An Examination of Requests for Deferred Exams in the Faculty of Social Sciences

Like many other Canadian universities, the University of Ottawa is struggling to deal with unexpected growth in the number of requests it receives for deferred exams. For example, an analysis of deferred exam requests in economics courses over the 2014-2018 period found that requests to defer fall or winter final exams increased by 62% between 2014-2015 and 2017-2018 (Day 2018, 1). Furthermore, a substantial number of economics students deferred more than one exam during the 2017-2018 academic year, with one student submitting a total of nine requests (Day 2018, 4). Similar trends have no doubt been observed in other academic units.

In any university, it is inevitable that some students will be too ill, or run into other legitimate problems, that prevent them from writing their exams at the appointed date and time. However, the sheer number of requests is creating coordination problems and increasing university costs: new exams must be prepared and printed, rooms must be found for students to write in, and people must be paid to supervise the exams. Different departments and faculties at uOttawa have adopted different procedures for managing and scheduling deferred exams, leading to confusion among students as to how such requests will be handled. The requirement that absences due to illness be accompanied by a medical certificate imposes a cost on society as a whole, as it may be forcing doctors to meet with individuals who have relatively minor complaints but need a medical note rather than spending their time on patients whose needs are greater. Finally, to the extent that deferral requests are correlated with absence from classes, they may be associated with poorer academic performance.1

In light of these problems, the Faculty of Social Science (FSS) and uOttawa as a whole have been trying to develop a better method of dealing with deferred exam requests. However, before such a policy can be designed, some basic questions about deferral requests need to be answered. The move to an electronic system for submitting deferral requests to FSS means that the data needed to answer such questions are now more readily available. This project will involve analyzing the available data to provide a picture of the number of requests per department, course, and type of exam (midterm or final), as well as trying to answer the following questions:

- How many days of illness on average (i.e., according to their doctors’ notes) are the students claiming per deferred exam?
- Are more students claiming deferrals for midterms or for final exams, or is it about the same?
- Is it possible to disaggregate the data by such factors as gender, year of enrolment, international student status, and language of study, among others?
- Does a more nuanced picture emerge from individual courses, in which some courses can be designated as “typical” of the overall data pattern while others are “outliers?”
- Is there a correlation between registration with SASS and the number of deferral requests? Does this vary depending on the year of study, etc.? If so, what might this indicate?

1 For example, Marburger (2001) finds that absence from class has a negative effect on performance in a first-year microeconomics course.
• Is there a correlation between the number of deferral requests and class size?
• Is there a correlation between the number of deferrals and class type (lecture vs. seminar vs. lab, etc.)?
• How do deferral requests vary across academic units?
• Is there a correlation between the number of deferrals and student status (e.g., Canadian, international, academic probation, CGPA, etc.)?

Using administrative data on enrolments, it should also be possible to control for enrolment in academic units, programs, and courses; controlling for enrolment is important because as the number of students increases, one would naturally expect the number of deferral requests to increase.

NOTE: Because this project involves working with confidential data, all the empirical analysis will need to be done on campus, most likely in the offices of the Vice-Dean of Undergraduate Studies.

Skills required:
• Ability to do calculations and create graphs in Excel
• Experience with an econometric software package that can handle large amounts of data, such as Stata, would be an asset
• Ability to write well in English or French
• An understanding of descriptive statistics and how to compute them using software

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References


