

# Imperial College London

## ASSESSMENT AND COVID-19: RATIONALE

1. The College is facing an unprecedented situation with the growing impact of COVID-19 and has had to take some difficult decisions to respond to these challenges. These have been made in consultation with staff and student representatives.
2. In approaching the discussion about the delivery of assessment this year the following key factors have been considered:
  - (a) The need to ensure the wellbeing of our students;
  - (b) As part of this, the desire to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on progression and award;
  - (c) The need to maintain the quality of our degree provision in order to maintain our graduates' employability and ability to qualify for further study;
  - (d) This implied the need to ensure our students can demonstrate the learning outcomes;
  - (e) And further the need to comply with the standards set by regulatory bodies, such as the professional bodies that recognise our degrees, and the Office for Students.
3. In order to achieve the above, the College has established an Education Group, with membership that include student, academic, and administrative representatives, to consider the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of our education, including assessment, and to enable informed decisions to be made. For formal written examinations, the following alternatives have been discussed:
  - (a) To move to remote assessment;
  - (b) To move the examination period and examinations wholesale to later in the year;
  - (c) To replace the approved assessment with alternative assessment;
  - (d) To cancel examinations for either progression or completely;
  - (e) To change examinations to pass/fail.
4. After careful consideration, the College concluded that remote assessment best met the objectives.
5. *Moving to remote assessment:* this option allows us to graduate and progress our students in the timescales they are expecting and gives our graduating students the opportunity to meet requirements for further study or employment. It allows us to follow regulations, policies and procedures already in place, rather than introducing new regulations at short notice. We can make use of the examination papers that have already been set (acknowledging that for some papers and disciplines there might need to be some changes), along with the departmental decision to use the option to *viva*. It also has the benefit of being of the same form of familiar assessment as that already advertised, just not in the venue expected. The quality of the assessment has already been assured through our checking and external examination procedure, whereas this quality process could not be achieved with new assessments. Importantly, the same exam format means we can compare performance to previous years' more consistently to ensure we do not disadvantage

students. The *viva* can be used to validate that the assessment method reflects the understanding of a student and aid the decision for promotion to the higher classification in borderline decisions.

6. In addition, this option allows us to provide consistent examination transcripts that may be required for further study and employment. There was discussion of allowing a longer time for the examinations (24 or 48 hours) but, for many disciplines, the time-limited nature is part of the assessment. Also, it was felt that, if a longer time was allocated, students would feel obliged to work on the paper for as long as they could in order to improve their mark, evidence indicates this does not make a material difference to the final marks achieved, and reduces the time available for breaks and other study. Given the number of assessments in some programmes, longer assessments would result in an examination period with very few breaks, leading to an unsustainable workload for the students (with detrimental effects on students' mental health and wellbeing), when compared to completing the assessments in a time-limited fashion. A longer time limit may also disadvantage those in different time zones, who will feel obliged to work on the assessment from the time it becomes available, and hence this may result in students working through the night in some cases.
7. The College acknowledges that any change to assessment will have a serious impact on our students and we have put in place additional mechanisms of support at a departmental level and have extended the mitigation circumstances criteria in order to support those students experiencing difficulties. Student Support Services have established mechanisms to ensure we continue to provide support remotely for all students. The Education Groups have ensured a consistent approach across faculties to protect the degree programmes and their integrity and standards, and to reward the students for their hard work while minimising the impact on them during a difficult period.
8. Below, we present the reasons why options (b)-(e) were not selected as the preferred method of assessment:
  - 8.1 *The option to move the examinations:* rescheduling examinations to later in the year was not supported for several reasons. The government is trying to move the peak and spread of the impact of the pandemic ([Imperial COVID-19 Response Team modelling](#)); this implies the impact of the pandemic might be long lasting and we cannot guarantee that we would be able to deliver the assessments on campus later in the year. Other issues with moving exams are accommodation; additional expenses to travel back (if travel is permitted); a potential impact on other activities (e.g. internships, jobs and further study); and having to make decisions about progression for all students very close to the start of the next academic year, leaving students very little time for planning. We schedule a large number of examinations during the summer term and it will not be possible to accommodate all the examinations in a compressed period later in the year without increasing the pressure and uncertainty on students. All progressing students would need to pass at first attempt in order to stay with their cohort.
  - 8.2 *The option to assess by alternative methods:* there was concern students would need guidance on the different form of assessment as well as sample assessments (as per our normal practice); that it would not meet the learning outcomes; and it was a change to the advertised assessment, which would result in students not receiving the educational outcomes that they were expecting from their programme of study. It was felt a change to

the format of assessment would be very unsettling for students who would already be coping with significant changes. Our students (after the first year) are used to our format of written examinations and have access to past papers to practise. A change to truly open-book examinations would remove the basic seen content that exists in closed-book examinations; removing this content could be disadvantageous to students as they would not have the opportunity to demonstrate basic mastery of the material. Students have already studied for weeks preparing for the upcoming examinations and assessments, and it was considered a significant change would undermine these efforts.

- 8.3 *The option to cancel examinations:* in most undergraduate programmes, all years contribute towards classification. Cancelling progression examinations would result in an increased weighting of the other years, adding stress to future years' assessments. The hard work completed by students during the year would not be recognised and there is significant anecdotal evidence to suggest this would leave a substantial fraction of the student body disadvantaged. Cancelling the final year examinations would result in no degree award as we could not meet the current national Framework for Higher Education Qualifications degree credit requirements, so it is simply a non-starter, as we feel it is important that we give our students the opportunity to graduate this year. There was also concern this option would mean we could not ensure our students demonstrated the learning outcomes and thus the requirements of the degree.
- 8.4 *The option to change examinations to pass/fail:* this would lead to issues with classification as we would have to use remaining assessments to determine degree classification. This would be unfair on those students who were relying on the performance of these examinations to improve their classifications. It would put a weighting on the remaining modules that was not intended in the programme design. Allocating marks demonstrates student performance in individual modules, which may be important in the application and requirements for further study and employment. The hard work of the students would not be recognised with a mark that contributes to their overall result. Again, there is significant anecdotal evidence to suggest this would leave a substantial fraction of the student body disadvantaged. We also discussed allowing departments a limited number of pass/fail modules, but this would be impossible to apply consistently across College, and students might feel they were treated unfairly if the marks associated with modules that were allocated to pass/fail would have improved their results.
9. The College has considered all the options very carefully, in the context of our desire to make the right decisions for our students, both in the immediate future and for their longer-term benefit. Student feedback and consultation with ICU has been pivotal in refining our guidance and the associated provisions being put in place to mitigate for the impact of the pandemic. Departments are now working hard to implement the remote teaching and assessments planned for the summer term to ensure that we can graduate and progress our students with the results they deserve.