Permitting December Exams for Year 3 and Year 4 Courses
M Rovatsos, Teaching Committee 4th December 2013

Motivation
Students persistently complain about the high exam load in the May exam diet, especially for Year 3. Apart from the workload issue, this also causes to students to focus on last-minute revision (“cramming”) months after the course has finished. It also arguably makes them focus excessively on smaller parts of coursework in Semester 1 and disengage with lecture and tutorial material. Historically, Large Practicals and the Hons/MInf Project work have led us to prohibit December exams in Year 3 and Year 4. For Large Practicals the deadlines are now significantly earlier, and due to the increased cross-listing of level 9/10 courses across years, students in Year 4 also now have more flexibility in balancing Hons project work at the end of Semester 1 with exams by picking courses accordingly in Year 3. These changes suggest that we may want to reconsider our policy on the matter.

Proposal
The proposal is to allow Semester 1 courses labelled as “normal year taken 3” or “normal year taken 4” to be examined in December with prior approval from Year Organiser (to check against overall assessment pattern in the respective year) and Head of Teaching (to check for logistical and administrative soundness). Examination in December is already possible for MSc-only courses (“normal year taken 5”), even if these are open to year 4 students per DPT. Permitting this in principle would naturally extend to those courses if re-classified to “normal year taken 4”.

Impact
Students and PTs would obtain more substantial performance feedback earlier in the year, allowing problems to be addressed earlier. Courses offering December examination would not have to prepare separate VUG exams. Effort into exam preparation and scrutiny, marking and exam board preparation would be spread out more evenly across the academic year.

The examination diet in December is shorter, naturally leading to shorter revision times. Board of Examiners meetings would be required in January, though these could be rather small. This requires that ITO receive marks in time to prepare BoE documentation. ITO also need sufficient notice to plan for this, lecturers would need to specify which exam diet they want to use in good time before the start of session, probably around July.

Further considerations
Currently, this change could affect as many as nine Year 3 courses and nine Year 4 courses. It might also affect up to seven Year 5 level 11 if they were re-classified as Year 4. If demand for this turns out to be very high, some courses may be encouraged to revert to coursework-only, or more exam-like coursework (e.g. midterm exams). This would require BoS approval much earlier in the year, so lecturers should be asked to provide their preferences about this around December (once). We would hope that this could be initially trialled on a small number of popular Year 3/4 courses.