

MATHEMATICAL, PHYSICAL AND LIFE SCIENCES BOARD

ACADEMIC COMMITTEE

Preparing students for examinations: revised guidance

Guidance

For undergraduate students

Departments, as the bodies responsible for examining, will want to reassure themselves that all students are adequately prepared for examinations, understand the criteria by which they will be assessed, and appreciate the range of resources available to support them in this. Where colleges are considered to be the most appropriate providers, departments should write to college tutors to clarify the division of responsibilities in this area. Departments will therefore act in a co-ordinating role with colleges in order to ensure this. The mechanisms for delivery might vary in different subject areas, and guidance might be delivered directly by departments or through tutorials and classes in colleges, or a combination of both. This might include one or more face-to-face sessions or other mechanisms whereby:

- a) students' attention is drawn to the Examination Conventions; degree class descriptors and any other guidance on what is expected of an exam answer; past examination papers; and past examiners' reports. If this is not done in a face-to-face session it must be clearly communicated in writing (if relying on a detailed entry in the Course Handbook the students should be reminded explicitly of the existence and location of this information).
- b) good practice in approaching examinations and different types of question is discussed;
- c) students are able to consider, or even mark for themselves, examples of (anonymised) answers to past exam questions (e.g. from collections, which often use past Finals/Prelims questions) in tutorials or classes, perhaps at different levels (e.g. a First, a borderline First/2.1), to help them contextualise the marking criteria. As this involves showing past answers from students, the permission of those students should first be sought¹. In some departments this may include the provision of skeleton model answers and marking schemes for a small number of illustrative past exam questions. During discussion of past questions departments may wish to warn students of the danger in assuming they will be able to use the answers to past questions as perfect answers to questions in their own written papers.

¹ The Information Officer in the Council Secretariat, which advises on Data Protection Matters and responds to FOI requests, has confirmed that making a student's past exam responses available to other students for educational purposes is compliant with the Data Protection Act, providing a student gives permission for his/her work to be used as an exemplar.

For taught postgraduate students.

Sessions should be provided for all students which will best enable them to familiarise themselves with the format of the examinations and fully understand the criteria by which they will be assessed. However, given the compressed nature of PGT courses and the greater weight given to dissertations or projects, this may be on a different model to undergraduate courses.

Context

In 2010 the Division issued guidance on preparing students for examinations, with the aim of contextualising exam conventions and marking schemes, such that students had a greater awareness and understanding of how they would be assessed. Student feedback from surveys and discussions at the Divisional Undergraduate Joint Consultative Forum (UJCF) had shown dissatisfaction with the provision of feedback and the clarity of marking schemas. Students also appeared to be sometimes unaware of the range of resources which departments had in place to support them in examinations, and of the significance of examination conventions.

In 2013 the Division reviewed the methods departments were using to prepare students for examinations. The review demonstrated that all departments were actively preparing students for examinations through a variety of methods, including workshops and lectures on good practice in examinations; workshops on how to approach different kinds of questions, with model answers being worked through; and presentations dedicated to explaining conventions and marking criteria. Some departments devolved responsibility for going through worked answers to colleges. Some departments had systematically increased the amount of information provided in Examiners' Reports in order to help students understand what was expected.

Divisional Academic Committee agreed that the range of support provided was important for preparing students for examinations. However, it was agreed that the existing guidance needed to be changed because it was not necessary to provide a specific session dedicated to conventions alone, and because some had expressed concerns about how to ensure that the provision of worked answers did not lead students to neglect the wider material. It had also been recognised that much work on preparing students for examinations was undertaken by colleges rather than by departments. The Committee therefore formulated the guidance above, building on good practice in place in the Division.