

Actuarial Society Special Update – Corona Virus – Update 4

Introduction

This Update is exclusively focused on the forthcoming ASSA examination session and is in response to a series of emails – some supportive and others not – from students and other members of the Society.

We are all in uncharted territory with the progress of this pandemic. While we can watch developments in other countries there is no certainty that a similar trajectory will be followed here. In order to meet the needs of the Society, the staff in consultation with the President, Council and other member structures aim to be decisive and proactive in our decision making while retaining the flexibility to adapt decisions considering emerging circumstances.

All decisions are made in the context of certain underlying principles and within the constraints of our available resources.

Principles

The core principles underlying our response to the pandemic are:

- To continue to serve our members in a manner that does not increase their risk to CV.
- To serve the public interest wherever possible.

Regarding the delivery of tuition, examinations and other events, our focus is primarily on the first principle.

Inclusiveness

Central to any decision concerning delivering exams and tuition is the issue of inclusiveness. At the start of the lockdown, we faced the critical decision of whether to find a way to deliver examinations to those who are willing and able to sit them or to only deliver a solution if it was available to all members. This is a core decision on which we consulted with the Education Board and Council. The clear view from these structures is that we must go ahead to find a solution to deliver exams during this semester. We are acutely aware that not all students will be able to benefit equally

from any solution and that there will be socio-economic selection with some students being less likely to be able to sit the exams if they occur during the lockdown.

Considering other similar bodies around the world, some are following a similar route to ourselves while others are cancelling or postponing their exams. In most cases, those cancelling exams did so primarily because their entire exam session was scheduled for April and they did not have time to develop an alternative solution.

Responsible corporate citizen

It is possible that the lockdown period could have expired and not been renewed by the time our exams are scheduled. However, even if this is the case, the risk of being infected would not have evaporated. Therefore, even if there are no formal social distancing guidelines in place, it is our view that it will be socially irresponsible to bring students together in a single venue for physical exams. ASSA will, therefore, not host examinations in a physical setting during the first semester of 2020.

Scope

This document refers explicitly to examinations managed by ASSA. Those outsourced to the IFoA will be run in accordance with the IFoA rules for this session. The IFoA have cancelled A111, A212 and A214 but will be sitting A112, A113 and F106. These examinations are out of scope for this document.

Accessibility

Should the lockdown still be enforced when the examinations are written, there is nothing ASSA can do to increase student access to the examinations. However, should the lockdown no longer be enforced, we have made provision with our regular examination computer providers to have computers available to students who do not have access to computers at ASSA's expense.

ASSA will not be making physical venues available to students this exam session. However, prior experience with the computer-based examinations for A212 and A214 has shown that employers have been willing to accommodate their staff who do not have access to appropriate exam venues.

ASSA exam solution

ASSA has contracted an internationally renowned examination proctoring service to provide online invigilation services for these examinations. Our chosen partner has been deployed widely by tertiary education institutions (including at least one ASSA accredited university) as well as professional bodies and other organisations. Their

approach is not new and was first recommended to ASSA at our 2013 Education Seminar. The exams will all be written out of the Moodle Learning Platform that students will be familiar with from our normative skills programme.

For each set of subjects there are differences in how the exam will be conducted depending on the nature of the examination. More detailed instructions are available elsewhere for each subject and will be communicated directly to registered students ahead of the exams.

The essence of the system is the remote invigilator will authenticate the student at the start of the session, check the exam room and monitor the student during the exam through the camera and microphone for anything that may constitute assistance or cheating during the examination. The system has a proven track record of being able to deliver credible exam sessions.

Cheating risks

There is always a level of cheating risk in examinations. Through our established network of trusted invigilators, this risk has been extremely low in our traditional exam sessions. There is an immediate perception that there must be a greater risk of cheating in the online exams.

While all members of ASSA are bound by the Professional Code, we are aware to the fact that a minority of students may attempt to cheat during the examination. We have engaged extensively with the examiners for each subject to understand how students can gain the greatest advantage through cheating then engaged with them as well as our invigilation partner to find ways to minimise the risk to the integrity of the exam session. There is still a month of testing until the commencement of the exam session and this risk will be extensively tested during this period.

Multiple screens

Some students have requested to have two screens for the exam session. This will not be possible as this will increase the risk of cheating in the exam as the camera cannot monitor activity for both screens. Students will, however, be able to split their screens to keep the question at the top of the screen when the solutions are typed into a tool other than Moodle (e.g. for N211).

Defer exam session

As it is, there is barely enough time between the release of results from one exam session and the commencement of exams for the next session for many students to be

able to make a serious attempt at a new subject in the next session. A deferral would therefore primarily be of value to students who are repeating a subject in the next session and not those who are successful in the deferred exam. This would then compromise the next session when conditions on the ground may be more favourable.

Cancel the session

This would have the advantage that all students would be treated equally, and all students would have a potential 6-month delay added to their qualification time. There is, however, no certainty that the social distancing and even lockdown associated with CV will not still be a factor for the next exam session or future sessions. Living and working in an increasingly digitalised and virtual economy – particularly the financial services industry – it is my view that it would be a gross dereliction of duty if we had not looked to find a viable solution for exams that works for as many students as possible.

What if ...

Our underlying objective is to deliver a credible fair examination process for all who are willing and able to write. What we have here is the core of the process under which exams will be operating. We will be open to consider modifications to increase the number of students able to participate provided it does not undermine the integrity of the exam session should changing circumstances allow. This will, however, not include ASSA hosting physical exam sessions.

Student feedback

We have fielded many queries from students – some sent to the Member Engagement team and other directly to the President. We have also conducted a survey of all student members to assess their capacity and appetite for online exams this session.

There are a range of different views ranging from strongly in favour to strongly opposed. The balance of feedback has been in favour of writing exams with the bulk of correspondence to the office focused on whether students have appropriate equipment to meet the examination standards.

We do appreciate the strong contrary views expressed by students and other members concerned about the limitations in access to examinations, the lack of an appropriate space to study or write the exam during the lockdown and concerns over the integrity of the exam session. While there is nothing that we can do to make up lost study time or to increase accessibility should the lockdown still be in place on the exam dates, we hope that, in collaboration with employers, we will be able to help improve access by the exam dates. We view risks of cheating very seriously and, while we appreciate the

integrity and professionalism of most of our members, will take all necessary steps to minimise the opportunity for successful cheating.

Deferral or cancellation

Students unwilling or unable to write the exam this session will be offered an unconditional refund or a financial credit carried forward to the next sessions. Refunds will only be paid to the individual or organisation that paid ASSA for the exam.

Conclusion

We are living in abnormal times that require organisations and individuals to be flexible as they adapt to the changing conditions. That is the underlying approach that ASSA is taking to this exam session. While we appreciate that the proposed solution will not be feasible for all students (especially if the lockdown stays in effect), we remain fully committed to delivering a credible, fair exam session to the greatest possible number of students.

Regards



Mike McDougall