



Senate

Paper title	Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2024
Outcome requested	The Senate is asked to consider this report, which discusses the number, type and source of suspensions considered in 2023-24 and considers means for the reduction of situations resulting in suspensions.
Points to note and further information	<p>A report on suspensions of regulations is submitted annually to the Senate and the Education Quality and Standards Board to provide assurance on the proper running of the process and to flag concerns and common themes. Suspension may be requested where a situation arises in which the normal application of the regulations would either be manifestly unfair to one or more students, or where a situation has arisen that was not foreseen by the regulations (that is, where a change to the regulations is needed, but action is required on behalf of the current cohort). These cases should be extremely rare, and the situations leading to them are normally avoidable.</p> <p>Numbers remained broadly static, with a decrease from 70 in 2022-23 to 69 in 2023-24. Queen Mary had anticipated a continued downward trajectory from a peak of 137 in the pandemic, especially given that 2023-24 was the first year in some time without disruptions to education to potentially necessitate suspensions. The External Member of the Degree Examination Boards commented in 2023 on the high numbers of suspensions, and especially on cases that were avoidable – as numbers have not fallen this remains a concern.</p> <p>Although the absolute numbers have not shifted significantly there are points to note on the nature and distribution of suspensions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspensions linked to the delivery of incorrect/unapproved assessment schemes increased somewhat both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the whole. There was a more significant increase in cases concerned with programme design and delivery. was a commensurate decrease in suspensions related to progression, classification, and award. • Humanities and Social Sciences historically accounted for the highest proportion of suspensions, normally by some distance (there were reasons for this, explored in the report). While H&SS still had the highest number of suspensions, the difference between the three Faculties is now much smaller. A significant decrease in H&SS cases in 2023-24 was balanced by increases in S&E and FMD. • 20 schools/institutes/units fell within the scope of this report in 2023-24. Five of those 20 accounted for 55% of all suspensions, while the 12 with the lowest numbers counted jointly for only 14% of the total.

<p>Questions to consider</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the number of suspensions be reduced? • Should there be consequences for avoidable suspensions of regulations? If so, what might these be? • Why do certain schools/institutes consistently have high numbers of suspensions? How can this be addressed? • Does the Senate agree with the proposal to realign the reporting year to match the academic year?
<p>Regulatory/statutory reference points</p>	<p>The paper concerns exceptions to the standard application of the Academic Regulations (the main regulatory document for the management of quality and standards in relation to our academic provision), programme regulations, and module regulations.</p> <p>The Academic Regulations are a primary means by which Queen Mary ensures and evidences compliance with the regulatory requirements of the Office for Students, and in particular the B Conditions. Failure to uphold the regulations could in some cases have the potential to be seen as presenting a risk to registration if this suggest that standards and expectations are not being consistently met.</p>
<p>Strategy and risk</p>	<p>Security of academic standards and quality relies upon the approved frameworks being applied consistently. There should be no exceptions. This paper details action taken to address those exceptions that did arise.</p>
<p>Reporting/consideration route for the paper</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Quality and Standards Board • Senate
<p>Author</p>	<p>Simon Hayter, Head of Academic Quality and Standards</p>

Suspension of Regulations: Annual Summary Report 2024

Background

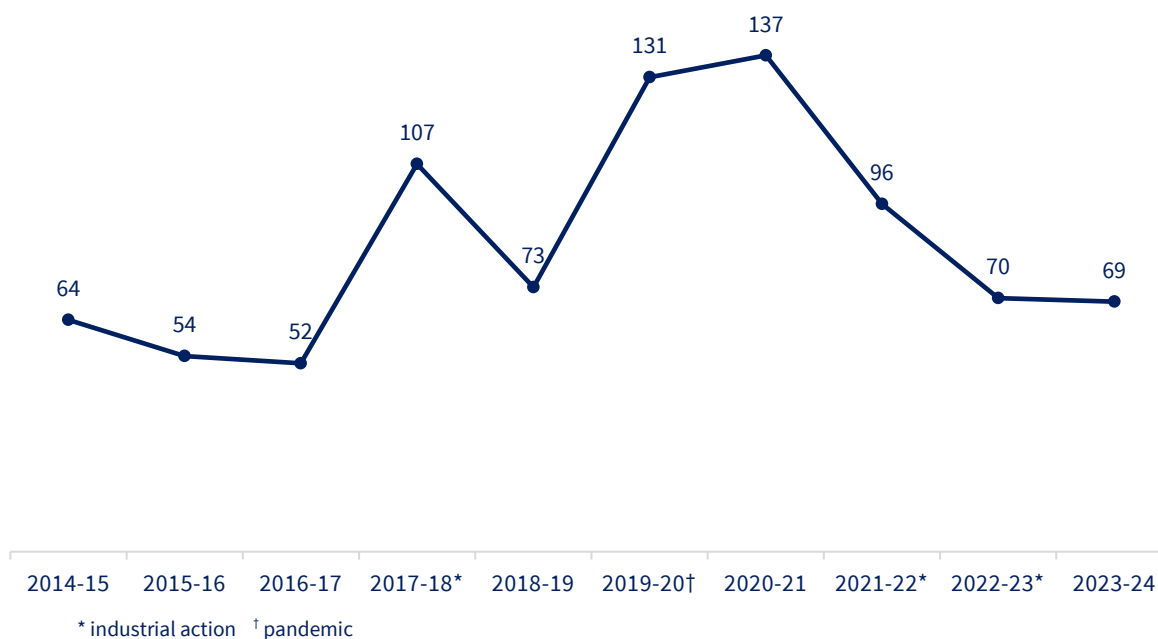
1. A report on suspensions of regulations is submitted annually to the Education Quality and Standards Board (EQSB) and to the Senate. Suspension may be requested where a situation arises in which the normal application of the regulations would either be manifestly unfair to one or more students, or where a situation has arisen that was not foreseen by the regulations (that is, where a change to the regulations is needed, but action is required on behalf of the current cohort). These cases should be extremely rare, and the situations leading to them are normally avoidable.
2. In practice, numbers are high and the EQSB and the Senate have repeatedly expressed concerns over the number and nature of cases. Queen Mary's External Member of the Degree Examination Board expressed concern at the high numbers in 2023. Most suspension requests seek to retrospectively validate an error in delivery rather than to proactively make reasonable adjustments as intended by the scope of the process.
3. To obtain a suspension requires support from the appropriate Subject and Degree Examination Boards for assessment issues, or else from the Head of School/Institute Director or equivalent. Approval is given by the nominees of the President and Principal (currently the Director of Governance and Legal Services and/or the Director of Registry Services) on the delegated authority of the Senate. All requests are passed through Governance and Legal Services (DGLS) and screened at that stage, so almost all cases that reach the stage of a formal request are approved; those that would be rejected seldom reach the stage of formal consideration.
4. This report covers the period 1 October 2023 to 30 September 2024. Graphics showing a breakdown of requests by faculty and school/institute are provided, together with a summary of common themes.

Planned changes for the 2024-25 report

5. The reporting year for suspensions of regulations is based on the timing of examination boards, some of which take place after the end of the academic year to which their business refers. Historically, most suspensions related to individual student circumstances that were considered at those examination boards; this is no longer the case, and the majority now relate to issues of programme/module delivery or student registrations.
6. It is proposed that the 2024-25 report will adjust the reporting period to 1 August – 31 July to align with the academic year and standardise reporting. To allow for the continuation of longitudinal reporting, suspension requests from the overlapping period of 1 August – 30 September 2025 will be reported twice, against both the 2024-25 (as dummy data) and 2025-26 academic years (with clear explanatory notes).

University-level data

Figure 1: Suspensions of regulations over time (2014-15 – 2023-24)



- There were 69 requests for suspension of regulations in 2023-24. There were 70 requests in 2022-23, so there has been no material change in overall numbers. As noted last year, these figures remain above acceptable levels given that most cases were avoidable.
- 2020-21 had the highest number of suspensions on record (137), following a previous record high in 2019-20 (131) when Queen Mary needed to suspend many regulations mid-year to mitigate the effects on education of the pandemic. Numbers have dropped since that time, but significant issues remain; while that drop is welcome these numbers should not be regarded as unalloyed good news. A greater and more sustained drop was expected, especially given that no major disruptive events in 2023-24 necessitated suspensions.
- Historically, Queen Mary made wider use of ‘special regulations’ with individual variances between programmes. These were difficult to administer and led to many errors. A major piece of work to harmonise the regulations contributed to a significant drop in suspensions between 2013 and 2017. Harmonised regulations can be communicated much more easily to students and staff, allowing for clear and consistent messaging and delivery. Programme-specific “special regulations” for “non-standard programmes” are once again on the rise and are one factor in the increased number of suspensions in recent years. Disproportionate numbers of suspensions relate to “non-standard” provision.

Figure 2: Avoidable and unavoidable suspensions 2023-24



- It is always the case that most suspensions are avoidable, but there has been a significant increase in the proportion of unambiguously avoidable cases this year. 90% (62 of 69) were avoidable, compared with 74% in 2022-23. The broad categories of suspension are discussed later in this report, but it is notable that there has been an increase in errors made by Education Committees leading to issues in teaching and assessment either through poor design and planning or through errors in paperwork. As in past years there are also significant numbers of cases where individual colleagues delivered content or - most commonly - assessment schemes that differed from the approved specifications.

Faculty-level data

Figure 3: Suspensions by Faculty 2023-24

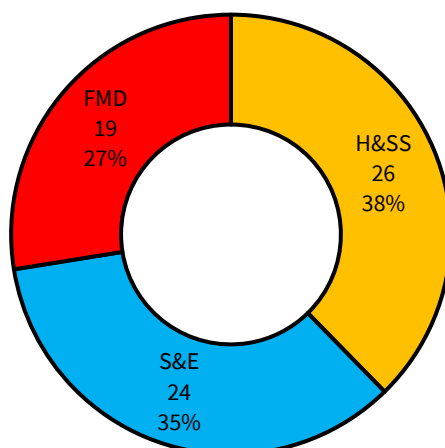
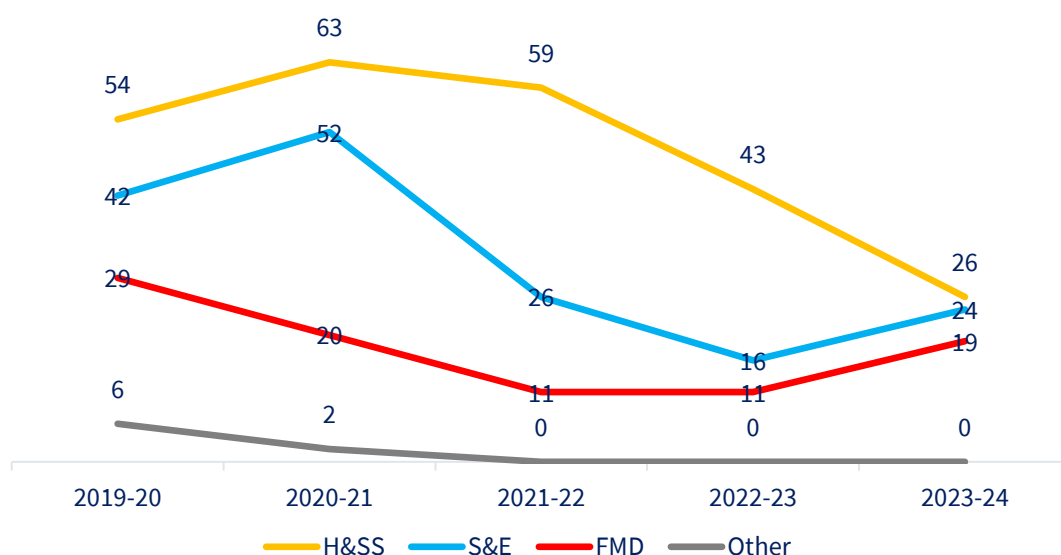


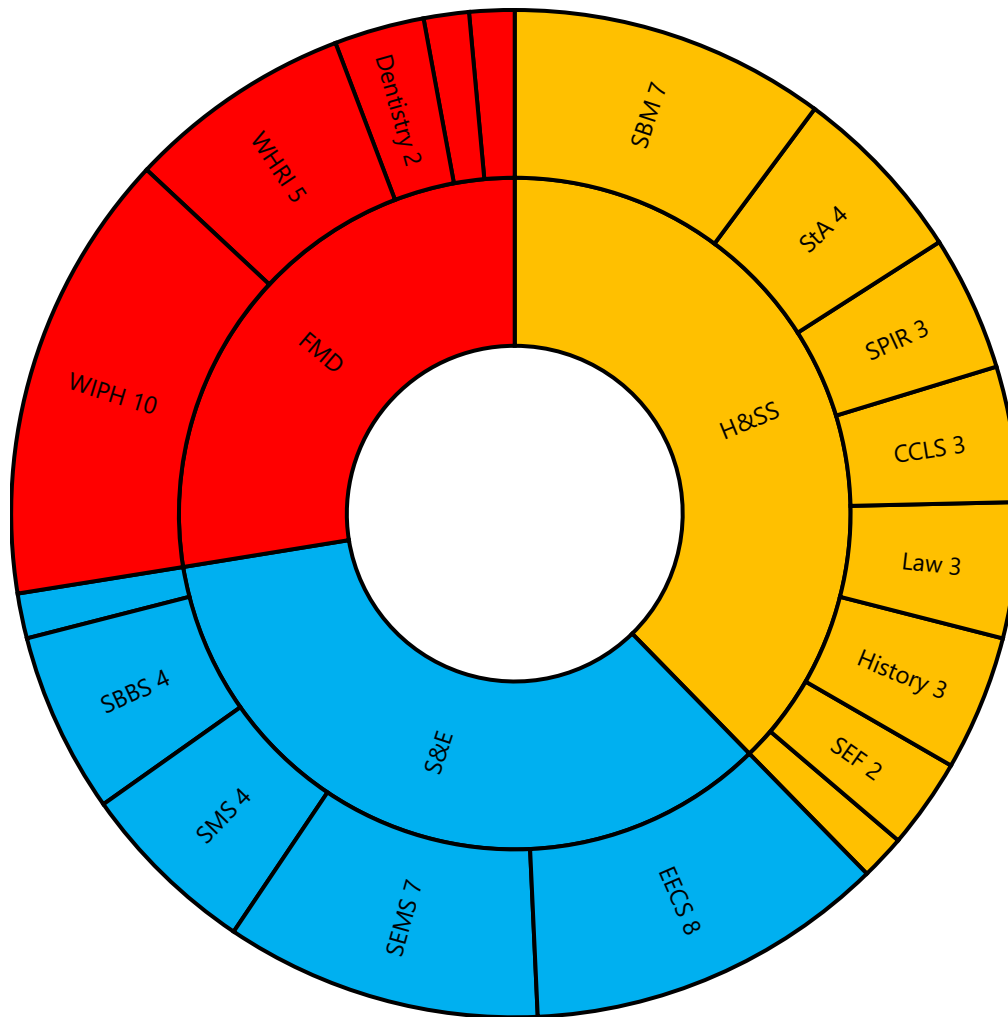
Figure 4: Suspensions by Faculty over time (2019-20 – 2023-24)



11. Relative proportions of suspensions between Faculties have shifted somewhat in recent years. Historically H&SS has tended to account for a significant majority of suspensions, partly due to the higher numbers of schools, modules, and programmes, which create greater scope for issues to arise either through error, necessity, or chance. The three Faculties have been converging over time and there is now relatively little difference between them in terms of absolute numbers. The significant decrease in H&SS cases is good news but was balanced out last year by rises in S&E and FMD. In each of the three cases a subset of one or two schools/ institutes was responsible for a significant proportion of the Faculty's suspensions.

School/institute-level data

Figure 5: Suspensions by school/institute 2023-24

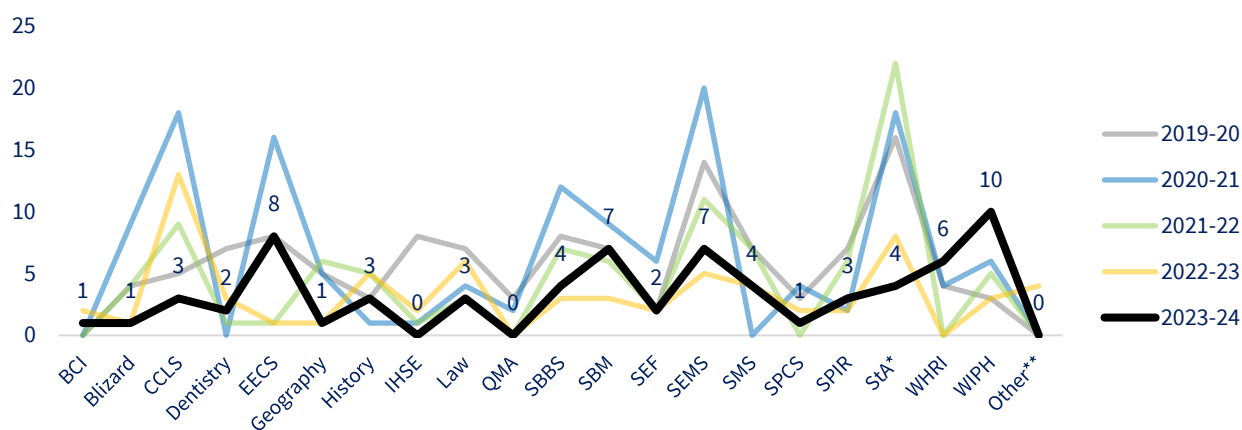


12. Figure 5 shows a breakdown of suspensions by school/institute in 2023-24.

- The Institute of Health Sciences Education (IHSE) and the School of English and Drama (SED) had no suspensions. The four School of the Arts (StA) suspensions originated in the School of Languages, Linguistics and Film (SLLF).
- Two of the three suspensions from the Centre for Commercial Law Studies (CCLS) related to modules managed by the Department of Law but contributing to CCLS' programmes.
- Six of the eight suspensions from the School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) related to degree apprenticeship provision.
- Four suspensions related to transnational provision – one each from the Schools of Engineering and Materials Science (SEMS), Electronic Engineering and Computer Science (EECS), Biological and Behavioural Sciences (SBBS), and the Department of Law.
- There were no suspensions relating to non-Faculty provision (Queen Mary Academy, University of London Institute in Paris, Professional Services).

13. The five schools/institutes with the highest numbers of suspensions account for 55% of all suspensions in 2023-24. These are: WIPH (10), EECS (8), SBM (7), SEMS (7), and WHRI (6). The eight highest (adding SBBS, SMS, and StA, with four suspensions each) account for 86%, with the remaining 12 jointly counting for only 14%.

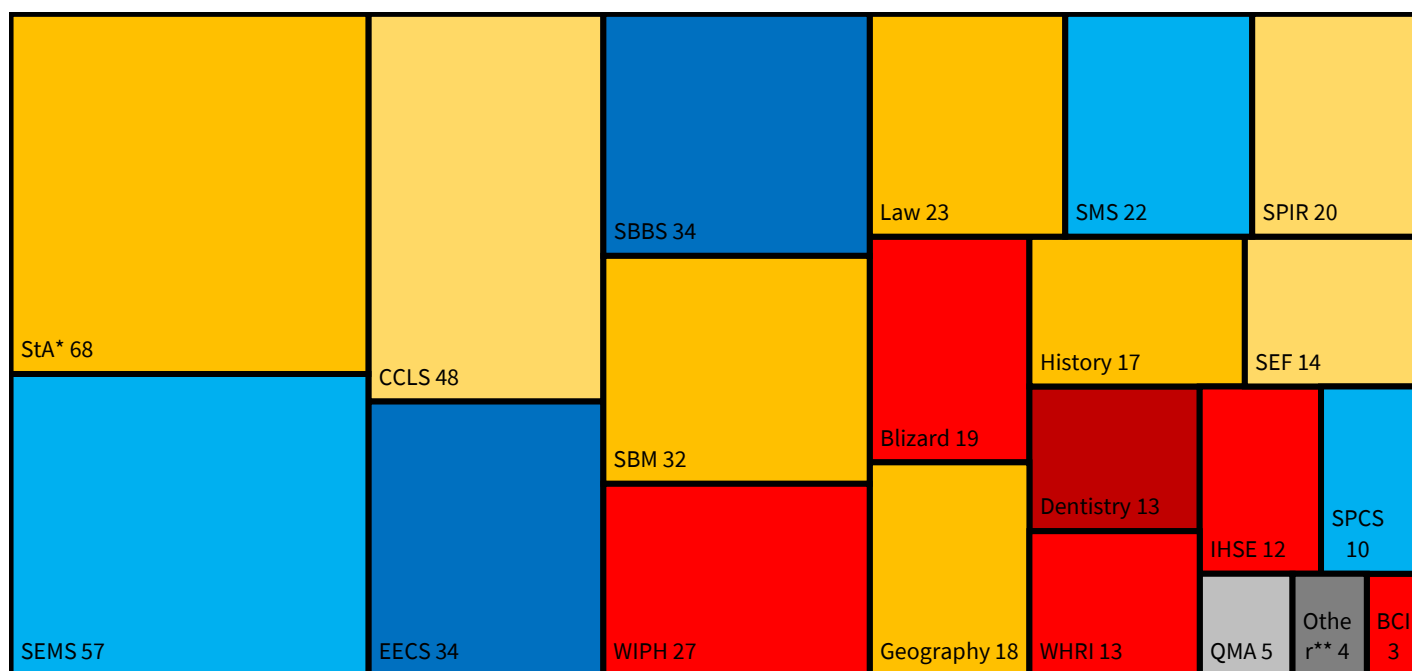
Figure 6: Suspensions by school/institute: comparisons over time (2019-20 – 2023-24)



* Figures for the School of the Arts (StA) are the combined totals of those of Languages, Linguistics and Film (SLLF) and English and Drama (SED).¹
 ** 'Other' in 2022-23 comprised two suspensions made by H&SS as a whole, one for the SEFP, and one for ULIP.

14. WIPH and WHRI counted for 80% of FMD suspensions. EECS and SEMS counted for 63% of S&E suspensions. SBM counted for 38% of H&SS suspensions. Figure 6 shows the distribution of suspensions by school/institute over time and shows that SBM, SEMS, and WIPH are regularly among schools/institutes with higher incidences of suspension (though it should be noted that four of the seven SEMS suspensions in 2023-24 related to modules for which it took over management from another school).

Figure 7: Suspensions by school/institute: total suspensions over time (2019-20 – 2023-24)



* Figures for the School of the Arts (StA) are the combined totals of those of Languages, Linguistics and Film (SLLF) and English and Drama (SED).¹
 ** The category 'Other' comprises four suspensions from 2022-23 - two Faculty-level suspensions from H&SS, one from the SEFP, and one from ULIP.

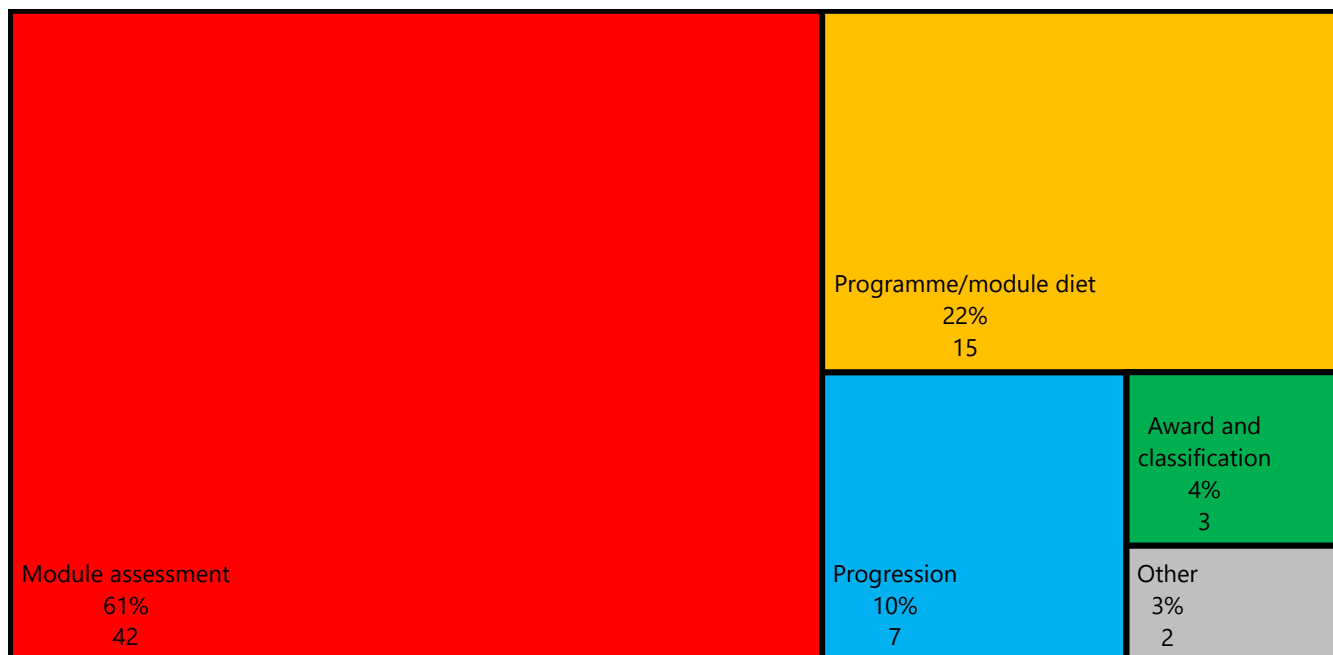
15. The collated figures for the past five years in Figure 7 show that StA, SEMS, CCLS, EECS, SBBS, SBM, and WIPH had the highest total numbers of suspensions. The StA figures are an amalgam of SLLF and SED; 55 of the 68 cases related to SLLF, and 13 to SED. In the cases of StA, CCLS and (until 2023-24) EECS there had been a significant decline in numbers and most cases are from early in the period under review, suggesting positive change in those three areas.

¹ Historical data from the School of the Arts:

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	5-year total
SED	2	2	7	2	0	13
SLLF	14	16	15	6	4	55

Suspension details

Figure 8: Suspensions by category 2023-24



16. Figure 8 shows the broad categories into which suspensions fell in 2023-24. These are explored below.

Module assessment

17. It is usual for module assessment suspensions to form the largest category, and 2023-24 was no exception. In 2022-23 there had been a drop in both the absolute numbers and the percentage of these suspensions (38 suspensions, forming 54% of 2022-23 suspensions). In 2023-24 this increased again to 42 (61%); this is not a significant increase, but it is disappointing to see that the downward trend has stalled. These are generally some of the most easily avoidable suspensions.
18. The 42 module assessment suspensions broadly fell into two groups – cases where a module organiser had deviated from the approved assessment scheme to deliver an unapproved alternative, and cases where an unsuitable assessment scheme had been approved.
19. In most cases where module organisers informed students of incorrect schemes the issue was only brought to Queen Mary’s attention after the students had completed the incorrect assessments, in good faith, leaving the University little choice but to suspend. Though some changes were minor in and of themselves, others were not. These suspensions should be easily avoidable if schools/institutes ensure that module organisers are fully briefed on the approved design of their modules.
20. There has been a significant increase in cases where the design of the approved assessment has been problematic. These included:
- eight cases where qualifying marks had been approved by the schools either in error or without understanding the consequences (four SBM, four SEMS; the SEMS cases were a consequence of SEMS taking over ownership of modules from EECS that had qualifying marks already in place).

Qualifying marks are an optional requirement that can be applied to individual elements of assessment – a student must achieve at least the qualifying mark in that assessment to pass the module overall (for example, if a UG module included a low-weighted element of assessment with a qualifying mark of 40.0 then a student would fail the whole module if they attained a mark of ≤ 39.9 in that assessment, no matter how high their overall module mark).

Qualifying marks should be reserved for cases where the specific assessment (rather than the overall assessment scheme) is critical for the demonstration of attainment of the learning outcomes. Legitimate use of qualifying marks is often linked to the requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (not necessarily as a direct requirement, but to evidence compliance with their requirements).

Suspensions tend to arise when qualifying marks have been applied outside of that scope and it is found that students are failing as a result. This alone would not qualify for suspension of regulations – even if it was not the school’s intention, the qualifying mark was a legitimate, approved, regulation; however, in the eight 2023-24 cases the students had never been informed that there were qualifying mark requirements, and this was judged “manifestly unfair” within the scope of the suspension provisions.

- b. In ten cases (seven WIPH, three StA (SLLF)) a school/institute had intended to make assessment changes and, in some cases, had even approved them at their Education Committees but never submitted the changes outside of the school/institute to complete the process.
- c. Six suspensions addressed cases where schools had amended one version of a module but had not made changes to other versions with dependencies upon and delivered in parallel with the amended version (five EECS/IOT degree apprenticeship modules, and one SPIR associate module).
- d. In most other cases there was no clear reason given for why module organisers deviated from approved assessment schemes. Only one of these 42 suspensions was classified as genuinely unavoidable.

Programme and module diet

- 21. 15 suspensions (22%) concerned issues of programme design or delivery, up from 6 (8%) in 2022-23. Many were linked to Education Committees failing to take full account of students who were resitting or interrupting when making changes to the programme, such that when those students returned they could not take the intended modules.
 - a. A group of five suspensions from the WHRI concerned students who would not have been eligible for funding had the programme structure been delivered as originally approved.
 - b. In two cases from WIPH the Institute made changes to one programme without appreciating that this would impact students on other programmes that shared some of its content.
 - c. In two cases (one CCLS, one SEMS) resourcing issues meant that the approved and advertised diets could not be delivered in full.

Progression

- 22. 7 suspensions (10%) related to progression regulations (down from 13 (19%) in 2022-23).
 - a. Three of these cases related to ‘with a year abroad’ programmes, which are often disproportionately represented in suspensions. In each of these cases the students took less than the required 120 credits while overseas. One (SBM) was unavoidable and linked to actions on the part of the host institution, but in the others the School of History approved changes to two students’ module selections that took them below the required thresholds.
 - b. One case (Blizard) concerned the removal of a progression hurdle between the taught modules and the project of an MSc. This was linked to the introduction of a January-start version of the programme for which the timings made such a hurdle impractical. The suspension removed the hurdle for existing September-start students so as not to create an unfair distinction between the two 2023-24 cohorts.
 - c. The remaining three cases (History, SPIR, StA (SLLF)) were linked to errors in the recording of results and/or communications with the students.

Award and classification

23. Three suspensions (4%) were linked to regulations on classification and award. Although these are few in number these are among the most serious suspensions as they deal with absolute academic standards. In 2022-23 there were seven such suspensions (10% of the total).
 - a. SEF erroneously allowed a PGT student to register for the same module twice in a single year. The suspension excluded the second (lower-scoring) iteration of the module from the calculation of the Classification Mark, meaning that the student was classified on 165 rather than 180 credits.
 - b. The assessment design for a final year UG SMS module was problematic to the extent that the marks could not be used, even with scaling applied. The module was excluded from classification meaning that the final-year average mark was calculated across 105 rather than 120 credits. The students were also given the option of taking a first sit in the late summer.
 - c. SEMS allowed an MEng student to register for fewer than the required 120 credits at academic level 7 in their final year, approving the selection of a module at a lower level from outside the approved diet. This was only raised after the student had completed the incorrect module in good faith. A suspension was approved to confer the award despite these circumstances.

Other

24. The remaining two suspensions cannot easily be categorised. One (Law) concerned a transfer between two programmes linked to programme-specific regulations for transnational provision. Permanent changes have been proposed to those regulations to avoid recurrence. The second (BCI) concerned a request to make exceptions to the scope of the Interruption of Study Policy for an individual student; there were no clear grounds for that request, and this was the sole suspension request to be put forward but not approved in 2023-24.

How can suspensions of regulations be reduced?

25. Queen Mary is invited to consider means by which suspensions can be reduced.
26. Suspensions relating to the delivery of unapproved assessment schemes comprise a high proportion of cases, and attention may be best directed there. This is discussed annually, and in the past Queen Mary has made suggestions including the increased visibility of assessment schemes, as ultimately this relies on clear dissemination of schemes (and the need to follow them) within schools/institutes. The official iteration is already visible and accessible to staff at any time online in the Module Directory and in MySIS, and can be readily downloaded in spreadsheets by school/institute and by academic level. It is acknowledged that not all staff regularly check MySIS, and that failing that there should be other means of communication in place between schools/institutes and module organisers. The implementation of a curriculum management system may aid in this for future years as additional module information will be available online, but this again is dependent on individuals seeking out information that should have been provided to them directly.
27. Queen Mary runs an annual review exercise through which every school/institute must confirm their module assessments and programme diets. Most suspensions could have been avoided had the changes been identified and acted upon in the review, and had the schools/institutes communicated those details clearly to the module organisers so that they did not – through accident or design – create alternative schemes. Queen Mary's high numbers of programmes and modules also create more opportunities for issues to arise than might otherwise be the case. The outputs of the forthcoming portfolio review may have some impact in this area.

28. Suspension can be an expedient solution to problems but does not tackle underlying issues and in fact creates additional work in and of itself for the school/institute and Queen Mary. The Education Quality and Standards Board and the Directorate of Governance and Legal Services are keen to work with the Faculties and schools/institutes seeking to further improve understandings of procedures and regulations. Members are asked whether there may be any further measures that might support them in addressing situations leading to issues that necessitate suspensions.