

# Guidance

## Mitigating Actions to Minimise the Impact of Severe Disruption to Teaching/Learning Delivery and Student Progression & Awards

### 1.0 Severe Disruption to Teaching/Learning Delivery

- Communication from the Dean or Associate Dean (Education) to staff asking them to prioritise delivery of teaching; where significant numbers of lectures have not been delivered, the curriculum should be adapted to prioritise key concepts and assessed material rather than trying to cover the entire syllabus at a faster pace.
- Data on teaching that has been severely disrupted will be collated and reviewed by a Working Group, who will assess the impact as follows:
  - i) High impact – do not assess
  - ii) Medium impact – implement Missing Marks Guidelines or Special Considerations Policy (<http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/special-considerations.html> Section A, 2.2; Section B, 1.5)
  - iii) Low impact – assess as usual
- Special Considerations
  - i) Individual students with exceptional circumstances outside of their control, that may have a negative impact upon their performance in a recent or upcoming assessment (including an exam) or ability to meet a deadline for submission of an assessment or to sit an examination, should follow the University’s Special Considerations Policy.
  - ii) Where groups or cohorts of students suffer significant disruption to an assessment, such that their overall mark is likely to be adversely affected, the circumstances should be reported to one of the Student Representatives for their Programme. The Student Representative will liaise with the Director of Programmes to ensure the Board of Examiners is aware of the problem. The Special Considerations Policy will then be implemented (<http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/special-considerations.html> Section A, 2.2; Section B, 1.5).
- Vice President (Education) will write to students:
  - i) Assuring them that the University will take all reasonable steps to minimise any negative impact on their studies and degree outcomes.
  - ii) Outlining who they should contact if their Personal Academic Tutor is not available.

Further communications to be sent as the severe disruption progresses.

### 2.0 Changes to University Regulations in times of Severe Disruption

Matters relating to assessment for the University are governed by:

- The Ordinances (Section III in the University Calendar, in particular Parts 2 (Organisation and Government), and Part 7 (Matriculation, Examinations and Awards), at <http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIII/sectIII-index.html>)
- The Regulations (Section IV in the Calendar, in particular sections under ‘General Academic Regulations’ on progression, determination and classification of results, and on the organisation and conduct of examinations, to be found at <http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/sectIV-index.html>)

The Ordinances and Regulations underpin fuller statements of policy, which are presented in the Quality Assurance Handbook in the section 'Assessment' at:

<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/quality/assessment/framework/index.page?>

Of particular relevance in this context is:

- [Missing Marks Guidelines](#)
- [Scaling Policy](#)
- The recently revised [Policy and Procedures for Boards of Examiners for Taught Programmes – Membership, Responsibilities and Operation](#)

In general, the formulation of the regulations with respect to progression, in combination with the statements relating to Special Considerations and supported by the formulation of the Missing Marks Guidelines and the new policy with respect to Boards of Examiners, provide a framework flexible enough to ensure that appropriate action may be taken in the case of severe disruption to facilitate the award and progression of students.

The framework is reinforced by the delegation of key Senate Powers to faculty level (to Deans or their nominee, and to Faculty Education Committee) with respect to e.g. variation of programme for an individual student or group of students (alternative ways of achieving programme outcomes), and consideration *and approval* of minor amendments or significant changes to existing programmes. (See Quality Handbook, at <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/quality/governance/senate.page?>).

This delegation of powers allows for decisions to be taken at faculty level to amend the definition of the 'required examinations' cited in the University's Ordinances (Part 7, 7.2.1: 'In order to qualify for a Degree, Diploma or Certificate of the University .... every candidate must have: .... pursued the appropriate programme of study for the prescribed period, satisfactorily completed any programme requirements and passed the required examinations....').

Current policy advises that full records should be kept at all points under any exceptional circumstances by both Boards of Examiner and THE FACULTY EDUCATION COMMITTEESs. In the case of severe disruption, in order that the University can assure itself that all necessary action has been taken to safeguard both academic standards and students' interests<sup>1</sup>, and as agreed by AQSC in June 2014, ***AQSC additionally requires a report from each faculty on decisions taken at faculty level which are necessitated by outcomes of the severe disruption, which can then be reported to Senate.***

## 2.0 Examinations

Amendments to the Regulations in respect of examinations include (extracts from University Calendar, Section IV: General Regulations, Organisation and Conduct of Examinations):

### 5. *Responsibility of Members of Academic Staff during the Examination Period*

The nominee(s) of the Associate Dean (Education) must be available during the whole of the examination period in case of queries, and must inform the Examinations Office of all relevant telephone numbers for this purpose. The nominee(s) must remain available until each day's examinations have been concluded, including those held on Saturdays. The nominee(s) of the Associate Dean (Education) must obtain names and telephone numbers of all paper authors and ensure that authors can be easily and quickly contacted when their papers are being sat, including papers scheduled for Saturdays.

Where the nominee of the Associate Dean (Education) is, exceptionally, unavailable for all or part of an examination period, a deputy should be nominated to cover the period of absence.

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<sup>1</sup> See reference to QAA's statement in 2006 in Footnote 1 above, 'If an institution were to assess or award using temporary or interim arrangements, we would expect it to confirm or regularise any decisions at the earliest possible opportunity, using rigorous procedures to do so ...'

Where a paper author is, exceptionally, uncontactable while their paper is being sat a suitably qualified member of academic staff should be identified to deputise for them.

### **8. Distribution of Scripts of Examinations Organised Centrally**

Scripts may be collected by the examiner or by a person authorised by the Faculty Academic Registrar, Associate Dean (Education) or his/her nominee(s), either from the examination room or the Exams Office. (In the event of industrial action, examination scripts cannot be collected from the examination room.) All scripts of a single examination paper must be collected by one person, including papers sat by students with additional examination requirements. The person collecting scripts shall count the number of scripts in the examination envelope and sign a receipt showing the number of scripts collected. During the main examination period scripts will be available during office hours (or later by prior arrangement). In the case of CAA tests that are administered centrally with iSolutions, candidates' answers are sent to a central database electronically and the results are collected electronically by the Faculty.

### **3.0 'Missing Marks Guidelines'**

[http://www.southampton.ac.uk/quality/assessment/framework/boards\\_of\\_examiners.page?](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/quality/assessment/framework/boards_of_examiners.page?)

The Guidelines are based on clear principles, and outline approaches and procedures for faculties to follow, with the aim that:

- Where Boards of Examiners have sufficient evidence to make decisions, then the decision will be made and stand, unless subsequent information becomes available which it would be in the student's interest for the Board to consider;
- For UG Final year students, a robust final award decision will be made e.g. classified honours, according to the guidance laid out in the policy; if this is not possible, then students so affected should appear on a separate list recorded as 'decision pending' or similar. They will be provided with as much information as possible on their academic attainment, with an explanatory letter;
- Students on taught programmes be permitted to progress; if a student has failed more than the maximum number of fully marked units allowed for them to pass into the following year, then they should be required to take referrals/re-sits in the normal manner.

The 'Guidelines' were amended to clarify Section 2.1 with respect to 'core subjects that must be passed'.

For PhD programmes:

- Assessment of required modules outlined in a prior academic needs analysis (or progression hurdle) that is to be monitored at a subsequent progression hurdle is disrupted. For example, requirement to pass 1 or 2 taught modules in first year in part fulfilment of the 8-10 month progression milestone criteria. Failure of the modules may not, by itself, automatically affect progression, though it might in the context of general discussion on all aspects of progress. Use Missing Marks policy approach for non-core assessments.
- Assessment that directly controls progression is disrupted, i.e., taught part of integrated PhD. Use Missing Marks Policy in full.

### **4.0 External Examiners**

External Examiners for taught programmes are required to give **three months' written notice of termination**, as per the External Examiners contract.

In the case of severe disruption, recognising that External Examiners provide a quality assurance function in the examination process, if any External Examiner is unable to act, then it should be noted that the quality assurance function must still be carried out, by another External Examiner, for instance, or by some other means that brings a level of externality to a Board of Examiners' decision. This possibility is in fact covered

in **outline in the BoE Policy under Section 4, 'Attendance'**, and also under 4.9.3, where action to take in the case of inquoracy of the Board of Examiners is clearly laid out<sup>2</sup>.

External Examiners for PhD examinations do not have a notice period stated in their appointment letters, therefore they may not inform the University of their intention to resign until the day of the Viva, or severe disruption may impact their attendance and they may not arrive for the examination. Faculties could take a proactive approach in contacting the External Examiners prior to the examination to establish if they will be attending, ie, contact from the Graduate School to provide support with travel arrangements, etc. Should the External Examiner not arrive for an examination then it should be postponed and rescheduled. Any postponement/rescheduling of PhD examinations should be reported to the Director of the Doctoral College.

## 5.0 Boards of Examiners (BoEs)

### 5.1 Quoracy of Boards of Examiners

The normal quorum is laid out clearly in the guidance on BoEs in the Quality Handbook at [http://www.southampton.ac.uk/quality/assessment/framework/boards\\_of\\_examiners.page?](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/quality/assessment/framework/boards_of_examiners.page?), where it is stated that:

The quorum for the Board of Examiners is:

- a. the Chair of the Board of Examiners;
- b. the Examinations Officer(s);
- c. the Programme Lead(s) (or Director of Programmes where applicable)
- d. at least four other internal examiners (Note: 'Where a programme has fewer than four other internal examiners the number of internal examiners required for the quorum shall be one third of the number of internal examiners plus one – normally rounded up);
- e. the external examiner(s) (unless, in exceptional circumstances, Faculty Education Committee has approved alternative arrangements for external examiner contribution to the Board, or an external examiner is not required for that particular Board).

The Associate Dean (Education) should be advised immediately if a Board of Examiners is inquorate. If the Board is inquorate, the Associate Dean (Education) will decide that either:

- (i) the meeting may continue but any decision made will remain provisional until confirmed by a Board of Examiners which is quorate; such meeting to be arranged at the earliest opportunity; or
- (ii) the meeting shall be postponed and reconvened at the earliest opportunity when a quorum may be secured.

Where an external examiner is unable to attend the Board of Examiners, but alternative arrangements have been approved by Faculty Education Committee, they will be regarded as present for the purpose of confirming the quorum.

In exceptional circumstances it may be possible to hold an Exceptional Board of Examiners to undertake the work of one or more discipline level Board of Examiners (see Section 1.5).

However, in addition, the 'minimum kit' for BoE quoracy is laid out in the [Ordinances](#) and is clear that this is 1 internal and 1 external examiner. It is worth noting that the process allows for the (exceptional) absence of the external, in which case the Chair of the Faculty Education Committee can decide procedure, and "consideration" by external might not be in person ([Policy and Procedures for Boards of Examiners for Taught Programmes – Membership, Responsibilities and Operation](#), 4.8.5, on attendance).

Section 4.8 External Examiner Attendance in the [Policy and Procedures for Boards of Examiners for Taught Programmes – Membership, Responsibilities and Operation](#), specifically point 4.8.5, makes it clear that any special arrangements (as the case of an External who cannot physically be present) *must* be approved by the Chair of the Faculty Education Committee; this would obviously also hold true of any arrangements concerning internal examiners e.g. using a member of staff who had taught on the programme rather than narrowly the internal examiner, bearing in mind that BoEs as currently constituted and conducted are NOT responsible for finalising individuals' marks but are rather about 'the

consideration and final determination of module and year results for all taught programmes of study that are under its remit, for ensuring that the standards of awards are maintained and that all the requirements for assessments that contribute to the gaining of an academic award are fulfilled, as set out in the relevant regulations’.

An issue was highlighted regarding the inappropriateness of an Associate Dean (Education), who in the circumstances concerned, had taken on the role of Chair of a Board of Examiners, then taking Chair’s action on behalf of the Faculty Education Committee to sign off on the recommendations for the list of awards resulting from the work of that Board of Examiners. The [Policy and Procedures for Boards of Examiners for Taught Programmes – Membership, Responsibilities and Operation](#) was amended to read:

- 4.8.5 If an external examiner exceptionally cannot attend a meeting of the Board of Examiners that they are required to attend, this shall be reported in advance to the Faculty Education Committee and the Committee shall agree and note the alternative arrangements through which the external examiner will exercise their responsibilities at the Board – for example by participation by video conference, consultation by telephone or submission of a written report in advance of the meeting. In cases of emergency or where there is not a Faculty Education Committee scheduled before the Board of Examiners, the arrangement may be agreed by the Associate Dean (Education) as Chair of the Faculty Education Committee. In those exceptional cases where it has been agreed that the external examiner will exercise their responsibilities at the Board through other means, the Board of Examiners must receive, and record in the minutes, clear evidence of the views of the external examiner on the appropriateness of marking standards. The minutes should also record when the Faculty Education Committee/Associate Dean (Education) agreed the alternative arrangements for the external examiner.
- 14.2 If there are no contentious issues following a Board of Examiners meeting, the Recommendation for Awards list shall be signed by the Chair of Faculty Education Committee. In the absence of the Chair, Faculty Education Committee may nominate an alternative signatory who is independent of the Board of Examiners that ratified the marks. Where exceptional circumstances have necessitated the Associate Dean (Education) taking on the role of Chair of the Board of Examiners in addition to that of Chair of the Faculty Education Committee, the Faculty Education Committee must nominate an alternative signatory to sign the Recommendation for Awards list who is independent of the Board of Examiners that ratified the marks. The Recommendation for Awards list and the Chair’s action taken must be reported to the next meeting of Faculty Education Committee.
- 14.3 If any of the decisions reached by the Board of Examiners are controversial a meeting of Faculty Education Committee must be held to approve the recommendations of the Board of Examiners and the Recommendation for Awards list. Circumstances where this may be appropriate include:
- Where not all members of the Board of Examiners have agreed with a decision of the Board.
  - Where an external examiner is unwilling to provide confirmation that they are satisfied with the conduct of the assessment process.

As agreed by AQSC, **faculties will be called upon to report any special arrangements made and approved by the Faculty Education Committee to AQSC.**

## 5.2 Recommendation of Awards and Graduation

Questions have been raised as to whether candidates affected by *inquorate BoEs* (i.e. BoEs not even meeting *the minimum quoracy* laid down in the Ordinances) may be recommended for award and be eligible for Graduation. There seems after consideration to be no reason why a candidate may not proceed to graduation without a final mark ratified formally by a quorate BoE, so long as the final mark that appears before the non-quorate BoE merits a pass, and so long as such a candidate is noted by the Faculty/Chair of the Faculty Education Committee on the awards recommendations list (e.g. asterisked and with explanatory note), with a view to allowing for the possibility that the certificate may have to be revised in the light of any adjustment made at a later date when the quorate BoE formally and properly

reviews the marks<sup>3</sup>. Essentially once marks get to the BoE they are not under individual scrutiny, given the way in which we now use BoEs, but are scrutinised at the cohort level; it is therefore highly unlikely that any individual mark would be moved *down* by a BoE, *tho* it may be moved up as action resulting from scrutiny of the cohort and affect the level and detail of the final result of individual students.

In all instances, it remains very important to follow the University's awards process fully and to have a clear record of how the provisional and then the final, result has been achieved.

In addition to the clear marking of affected students on awards lists as recommended above, it is also possible to flag them in Banner; in the case that any faculty has such candidates, they should ensure that the list is **copied to Student Records Manager**, to ensure that the University can keep a clear, central and accessible record of which students are so affected and of whose results will need revisiting by a quorate BoE at the earliest possible opportunity when that is possible.

### 5.3 PGR Special Consideration Boards

The [Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Students](#) outline the policy and procedures to be followed when a student registered on a research degree at the University of Southampton applies for Special Considerations. To minimise any impact of severe disruption, the policy and procedures should consider how requests should be reviewed if the PGR Special Considerations Board is unable to operate due to being non-quorate.

To ensure we facilitate the award and progression of students, should the PGR Special Considerations Board be non-quorate due to the impact of severe disruption, the following will be implemented:

- The Faculty Director of the Graduate School will undertake the responsibilities of the PGR Special Considerations Board, making recommendations to the Director of the Doctoral College.
- Should the Faculty Director of the Graduate School be unable to undertake those responsibilities, due to the impact of severe disruption, then the responsibilities will be undertaken by the Faculty Academic Registrar, who will make recommendations to the Director of the Doctoral College.

## 6.0 Exceptional Circumstances

Given that it is a primary responsibility of Senate to '... award Degrees (other than Honorary Degrees) Diplomas and Certificates including those awarded jointly with other institutions recognised for this purpose', which it delegates under normal circumstances to the Vice-Chancellor on the recommendation of the relevant Faculty Education Committee, the [Policy and Procedures for Boards of Examiners for Taught Programmes – Membership, Responsibilities and Operation](#) has been amended to include the ability for the Chair of Senate to convene an Exceptional Board of Examiners to undertake the work of one or more discipline level Board of Examiners and/or Faculty Education Committee where, in exceptional circumstances, the functions of Boards of Examiners and/or Faculty Education Committees face significant and wide-spread disruption.

## 7.0 Complaints/Appeals

To allow for the adoption of a consistent approach to complaints/appeals arising from the impact of severe disruption, which are not considered under the Special Considerations policy, it has been agreed that a special Complaints Panel will be implemented.

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<sup>3</sup> Actions relating to candidates affected by Special Cons help to provide a precedent here - their classification/certificates may have to be retrospectively revised on the basis of the outcome of a late appeal; see also guidance relating to finalists in the Missing Marks Guidelines, section 5 (see QH handbook, under Assessment/Assessment Framework/Boards of Examiners/Guidelines)