Dear Rio, Craig

You will have received responses from individual Schools in the College of Science and Engineering on the consultation on the timetable for return of exam results and Summer 2013 graduations. In the main, Schools have responded directly to your question of whether they preferred option 1 or option 2. This should not disguise the fact that there is considerable concern that both options are impractical and do not address the underlying problems.

The College of Science and Engineering considers that neither of these options addresses the issues and neither are acceptable. We believe that we need a dialogue between Registry and Schools to discuss and agree realistic future timescales together. The timescale needs to take account of the need for sufficient time in Schools to ensure robust marking and decisions on programme outcomes, as well as providing Registry with sufficient time to organise graduations.

Schools have set out in their responses to you the intolerable strains that the Summer 2012 timescale imposed on academic and administrative staff in Schools. This had major, negative impacts on the examination process and raised serious concerns about ensuring the quality and consistency in marking. There seems a lack of recognition of the importance of the marking process and the need for double marking or moderation, which adds to the marking period but is essential to maintain confidence in our academic standards. It also raised serious concerns about transcription errors in Registry, as illustrated by the false pass marks entered for some students in Physics. This is not consistent with the University’s desire to enhance the student experience and is damaging the reputation of the University in the eyes of students and the academic community.

Several of our Externals Examiners commented directly on problems that arose from the tight timescales (Chemistry, GeoSciences, Physics & Astronomy). There were also numerous comments this year on inadequate annotation of scripts or completion of marking proforma to communicate to Externals how a mark was arrived at, arguably symptomatic of rushed marking. Other comments from Externals included the lack of time to collate the assessment materials for borderline candidates to assist the detailed review of their work by the externals (Chemistry); joint degree results not available at the time of the exam board - related to assessment timescales (GeoSciences). Some of the strongest comments came from External Examiners in their final year who commented on the problems this year in the context of their previous experience. This is illustrated by Professor McCoustra:

"One abiding impression I had this year in attending the final assessment process was a feeling of rush in a compressed timescale. It does the accuracy of this important process no good if timescales are compressed to meet central timetabling requirements. The stress on the TO staff was noticeable and unnecessary. Professor Martin R. S. McCoustra, Chemical Physics"

The problems created by the compressed timescale this year have already affected our academic reputation and our External Examiners will expect the University to address these issues for next year.

It is deeply concerning therefore that the new proposals for 2013 are either the same as 2012 (option 1), or adjusted by three days, two of which are over a weekend, so in effect just one day more (option 2). Neither of these options addresses the issues. We would not be able to deliver accurate results to Registry within the proposed timescales and we strongly oppose both of these options.
To move forward, we need a dialogue between Registry and Schools to discuss and agree realistic future timescales together. The timescale needs to take account of the various dates of School Exam Board meetings (which are set at least two years in advance, in accordance with the University guidance) and the subsequent processes involved in making changes to results before they are returned to Registry. There should be an agreed separation between dates for the return of classifications and dates for the return of marks. The former is needed for graduations and can be done relatively swiftly after an exam board; the latter takes time (as explained above) and can be done in the days following. If Graduation dates need to be moved back to early July in order to ensure confidence in our academic judgements, then this needs to be accepted.

We wish to emphasise again that the production of marks and results this year was achieved only because staff were willing to work unacceptably long hours and at weekends. The goodwill of staff is an incredibly valuable resource which will be stretched if the timetable for this year is not significantly altered. If, despite these concerns, the timetable is not significantly altered, then I see no reason why the deadline for Science and Engineering results should continue to be required to be amongst the first.

Regards...

Sent 5th September 2012