

Exam Scheduling

Policy Development Briefing
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Introduction

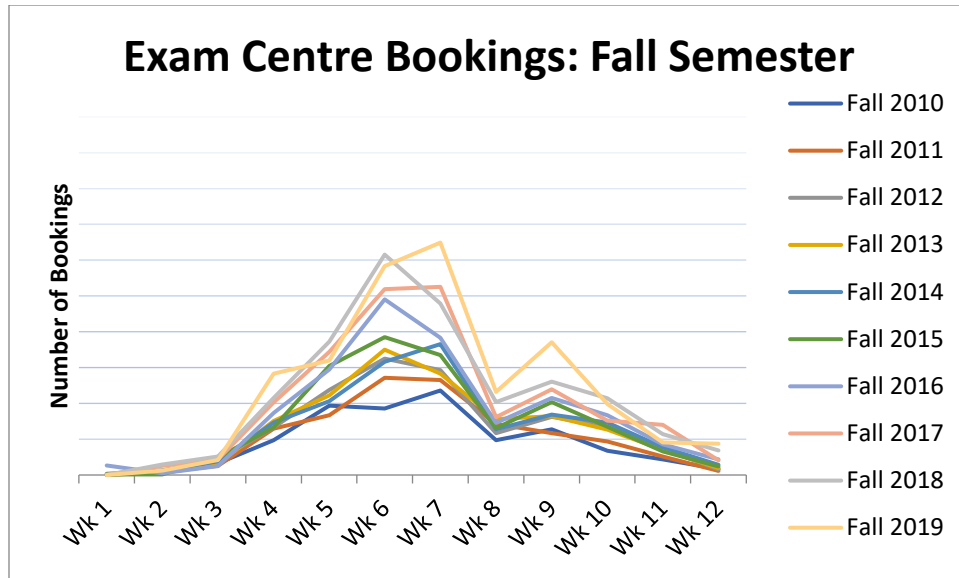
The purpose of this document is to describe on-going and politically-sensitive issues with exam scheduling that have routinely emerged in discussions with members of the campus community – particularly students. As future discussions unfold, this document might serve as a primer on some of the issues and complexity that will affect our decision-making as an institution going forward.

The University of Guelph has two examination scheduling protocols: those that can be scheduled at the discretion of instructors (primarily midterms), and those that are scheduled centrally by the Registrar (primarily final exams). Centrally administered scheduling is intended to minimize conflicts.

Exam scheduling is highly visible within the university community and has an impact on the majority of students and instructors. It also drives many aspects of the academic cycle (e.g. course registration, academic advising, the grade submission deadline, academic consideration, programming to support study skills, the timing of field studies and other research, etc.), and is a major undertaker each semester. It is little surprise, therefore, that exam scheduling can be a politically sensitive matter.

While scheduling might seem like a largely administrative issue, from students' perspectives it can have a major impact on stress levels, health and wellbeing, and academic success. Therefore, any in-depth discussion about problems and opportunities relating to academic evaluations ends up including an exploration of exam scheduling.

Bookings in the SAS Exam Centre might serve as a proxy for the distribution of midterm exams throughout a typical 12-week semester. The graph below illustrates the number of bookings each week in the fall semester over a 10-year period. Note that weeks 6 and 7 are consistently the busiest weeks, but the number of exam bookings is high from weeks 4 through 9.



The most commonly discussed issues with midterm scheduling are:

- Students who have too many midterms all at in a short time frame.
- Midterm exams that are scheduled outside of class time (typically Friday nights or Saturdays).
- Online midterms that are scheduled in a way that is inconsistent with Senate policy (holidays, outside of the academic day, or in conflict with other courses).

The final exam schedule is created using a complete registration dataset for the upcoming semester following the course selection period. All students, instructors and their associated courses are added to scheduling software that generates many permutations to satisfy a series of rules such as:

- No students or instructors can have two final exams at the same time.
- Spread out final exams to the greatest extent possible, for the most students possible.

Across both midterms and final exams, there are also some common external scheduling conflict issues such as:

- Religious observances
- Family responsibilities
- Medical tests or procedures
- Appearing as a witness in court proceedings
- Competitions for varsity athletes

While policy exists to suggest that remedies are possible, frequently the solutions create additional problems and many students find them to be unacceptable (e.g. shifting the weight of a midterm to a final exam, or pursuing a deferred exam in week 5 of the subsequent semester).

The purpose of this document is to acknowledge that discussion about exam scheduling is an on-going and political issue in the life of our community. As future discussions unfold, this document might serve as a primer on some of the issues and complexity that will affect our decision-making going forward.

Known Issues

Anecdotally, one of the most commonly reported problems with exam scheduling is students who find themselves with three exams in a 24-hour period. Often these students are surprised to learn that the university does not have a policy against this scenario and there is no formal mechanism to provide alternatives. While some instructors are able to offer an alternate date by making separate arrangements upon student request, this is not always possible.

When the final exam schedule is created (after course selection), it is free from internal scheduling conflicts. However, every semester there are students who create conflicts for themselves during the “add period” when they change the courses they are taking. The university does not currently have a mechanism that prevents students from enrolling in two courses with exams scheduled at the same time.

Further, with only a few exceptions, students do not generally travel as cohorts through a series of courses. One can think of this as the “six degrees of separation” problem – all courses are related to each other through a small number of jumps. Therefore, there is significant complexity in scheduling because any given course at the undergraduate level can include students in almost any academic program, across all years of study.

Open Exam Content

Exam scheduling is a particularly thorny issue when the content of each exam is confidential until students sit down to write it. When using this approach, instructors may feel compelled to develop alternate versions each time the exam is administered so that students do not have an unfair advantage by learning about what questions to expect from discussing it with their peers.

When there is greater transparency, it becomes easier to offer alternate dates for students with conflicts or other extenuating circumstances as there is less work involved. Here are examples of two alternative approaches:

1. **Driver’s license method:** the stakes are high for driver testing as unqualified drivers present a significant safety risk to themselves and the public. Even still, all of the possible content on these tests is readily available to help guide studying. The goal is not to encourage comprehensive understanding of the material.

In a similar way, there are some courses that provide students with a comprehensive set of questions to help guide studying and practice thought processes modelled in the course, and the exam is composed of a random selection from that set.

This is the same principle students use when studying for the GRE, LSAT, MCAT and other standardized exams.

2. **Culminating exam method:** some courses, particularly at more advanced levels of study, explicitly tell students what questions will be on the exam ahead of time. The assumption is that

in order to effectively answer the questions, students must be well-prepared and have a comprehensive understanding of the course material.

In this scenario, instructors might provide five or ten long-answer questions to help guide studying, and choose only a couple of them for the exam. In some cases, instructors also let students choose which questions to answer, which is consistent with the principles of accessible design,

Both of these approaches require a shift in thinking about exam content. Rather than surprising students with exam questions, there is open exam content that is a part of a larger process that informs learning. This is consistent with values such as transparency, equity, and treating students as partners in the learning process. In an increasingly online and digitally connected world, maintaining secret exam content in courses with hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of students seems like a proposition that is going to be fraught with frustration.

Potential Solution: Scheduling Midterms

For midterms, centrally administered scheduling could help address some of the existing problems. This would present a number of logistical challenges and might initially focus on those courses with larger enrolment numbers (e.g. initially 250+ students, then 100+ students, then 40+ students, then 20+ students). In addition to addressing the immediate needs of students, this would have the added benefit of creating a central list of midterm exam dates/times that could serve as a point of reference for the university community (e.g. for supportive academic programming), and provide data to allow for strategic planning in the future.

Potential Solution: Scheduling Finals

There are currently 44 timeslots in the final exam period (4 per day across 11 days). Each timeslot allows for two hours of exam writing and a 1-hour switchover that is operationally required in large venues.

To distribute final exams more widely, the university would need to consider the following options:

1. Reduce the number of timeslots to 3 per day. This would increase the final exam period from 11 days to 14 days and add one additional time slot.
2. Increase the number of final exam days, which would result in either:
 - a) Exams running 7 days a week by adding exams on the Sunday of the weekend in the middle of the final exam period, and to both Saturday and Sunday at the end of the exam period.¹
 - b) Extending the final exam period to three weeks, thus maintaining Sundays as a day off and possibly adding Saturdays as a day off. This would be consistent with the goal of spreading out exams more and supporting the mental health of the community.

¹ This becomes more problematic in years when there are statutory holidays during the winter final exam period in May.

It should be noted that running exams on Sundays would introduce transportation issues for many students. Guelph Transit operates on a reduced schedule on Sundays, as does inter-city public transit. This would likely have a disproportionate effect on members of equity-seeking groups.

Potential Trade-offs

Changing the final exam schedule would inevitably have some trade-offs, particularly if the final exam period were made longer. The university community would need to decide which (if any) of the following are acceptable compromises:

1. The fall semester begins on the Tuesday after Labour Day rather than the Thursday. This would either shorten Orientation Week, result in more orientation programming that overlaps with classes, or cause the week to begin before the long weekend.
2. Provide a shorter break between the fall and winter semesters.
3. In the future, it could be more difficult to introduce a fall reading week as there are only so many calendar days between Labour Day and the December holidays.
4. There could be additional personnel costs if exams run 7 days a week.

Additional Considerations

The university might consider establishing metrics for monitoring the effects of exam scheduling over time. A specific unit or department would need to be tasked with tracking data and reporting back to the university community from time to time. Potential questions to be addressed might include:

- How does exam scheduling affect the health and wellbeing of students?
- When there are changes, who is impacted and to what degree?
- What are the costs and benefits of the current procedures, and any potential changes?
- To what extent does exam scheduling have an impact on student retention and academic success?