

Senate

<b>Paper title</b>	<b>Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2022</b>
<b>Outcome requested</b>	The Senate is asked to <b>note</b> the report and to <b>consider</b> approaches for the reduction of situations resulting in suspensions.
<b>Points for members to note and further information</b>	<p>A summary of suspensions of regulations requested during the period 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2022, and commentary on the statistics and themes.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Numbers have fallen since last year, but 2020-21 was a record high. There were 96 suspensions in 2021-22, which is a high number and is of serious concern.</p> <p>The vast majority of cases (70%) relate to cases where there was deviation from the approved assessment scheme, generally due to error.</p>
<b>Questions for Senate to consider</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the number of suspensions be reduced?</li> <li>• Why do some schools/institutes have disproportionately high numbers of suspensions caused by error?</li> </ul>
<b>Regulatory/statutory reference points</b>	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.
<b>Strategy and risk</b>	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.
<b>Reporting/consideration route for the paper</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Considered by the Education Quality and Standards Board (23/11/22)</li> <li>2. Senate to consider.</li> </ol>
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## Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2022

### 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 for some years, but more than doubled between 2017 and 2018 and have remained high. Last year, 2020-21, was a record high-point, exceeding even the figures of 2019-20 when suspensions were used to mitigate the first impact of the pandemic.

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 Director of Governance and Legal Services and/or the Director of Registry Services. All requests are passed through Governance and Legal Services (GLS), and screened at that stage, so almost all 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 2021 to 30 September 2022. Graphics showing a breakdown of requests by faculty and school/institute are provided, together with a summary of common themes.

### Suspension numbers

#### Total numbers

There were 96 requests for suspension of regulations in 2020-21, 95 of which were approved. Additionally, one request was withdrawn after being submitted, and there was one (approved) suspension relating to a University of London external programme that Queen Mary administers; those two have not been included in the totals.

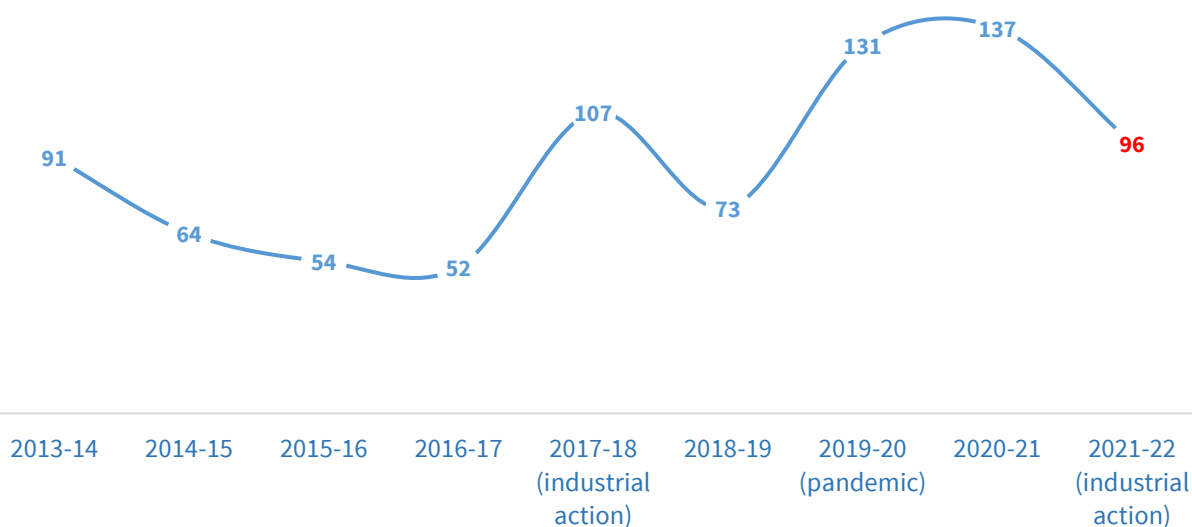
96 is a significant drop from last year, especially given that there was industrial action in 2021-22 that necessitated a number of suspensions. However, it is still well above acceptable levels, given that the majority of cases were avoidable.

Last year (2020-21) had the highest number of suspensions on record (137), following a previous record high in 2019-20 (131) 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 seems that the situation stabilised somewhat in 2021-22 (96 cases) but significant issues remain and while the drop is welcome these numbers should not be regarded as good news.

The themes within the suspensions are explored below, but the numbers are concerning in terms of academic assurance and remain roughly those of 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 (special regulations for non-standard programmes are currently on the rise again and are one factor in the increased number of suspensions). Industrial action resulted in a spike in 2017-18, which dropped (though not to the former levels) in 2018-19, before numbers rose in 2019-20 as a result of pandemic mitigation measures. There was no clear justification for the further increase in 2020-21.

Total suspensions (2013-14 - 2021-22)

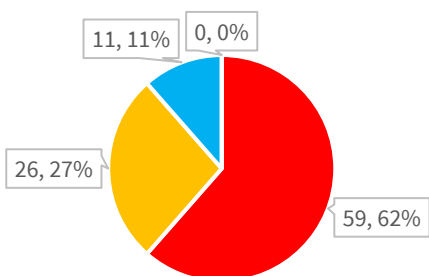


### Faculty numbers

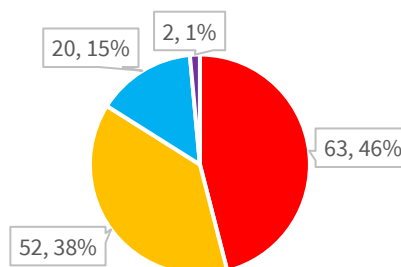
The charts below show the breakdown in cases across the Faculties. Relative proportions between Faculties are generally fairly consistent between years, but this year there has been a considerable drop in S&E and FMD while numbers in H&SS have remained fairly steady, with its 59 cases accounting for 62 per cent of all suspensions. While it is normal for H&SS to have the highest proportion of suspensions – it has more schools and programmes, many of which contain more modules and more elective options, and thus greater scope for error – the decrease in other faculties versus H&SS cannot easily be explained. The impact of industrial action was greater in H&SS than elsewhere and necessitated some additional suspensions, but this does not adequately account for the level of difference.

Most suspensions across all faculties were attributable to error and were wholly avoidable. Only 14 cases (15 per cent) were categorised as ‘unavoidable’ (many of which were linked to industrial action).

Suspensions by Faculty 2021-22

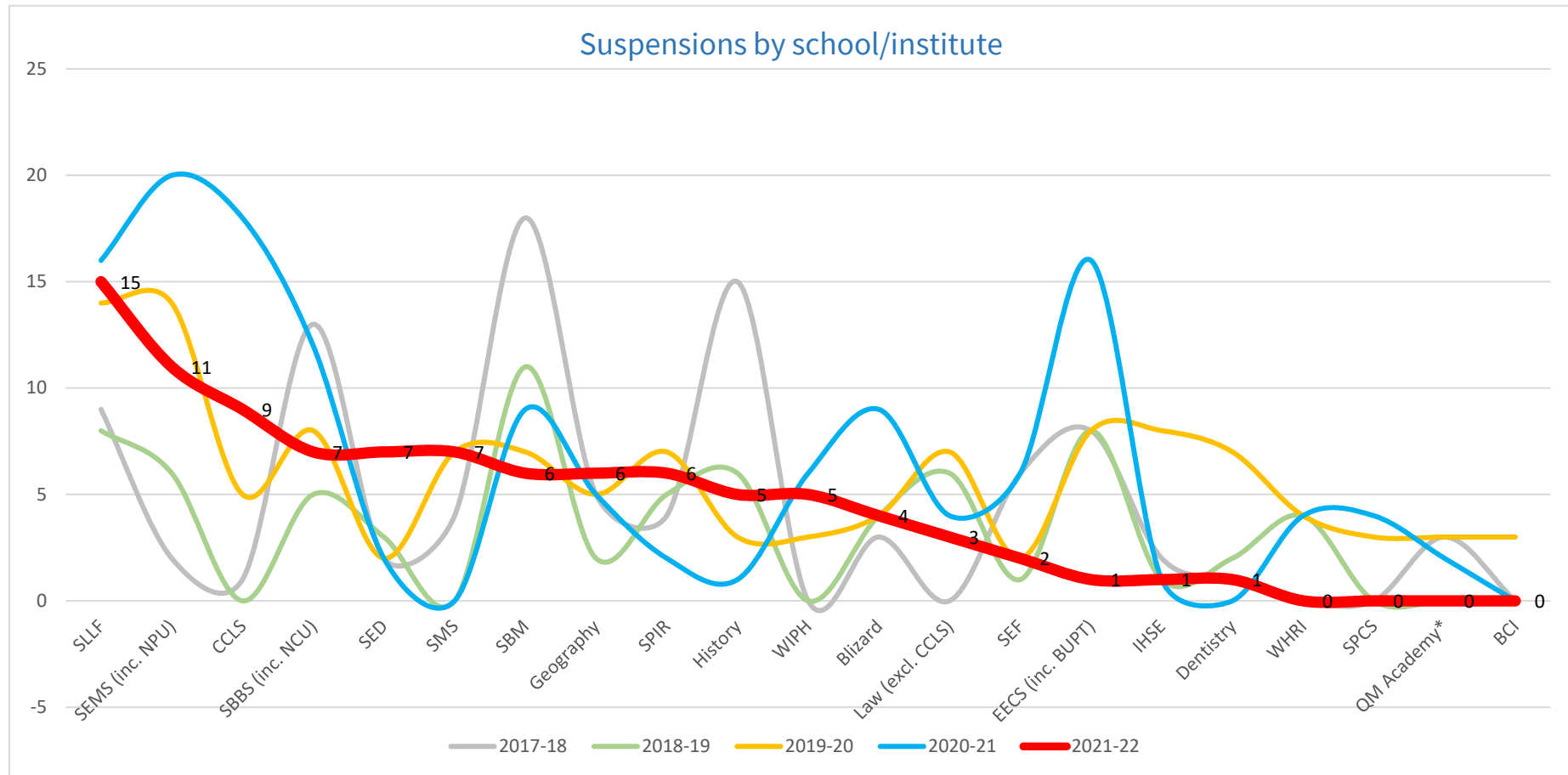


Suspensions by Faculty 2020-21



### School/institute numbers

The chart below shows the number of suspensions by school/institute in 2021-22. Three schools accounted for more than one third (36%) of all cases (35 of 96): SLLF, SEMS and CCLS. These schools often have high numbers of suspensions. While SLLF was impacted by industrial action, only five of its 15 cases were linked to this. The remaining cases – as with the majority of SEMS and CCLS cases – related to errors in the delivery of programmes, modules, and assessment. SLLF has conducted a major assessment review, especially in Modern Languages, reducing the numbers of assessments and increasing consistency of assessment between modules. Both H&SS and S&E have established new groups bringing together all Subject Examination Board Chairs to share and develop good practices. It is hoped that these initiatives will see a reduction in cases over time.



\* Queen Mary Academy data includes suspensions from its predecessor bodies for the older years.

## Suspension themes

### Assessment schemes

67 of the 96 suspensions (70 per cent), were to validate unapproved assessment schemes for modules. This is always the highest category. Most related to cases where 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. Causes included:

- Changes were planned (and sometimes even approved at school-level), but never communicated to GLS 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.
- 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.
- Specific to 2021-22: nine of these 67 suspensions were approved to mitigate the effects of industrial action on students/modules, excluding elements of assessment in cases where Queen Mary was satisfied that the learning outcomes of the discounted elements were adequately tested elsewhere.

### Programme and diet issues

12 suspensions (12.5 per cent) related to issues with the set-up or delivery 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, ie 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.

Many of these issues were linked to non-standard (including January-start) programmes. This was a major issue last year with suspensions and was attributed in part to those programmes being new, and settling into place. However, the issues have persisted. The EQSB has previously discussed reintroducing greater standardisation in programme design, with a number of set templates for delivery rather than designing programmes from the ground-up for each instance of non-standard provision. EQSB and the Senate may wish to consider escalation of this review. In most cases (non-standard or not), fuller and earlier engagement with the programme development process could have avoided the problems that arose.

### Progression and award

Nine cases (9 per cent) concerned progression and award requirements for individual students. These are often among the most serious cases as they relate to absolute academic standards. 2021-22 was unusual in that most of these cases related to progression, allowing progression for students slightly short of the progression requirements but who had been disadvantaged by missing late summer assessment opportunities (generally due to late return of marks from the first attempt). More concerningly, two students were awarded on fewer than the normally required number of credits because they had not been registered for the correct volume of credit and this was not identified by the schools at a point where it could be corrected.

## Study abroad

Three cases (3 per cent) related to students studying abroad who had broken their study agreements (eg by not taking enough credits, or by taking pass/fail options at the host institution (which is not permitted)). By the time this was identified it was too late to make amendments. The Global Opportunities Office proposed changes to the study agreement to tighten the regulations in this area, increasing the minimum mark threshold required for a student to be eligible to study abroad, and allowing students to take a limited number of pass/fail credits whilst abroad. These were considered and endorsed by the EQSB in November 2022.

## Other cases

The remaining five cases (5 per cent) covered issues that are not easily categorised, including:

- Changes to the duration of study.
- Permitting changes of programme to programmes for which students did not meet all of the standard requirements.
- Granting a third attempt at a module for one student.

## 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. 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. Queen Mary's high numbers of programmes and modules also create more opportunities for issues to arise than might otherwise be the case.

Queen Mary is undertaking a strategic project to implement a curriculum management system, which will act as both a system for developing programmes and modules and a repository for them, acting as a 'single source of truth'. This is a large project and will take time to implement but should bring benefits once complete.

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 exercises. 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 school/institute and Queen Mary. The EQSB and GLS 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.