

Deferred Exams

Policy Development Briefing
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This document was produced as an output of the Alternative Forms of Assessment & Evaluation Working Group of the Provost's Task Force on Pedagogical Innovation (winter/spring 2021). Members of the working group included: Lisa Kazuhara, Justine Hobbins, Indira Naidoo-Harris, Barry Praamsma-Townshend, Byron Sheldrick, and Martin Williams. We also gratefully acknowledge contributions by Sean Mitchell and Tyler Poirier.

Introduction

The deferred exam period is currently scheduled during week 5 of the semester. This is at the very peak of midterms and frequently creates an untenable situation for students.

The purpose of this document is to outline the current issues and some of the potential remedies to help inform discussion about policy change at the University of Guelph. Ultimately, the goal is to move the deferred exam period to the start of the semester.

Addressing the timing of deferred exams is of the utmost urgency. This is a longstanding issue that affects hundreds of students every semester.

In terms of process, we imagine the Academic Policies and Procedures Committee, which is chaired by the Registrar, might take the lead on additional consultations, operationalizing, and moving change forward. While it may be possible to make some changes administratively, the schedule of dates is approved by Senate, therefore a recommendation to the Board of Undergraduate Studies would likely be needed.

The Issues

For courses with final exams, a significant proportion of a student's final grade is determined by their performance at a single moment in time. A review of 190 undergraduate course outlines in 2019 found that most final exams are worth 30% to 42% of the final grade, with some courses weighting their finals at 75%. A negative outcome of such heavily weighted assessments can affect a student's academic standing (i.e. academic probation, required to withdraw, etc.), eligibility for subsequent courses, progress towards graduation, scholarships, eligibility for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), international student visas, status as a varsity athlete, relationships with family, and self-esteem.

We reviewed the outcomes of 553 deferred exams that were granted at the start of W21 semester. By the end of the semester, we noted that about half (48%) resulted in a negative outcome:

- 16% failed the course
- 3% further deferred the exam despite completion of current courses in W21
- 2% dropped the course despite intentions to write the exam at the start of the semester
- 15% earned a grade in the course that was more than 10 points below their cumulative GPA
- 12% earned a grade that was 5 to 10 points below their cumulative GPA

As a result of the generally poor performances associated with deferred exams, many students feel significant pressure when writing final exams, and doubly so when the value of other assessments in the course have been shifted to the final, as is common practice for students with episodic disabilities or tumultuous personal circumstances.

It is important to note that many students with deferred exams have missed significant content/learning and as a result, they then have to go back and learn the missed content. In other words, preparing for a deferred final exam can be a major undertaking. In many cases, it would be in the student's best interest to drop the course rather than write the deferred exam, but many students believe this option is not open to them. In this context, it is important to note that students are nearly 10 times as likely to fail a course with a deferred exam than to get permission for a late drop. Among that fail, half have a final grade lower than 38%.

In the week(s) leading up to a deferred final exam, it is common for the workload associated with preparation to be on par with any other current course. Students are often already working at their maximum capacity with the current semester's course assessments (e.g. midterms) and thus find themselves in an overload situation when deferred exams are layered on top. In addition, the impact can last for months as students try to get caught up on missed work for current courses after focusing on their deferred exams.

The current timing of the deferred exam period, combined with the inherent stressors associated with preparing for and writing deferred final exams, frequently has a significant impact on students' health and wellbeing. Time for sleep, exercise, eating well, social connections, effective learning, and stress management are all impaired for an extended period.

The current situation also presents a significant risk management issue for the University. Students who defer their final exams frequently have health conditions that are exacerbated by stress. For example, approximately 25% to 30% of deferred exams are needed by students with disabilities, most of which have chronic health conditions that are sensitive to high-stress situations. Some of these conditions can be life threatening. Examples include:

- **Seizure disorders:** there have been examples in recent years of students who have been in hospital and who have felt compelled by the university to return to their courses as quickly as possible, jeopardizing their safety.
- **Concussions** typically require students to rest for an extended period or risk ongoing neurological harm. The prescribed return to daily activities is intentionally slow in order to protect the student's brain from long-term effects, and this is frequently incompatible with the university's academic timetable.
- **Mental health emergencies** that involve in-patient care carry significant stigma even though they are relatively common. Many students who have needed this kind of care at the end of the semester have gone from the hospital directly into the final exam period.

- **Survivors of sexual violence** who are involved in legal proceedings against an alleged perpetrator sometimes have scheduling conflicts between their final exams and court dates. In these cases, the university's response often feels harsh.

Moreover, students write final exams under duress when they should not be writing at all, because they perceive deferred exams to be a terrible alternative that will result in negative outcomes. Many students report that they perceive the timing of deferred exams to be punitive; which is sometimes confirmed by instructors. Furthermore, the university does not issue tuition refunds for students who become incapacitated late in the semester. If a student chooses to withdraw, they forfeit most or all of what they have paid and this can be a significant financial burden.

Additionally, the process of seeking a deferred exam can be onerous for students who are in the midst of a significant illness, crisis or other difficult situation. Students following the standard procedure frequently have separate conversations (or email correspondence) with their course instructor(s), their program counsellor, their SAS advisor, their physician, other health professionals involved in their care, and various receptionists for booking appointments. In addition, the student must discern how much information needs to be disclosed to the university, write a letter, and fill out a form. In many cases, students "err on the side of caution" and overly disclose personal health information because they do not want to risk having their request turned down.

The imminent risk to the university in these situations is that one could argue the structure of the deferred exam period fails to meet our duty to accommodate under U of G policy and the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. When students cannot write their final exams on the originally scheduled date, the alternative (which is a form of accommodation) is not equitable and in many instances puts the student at a further disadvantage. In other words, the timing of deferred exams serves as a disincentive for students from seeking the accommodation they require, and potentially steers them towards a harmful situation. Therefore, it is of the utmost urgency that the university reconsider the process and scheduling of deferred exams.

Mandate for Change

In 2017, the University of Guelph was one of the first institutions to adopt the [Okanagan Charter: An International Charter for Health-Promoting Universities and Colleges](#). The charter includes a framework for its two calls to action. The first principle is:

Embed health in all campus policies: Review, create and coordinate campus policies and practices with attention to health, well-being and sustainability, so that all planning and decision-making takes account of and supports the flourishing of people, campuses, communities and our planet.

Implications: The University's commitment to the Okanagan Charter would seem to support an effort to move the deferred exam period to a time when it will be less stressful for students and less deleterious for their health and well-being.

The University has also established policy to provide academic accommodation for students with disabilities in accordance with the *Ontario Human Rights Code* ("the Code"). The OHRC [Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities](#) helps explain how the Code is to be interpreted in an

educational setting. It describes how seemingly neutral policies and practices can have an “adverse effect” on students with disabilities, and this constitutes a form of discrimination.

Implications: students with disabilities are disproportionately represented among those who have deferred exams. Whereas about 13% of the student population is registered with SAS, about 25% of deferred exams are for students who need disability-related accommodation.

Moreover, scheduling deferred exams during week 5 has an adverse effect on students with disabilities, many of which have medical conditions that are exasperated by stress and dysregulation of daily routines. The challenges associated with studying for final exams during a heavy midterm time tends to exacerbate disability-related symptoms and compromises academic performance. The alternative is to take a reduced course load, which slows students’ progress through their degree.

Finally, the University has a [Strategic Mandate Agreement](#) with the provincial government, which includes ten performance-based funding metrics. The third metric is “graduation rate,” which is the proportion of full-time undergraduate students who graduate from the same institution where they began their degree within seven years.

Implications: the current deferred exam period frequently slows students’ progress through their degree and/or creates an alienating student experience. Improving the scheduling of deferred exams can help to retain students and contribute to a strong graduation rate.

Barriers to Change

There has been discussion about the need to change the timing of deferred exams for many years. Perhaps the most straightforward explanation for why change has not yet happened is related to the complexity of the existing procedures (see “current process” below). Going into the W21 semester there were 553 approved requests for deferred exams spanning 148 courses¹. Numerous program counselling offices, which are spread across the colleges, support many different academic review committees, with decisions needing to be communicated across multiple academic and administrative units. This has created a complex system involving a larger number of stakeholders, with decisions made in many different places, and many layers of internal communications.

Current Process

Below is an overview of the steps involved in the deferred exam process.

1. Deferred exam period approved by Senate in the “schedule of dates”
2. Student makes initial inquiry (instructor, SAS, others)
3. Referral to Program Counsellor
4. Student seeks supporting documentation (SAS, counselling, physician, others)
5. Student submits request for academic consideration
6. Academic Review Committee considers request

¹ More generally, there was 859 deferred exams, conditions and supplementary privileges across 291 courses.

7. Decisions (by Academic Review Committee?) are recorded and submitted to the Registrar ("coding")
8. Deferred exam schedule is created to avoid conflicts among deferred exams. As the university does not have a central database of midterms, it is not possible to avoid midterm conflicts.
9. Notification to student from the Registrar
10. Restore student access to CourseLink (this is automated for some courses but not all)
11. Registrar requests exam script from academic department
12. Department connects with instructor
13. Student books with SAS Exam Centre if accommodations are required
14. Instructor creates/updates exam script
15. Department forwards exam script to Registrar
16. Exam prep (multiple steps)
17. Student writes exam

Potential Solutions

Move the final exam period to the start of each semester by streamlining and simplifying administrative procedures.

- A. Consider using barcode scanners to check-in students at regularly scheduled final exams, and send a standardized, centrally administered follow-up message to anyone who was absent within 24 hours (e.g. University of Toronto Mississauga).
- B. Centralize written requests for deferred exams in a single office for all undergraduate students.
- C. Eliminate the "incomplete coursework" form for each individual student who has requested a deferred exam.
- D. Establish an administrative approval process for routine requests for deferred exams. Pass along complex cases to the appropriate academic review committee, such as for cases of academic misconduct, or outstanding deferred exams from a previous semester.
- E. Communicate to instructors well in advance of the final exam period that a copy of a deferred exam script will be needed by the final grade submission deadline (or another date as appropriate). It should be noted that some universities ask instructors to create an alternate version of their exams at the same time as the original.

Related Policy Issues

In addition to addressing the timing of deferred exams, the university could consider the following policies to help alleviate some of the problems described in this document. This working group recommends adopting all of the following policies/procedures:

- A. Provide a “slip day” at the end of the final exam period for students who miss an exam through no fault of their own, but are otherwise well enough to finish their courses. This would reduce the number of deferred exams in the subsequent semester.
- B. Enforce [existing policy](#) that states “deferred privileges must be completed within the semester immediately following the semester in which the exam/course work was originally missed.” Currently, a notation can be placed on a student’s record to prevent them from registering for subsequent courses until it is removed (i.e. when the deferred privilege has been completed), but this is not enforced consistently and some program counselling offices rarely use it. The notation should be applied by default.
- C. Reduce the number of courses a student can take in a subsequent semester by one for each outstanding deferred exam.
- D. Proceed with approval of the proposed policy to limit the maximum value of a final exam to 50% of a student’s final grade.