



Senate

Paper title	Semester Based Exams
Outcome requested	Senate is asked to consider the paper on semester based exams.
Points to note and further information	<p>Senate commissioned a consultation on semester based examinations at its meeting in March 2018.</p> <p>This paper summarises the results of that consultation together with questions for Senate.</p> <p>The consultation document including detail on the possible options is included as an appendix.</p>
Questions to consider	<p>Is Senate content to approve the introduction of semester based examinations?</p> <p>If so, is Senate able to identify the optimum model for further exploration by a task and finish group? The group would report to Senate in October 2018 with recommendations for implementation.</p>
Regulatory/statutory reference points	Queen Mary Academic Regulations.
Strategy and risk	2.01 – student experience.
Reporting/consideration route for the paper	Senate
Author	Kaya Wiles (ARCS)
Sponsor	Professor Rebecca Lingwood Vice-Principal (Student Experience, Teaching & Learning)

Semester-based examinations

Queen Mary recently consulted on the possibility of offering semester-based examinations. Three options were proposed for consideration (attached as appendix 1). The consultation was sent to academic staff, professional services staff and the Students' Union (QMSU). Responses were received from all three faculties, QMSU and the Health and Safety Directorate.

Summary of feedback

The majority of respondents were in favour of semester based examinations though a significant minority would prefer to retain the current model with some amendments. Of those who favoured semester-based examinations, a clear majority favoured a model with two weeks of assessment in January and four weeks in May/June.

Option 1

A six-week examination period split into two blocks (see appendix 1)

- Option 1 was preferred by six respondents: Queen Mary Students' Union, School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, School of Geography, School of Politics and International Relations, Wolfson Institute and School of Law.
- It was considered that holding examinations in January could help to consolidate students' learning of semester A modules which could be developed during semester B. Further, having the assessment immediately after the module had ended was beneficial to those students who had expressed concern about the long gap between Semester A modules and the final assessment for these.

Option 2

A seven week examination period without a revision week to be split into two blocks(see appendix 1)

- The School of English and Drama was the only respondent to favour Option 2 (2a). It was suggested that for this model to work effectively, Semester B would need to be extended by one week during years where Easter would fall during the semester.

Option 3

To hold examinations in December (see appendix 1)

- Option 3 was preferred by the School of Business and Management and the Institute of Health Sciences Education. The Institute of Health Sciences Education had held examinations in both January and December and had received feedback from students who tended to prefer December examinations in order that they were able to have a break over the holiday period.
- It was noted that starting the academic year earlier could affect summer schools, accommodation costs and have an impact on fieldwork and research. There may also be clashes with research conferences and grant application deadlines. It was also noted that students recruited through clearing could be disadvantaged by the earlier start.
- The removal of revision week was a significant concern for this model as it could lead to a decrease in student engagement during the last week(s) of teaching.

- Some respondents felt that Option 3 could be disruptive to established elements of the academic year.

Existing Model

- Seven respondents preferred to retain the existing model for examinations: School of Mathematical Sciences; School of Physics and Astronomy; School of Engineering and Materials Science; School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science; School of Languages, Linguistics and Film; School of History; and School of Economics and Finance.
- A significant number of respondents in favour of the existing model felt that there were no discernible advantages to splitting the examination period, particularly for those schools and institutes that planned use fewer formal examinations in future. There were also concerns about the impact of space constraints on pedagogy, and staff had posed the question whether some adjustments to the current structures might release additional capacity.
- Some respondents expressed had expressed concern about the additional burden on academic and professional services staff if the examination period was split, together with concerns about student health and well-being.

Those who had opted for other models suggested that the existing model could be suitable if revision week was removed to allow for 7 weeks of examinations. Other schools and institutes felt that the removal of revision week would be unacceptable.

Other points

- Marking was raised as a concern among respondents, including those in favour of semester-based examinations. Despite the obvious advantages that splitting the assessment period offered, colleagues were concerned by the challenges presented by marking assessments at the same time as preparing for teaching in the second semester.
- Existing commitments in January (such as overseas visits, research grant deadlines and conferences) were raised in relation to the models which included a January examination period.
- It was suggested that there could be a revision week held before the Christmas break for models with January examination periods to relieve pressure on family commitments or employment.
- There were wide concerns regarding the Easter holidays splitting up semester B (as would be the case for Options 1 and 2).
- It was suggested that the Easter break could be shortened to one or two weeks although other respondents had noted that the three week break was used for field based study (which would be season dependent and so could not reasonably be moved to another point in the year).
- Moving to evening and/or weekend exams was unpopular with students in one faculty for a variety of reasons (employment, religious commitments and domestic).
- Graduate entry to medical school interviews were held in early January and therefore may clash with a January exam period.
- The introduction of semester based examinations would be popular with those students who had expressed concern regarding the gap between Semester A modules and the final assessment for these.

- One faculty had suggested an alternative model whereby semester B would be shortened to 11 weeks with a two week Easter break. This would allow for a revision week immediately preceding both January and early summer exams.

Questions for consideration by Senate

1. Is Senate content to approve the introduction of semester based examinations?
2. If so, is Senate able to identify the optimum model for further consideration by a task and finish group? The task and finish group will report to the October 2018 meeting of Senate with detailed proposals for implementation.



Consultation Semester based examinations

1. Queen Mary currently operates a six-week examination period at the end of the academic year. The possibility of offering semester based examinations at Queen Mary has been discussed a number of times, most recently by the Education Quality and Standards Board (February 2018) and Senate (March 2018). It has been agreed that a consultation should take place across Queen Mary to explore options for splitting the assessment period on a semester basis, in order to reduce the current gap between teaching and assessment at the end of Semester A, and potentially to reduce the overall burden of assessment and feedback.
2. Sustained growth in student numbers provides a further reason to review the way that the main assessment period is organised. In 2016-17 there were 73,000 examination sittings; in 2017-18 it is expected that there will be 84,000. It is becoming increasingly difficult for schools and institutes to meet marking deadlines as, of necessity, there are more examinations that are scheduled later in the assessment period. There is also insufficient capacity for further growth in student numbers, unless a different approach to assessment is adopted.
3. Three models are proposed below for consideration. It is recognised that increased capacity will be an issue for the current model, and any future method for delivering examinations. There are a number of ways in which capacity could be increased, with the likelihood that these factors would need to be considered together in order to maximise capacity:
 - a. Increase the number of available examination seats by hiring more external venues. There are very few suitable venues in the local area and students have expressed a preference for sitting their examinations on campus.
 - b. Introduce a third examination sitting on each day, Monday- Friday (e.g. a three hour examination in the morning, followed by two two-hour sittings in the early and late afternoon), or introduce additional sittings at weekends. The former option would require greater standardisation of examination durations than we have at present.
 - c. Extend the length of the assessment period.
 - d. Explore alternative methods of assessment that place fewer demands on physical resources.
4. Colleagues are asked to consider the consultation paper and provide one response per school, institute or directorate (or joint faculty responses if that approach is preferred). Responses should state:
 - which of the three options is preferred;
 - if any of the other options would be workable;
 - whether a different model should be considered;
 - any additional feedback that is deemed relevant.
5. Please send responses to Kaya Wiles (k.wiles@qmul.ac.uk) by the end of the day on Tuesday 08 May.

Points to note / for consideration

6. In each of the proposed models it is assumed that:
 - Results from the Semester A assessment period would remain provisional until the summer examination boards.
 - Semester A resits would be held during the late summer resit period, and not during the May-June examination period.
7. It will be important to clarify expectations around the nature and timing of feedback to students following the Semester A assessment period, whether for formal written examinations or other forms of assessment.
8. Programmes that do not set formal written examinations in January will need to clarify how students are spending the time, between coursework and other self-directed learning.
9. An equality impact assessment would be undertaken as part of the process taking into consideration students who may have religious commitments.
10. If the revision week is removed, there may be practical implications as this week provides time for examination rooms to be set up.

Opportunities

11. There would be an opportunity for students to be given feedback following the Semester A assessment period. This could be a useful tool in preparing them for their summer examinations.
12. The delayed start to teaching in Semester B would create an opportunity to use the teaching estate for other activities, such as compressed learning, short courses and CPD.
13. Semester based examinations could lead to a reduction in the number of external venues and invigilators required during the examinations period. In addition to being popular with students this would release funds which could be used to invest in resourcing evening/weekend examinations.

Option 1

14. Option 1, a six week examination period split into two blocks:
 - a. Option 1a is two weeks of examinations in January and four weeks in the early summer;
 - b. Option 1b is three weeks in January and three weeks in the early summer.
 - c. These options have the benefit of maintaining the length of the academic year as it currently stands. Option 1a may be more attractive than Option 1b, because it would have less impact on intercollegiate teaching and on programmes that do not require formal examinations in January. These options would require a significant increase in capacity through one or more of the methods outlined under point 3.

Option 2

15. Option 2, seven week examination period (without revision week):
 - a. Option 2 addresses the issue of capacity by extending the assessment period to seven weeks, but maintains the current length of the academic year by removing revision week.

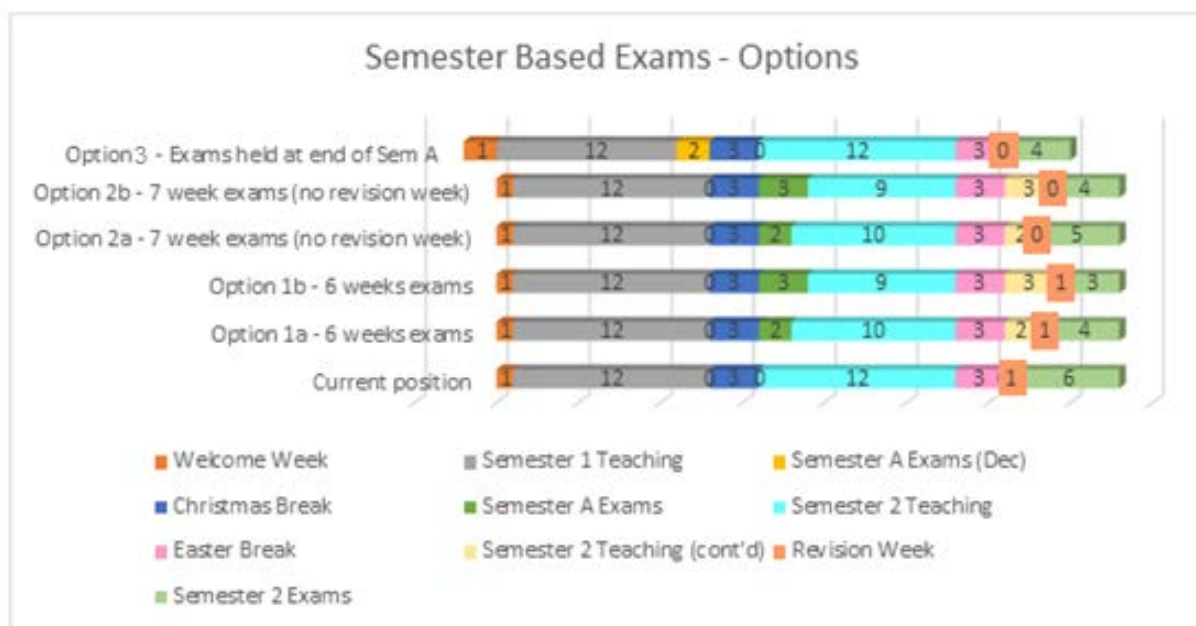
Appendix 1: consultation document

- b. Accordingly, Option 2a is a two-week period of examinations in January and a five-week period in the early summer.
- c. Option 2b is a three-week examination period in early January and a four-week period in the early summer.
- d. Option 2a is more attractive than Option 2b for the reasons stated above. However, the removal of time for revision and independent study between the end of teaching and the beginning of the second examination period could be problematic.

Option 3

16. Option 3, December examination period:

- a. Option 3 covers the possibility of holding examinations at the end of Semester A teaching and before the Christmas break.
- b. This option would only be achievable if the start of the academic year was brought forward by 2 weeks to the start of September and the late summer resit examinations were moved into July to enable marking and examination boards to take place ahead of the start of the new academic year.
- c. With the removal of revision week to mirror the semester A experience, the main summer examination period of 4 weeks would be completed before the end of May.



Benchmarking

17. At the request of Senate, ARCS undertook a desk-based review of examination periods at other institutions. Examination dates were readily accessible in most cases.
18. QMUL's existing examination period has been benchmarked against those of other institutions (Russell Group, large multi-faculty University of London, and the top five institutions in the recent Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey 2018 (Loughborough, Harper Adams, Bath, Sheffield, Leeds). Oxford and Cambridge (which are not comparable) have been excluded from the analysis. A summary table is given below, but respondents are advised to read the full paper for additional context.

Institution	Examination period(s)	Semester based exams Y/N
Harper Adams	4 weeks in summer	N
Goldsmiths	4 weeks in summer	N
Durham	4 weeks in summer <i>(including Saturdays and Bank Holidays)</i>	N
Birmingham	5 weeks in summer <i>(Including Saturdays and excluding Sundays and Bank Holidays)</i>	N
RHUL	5 weeks in summer	N
QMUL	6 weeks in summer	N
UCL	6.5 in summer	N
York	1 week in January, 3 weeks in summer <i>(including Saturdays)</i>	Y
Exeter	1 week in January, 4 weeks in summer <i>(including Saturdays)</i>	Y
Kings	1 week in January, 5 in summer	Y
LSE	1 week in January, 6 weeks in summer	Y
Glasgow	1.5 weeks in December, 4 weeks in summer including <i>(including Saturdays and during revision week)</i>	Y
Queens University Belfast	2 weeks in January, 2.5 weeks in summer	Y
Bath	2 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer	Y

Appendix 1: consultation document

Bristol	2 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer <i>(Including during revision week)</i>	Y
Leeds	2 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer <i>(including evenings if required)</i>	Y
Newcastle	2 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer <i>(including Saturdays)</i>	Y
Nottingham	2 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer <i>(including Saturdays)</i>	Y
Southampton	2 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer <i>(including Saturdays)</i>	Y
Manchester	2 weeks in January, 3.5 weeks in summer	Y
Edinburgh	2 weeks in December, 4 weeks in summer <i>(including Saturdays)</i>	Y
City	2 weeks in January, 4 weeks in summer	Y
Cardiff	2 weeks in January, 5 weeks in summer	Y
Loughborough	2.5 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer	Y
Liverpool	3 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer	Y
Sheffield	3 weeks in January, 3 weeks in summer	Y
Imperial	Varies by faculty/department	-
Warwick	Varies by faculty/department	-

19. QMUL is one of 7 institutions in the sample who do not offer semester based examinations. 19 institutions offer semester based examinations, with an examination period in December or January.
20. A number of institutions also hold examinations during the evening and/or at weekends. Holding evening and weekend examinations could be considered as an alternative to extending the academic year.

Appendix: Links to examination dates elsewhere

Birmingham: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/registry/exams/dates-and-timetable.aspx>
Bristol: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/directory/exams/dates/>
Cardiff: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/corporate-information/semester-dates>
City: <https://www.city.ac.uk/about/city-information/academic-year>
Durham: https://www.dur.ac.uk/student.registry/student/assessment/exam_timetable/
Edinburgh: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/student-systems/key-dates>
Exeter: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/students/administration/examsandassessment/ugpqt/personalexaminationtimetables/>
Glasgow: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/registry/exams/dates/>
Goldsmiths: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/students/studying/assessments/>
Harper Adams: <https://www.harper-adams.ac.uk/documents/term-dates-2017.pdf>
Imperial: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/about/governance/academic-governance/regulations/>
Kings: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/campuslife/acservices/examinations/timetable.aspx>
Leeds: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/homepage/17/academic_year
Liverpool: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/term-dates/>
Loughborough: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/students/welcome/handbook/exams/university-exams/>
LSE: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/services/assessment-and-results/exams/exam-timetable>
Manchester: <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/key-dates/>
Newcastle: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/students/progress/exams/exams/ExaminationDates.htm>
Nottingham: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/about/keydates/#Examinations>
Queens University
Belfast: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/AcademicStudentAffairs/StudentServicesSystems/StudentRegistryServices/Exams/ExamsSchedule/>
RHUL: <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/students/study/exams/preparation/preparing-for-your-exams-and-assessments.aspx>
Sheffield: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/exams/exdates>
Southampton: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/studentadmin/assessment/exam-timetables/exam-dates.page>
UCL: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/term-dates>
Warwick: <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/academicoffice/examinations/timetables/>
York: <https://www.york.ac.uk/students/studying/assessment-and-examination/>

