

Short Communication

The Timing of Referred Examinations

Robert Slater

School of Life Sciences, University of Hertfordshire

Date received: 07/01/2009

Date accepted: 12/01/2009

This article reports on the experiences of the University of Hertfordshire following changes in the timing of resit examinations and coursework in the 2007/8 academic year.

The 'dreaded resits', or referred examinations to give them their full title. Hated by everyone: the students (when they start the course they think they won't need them), the academic staff (they think the students should have worked harder first time around) and administrative staff (they have seen it all before and really would prefer everyone to pass first time and get it over with). Referred examinations always seem to have the atmosphere of a school detention to me: nobody wants to be there, least of all the teachers.

In this article I am not going to discuss the pros and cons of resit exams (some institutions do not have them, if a student fails a module that is it, the student repeats it the next time it is offered). Referrals are a common approach in UK Universities and I am assuming they will exist for sometime. And to make myself clear I am taking 'referral' to mean the student is given the opportunity to retake examinations and/or resubmit coursework prior to the beginning of a subsequent academic year or semester.

So if we are going to have referrals when is the best time? This was the subject of much debate in a working party on the academic year that I chaired during 2005 to 2006. We talked about more than just referrals, of course, and it rapidly became clear that many of the features of a 'perfect' academic year are either mutually exclusive or impossible to achieve. So we needed a framework, and given that teaching was our core business we decided to put the student experience as a guiding principle. The timing of referrals became high on our list of priorities.

So why was that? Our resits were always in September and if this goes unchallenged it seems perfectly sensible: the University needed time to mark the first sits, hold examination boards and issue results; the students needed time to absorb the implications of their results, get back from a holiday or vacation job and start revising again (although in the case of some students I use the word 'again' with reservations). Yet there are significant disadvantages:

- Students who have resits in September do not fully know their progression opportunities until they obtain their results (which is effectively at the start of the new session);
- Administrative staff are dealing with referrals and subsequent results when it would be better if they were able to devote more time to the start of the academic year and welcoming new and returning students;
- Students may have planned their summer (working abroad perhaps) and are not prepared to give it up for a few irritating resit examinations; indeed there is no guarantee that they see their results in time to prepare; and
- Students may go a long time without studying and find going back to notes that are several months old something of a chore.

In 2003 the School of Life Sciences at Hertfordshire piloted summer referrals for its biology and sports science first year students (~ 300 students). We had come to realise that our referred students did not spend all summer revising as we naively hoped. The vast majority knuckled down the week before (if we were lucky) or maybe during the weekend before the examination. No wonder the attendance and pass rates at referral were low. So the arguments for moving to a summer referral system were as follows:

- Students would get their results earlier, those with failures could be counselled whilst they were still available, this would help them understand the implications of their results and assist preparation for the referrals;
- The gap between the first and second sittings would be shorter, giving the students less time to forget what they had already learned;
- Staff would be available for support between first and second sittings should it be needed;
- Students who had referrals would get their resit results well before the start of the next session; and
- Finally, students could plan their time for August and September knowing that resits could not get in the way.

For the pilot we put first sittings into the first of the three examination weeks at the end of semester B, everything was marked by (about) one week later, we held an exam board and issued results within three weeks of the first exam. The pilot was done with students who had already enrolled and they expected a particular pattern to the academic year, so we had to obtain their permission. Interesting result one: not a single student objected. Indeed the idea was received with much enthusiasm. "I can plan my summer with confidence" was how one student put it. Result two: pass rates as a percentage of candidates at referral compared to previous years were statistically neutral but attendance at referrals rose by ~7% (i.e. percentage of students eligible to resit). The pilot was deemed interesting enough for the concept to become incorporated into the remit of the working party considering the academic year.

To move from September referrals for the whole University was not easy (not everyone can have their first sittings in the first week of examinations!). Without boring you with the details we had to: look into the largest cohorts to see if we could cope; change some aspects of the grading system and the way we structured examination boards; change the rules about how students selected which modules to resit; and move to an entirely web-based results system. Boards of examiners that looked at all of a student's first or second year profile prior to resit were abolished. Also we were challenged with respect to our views on what referral is trying to achieve. One of the most interesting academic discussions that took place was this (and it went right to heart of our assessment strategy): some coursework-only modules were setting very substantial referred coursework. The amount was equivalent to the module's original coursework. With September referrals there was plenty of time for the students to do it. With summer referrals, where time is shorter, the discussion centres around what constitutes referral and what requires a complete retake of the module. If a student requires the equivalent of a semester to make up a failure then surely they should retake the module. We took the view that a student should only be referred if he or she had achieved some learning outcomes, the referral is to make up the shortfall. In other words 'too bad a fail' forces a re-enrolment, not a referral.

Of course there were staff who were not keen and raised objections; the principal ones being the time available to do the marking (in particular between first sittings at the end of Semester B and the first examination boards) and the shift of work from the autumn to summer. The first point was dealt with in three ways: we put the very large cohorts into exams near the beginning

of the examination period; we had heads of department sign up to the concept that marking was the highest priority during certain periods; and the academic staff were relieved from invigilation duties. The second point was largely solved by the administrative staff, they were the ones who most likely would have to work harder at the end of July. These staff were very frustrated by what was expected of them in September and saw the move as beneficial by spreading the workload more evenly across the year. Another huge benefit for all staff was the removal of a layer of examinations boards (we no longer needed programme, or progression, boards prior to the resits, see above).

So the new calendar looks like this: semester B ends with three weeks of exams, then there is a marking week followed by an exam board week. Results go up the following Monday. Two weeks later resits start, with marking and exam boards completed by the end of July. The results were an improvement in the way results were given to students (i.e. sooner), a more rational use of time in the summer and autumn and an increase in pass rates in every faculty across the University, with ~8% increase in pass rate overall. A pleasing result and we await with interest to see if it is sustained this year.

Communicating Author

Robert Slater, School of Life Sciences, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield AL10 9AB,
r.j.slater@herts.ac.uk, 01707 284547

References