

Frequently Asked Questions: Restructures and Reviews in Academic Departments 2011-12

The original version of these FAQs was published in order to provide staff across Queen Mary, University of London (QM) with information about the restructure and review of academic departments that took place during 2011-12. The FAQs have subsequently been updated as a consequence of staff input and to reflect the current status of these reviews.

Why is Queen Mary reviewing and restructuring some of its schools and Professional Services directorates?

Queen Mary, like other universities in the UK, is operating in a changing landscape. We have an ambition to maintain and improve on our success. To ensure we are equipped for the challenges ahead, and to continue to make progress towards our ambitions, QM has been reviewing its structures and activities.

Professional Services are subject to an on-going review; the Library service and the Marketing and Communications directorate have completed their reviews; IT Services is undergoing substantial change. A number of other components, including Human Resources and the Learning Institute, are about to initiate the process.

Three academic schools have undergone change in the past academic year: the School of Engineering and Materials Science, the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, and Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry.

Why was the School of Medicine and Dentistry under review?

Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry (SMD) has undertaken a rigorous review and restructuring programme in response to recent and significant changes in Government (HEFCE) funding. The review aims to achieve a saving of £3 million per annum.

Why was the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences under review?

The School of Biological and Chemical Sciences (SBCS) is recognised for its high-quality teaching and excellent National Student Survey results, but needed to raise its overall research performance to be comparable with other disciplines at QM. The changes aimed to refocus our specialisms, provide support to undertake more high-quality research, and to bring the balance of teaching and research in SBCS in line with the QM standard. In doing so QM also proposes to increase overall staff numbers in SBCS.

Why was the School of Engineering and Materials Sciences under review?

The School of Engineering and Materials Science (SEMS) underwent a review which revealed the School had been underperforming in a number of areas and had a growing budget deficit. The aim of the restructure was to reduce the deficit and focus on three key research groups: biomedical engineering and materials; functional nano-materials; and modeling and simulation in engineering systems.

How have these reviews and the subsequent restructurings been carried out?

In each case, review proposals were put forward to the QM Senior Executive by senior academic leaders (including Heads of School and Faculty Vice-Principals). These proposals were then reviewed and subsequently agreed by the QM Council.

Staff were consulted and encouraged to provide comment and feedback at all stages, including defining the criteria for determining which posts were at risk of redundancy and providing alternative proposals. Each review was also the subject of extensive consultations with staff and trade unions. In each case, changes were made to redundancy criteria and final proposals as a result of feedback from staff.

How have you communicated with staff through what has clearly been a difficult period?

We recognise that this has been a difficult and challenging time for colleagues as these proposals did eventually involve some redundancies. We encouraged input from colleagues at each stage (see above) and this included face-to-face briefings with senior academic leaders, staff open meetings, online/email updates from Heads of School, regularly updated FAQs, and formal correspondence from HR. More broadly, information about each review was communicated via all-staff communications, so that the entire QM community was kept informed throughout.

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How did you determine the criteria against which staff were assessed?

The criteria for determining which academic posts were at risk were set out in advance and were the subject of extensive consultations with staff and their trade unions to ensure that they were as fair and transparent as possible. In setting these criteria, discipline-specific input was sought and received from academic colleagues. They were based on overall contributions to research, education and related activities, and were designed to ensure an outcome of Queen Mary being at the forefront of universities in these fields. Those objective criteria were based, in discussion with staff, on generally recognised discipline-specific academic expectations and set at reduced levels that reflect the imprecision of any such measures, with discretion applied in borderline cases.

Why were metrics used?

Metrics were part of the criteria used, they were not the totality. Metrics are a vital tool in assessing an academic's contribution to research. Looking at a researcher's publication record is an empirical way of measuring a critical element indicating success in science. Publication in peer-reviewed journals ensures that this contribution is assessed by independent external subject experts. Research income is another external peer-reviewed measure of success, as is successful supervision of PhD students through to graduation. Where academic performance has been assessed, it has been important to do so on the basis of objective criteria including metrics – any subjective assessment would be quite unacceptable.

Why was impact factor included in the SBCS metrics?

A journal's impact factor indicates the number of times that an average paper in that journal is cited. High impact factor journals are generally considered leading publications in their field, so that acceptance of submitted papers follows particularly stringent peer review. The research-related metrics used in SBCS were a result of extensive consultation with staff and include both the Australian ARC journal classification system as well as impact factor. Following lengthy discussions with staff, the ARC system was deemed to be the most suitable – it ranks journals in specific fields, and staff are familiar with the rating. Citation rates for individual papers were not considered for inclusion in the criteria, in part because of the heavy dependence on time since publication.

How have you supported those people who are affected by the process?

All members of staff involved were offered face-to-face meetings with the Head of their School (or Institute in the case of the School of Medicine and Dentistry) and with Human Resources. As part of the process, people who were then deemed to be at risk of redundancy were offered further one-to-one meetings with their Head of School/Institute and HR, and also offered the opportunity to meet the redundancy committee, where they were given the opportunity to provide additional information on their case.

All colleagues involved in the restructures were encouraged to use the employee assistance programme for discussion, counselling and advice, and external services were available to support staff in reviewing career options and seeking alternative roles.

How involved have the unions been during this process?

We involved our recognised trade unions at each stage, and, wherever possible, before formal consultation. During formal consultation, regular meetings were held and full explanations and data were given to trade unions. Correspondence continued between meetings and further discussions were held regarding specific issues or where individuals were involved in meetings and wished to be represented by a union representative.

Trade unions' views on all aspects of the restructures were sought, and in a number of instances changes to proposals were made.

Formal and informal channels of discussion have been available throughout and additional facilities and time off for representatives have been given.

We recognise that our trade union colleagues were not always satisfied with either the process or our responses.

Who else did you consult during these restructurings?

Communicating with our partner NHS Trusts has been an integral part of the review of the School of Medicine and Dentistry. Barts Health NHS Trust has been represented on the review panel and our partner Trusts were included in our consultation, along with staff and trade unions.

Where clinical academic posts are at risk, we hold detailed discussions with the relevant NHS Trust about how the post-holder's clinical commitments could be met.

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How have students (undergraduate and postgraduate) been considered in this process?

We have ensured that we have kept students up-to-date with developments throughout the process. This included holding open meetings and drop-in sessions for students to inform them about the process and answer any questions or concerns. We also briefed relevant student liaison committee representatives, and kept student cohorts up-to-date via email.

A stakeholder panel was set up during the SBCS restructure which involved both undergraduate and postgraduate student representation to help inform aspects of the process and minimise disruption in the transition process. We recognised the importance of engaging with students as re-focusing in areas of research strengths would ultimately enhance and inform improvements to the curricula of some courses.

How were responses to the consultation addressed during the process?

There were various ways that staff and students could raise questions and concerns during the consultation – through email, face-to-face and in open meetings. Those who contributed to the consultation were responded to either in writing, or their points were addressed through meetings, general emails and Q&A briefings.

In some cases concerns and protests were submitted via individual and/or collective letters. Not all of these could be addressed, as in some cases they did not call for a response, some were reiteration in a different forum of discussions that had already been held, and some referred to individual cases where response would have led to breach of confidentiality.

Feedback from staff and students about this process and others is subject to on-going review and will contribute to the development of future communications strategies.

How were the timescales for the different restructures determined?

Initial timescales were defined by statutory requirements and extended where appropriate in individual circumstances.

Did staff know what was expected of them since the metrics were applied retrospectively?

All academic staff on teaching and research contracts are aware that their role includes research, teaching and enabling activities. All academic staff are also aware of the standards needed in their work.

For staff that had shown evidence of success in more teaching-focused activity, teaching and scholarship roles were available.

The standards of output used to assess whether a member of staff was at risk in SBCS was set at what was considered by QM to be a level that was not especially stretching or unusual. The measures of achievement were reduced and amended during consultation. Whilst they were not accepted by all parties as reasonable and appropriate, QM takes the view that they are objective, reflect the expectations of the roles of academic colleagues, and are at a level that is not exceptional.

The overwhelming majority of staff met the criteria for either teaching and research, or teaching and scholarship roles.

What was the process of collation and checking of the data used to determine whether someone was at risk of redundancy?

The data was sent to each individual for them to check and raise any discrepancies or extenuating circumstances which needed to be taken into consideration – where points were raised and accepted as valid they were included. Data presented at the Faculty panel was anonymised to ensure objectivity.

Has the College changed its focus from teaching to research?

No, as a university that places great emphasis on research-informed teaching, QM continues to place emphasis on both teaching and research. As a previous member of the 1994 Group of universities and now as a Russell Group university the importance of research to QM has always been visible. The inclusion of eight new teaching and scholarship roles as part of the SBCS restructure demonstrates our on-going commitment to high-quality teaching. We see these teaching and scholarship roles as being of equal value to teaching and research roles; specifically, incumbents in teaching and scholarship roles have the same opportunity for academic promotion as colleagues in teaching and research roles.