

ASSESSMENTS

Guide to exam alternatives

This guide provides advice and links to resources to help staff replace face-to-face exams with alternative assessments.

**SUPPORTING
STUDENT LEARNING
ONLINE**

INTRODUCTION

The response to the coronavirus pandemic has ruled out the possibility of traditional face-to-face exams for the present time. Where face-to-face exams were planned, staff will need to develop alternative ways of assessing their students. A separate guide is available for those staff who are keeping the exam format, but need to adapt it for take-home conditions.¹ However, there are inevitably compromises involved in repurposing existing exams as take-home assessments, and some staff may have the time and opportunity to rethink their assessment

in a more comprehensive way. This guide is designed to provide help with developing alternatives to exams, by giving you some general things to think about when creating new assessments, and information about useful resources available online. This guide is focused on the replacement of end-of-semester exams, and therefore the development of high-stakes summative assessment. More detailed advice on assessment design is available in the Learning and Teaching Academy's guide 'In At The Deep End: Starting to teach at Heriot-Watt University'.²

1. Keep the assessment focused on what you want the students to have learned.

The learning outcomes for the course – the phrases that describe the knowledge and skills that students were supposed to gain over the course – will remain fixed. The most important factor when developing an alternative assessment is that it remains focused on those learning outcomes. Not every assessment needs to address every one of the course learning outcomes, but every learning outcome should be assessed at some point in the course.

2. Create effective marking criteria.

A new assessment will require new marking criteria, to ensure that different markers can be broadly consistent, and that students can get a good sense of what is expected of them.³

- Criteria need to be able to distinguish different levels of demonstration of the learning outcomes. Generic grade descriptors have been developed for the University as a whole, which you can adapt for your own disciplinary context.⁴ To help you ensure that your marking criteria are appropriate for the level of the students, the SCQF level descriptors provide a good high-level picture of what is expected from students in different years.⁵
- You may wish to expand the marking criteria into rubrics: these provide a description of what is expected for different levels (e.g. first class, 2:1, 2:2 etc.) for each of the marking criteria associated with the specific assessment. Rubrics can be very helpful for enabling more objective and transparent marking. However, it can be challenging to create rubrics that are sufficiently specific and explicit, and don't rely on subjective words like 'acceptable', 'good' and 'excellent' to differentiate between levels of performance.

3. Help students to develop a good understanding of what to expect.

Students will only be able to accurately demonstrate their ability if they have a good understanding of what the assessment requires them to do. Bear in mind what kinds of assessment tasks students are familiar with: what do you use elsewhere in your course, what have they encountered previously in their programmes? When developing an alternative to an exam, it may be possible to use an assessment format that students are already familiar with. If not, it is important to take steps to help students develop a clear understanding of what is expected.⁶

- Clearly communicate the change you've made to the intended assessment: what is expected in practical terms (deadline etc.); why you are using that form of assessment; how you expect them to approach it, etc.
- Provide students with the marking criteria and, if you are using one, a rubric. You could also consider setting students the task (either individually or in groups) of putting the marking criteria in their own words, as a way of helping them to understand the terminology used.
- Consider providing students with some exemplars: selected examples of work of different levels of quality, either drawn from previous cohorts (anonymised and with permission) or written by yourself. You can make the most of the exemplars by asking students to assess them against the marking criteria. This can be a good way of helping students to develop a deeper understanding of what you will be looking for when marking.⁷
- If there is time, consider giving students the opportunity of a practice run. Ideally this would be a full formative assessment, with feedback from teaching staff, but at a minimum it could mean providing the students with a mock version of the assessment for them to try out on their own.

4. Make sure that the assessment is manageable from a staff point of view.

Marking loads can be a challenge at the best of times, and in the current situation staff are likely to find it harder than ever. Bear your workload in mind when you are designing the assessment, as there can be trade-off between the complexity of the assessment task and the difficulty of marking. Try and strike a balance, and create an assessment that allows students to demonstrate an appropriate complexity of knowledge and skills, but does not overwhelm your ability to do the marking in the required timeframe.

5. Ensure the assessment is inclusive, equitable and fair.

Designing inclusive assessment means making sure that assessment methods allow all students to demonstrate their ability, regardless of any specific disadvantage – whether they have physical or mental challenges, are learning in a second (or third) language, or belong to a minority group. It is based on ideas of equity, fairness and accessibility, and in practical terms it means taking into account the diversity of your students when making decisions about assessment

methods. Assessment can be made more inclusive by, for example, making sure that students encounter a variety of assessment methods, that students are supported to prepare well for assessments, and that you consider the benefits, and limitations, of technology for different students.

6. Consider the potential for academic misconduct.

All assessment carries the risk of academic misconduct: students passing off others' work as their own, collaborating when the assessment is an individual task, etc. You can reduce the potential for plagiarism by increasing the focus on students' individual contributions: ensuring that assessments aren't focused on one single right answer, but reward particular routes that students take; or incorporating reflection into the assessment. Designing assessments around particularly local or topical material (e.g. recent research articles) make it harder for students to find off-the-shelf answers. Providing students with slightly different tasks (that fit the same marking criteria), will help to discourage collusion. On a technological level, Turnitin provides a simple tool that staff can use as a way of identifying possible cases of plagiarism.

- 7. Ensure that the assessment is suitable for online submission.** As the motivation for developing an alternative assessment is the impossibility of face-to-face exams, it is important to make sure that your chosen assessment is fully suitable for the current situation, with students undertaking the assessment remotely. At a simple level, that means making sure that students can both access assessment instructions, and make their submissions, online. You should also consider keeping the technology demands of the assessment simple; there is less to go wrong if the assessment doesn't require lots of additional software or hardware. With inclusivity in mind (see above) be careful about any assumptions you make regarding students' access to technology, high-speed internet, or private spaces.

REFERENCES

1. 'Assessments: Making your exam work as a take-home assessment' is available here: https://www2.hw.ac.uk/mediaservices/pageflip/LTA/Converting_a_traditional_exam_to_a_take-home_exam/
2. 'In At The Deep End' is available here: https://www2.hw.ac.uk/mediaservices/pageflip/LTA/In_at_the_Deep_End_Document/In_at_the_Deep_End_Document.pdf
3. More detailed advice on writing marking criteria is available from 'In At The Deep End'.
4. The Heriot-Watt University Assessment and Progression System (HAPS) can be found here (with the grade descriptors as an appendix): <https://www.hw.ac.uk/uk/services/docs/academic-registry/examdoc4.pdf>
5. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework level descriptors can be found here (note that SCQF levels 9 and 10 correspond to years 3 and 4 of an undergraduate degree in the UK and Dubai (and years 2 and 3 in Malaysia), and level 11 corresponds to a Masters degree, or year 5 of an integrated Masters degree in the UK and Dubai (and year 4 in Malaysia): <https://scqf.org.uk/media/1925/scqf-level-descriptors-web-july-2019.pdf>
6. The Watt Works Quick Guide on assessment literacy provides more detailed advice on how to help students to understand what you are asking them to do in assessments: https://lta.hw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/GUIDE-NO8_Assessment-Literacy.pdf
7. There is a Watt Works Quick Guide on the effective use of exemplars: https://lta.hw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/GUIDE-NO9_Exemplars.pdf

OTHER TIPS

- Make sure you keep quality assurance processes in mind, such as School-level approval mechanisms and accrediting professional bodies (and bear in mind these may have been revised due to the current situation).
- Make sure you are aware of the assessment decisions being made in your School and in the University as a whole, to help keep messages to students as simple as possible.
- Keep an eye on how the assessment works, both for you and the students. This is an opportunity to try out something new, and to learn from the process.

Try and strike a balance, and create an assessment that allows students to demonstrate an appropriate complexity of knowledge and skills, but does not overwhelm your ability to do the marking in the required timeframe.

USEFUL RESOURCES

GUIDANCE ABOUT DIFFERENT ASSESSMENT METHODS

LSE

The London School of Economics and Political Science has produced a comprehensive guide to a range of assessment methods. For each method, they describe the strengths, challenges and other things to bear in mind.

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Eden-Centre/Assessment-Toolkit/Assessment-methods/Assessment-methods>

As part of the guide, they provide advice on which assessment methods are best suited for the assessment of different key skills (e.g. critical thinking, synthesis of data, etc.).

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Eden-Centre/Assessment-Toolkit/Selecting-assessment-methods-based-on-skills>

MMU

Manchester Metropolitan University has created a guide to different assessment methods, with advice on how to implement many different non-exam assessment tools.

<http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/assessment/design/tasks/index.php>

You can find all of the guides collected in one document here:

<http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/assessment/design/tasks/Assessment%20types.pdf>

READING

The University of Reading has produced a handy A-Z of assessment methods, available as a pdf.

https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/eia/A-Z_of_Assessment_Methods_FINAL_table.pdf

PHIL RACE

Phil Race – a recognised expert on assessment – has produced a useful table that considers the pros and cons of different assessment methods.

<https://phil-race.co.uk/2020/02/a-draft-table-assessment-feedback-and-contract-cheating-in-perspective/>

CASE STUDIES

HEA

The Higher Education Academy (now part of Advance HE) published a document containing 18 different assessment case studies.

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/transforming-assessment-higher-education>

IMPERIAL

Imperial College, London, has collected a number of case studies of different assessment methods in STEM subjects.

<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/staff/educational-development/teaching-toolkit/assessment-and-feedback/assessment-methods/>

KING'S

King's College London have made a number of case studies available, written by teaching staff about their experiences of introducing new forms of assessment.

<https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/aflkings/category/case-studies/>

SPECIFIC GUIDANCE ON REMOTE ASSESSMENT

UCL

University College, London has produced guidance on how to adapt different assessment methods for the current context, when face-to-face assessment is not possible.

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/teaching-continuity/assessments-progression-and-awards/getting-started-alternative-assessments>

UCD

University College, Dublin, has also provided advice on how to modify assessment formats for the current context.

http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/alternative_assessment_methods.pdf

E-BOOKS AVAILABLE FROM THE HERIOT-WATT LIBRARY

There are a number of books available from the library as electronic resources, that staff may find helpful either for general guidance or ideas for specific assessment formats.

Benson, R. and Brack, C. (2010) **Online learning and assessment in higher education: A planning guide** (Burlington, Elsevier Science): https://discovery.hw.ac.uk/permalink/f/1nh9hb8/44hwa_alma5133602920003206

Bloxham, S. and Boyd, P. (2007) **Developing effective assessment in higher education: A practical guide** (Maidenhead, Open University Press): https://discovery.hw.ac.uk/permalink/f/1nh9hb8/44hwa_alma5134255160003206

Bryan, C. and Clegg, K. (eds.) (2019) **Innovative assessment in higher education** (London, Routledge): https://discovery.hw.ac.uk/permalink/f/1nh9hb8/44hwa_alma2161751850003206

Carless, D., Bridges, S., Chan, C. and Glofsheski, R. (eds.) (2017) **Scaling up assessment for learning in higher education** (Singapore, Springer): https://discovery.hw.ac.uk/permalink/f/1nh9hb8/44hwa_alma5146753140003206



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