Examinations Experience Survey

Background

One of the primary aims of the Examinations and Awards Team is to deliver all examinations as smoothly, effectively and professionally as possible. Therefore, the views and comments of the students were sought in order to help the Examinations and Awards Team identify any aspects of examinations that are delivered well, and any aspects that could perhaps be improved upon.

In February 2016, all students were invited to complete a survey about their examination experience at Newcastle University. The survey asked a variety of questions about the exam timetable, venues, rules and invigilators as well as providing students with the opportunity to make suggestions and/or provide any general comments.

There were 1484 responses in total which equates to approximately 10-11% of the total number of students who sit examinations during the Semester 1 or Semester 2 exam periods.

Summary

Overall, the results of the survey are encouraging as 97% of respondees indicated that their overall examination experience was either satisfactory, good or excellent (with 85% indicating that it was either good or excellent). This is even more reassuring when it is taken into account that for many, examinations are unlikely to be considered a popular or enjoyable part of the University experience.

There were also other generally positive responses to questions regarding the overall satisfaction with the exam timetable information, exam venues and invigilation.

However, the survey also identified areas for improvement such as making it easier to locate some of the exam venues, trying to ensure that students are aware of the Exam Rules and certain aspects of invigilation. The Exams and Awards Team has already made some improvements (and started working on others) based on the responses and suggestions received. For example, changes have already been made to the way the timetable is displayed and additional information is bring provided for the Semester 2 Exam Period 2016.

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Examinations Timetable

The information displayed on your personal exam timetable is clear and easy to understand:

How could it be improved?

(Responses have been grouped into the above categories to highlight the main areas where suggestions were made).

Exams & Awards Comments...

With 96% of the respondees either agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, it seems that this is an area that works well.

Exams & Awards Response!

Chronological order:
Many students indicated that they would like their personal exam timetable to be in chronological order (as opposed to module code order); this has been actioned for the Semester 2 exam timetable 2016.

Exams & Awards Response!

Detail/Map/Clearer/Mobile App/Access:

- More detail will be provided in regards to the location of exam venues and the current map will be enhanced and made more accessible in time for the Semester 2 2016 exam period.
- The Team have already met with a Learning Technologies representative to discuss how the exam timetable can be enhanced on the mobile app in the future. In the meantime, an ‘Exams channel’ including selected key information will be introduced on the app prior to the Semester 2 2016 exam period.
Please provide any comments that you have in regards to the exam timetable:

Exams & Awards Comments...
The majority of comments here gave a positive view of the exam timetable.

Some responses overlapped with the previous question (e.g. chronological order, clearer, detail etc.) so are already addressed above.

The second highest category of comments was in regards to ‘exam spacing’ and the desire for improved spacing between exams; please see the ‘Scheduling’ box within the ‘General’ section on page 11 for a full response on this.

Examination Venues

Are the exam venues easy to locate?

Exams & Awards Comments...
Exam venues should always be easy to locate and therefore there are clearly improvements to be made as 83% of respondees indicated that exam venues are not ‘always’ easy to locate.

Is there anything that could be done to make it easier to locate exam venues?

Exams & Awards Response!
More detail will be provided in regards to the location of exam venues (especially external ones) and the current map will be enhanced and made more accessible in time for the Semester 2 2016 exam period.
Which venues do you particularly like…?

Top 10 most liked venues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Exam Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sports Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>St. James’ Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Campus venues (in general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lindisfarne Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Herschel Cluster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Freemen’s Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Turbine Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Smaller venues (in general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Barbara Strang Teaching Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Merz Court</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which venues do you particularly dislike…?

Top 10 least liked venues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Exam Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Turbine Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sports Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Freemen’s Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>External venues (in general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tyne Suite (Premier Inn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lindisfarne Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>St. James’ Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Barbara Strang Teaching Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Larger venues (in general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Smaller venues (in general)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...and why?

‘good temperature’
‘easily accessible’
‘convenient and close’
‘nice and quiet’
‘good visibility of clocks’
‘good light’
‘spacious’
‘plenty of space’
‘easy to find’
‘relaxed atmosphere’

‘too cold’
‘far away from campus’
‘difficult to find’
‘too dark’
‘not much space’
‘hard to get to’
‘hot and stuffy’
‘can be noisy’
‘chairs don’t fit under desks’

Exams & Awards Comments…

It is clear that opinions on exam venues vary greatly amongst students. For example, the Sports Centre and St. James’ Park were simultaneously the two most liked venues as well as being the 2nd and 7th least liked venues.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, reasons why exam venues were liked/disliked often focussed on factors such as temperature, noise levels, lighting, space and location/access.

Exams & Awards Response!

Exam venues are already constantly reviewed and will continue to be so (e.g. the Tyne Suite was recently replaced with St. James’ Park following negative feedback).

All venues on campus are checked (e.g. lights working etc.) by the Estate Support Service before each exam period. Estates also try to plan disruptive work around the exam periods.

Due to the limited availability of suitable exam space on campus, external venues are required. Whilst the proximity to campus is a major consideration, the main priority is trying to ensure that the venue is suitable for exams and available at the required times.
Overall, how do you rate Newcastle University’s exam venues?

With 94% of respondees indicating that the exam venues overall are either adequate or excellent, it seems that there are not major problems with the venues used. However, there is work to do in converting ‘adequate’ venues into ‘excellent’ venues.

Exam Rules

Have you ever read the University’s Exam Rules?

It is concerning that over 25% of respondees indicated that they had never read the Exam Rules as failure to follow these can lead to disciplinary action including academic penalties. Equally, it is concerning that over 25% of respondees either thought that the possession of a mobile phone was not serious or were unsure. Possession of a mobile phone, even if switched off, is a serious offence and can often result in the student being awarded a mark of ‘0’ for the examination in question.
Which of the following do you think would represent a breach of the Exam Rules?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Switching your phone to ‘silent’ mode and placing your bag at the side of the room</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>Phones must be fully switched off, not just on ‘silent’ mode.</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking an unused answer sheet away with you at the end of the exam</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>All exam stationery must be left on your desk at the end of the exam, candidates are not permitted to take any away.</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing notes/formula in the answer booklet before the exam has started</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>No notes or formula must be written until after the exam has been officially started.</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using some blank paper that you have in your pocket to do rough work</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>All rough work must be done in the stationery provided. Candidates should also not have any paper in their pockets.</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking another candidate during the exam if you can borrow a pen</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>Candidates are not permitted to communicate with each other at any time during an exam.</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at the exam questions before the exam has started, but not writing anything</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>Candidates are not permitted to open or turn over exam papers until after the exam has been officially started.</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing the yellow attendance slip whilst the invigilator is making pre-exam announcements</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>Attendance slips should be completed before the exam, though candidates should also try and ensure they listen to the announcements.</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping your pens in a clear pencil case on your desk</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>Any pencil cases on your desk must be clear.</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exams & Awards Comments...
For the scenarios that did represent a breach of the rules, the percentage of respondnees who answered incorrectly varied from 13% to 59%.

In particular, over 25% of respondnees answered incorrectly to scenarios regarding mobile phones, taking exam stationery and writing before the exam has started.

The responses to this set of questions indicate that further work is required to ensure that all candidates are fully aware of the Exam Rules.

Exams & Awards Response!
The Exams & Awards Team have reviewed how the Exam Rules are communicated to students to try and ensure that everyone is aware of what is expected and required of them in the exam venues.

The responses to the following question have been used as guidance when considering the best methods for communicating the rules.
Invigilation

When entering exam venues, are you clearly instructed as to where to place your bag, coat and mobile phone?

If you have selected ‘Other’ for the previous question, please indicate your suggested format:

Suggestions made multiple times:
- Dedicated email
- Multiple different formats
- During induction
- Via social media

Other suggestions included:
- FAQs/Quiz format
- PowerPoint presentation
- Via mobile phone
- Hard copy/letter

Exams & Awards Response!

- A separate, dedicated email regarding the Exam Rules will be sent out prior to each exam period.
- A reminder about the Exam Rules will also be sent out via social media before each exam period.
- There will be an Exam Rules ‘article’ on the ‘Exams Channel’ being created for the mobile app.
- New signage with visual warnings regarding mobile phones have already been created and mobile phone symbols have also been added to the desk no. labels as a visual reminder for when students sit down at their allocated desk.
- A short video to highlight some of the main rules has been discussed with the University’s Audio Visual Team and is planned for completion prior to the Semester 1 2016/17 exam period.
The pre-exam announcements are always delivered clearly and are easily heard:

Exams & Awards Response!
Although 87% of respondees either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, this will be reviewed to try and ensure that announcements are always delivered clearly and are easily heard.

The invigilators are quick to respond when you raise your hand:

Exams & Awards Response!
Only 29% of respondees felt that the invigilators are always quick to respond although the majority felt that they were most of the time. This issue will be investigated further though to see if it can be improved.

In your experience, which of the following words do you think best describe the exam invigilators?

Exams & Awards Comments...
Respondees were able to select as many of the 8 words as they wished and the overwhelming majority chose the more positive descriptions (3159 positive vs 347 negative). 71% of all respondees described the invigilators as ‘professional’ (compared to just 4% who chose ‘unprofessional’) and 59% of all respondees selected ‘helpful’ (compared to just 4% who chose ‘unhelpful’). Overall, these are pleasing statistics although there is always room for improvement.
Newcastle University examinations are conducted and invigilated in an appropriate manner:

Exams & Awards Comments...
These responses suggest that Newcastle University exams are conducted and invigilated appropriately in the vast majority of cases with less than 2% of respondees saying this was either never, or only occasionally, the case.
However, our aim is to try and ensure that exams are always conducted and invigilated appropriately.

Alternative Examination Arrangements

Of the 1484 respondees, 9% indicated that they had been granted alternative exam arrangements at some point during their time at Newcastle University. Those 9% were asked:

Are your alternative exam arrangements implemented effectively?

Exams & Awards Comments...
With 43% of the respondees to this question indicating that their arrangements had not always been implemented effectively, there may be a need for a further and more specific investigation into alternative exam arrangements.
However, it is still worth noting that 87% indicated that their arrangements were either ‘always’ or ‘mostly’ implemented effectively.
Overall, how do you rate your Newcastle University examination experience?

Please let us know if you have any general comments about your examination experience:

Exams & Awards Comments...

The responses to this question suggest that the Exams & Awards Office are generally getting it right as 97% of respondees indicated that their overall exam experience was either satisfactory, good or excellent.

However, the Exams & Awards Team will use the responses received to this survey to try and increase the proportion of ‘Excellent’ responses as well as to eliminate the ‘Poor’ and ‘Very Poor’ responses.

Please let us know if you have any general comments about your examination experience:

(Responses have been grouped into the above categories to highlight the main areas where comments were made).

Exams & Awards Comments...

Many of the comments made in this section have been very useful in providing detail or specific examples to some of the issues covered in this survey. These will be referred to when the Exams & Awards Team are reviewing and amending policies and practices.

Although the categories of Invigilators, Venues and Exam Rules were amongst the most commented on, these will not be discussed further below because they have already been addresses elsewhere in this report.
Scheduling...

Most of the comments made in regards to exam scheduling were concerning situations when exams have been scheduled close together.

The Exams & Awards Team use sophisticated scheduling software to try and create the ‘best’ exam timetable for all students. Heavy emphasis is placed on trying to avoid students being scheduled with two exams on the same day or two consecutive exams (i.e. a PM exam followed by an AM exam the next day) and this is normally able to be restricted to less than 1% of all students.

When exams are scheduled close together, this is usually down to one or more of the following:

- Modules are open to students from other programmes/Schools
- Students from the same cohort having a wide range of module choices available to them
- Scheduling requests made by the School
- Modules are being taken by students from different stages

The priority of the Exams & Awards Team when scheduling is always to try and create the best possible timetable for all students. This may not always appear to be the case when some students end up having 3 exams on consecutive days, but unfortunately these scenarios are unavoidable due to the complexities of the scheduling process.

Exam Papers...

The majority of comments made in regards to exam papers were concerning errors or mistakes in the questions.

Each School has their own internal process for the preparation and scrutiny of exam papers prior to their submission to the Exams & Awards Team for printing. Details of queries and/or errors that are raised during exams are always communicated back to the School by the Exams & Awards Team so that they can be addressed accordingly.

Alternative Arrangements/ Computers/ Stationery/ Durations/ Results/ Take Home Exams...

The number of comments in each of these areas were relatively small and also quite varied. However, all of these comments are still valid and have already proved useful for the Exams & Awards Team when identifying potential areas of concern.