

You may now turn over

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YOU MAY BE AWARE that there were some severe administrative failures surrounding the April 2005 exam sitting. Then again, you may not be aware of this: the matter has not been widely discussed in public, and this magazine has only alluded to it. I had expected to receive some letters to the editor from disgruntled students, or an official explanation from the profession. But there has been no public statement from either camp.

A candid explanation of the problems is provided by the then chief education executive, Dr Lis Goodwin, who wrote to students explaining why the problems occurred. She wrote:

'Underestimating the impact the change to the 2005 strategy would have on normal operations for our relatively new administration team was undoubtedly one reason. Many students had unexpected difficulties in mapping their options which had a knock-on effect to other activities. Staff did their best to help but because of their lack of experience they did not realise early enough that the resultant delays made it impossible to complete all the work in a timely fashion.

'As a result, problems with overbooking of centres and non-arrival of examination papers and materials only became clear at the very last minute. Permits were also sent out very late in the day so that several of you had to take an examination in a different location, and did not receive the right permit.'

These must be some of the 'glitches' and 'headaches' that Dr Goodwin refers to in her interview on p33 of this month's magazine. It is backed up by this eyewitness account:

'My entry forms turned up one day before the exam, with Horsham listed as the exam centre. I then received a phone call saying that I had to sit the exam in Croydon as they had overbooked Horsham. I duly turned up to Croydon to find that I had no candidate number and the invigilators had to make one up for me... they didn't know who was supposed to be sitting the exam... unbelievable! The morning exam started late and we had less time between that and the afternoon exam.'

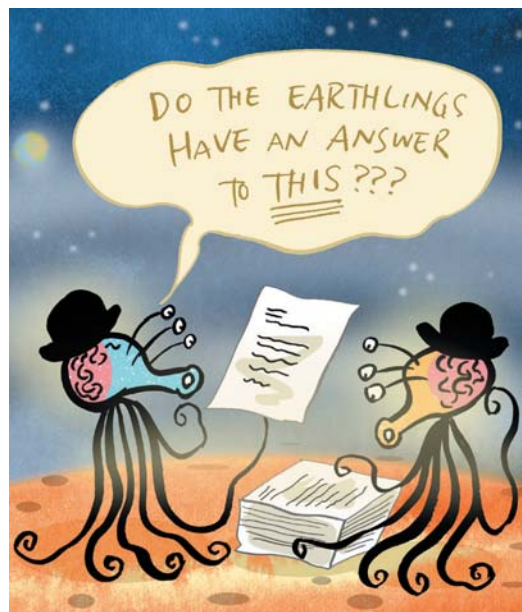
No doubt this caused headaches, and was a glitch, but to give credit to Dr Goodwin and her team, they did manage to get everyone to sit the correct exams, while apparently under some considerable pressure.

Returning to Dr Goodwin's letter, she goes on to make what looks like a prediction:

'We have put back the date of announcing results. We believe with all the changes the exam-marking process needs this extra time to avoid administration errors.'

This extra week may have been a necessary condition for success but was not, as it turned out, a sufficient one. Tragically, just one week before the results were due, a small number of students received an email from Dr Goodwin's successor, Dr Trevor Watkins, that read:

'I am writing to inform you that the examination script that you submitted for the ST4 subject which you sat in



Beijing in April has been lost in transit before it could be marked. I am sure that this is as disappointing to you as it is to us. We have investigated the reasons for the disappearance as best we can with the courier company involved but we now feel there is no realistic hope of recovering them and hence we have no mark for the examination.

'Our policy in these circumstances is to offer another attempt at no charge at the September sitting for ST4. I appreciate that this is poor compensation for what happened but there is little else we can do in the circumstances.'

You have to sympathise with Dr Watkins – what a terrible time to start a new job. But you have to question two things in his email. First, the sentence: 'I am sure that this is as disappointing to you as it is to us.' This must have jarred with these unfortunate candidates who had invested months of study only to receive automatic fails (possibly even lower pay rises as a result). Also, the candidates deserve a little more explanation as to why no alternative course of action was offered. Three apparently viable courses of action spring to mind: vivas, financial compensation, and infinitely many free resits (not just one). Automatic passes is another option, but that would set a dangerous precedent.

This recent exam sitting was undoubtedly a disaster. Part of the explanation is the transition to the new system. Part of it, according to Dr Goodwin, is the inexperience of the administration team. And part of it was the fallibility of the postal system. Fortunately, two of these reasons do not apply this time, and so the September sitting ought to run more smoothly.

Best of luck to all students taking exams this month – do write in and let us know how things go.

TIMOTHY BRAMHAM