

Points of view

Hannah Cook provides some insight into the examiner's perspective on exam papers.

ON A COLD TUESDAY EVENING IN JANUARY I unchained myself from my desk and dragged myself up to Staple Inn to hear the talk that Trevor Watkins gave on 'Exams from the examiner's point of view'. With the fellowship looming large, I decided I needed all the help I could get and besides, it was a good excuse to leave work before 9pm, which had been quite a rarity over the past few weeks.

I arrived at just after 5.40pm for a 6 o'clock start and was quite taken aback. The main hall was already full to the rafters and that dim hope of a choccie biccie and a nice cup of tea beforehand quickly faded. The biscuits were finished a long time ago. Oh well, might as well go and find a seat then – but even that was quite a task. It was literally standing room only by the time the session was opened.

Trevor started off telling us about the administration of exams to give us all a feel for what a huge task the team has. With students sitting exams in 180 centres in 80 countries it's a wonder things don't go wrong more often than they do. The lengths the examiners go to make sure that the paper is fairly and correctly set are quite impressive. I've been a Student Consultative

Committee (SCC) rep for longer than I care to remember and even I learnt something. Did you know that each exam paper is guinea-pigged not once but twice? I didn't.

The main aim of the game for examiners is consistency – consistency between markers, papers, and sessions. So why do pass rates vary so much? The main reasons given were a need to maintain standards, under-prepared candidates, inability of candidates to apply what they know, and – the student's favourite – the occasional rogue paper.

The second half of the evening was run by Helen Gregson, one of the staff actuaries at the Institute. Having held many a hand through exam counselling she's in a pretty strong position to comment on the reasons why people fail exams. Her talk started with an example – a 'student's' answer to an exam question was passed round (she promised us faithfully that answer hadn't come from one single student but was an amalgamation of many scripts that she'd seen). I don't know about the other people in the room but it was quite an eye-opener for me.

It was a perfectly sensible answer – it read reasonably well and struck me as the sort of answer I could

come up with too. The only trouble was that, while being reasonably impressed by the answer, I also knew it was a load of rubbish. It hadn't answered the question asked and at points was merely a brain dump of vaguely relevant core reading. I decided I had better pay careful attention to the rest of this talk.

Those hoping for a secret recipe for passing the exams may have been disappointed – as suspected there is no substitute for hard graft. Helen likened the exams to passing your driving test (yeah, I know, if only (!) – but bear with me). It's not just about knowing your stuff but also having had as much practice as possible so that you can perform the manoeuvres with some confidence and do so under pressure. So yes, know your bookwork but there's no substitute for practice exam questions. And for goodness sake, don't do an emergency stop if the examiner tells you to reverse round the corner! The examiners are looking for evidence of 'fitness to proceed and assume professional responsibilities' – so demonstrate it! Wise words indeed – I just hope they stand us all in good stead for April.

Hannah Cook is a senior financial reporting analyst at Legal & General

60-second interview

What would you do if you heard the four-minute warning? Wrap up in tin foil! And then call my mum.

What would you be if you weren't an actuary? I would definitely want to do something that involved building stuff or perhaps figuring out how things work... a builder.

Why did you decide that pensions wasn't for you? I began to feel that the things I was doing were very mechanical and process-driven,

because a lot of the work was so established. That was just my experience though – horses for courses.

Why did you choose to move into GI? The situations and scenarios are always changing, meaning that projects are fast-moving too. You really feel you can contribute something valuable – there is so much scope for innovation and development.

Who's your all-time hero? Batman. He has no super powers, he's just hard.



Sameer Keshani recently moved from pensions consulting to general insurance in the London market

Dungeon master

As a kid one of my favourite TV shows was *Knightmare* – the fantasy game show where an intrepid teenager with a bucket on his head is guided around a computer-simulated dungeon by his friends, solving riddles posed by out-of-work actors in tights.

I always wanted to go on that show, but I'm living the closest thing there is to it now, stumbling my way through these endless exams with their rules and layout constantly shifting at the whim of the dungeon masters. (And, as in *Knightmare*, no one ever seems to be able to complete the game!) This month, Hannah gives some omnipotent guidance for those of us with buckets on their head, and to illustrate the changing nature of the game I leave you with a poem by Chris Logan.

150 years since the Scots got
their Royal Charter
Since then, there's been
many a disaster
The great Sheffield flood, the
Spanish flu
Who can forget the great
smog of '52
But for students like me, the
worst it would seem
Was turning two exams into
sixteen!

Tristan

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