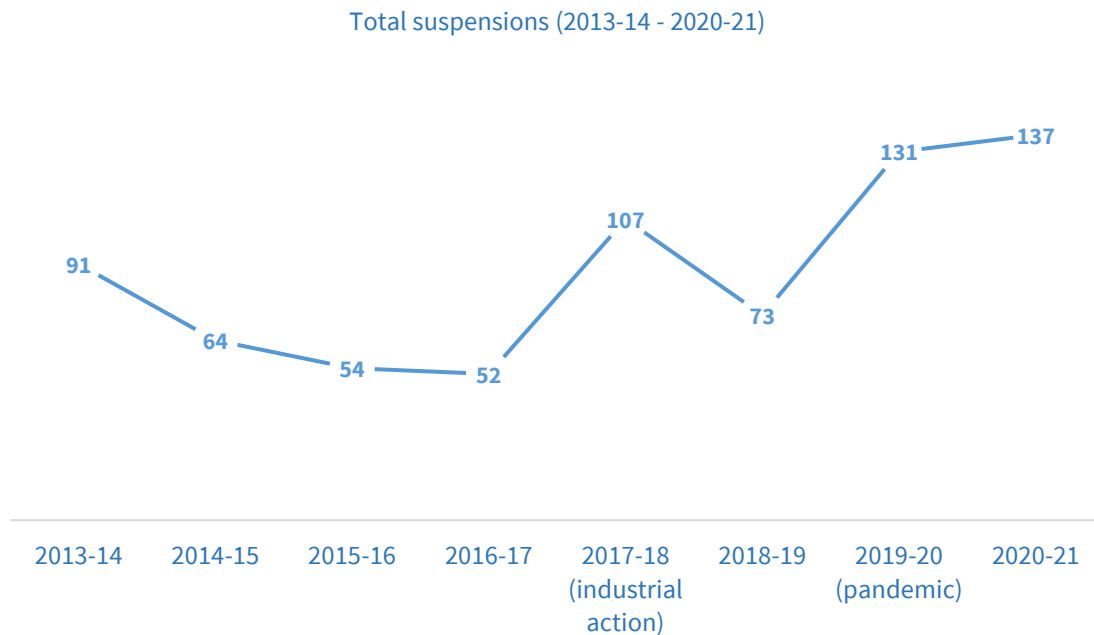
Suspension numbers

Total numbers

There were 137 requests for suspension of regulations in 2020-21, all of which were approved. A further two were withdrawn after being submitted, and there were two (approved) suspensions relating to University of London external programmes that Queen Mary administers; those four have not been included in these totals.

137 is the highest number on record, exceeding even 2019-20 (131 cases) when Queen Mary needed to suspend many regulations mid-year to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on education, notably regulations relating to module assessment schemes and programme delivery. It is disappointing to see a further increase, especially given the work that took place over the summer of 2020 that was intended to pre-empt the need for suspension by redesigning modules to be delivered remotely from the outset.

The themes within the suspensions are explored below, but the total number is concerning in terms of academic quality and standards and is considerably more than double the figures from a few years ago (which were themselves considered high, at the time).

Historically, Queen Mary made wider use of 'special regulations' with variance between programmes. These were difficult to administer and led to many errors. Work to harmonise the regulations led to a significant drop in suspensions between 2013 and 2017. Industrial action resulted in a spike in in 2017-18, which dropped (though not to the former levels) in 2018-19.

Total suspensions (2013-14 - 2020-21)

| 2013-14 | 2014-15 | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 (industrial action) | 2018-19 | 2019-20 (pandemic) | 2020-21 |

Faculty numbers
The charts below show the breakdown in cases across the Faculties. This is broadly consistent with previous years. 2019-20 saw a higher proportion of SMD suspensions than in previous years, largely as a result of the particular effects of the pandemic on the delivery of clinical programmes; the 2020-21 proportions are more typical. The largest proportion (46 per cent) comes from H&SS; this may be attributed in part to the larger number of schools and programmes, many of which that contain more modules and more elective options, and thus greater scope for error.

However, the vast majority of suspensions across all faculties were attributable to error and were wholly avoidable. Only 37 (27 per cent) were categorised as 'unavoidable' and even within that group the majority of requests were to extend 2019-20 pandemic assessment schemes into 2020-21; while necessary, in most of those cases this could and should have been done as part of the module amendment/confirmation process prior to the start of the year.

Suspensions by Faculty 2019-20
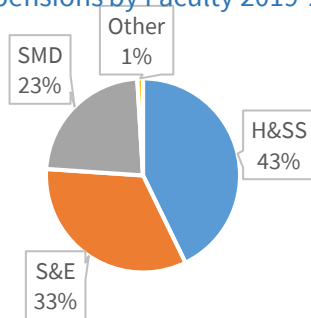

Suspensions by Faculty 2020-21
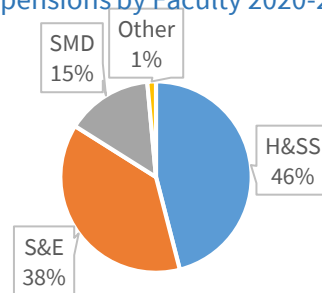
School/institute numbers

The chart below shows the number of suspensions by School/Institute in 2020-21 (the breakdown reflects school/institute structures as they were in 2020-21).

Five schools accounted for 60 per cent of cases (82 of 137). These were SEMS, CCLS, SLLF, EECS, and SBCS. With the exception of CCLS these were among those with the highest rates in 2019-20, with SEMS and SLLF having particularly high numbers both years. Again with the exception of CCLS there were no unusual patterns in the nature of cases among those schools and only in the volume; as elsewhere, the majority of their suspensions related to assessment issues. For CCLS, many cases were linked to issues with the design and delivery of new nine- and 12-month January-start programmes, including issues of module availability and over- and under-registration.

The figures include suspensions for joint programmes with overseas institutions. Four of the 16 EECS cases related to BUPT, two of the 10 SBCS cases to Nanchang, and six of the 20 from SEMS to NPU. Given the rigidity of the programme set-up in those cases and the apparent lack of scope for deviation from the approved policies, this may be thought a disproportionately high rate.

Suspensions by school/institute
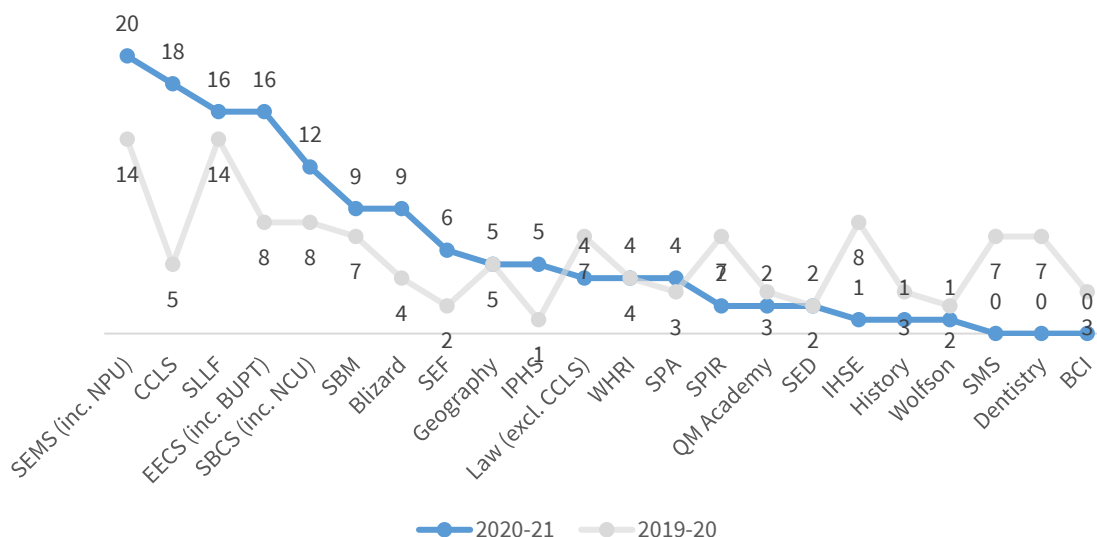
Suspension themes

Assessment schemes

95 of the 137 suspensions (69 per cent), were to validate unapproved assessment schemes for modules. This is always the highest category. The numbers this year were somewhat exacerbated by the pandemic, including a small number where – despite a review having taken place – new factors meant that the scheme could not be delivered as intended due to remote learning. A larger number concerned cases where reviews should have taken place but did not. Many others, though, did not relate to the pandemic. Some of the most common reasons presented are listed below; these are not in the main legitimate grounds for suspension, but because module organisers had informed students of the incorrect schemes and – in many cases – the students had already completed them, in good faith, Queen Mary had no choice but to suspend. Though some changes were minor in and of themselves, others were not. Any case in which we do not follow our approved regulations reflects poorly in terms of management of academic quality and standards.

- Changes were planned (and sometimes even approved at school-level), but not communicated to ARCS through the annual module amendment/diet checking exercise.
- The amendment/diet checking exercise *was* completed but included errors on the part of the school/institute, which then became the approved versions.
- Assessments were delivered in a manner that lacked academic integrity/security to the point that they could not stand and needed to be excluded from the module entirely.
- The module organiser (often a new organiser) delivered a scheme of their own devising without reference to the approved scheme or miscommunicated the scheme to students.

Programme and diet issues

26 suspensions (19 per cent) related to issues with the set-up of programmes. Unlike the module suspensions described above, these mainly (though not exclusively) related to individual students or groups of students rather than full cohorts. Examples included:

- Changes to the status of certain modules (core/compulsory/elective, i.e. whether or not certain modules had to be passed outright or, in some cases, taken at all).
- Incorrect advice to students transferring from one programme to another, resulting in students taking diets that did not match either programme.
- To permit over- or under-registration for modules in particular semesters, largely because the anticipated range of modules was not running/withdrawn at short notice.
- Delivering a wholly different mode of study (e.g. a part-time programme where no part-time option existed) due to miscommunication at the admissions/recruitment stage.

Many of these issues were linked to new January-start programmes, which were set up outside of the standard timeframes, and at short notice. Fuller engagement with the programme development process could have avoided those problems by designing out the issues.

Progression and award

Seven cases (5 per cent) concerned progression and award requirements for individual students/small groups of students. Though the numbers – at least as a proportion of the whole – are relatively low, these are among the most serious cases as they relate to absolute academic standards. In most cases, incorrect information was published to students by schools/institutes in official media, and we were obliged to honour those

conditions. In other cases, errors in module registration/changes of programme were to blame – mainly where the changes should never have been permitted. Issues included:

- Students taking too many credits at the lowest academic levels and/or too few credits at the level of the award.
- Applying the award regulations of a different cohort to a group who would otherwise have failed their degrees.
- Allowing progression for students who did not meet the minimum progression thresholds for either weighted marks or credits passed.

Other cases
The remaining nine cases (7 per cent) covered issues that are not easily categorised, including:

- Excluding elements of assessment from module marks on the basis of extenuating circumstances beyond what was permitted by the policies.
- Granting a third attempt to pass a module, following mark entry errors that had misled the student into thinking they had already passed the module.
- Allowing a resit in a module that had already been passed.

How can suspensions of regulations be reduced?
Queen Mary is invited to consider means by which suspensions can be reduced.

Suspensions relating to the delivery of unapproved assessment schemes form the vast bulk of cases, and attention may be best directed here. This is discussed annually, and in the past Queen Mary has made suggestions including the increased visibility of assessment schemes. This could be explored further. The official iteration is visible and accessible to staff at any time in MySIS and can be readily downloaded in spreadsheets by school/institute and by academic level. It is acknowledged that not all staff regularly check MySIS, and that failing that there should be other means of communication in place between schools/institutes and module organisers.

Queen Mary runs an annual review exercise through which every school/institute must confirm their module assessments and programme diets. This has been a subject of discussion, in terms of timing, with a wish in some quarters to push the deadline (normally around the end of the calendar year) back to give more time for academic developments. The deadline is a separate issue though it should be noted that Queen Mary's deadline is considerably later than that of many institutions, which impacts on planning and timetabling for the year ahead. The more relevant point here is the quality of the review, and what is done with its outcomes. Most suspensions could have been avoided had the changes been identified and acted upon in the review and had the schools/institutes communicated those details clearly to the module organisers so that they did not – through accident or design – create alternative schemes.

The EQSB has previously observed that a definitive online repository of module specifications would be strategically advantageous on a number of fronts. Schools/institutes are currently responsible for holding this data, while core elements of that data (including assessment schemes) are held centrally within the academic model and are available there for all staff to view through MySIS and/or standard reports. The EQSB has an action point to consider this issue.

Similar points apply to the suspensions concerned with programme and diet issues – again these could be avoided through more robust checks in the annual confirmation exercise. Many of the remaining suspensions relate to familiarity with regulations – these are more difficult to predict, but it is hoped that training on academic advising will see some benefits,

by either ensuring that staff have the correct information or else that they signpost students to the correct person or policy who 'can' advise.

Suspension can be an expedient solution to problems, but it does not tackle the underlying causes and in fact creates additional work in and of itself for the department and Queen Mary. Many suspensions cite pressure of work as a justification, with errors 'slipping through the cracks'. While this is understandable and partly linked to additional pressures created by the pandemic, that has not been the sole factor. The EQSB and ARCS are keen to work with schools/institutes seeking to further improve understandings of procedures and regulations, and the Senate is asked whether there may be any further measures that might support them in addressing situations leading to issues that necessitate suspensions.

Feedback from the Education Quality and Standards Board

The EQSB was concerned by the high number of cases, though noted that continuing issues from the pandemic and increases in student and programme numbers were contributing factors to the increase. The EQSB focused on assessment suspensions and determined that overly complex assessment schemes (and potentially overassessment) played a role, and that additional and ongoing staff training was required, particularly where a new module organiser took over a module designed by another person. The Board had, separately, agreed to establish a new sub-board with specific responsibility for assessment and agreed that these issues would be remitted to that sub-board once it was constituted.