

Exam past paper discussion

A paper by Doug Hunt, Deputy President (Education)

Background

This paper has been put together to discuss if Imperial College Union should have a stance on the distribution of exam past papers to our members.

Since computers and the internet have changed the face of higher education, it has also changed the ease at which students can distribute their notes, non-assessed problem sheet solutions and departments' exam past paper questions and outline answers. This has led to more organised "underground" sharing of these resources in some student communities, while not the entire student body has access to them.

From my own personal experience, I have witnessed that some departments have different policies on whether they distribute past paper questions and outline answers, with the later normally being more restricted. For example I know that the Chemistry department give out the last five years of past papers to their students, after their reps asked for this, while other departments will not give any out. These inconsistencies annoy students who are studying in the departments that do not distribute any of these papers.

The College picked up on this issue in the last academic year and as such issued a policy to make sure there is a minimum each department should meet for UG and PGT courses. The wording below was passed by College Senate on 27 February 2013.

That the policy stated that Departments should provide their external examiners with model answers to questions and that, as a minimum, Departments should provide their students with outline answers to specimen questions, or illustrative examples of how students might address the question. Where students were required to undertake MCQ examinations, Departments should provide examples of the format of such examinations and state whether the MCQ examination was negatively marked.

The departmental staff views I have heard for not giving out the past paper questions and outline answers are:

- Giving outline answers to students only teaches them how to learn within the exam format and doesn't make them learn the actual material.
- If students can't answer the questions without the outline answers, they can always approach the lecturer or an academic and they will help them work through the question.
- Staff can only set a maximum number of questions based on the material taught, so if they give out all or a large number of past papers, they can't ask any new questions and students know the answers.

I have heard student arguments for past paper questions and outline answers to be given out by the department as:

- The questions and outline answers help us know if we fully understand the material. Without the practice on the questions and to see if our answers are correct we don't know if we fully understand the material.
- Some lecturers don't reply to their emails (quickly enough or at all) and practically not every student can approach the lecturer to see if their answer is correct.

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- With the increased popularity of the internet and students owning a personal computer, some student communities have more access to past papers than all of the student body studying that course. This puts some students at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to sitting the exam.

Discussion

Please discuss what you think Imperial College Union should have a policy on?

- Should we try and make the College pass a standard number of years' worth of past papers being distributed to all students?
- Should we mobilise the students to distribute their papers to all students in their department? This could be done by Departmental Societies and student representatives.