A Tale of the Unexpected: Learnings from a major incident during exams

Veronika Roth, Manager Examinations & Graduations, UTS with extraordinary help from the UTS Examinations & Assessments Team

WARNING: THIS PRESENTATION INCLUDES COARSE LANGUAGE (Bad pun unintended)
This is a story about…

A major exams incident

Chaos

How the students responded

Criticism

And dealing with that…

Culture
Our Context – Exams @ UTS

Main Exams Period in Autumn

- Exams runs Saturdays and Monday to Friday for 2 full weeks
- 4 main sessions a day: 9am, 12:30pm, 4pm, 7:30pm
- Special Conditions/Accessibility Exams 10:30am and 2:30pm
- 4 main venues: 1 off-site, 3 buildings on campus
- Total of 10 main rooms + 25 smaller/specialist rooms for Special Conditions
- Core exams team work shifts 6:45am - 11pm (usually later…)
- Core Team of 5 plus me
- 200+ exam supervisors

The numbers

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sittings (Main Exam in Autumn)</td>
<td>63 004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students with Exams (Main)</td>
<td>23 793</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exam instances (single events to be prepped for)</td>
<td>2153</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exam Sessions</td>
<td>487</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subjects being examined</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largest subject</td>
<td>1943 enrolments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Largest room capacity on campus</td>
<td>312 students</td>
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Exams are unloved at the best of times…

UTS Rants Revived Again
June 18 at 2:30 PM

#464 [link]

why are all the exam supervisors on such a fucking power trip like yes Karen I DID check the board holy to you don’t need to talk to us like we’re dumb babies

9

UTS Rants Revived Again
June 15 at 4:39 PM

#440 [link]

Dear exams,
Fuck you.
Thank you for your attention

40
Our much loved off campus venue... *Wenty*

- **UTS Confessions**
  - June 18 at 11:27 AM
  
  "About to boycott exams at Wentworth Park because UTS is giving MORE money to an already rich and SUPER unethical ‘sporting’ business. #nothappyjan #freeethehounds <333"
  
  ![Image of 24 likes, 3 comments]

- **UTS Confessions**
  - June 25 at 6:20 AM
  
  "Wentworth Park- the place where I have lost thousands of dollars on greyhounds, and on university fees after failing that Business Statistics exam. What a truly revolting venue."
  
  ![Image of 36 likes, 6 comments]

- **UTS Confessions**
  - June 19 at 2:22 PM
  
  "We are part of the top 200 universities in the world with over 20 buildings, but still write our exams at a greyhound track. Ok."
  
  ![Image of 771 likes, 301 comments, 7 shares]

- **UTS Confessions**
  - June 25 at 5:24 PM
  
  "Imagine paying approx 1K per subject to do exams in a dog park... *uick you UTS"
  
  ![Image of 318 likes, 246 comments, 10 shares]
Week 1 of Exams, Monday morning, first session …

Our largest single exam:

• 1943 students
• Sitting in 4 different venues
• Across 6 different rooms
• Subject Coordinator unavailable to attend

“It will be fine” they said….

First day on the job for new supervisors

A new exams team – 4/5 have been in the team for less than 12 months
“Morning Veronika… I suppose you know we’ve gone dark over here at Wenty”

Is this some weird supervisor-speak for running out of milk or something? “Um .....”

“Oh, we’ve had a Blackout. Both floors. No power at all. Will be out for a couple of hours at least they tell me. What should we do?”
So….

• 1202 students + supervisors sitting in the dark. Ok, there is *some* natural light, but not much
• The exam was about 45 minutes in for a 2 hr +10 mins exam
• It’s a freezing cold winter’s day and its raining – now its dark, cold and probably wet in places
• Likelihood of being able to read and finish exam = NIL to very little
• “Ideal exam conditions” = NO CHANCE
• “Slips, trips and falls are the biggest hazard on campus” + our “senior” supervisors
• Estimated power return – 3-4 hours (a second session of examinations starts at 1pm)
What we learned….

Day 1 is horrible.
Day 2 is terrible.
Day 3 is even worse.
Don’t underestimate the power of a loud scream and a strong drink.

Day 4 you might start thinking this is a “learning opportunity”.
Day 5 you wonder why you are in this job. If you haven’t cried yet you will now.

Day 6 – you survive and start laughing about it
5 weeks later – actually, more went right than wrong!!!
But as you know, students are always reasonable and well-mannered.

And a large first year Business subject is a model example.
We knew they’d be cranky…

UTS Confessions
June 18 at 9:13 PM
"IBP Exam Re-sit - 7:30pm to 9:40pm on a Saturday Night
I think that's all that needs to be said 😊"

333 Likes 444 Comments 4 Shares

UTS Confessions
June 22 at 3:07 PM
"Who else is doing the IBP exam drunk?"

158 Likes 129 Comments

UTS: University of Technology Sydney
June 19 at 5:00 PM
We're now ranked 140th in the world (QS World University Rankings) 😊 That's 144 places in eight years. Wait and see what we can do next.
https://uts.ac/2FJ371a
...but then the chaos started...

UTS Rants Revived Again
June 18 at 11:09 PM

#456 (https://submit.crush.ninja/UTSRantsRevivedAgain)
Are we attending or should we attack??

UTS Rants Revived Again
June 17 at 10:16 PM

#451 (https://submit.crush.ninja/UTSRantsRevivedAgain)
Update on #451
Turns out the blackout was actually planned by the electricity company and instead of UTS, useless or actually changing the test time beforehand, they decided to let it continue and postpone after one hour of the exam...
So how do you prepare for the unknown?

❖ Everyone does risk assessments, but…

❖ Security/Emergency/Incident Drills

❖ Talk to your team about specific scenarios and what they would do in those situations ….
  ❖ Brainstorming activity
  ❖ Development discussions
  ❖ Jog the corporate memory
pregnant student gives birth
bomb threat
active shooter
exam papers compromised
earthquake
fire evacuation
venue double booked
bomber threat
protests / riots
flooding
police operation in progress
air con breaks at 40 degrees
toilets explode
gastro outbreak
supervisors strike
Supervisors run out of English Breakfast Tea
missing papers
whole team gets influenza
DVC has a “good idea” about exams
medical emergencies
zombie apocalypse
Supervisors strike
police operation in progress
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You might consider in your planning…

❖ Know in advance your systems capabilities for resits, reallocations, managing the unexpected
❖ Have templates ready that can be adapted
❖ Resit ASAP (within a week if possible)
❖ Resit large cohorts in smaller chunks
❖ Throw out processes that will complicate your ability to make plans quickly (i.e. anything asking students to submit things, documentation, reply or RSVP)
❖ Triage student communications to one place
❖ Communicate quickly – even if not perfect and plans not finalised
Plan for needing help and advice

❖ Your “Tiger Team” positions
  ➢ Core: Exams, Faculty, Security, Emergency Management
  ➢ Secondary: Printing, Social Media / PR, Security, Legal, Student Centres, Results team, Special Consideration etc

❖ Make sure one person is designated to liaise UP, DOWN & SIDEWAYS
❖ How to get more staff in a hurry *(Hint: Overtime)*
❖ Who can make what decisions – Central vs Faculty
  ➢ Assessment and marking decisions/processes
Culture amplifies in a crisis.

Clear team values makes a HUGE difference:

• Decisions made putting STUDENTS first as much as possible
• Staff and student safety & wellbeing a priority
• “I’ve got your back” – everyone pitches in, does their best, helps each other
• Support, Empower > Trust!
• Make sure you very deliberately check in on each other

Hot Tip: Order in Pizza 😊
Hot Tip! Interview Questions…

Talk us through what you would prioritise and why in this hypothetical scenario:

*It’s the first day of exams and you are the on duty team leader starting your afternoon shift. You walk into the Operations Room and are told:*

- There is a leaking roof in the Sports Hall
- A supervisor sat on a desk and has broken their tailbone
- There is a virus in the computer labs
- A student is throwing a tantrum after they were found with writing on their hand
- and the Presider has called security
- The DVC has called asking for information on a student complaint from last night
In the end…  7:30pm Saturday was pretty dull…

PARTY EVERY NIGHT
OR GET MY DEGREE?

WHY NOT BOTH?

@MARSITYTRE
Thank you to

Janice – Special Conditions Wiz

Jo – Chief Supervisor Wrangler

Janet – Accidental Databee Expert, Complaint Handler & Team Mum
Our Ops Room Boys

James Bob Ben & Andy
Exam Superheroes
Thank you

and please come and say hello
and ask questions

Veronika.Roth@uts.edu.au