



Senate

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| Paper title | Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2023 |
| Outcome requested | The Senate is asked to note the report and to consider approaches for the reduction of situations resulting in suspensions. |
| Points for members to note and further information | <p>A summary of suspensions of regulations requested during the period 1 October 2022 to 30 September 2023, 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 significantly since last year, from 96 to 70. However, this is part of an expected downward trajectory from a record high of 137 in 2020-21 and 70 remains a high number that is of concern. Queen Mary's External Member of the Degree Examination Boards commented in her 2023 report on the high numbers, especially on cases that were avoidable.</p> <p>A number of 2022-23 suspensions were made to mitigate the impact of the marking and assessment boycott upon students and standards, However, as Queen Mary took the general approach that it would not deviate from standard procedures wherever possible these only account for a relatively small proportion of cases. The vast majority – as has consistently been the case - relate to cases where there was deviation from the approved assessment scheme, generally due to an inadvertent or deliberate error on the part of a module organiser.</p> <p>The paper was considered by the EQSB in November 2023. The EQSB remained concerned by the number of suspensions, particularly in certain schools and discussed potential means of addressing the situation including harmonisation and rationalisation in programme, module, and assessment design, and consideration of technical solutions including a curriculum management system and the possibility of an interface between SITS and QMplus to ensure that the approved (SITS) assessment schemes were properly reflected, and locked in place, in QMplus.</p> |

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| Questions to consider | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the number of suspensions be reduced? • Should there be any consequences for avoidable suspensions of regulations? If so, what would these be? • Why do certain schools/institutes consistently have high numbers of suspensions? |
| 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 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Education Quality and Standards Board (November 2023) 2. Senate (December 2023) |
| Author | Simon Hayter, Head of Academic Quality and Standards |
| Sponsor | Professor Stephanie Marshall, Vice-Principal (Education) |

Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2023

Background

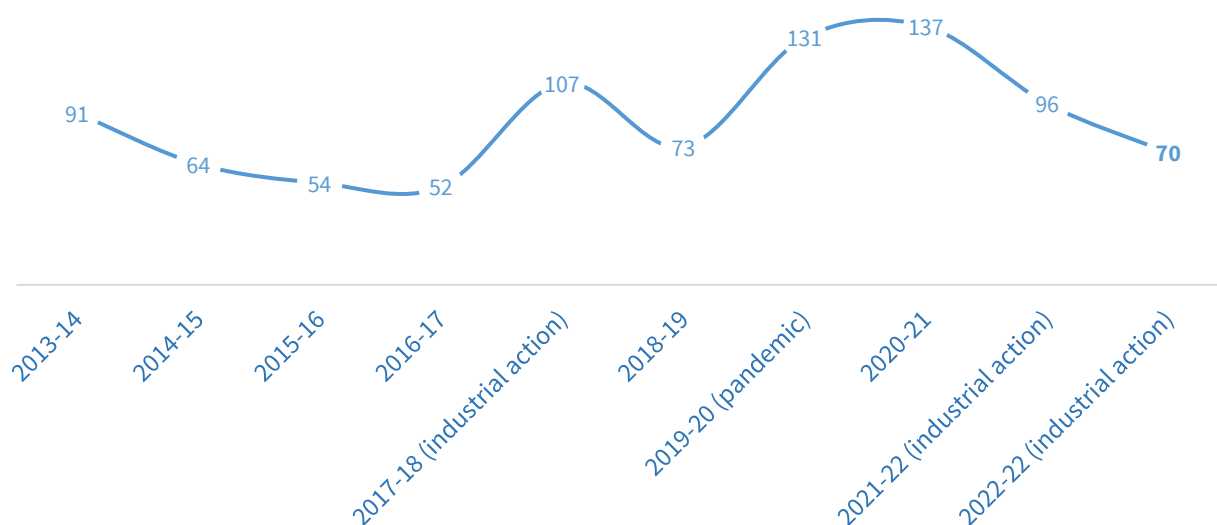
A report on suspensions of regulations is submitted annually to the Education Quality and Standards Board and to the Senate. Suspension may be requested where a situation arises in which the normal application of the regulations would either be manifestly unfair to one or more students, or where a situation 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. Queen Mary's External Member of the Degree Examination Board also commented on the high numbers in 2023.

To obtain a suspension requires support from the appropriate Subject and Degree Examination Boards for assessment issues, or else from the Head of School/Institute/Directorate. Approval is given by the nominees of the President and Principal: the Directors of Governance and Legal Services and/or Registry Services. All requests are passed through Governance and Legal Services (DGLS) 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 the period 1 October 2022 to 30 September 2023. Graphics showing a breakdown of requests by faculty and school/institute are provided, together with a summary of common themes.

Total suspension numbers



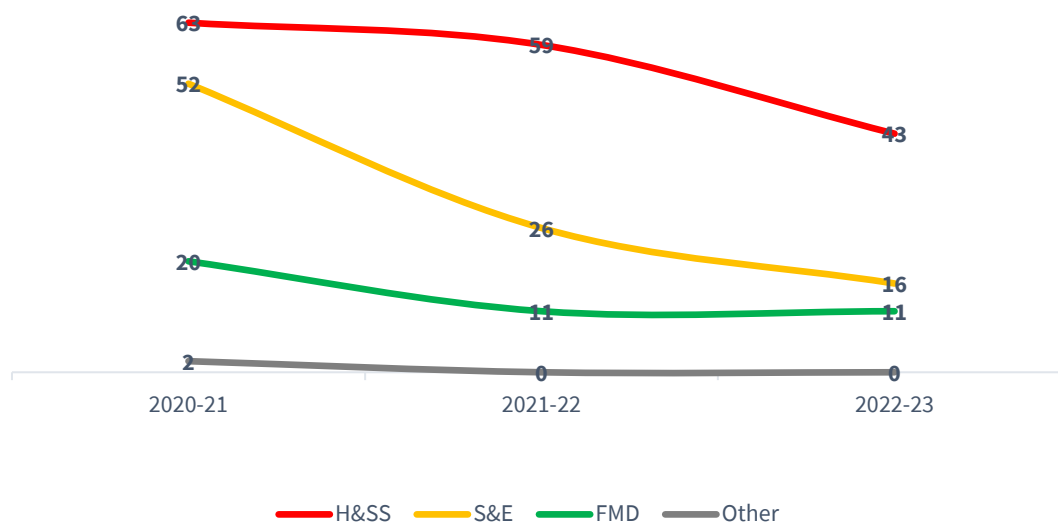
There were 70 requests for suspension of regulations in 2022-23, of which 67 were approved (96%). This is a significant drop from last year (96 cases – itself a drop from 137 the year before), especially given that the impact of the marking and assessment boycott necessitated a number of suspensions. However, it is still well above acceptable levels, given that most cases were avoidable.

52 of the 70 cases were deemed unambiguously avoidable. Of the remaining 18, ten related to industrial action, and the remainder to individual student circumstances or external factors. Some of those 18 could have been potentially have been avoided had different procedures or approaches – including assessment design – been in place.

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. Numbers are now dropping but significant issues remain and while the drop is welcome these numbers should not be regarded as unalloyed good news.

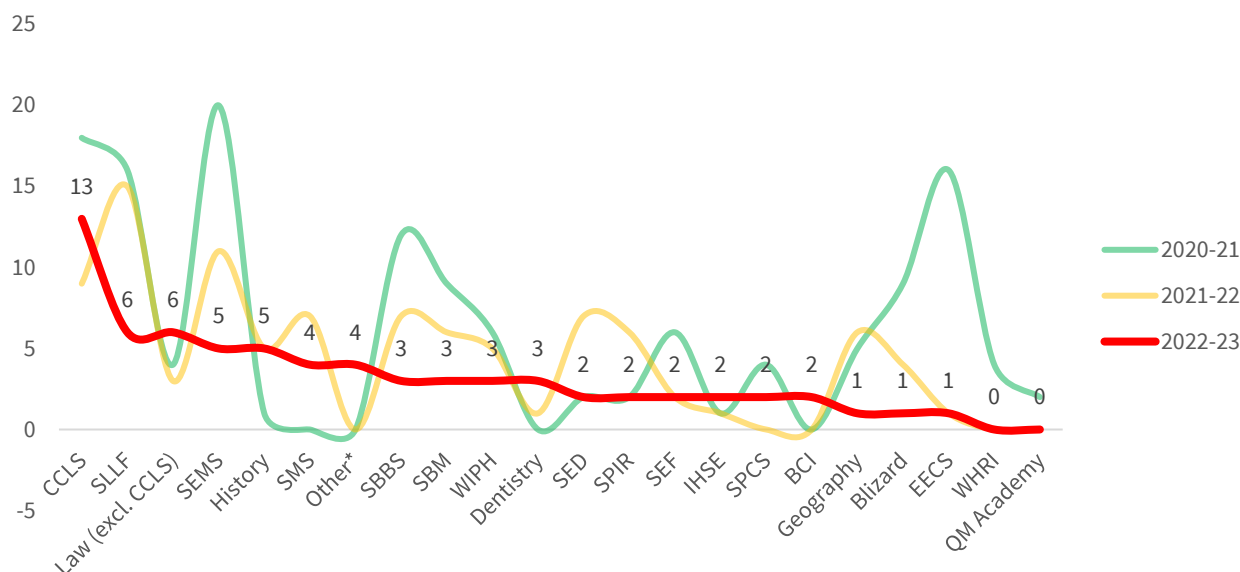
Historically, Queen Mary made wider use of ‘special regulations’ with variance between programmes. These were difficult to administer and led to many errors. Work to harmonise the regulations led to a significant drop in suspensions between 2013 and 2017 (special regulations for ‘non-standard programmes’ are currently on the rise again and are one factor in the increased number of suspensions). Harmonised regulations can be communicated much more easily to students and staff, allowing for clear and consistent messaging. Industrial action resulted in a spike in 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.

Suspensions by Faculty



- Relative proportions between Faculties are generally fairly consistent, and this broadly remained the case in 2022-23.
- In 2022-23, H&SS accounted for 61% of all suspensions, S&E 23%, and FMD 16%.
- It is normal for H&SS to have the highest proportion of suspensions – it has more schools and programmes, many of which contain more elective options and thus greater scope for error and other issues to occur. Members may wish to consider whether that accounts for the full extent of the difference.
- The impact of industrial action was greater in H&SS than elsewhere and necessitated some additional suspensions, though some of those were potentially avoidable.
- In 2021-22, decreases in FMD and S&E were not mirrored in H&SS, and the reasons for this were not wholly clear. This appears to have corrected itself somewhat in 2022-23.
- Numbers in FMD remain relatively low overall but have remained constant (11 cases) meaning that the Faculty now accounts for a slightly higher percentage of the whole (16%, up from 11%).

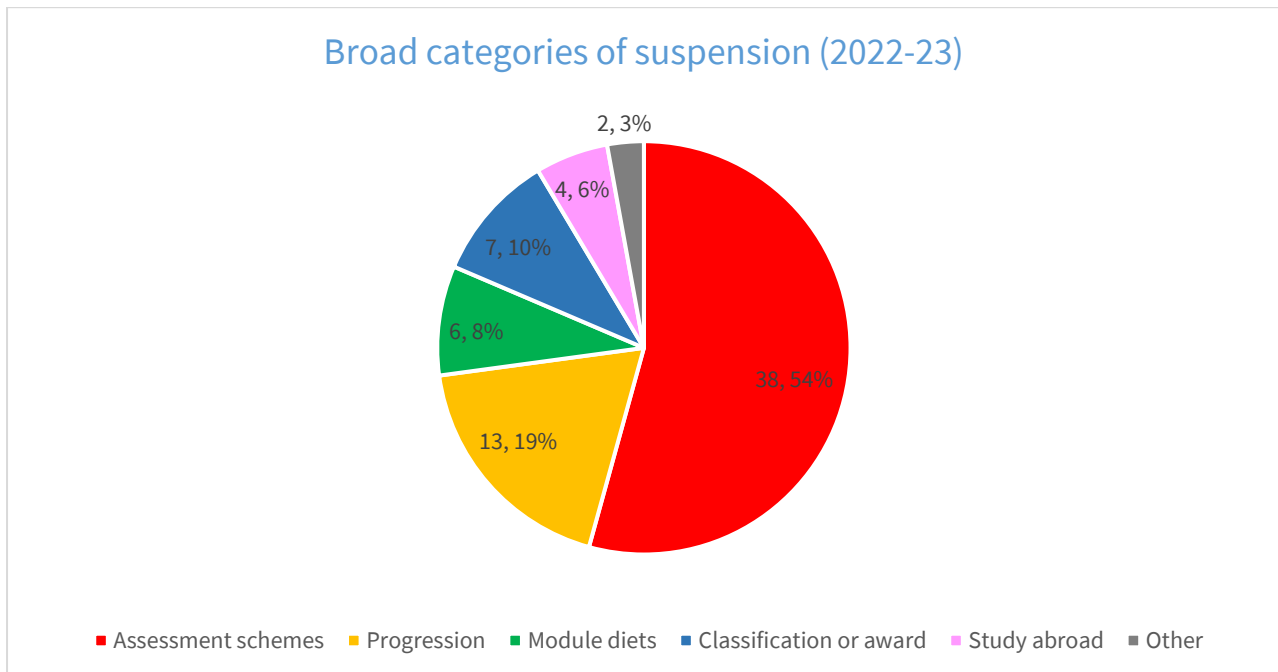
Suspensions by school/institute



* 'Other' comprises two suspensions made by H&SS as a whole, one for the SEFP, and one for ULIP.

- In 2021-22, three schools – SLLF, CCLS, and SEMS – accounted for 36% of all suspensions. Again in 2022-23, three schools - SLLF, CCLS and Law account for 36% of all suspensions (a combined 25 cases). Adding in History and SEMS, five schools account for 50% of suspensions.
- SEMS, CCLS and SLLF consistently have significantly higher numbers of suspensions than other schools. The decreases in SEMS and SLLF are pleasing to see, but the numbers remain higher than in most other schools and institutes.
- Numbers of suspensions in CCLS (13) and in Law (6) have increased, and the number in History (5) has remained constant. Numbers in all other schools/institutes have fallen, although in some cases they remain high.
- Only the William Harvey Research Institute and the Queen Mary Academy had no suspensions.
- While some suspensions were linked to efforts to mitigate the impact of the marking and assessment boycott on students and academic standards, the underlying issues could be attributed to assessment design and could potentially have been avoided in many cases.
- Overall, good progress has been made but there are areas where Faculties, schools and institutes should consider directed attention and potential interventions.

Suspension themes



Assessment schemes

38 of the 70 suspensions (54%) related to assessment schemes. This is always the highest category, though both the absolute figure and the percentage have fallen somewhat this year. Many 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, so 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 upon us in terms of management of academic quality and standards. Causes included:

- Changes were planned (and occasionally even approved at school-level), but never communicated to DGLS through the annual module amendment/diet checking exercise to complete the approval process.
- 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.
- A minority of these 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.
- Some cases were genuinely unavoidable and were linked to external regulatory or resource issues.

Some individual modules were subject to multiple suspensions in 2022-23, and in one case a module's assessment scheme was suspended three times. These cases generally related to the marking and assessment boycott, though in one case the module had not been delivered in accordance with the approved scheme even prior to the boycott. Several of these modules had large numbers of elements of assessment – over 20 in some cases, often including very small elements related to engagement and participation. Queen Mary took the general view that it would not discount elements of assessment in the boycott on the basis that work students had completed should be marked and recognised.

In the cases of the suspensions, it was put forward that it was not possible to recover the assessments, though this later proved not to be the case in every instance. The schools involved noted when making the original suspension requests that the remaining assessments (sometimes just one or two out of the large original number) fully and adequately tested the modules' learning outcomes. The Education Quality and Standards Board and its Assessment Sub-Board will consider issues of assessment design in 2023-24. Members of the EQSB and the Senate may wish to consider the appropriateness and value of including large numbers of small *summative* assessments that do not directly contribute to a module or programme's learning outcomes.

Other assessment-related suspensions included requests to remove qualifying marks, changes to reassessment methods, and the exclusion of compromised elements of assessment.

Progression

13 suspensions (19%) related to progression and granted (or sought to grant) exceptions to the normal progression requirements. These were, in the main, linked to the marking and assessment boycott. Several suspensions were put in place to waive the requirement to achieve a weighted average mark of 40.0+ (while retaining the other progression requirements) where students either had not received their results or had missed the opportunity to take late summer resits or first sits because their first attempt marks had not yet been confirmed and released. These suspensions received particular scrutiny at Faculty and at University level.

A sub-group of progression suspensions related to progression onto a compulsory extramural year. While some were approved (relating to the marking boycott in the same way as those described above), other requests - where students had their results but fell just short of the thresholds - were refused, noting that the regulations were in place for a reason - to protect students, academic standards, and Queen Mary's reputation with its partner organisations - and would not be varied.

Classification and award

Seven suspensions (10%) related to minimum requirements for award, or to classifications. These are among the most serious cases as several relate to absolute academic standards. In 2022-23 these included cases where students had not taken and/or passed sufficient credits at the level of the award, and students who had not passed modules the school/institute had deemed core, and students. In six of the seven cases schools/institutes had made errors (including allowing deviation from the approved module diets and explicitly communicating incorrect regulatory information to students). The seventh case, in which a student's work had been lost due to an IT issue, was not avoidable. Six of the seven cases had to be approved.

Programme and diet issues

6 suspensions (8 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.

Study abroad

Four cases (6 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 but were not approved by the Senate in 2023. The EQSB retains significant concerns over the selection, management, experience, and support of students who are overseas as part of a Queen Mary programme and has asked its Assessment Sub-Board to revisit these issues and make further recommendations for change. The External Member of the Degree Examination Boards also commented on these issues in her 2023 report, recommending action.

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.

As noted in the narrative sections of this report, members are invited to consider whether a significant reduction in the number of elements of assessment for each module – especially small elements related to engagement and participation – would aid in the reduction of suspensions by allowing for more consistent and easily managed assessments with fewer elements and thus fewer opportunities for error and issues.

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 does not tackle underlying issues and in fact creates additional work in and of itself for the school/institute and Queen Mary. The EQSB and DGLS 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.