

In responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, traditional exams (in-person, 2-3 hours, closed book, invigilated) were replaced by take-home exams (remote, 24 hour, open book, uninvigilated). This was done first for the exams in May 2020, and the decision has now been made that face-to-face exams will not take place (with a small number of exceptions) for the entirety of the 2020-21 academic year. As a consequence, take-home exams will play a prominent role in how students are assessed this year. This document draw on students' feedback from May 2020 to make some recommendations for academic staff about how to design take-home exams, and prepare students for them.

Theme 1: Students didn't feel clear about what was expected

Recommendations:

- Once the exam paper is written, help students understand what is expected of them, for example by providing them with examples of the kinds of questions that will be in the exam, and the kinds of answers that will receive good (and bad) marks
- Consider giving the students a practice run with a mock take-home exam. As well as helping them to understand the standard expected, it will give them a chance to rehearse the process of preparing their notes and resources
- There is relevant advice in the Watt Works guides [Helping students appreciate what's expected of them in assessment](#) and [Using exemplars to enhance learning and support achievement](#)

Theme 2: Students found the take-home exam format had benefits in terms of a) rewarding deeper learning instead of memorisation, and b) more closely resembling tasks in the professional world

Recommendations:

- Given that take-home exams are unsuited to assessing information recall, it is important to ensure that the exam questions instead require the students to do something with their understanding of the course content: apply it, analyse it, synthesise it, evaluate it.
- Take-home exams – by giving students 24-hours to complete a task, normally on a computer, with access to their notes and the internet etc – do provide the opportunity to set tasks that are more 'authentic', i.e. have a clear link with the kinds of tasks that students will need to complete once they graduate.
- There is advice on designing exams for understanding, and authenticity, in both [In at the deep end](#) and the RBL guide [Making your exam work as a take-home assessment](#)

At a glance

The design of a take-home exam can address some key concerns expressed by students

Theme 3: Some students were concerned about the potential for academic misconduct in the take-home exams

Recommendations:

- There are a number of ways of improving the academic integrity of assessments and reducing the likelihood of plagiarism and other forms of misconduct: clear policies, detection, deterrence and helping students to understand academic conventions are all important, but the design of assessments can also play a part
- The *motivation* to plagiarise can be reduced if students can see the value of assessments beyond the course (e.g. if they are authentic), and if they understand what is expected of them and so feel sure that their efforts will be rewarded
- The *opportunity* to plagiarise can be reduced by making assessments specific in particular ways
 - Make the tasks individual-specific: using randomised or personalised values in calculations, or asking the students to relate the course content to their own experiences or circumstances, will make it more challenging for students to share their answers with each other
 - Make the tasks topic-specific or context-specific: if the exam question asks about the course content from an unusual angle, or draws on recent events, local industries, etc., it will be more difficult to find ready-made answers on the internet
- There is advice on limiting the opportunities for plagiarism in the RBL guide [Making your exam work as a take-home assessment](#)

Theme 4: Students found the take-home exams both more and less stressful, in different ways

Recommendations:

- Help students manage their stress about performance by helping them to develop a good understanding of what is expected (see above)
- Bear in mind students' individual circumstances. For some, a take-home exam is an opportunity to take their time and complete the assessment in a comfortable environment. For others, they will need to juggle completing the exam with caring responsibilities, in a noisy environment

Background

Between 5th and 19th May 2020, students across all campuses were asked to provide feedback on their experiences of the Covid lockdown, online learning and changes to assessments. This report focuses on students' perspectives of the take-home exam format that was used for the Semester 2 exam period.

Of the 674 students who responded to the survey, 198 students reported having taken a take-home exam. 97% of those were UGs, and of those, 92% were in years 3, 4 or 5. The vast majority (87%) were in two Schools: EPS and SOSS. In all, three quarters (73%) of students who reported doing a take-home exam were third or fourth years in EPS or SOSS.

This report highlights some of the themes in the comments of those 198 students, in response to a number of questions in the questionnaire (full list in appendix). Those students only make up a small number of those who took a take-home exam in Semester 2, and the data only provides a snapshot of how they felt at a particular point in time. Nevertheless, the feedback provides some useful points for reflection. Illustrative quotations are provided.

Themes from the student feedback

Theme 1: Students didn't feel clear about what was expected

The most prominent theme in students' comments was about how well they understood what was expected from them. There were many comments from students expressing uncertainty about how their take-home exam would be marked, given the unusual conditions. In particular, students were often unclear about whether the take-home exam would be marked more stringently than a traditional exam.

"Concern about how assessments will be marked, will it be far harsher due to open book nature."

There were concerns that more information wasn't provided about how the take-home exams would be marked

"Lecturers should make it absolutely clear how their expectations for exam answers have changed, now that the exams are open book. In my case some did, others not so much."

There were a few particular sources of confusion. Some students felt confused about a perceived difference between the 'official' expectation that the exam would take 2-3 hours, and the actual time the exam took to complete.

"On average (after speaking with classmates afterwards) exams were taking 6 hours to finish all the questions (the usual exam length is 2 hours)."

There was a related confusion about whether or not exam papers had been changed, with some students feeling that papers had been changed to make them more challenging, in light of the altered conditions.

"After speaking to fellow students after the 24 hour period had elapsed, we all came to the consensus that papers had been altered (to answer all 4 questions instead of 3/4 as usual, etc.) and had additional problems added or steps removed to make the papers more difficult"

Some students were also under misconceptions about the status of the word count, taking it to be an expectation rather than an upper limit.

"Having to write 2000 words in one day is something new to most of us. It was really hard to meet the word limit"

Theme 2: Some students found the take-home exam format had benefits in terms of a) rewarding deeper learning instead of memorisation, and b) more closely resembling tasks in the professional world

There were several positive comments about the format of the exam, in comparison with a traditional exam. Firstly, several students felt that the take-home exams had less of a problematic focus on memorisation

“Overall the take-home exam was a pleasant experience as opposed to a traditional exam. I felt that the exam was actually testing my ability to produce a good, coherent essay and what I had learnt from the course. Traditional essay based exams feel more like a test of how much information one can memorise and not how much one understands.”

Secondly, some students felt that the take-home exams were more linked to the ‘real world’ than traditional exams.

“Take home exam format is actually very practical. This practice should be made the norm. In reality, at workplaces will give a deadline and access to resources. Hence, take home exams prepare students for the future.”

Theme 3: Some students were concerned about the potential for academic misconduct in the take-home exams

There were a small number of comments from students concerned about the potential for academic misconduct with the take-home exams.

“Don't really see how you can effectively evaluate a student's understanding of the coursework through an online exam, where there is a high likelihood of them googling answers and even sharing answers despite the university's plagiarism policy.”

Theme 4: Students found the take-home exams both more and less stressful, in different ways

Many students commented that the take-home exam was less stressful than a conventional exam.

“It was so much less stressful having 24 hours to complete”

Several students felt that they had been able to better demonstrate their ability.

“For the first time I didn't feel as stressed or panicked about exams and because of that I will have done my best.”

In most cases, the reduced stress was linked simply to the 24-hour exam period. Some students mentioned the benefits of being in a more comfortable environment.

“Being able to take breaks definitely made them less stressful.”

“Take home exams allow you to be in a more familiar place and not have to stress about travelling and or things that cause me anxiety.”

However, there were also a significant number of comments about the increased stress and anxiety associated with the take-home exams. One reason for students feeling pressure was the difficulty some of them found in finding a quiet place to take the exam, whether that was to do with noise, or with caring responsibilities.

“Noisy next door neighbours.”

“Very difficult with a family. I have 2 children and took hours and hours to complete when an exam usually takes me 2 hours at most.”

A small number of students raised concerns about the unequal way that the costs and benefits of take-home exams arise for students in different circumstances.

“Exams felt mostly pointless as those not experiencing difficulties in lockdown had so much time to complete them that they felt trivial, but the extra time would be needed for those in difficult situations, so it just further disadvantaged them and put them under more stress whilst those who were relatively unaffected had any stress about the exams removed.”

An additional source of stress reported by students was the 24-hour window permitted to take the exam. Although guidance was provided that the exams should not take much longer than a standard exam, some students felt compelled to spend long periods working on their answers, which led to stress.

“I thought the take home exams were encouraging bad practice. Encouraging students to work all night (although this was never directly said) it is difficult for a student, particularly those who’s final year counts for 100% of their degree to not use all possible time.”

Appendix: List of questions from which data were drawn

17. For those forms of learning support which you found to be most helpful, please tell us why
18. What other forms of learning support (in addition to those listed in Q16) would you have found useful?
19. What are your top tips for learning online/remotely?
20. Please provide any other comments about your experience of online/remote learning and teaching.
22. What has concerned you most about the changes to assessments/exams? Other
23. Have you found any unexpected positives from the changes to assessments/exams? Other
- 26.a. What concerns did you have about your take-home exam? Other
- 26.b. What benefits were there in completing a take-home exam? Other
- 26.c. Did you have any difficulties in completing a take-home exam? Other
27. Please provide any further comments on assessment and exams
- 28.b. Please provide any comments related to next academic year.
- 28.d. Please provide any comments related to technology and/or remote studying
29. Please use this section for any further comments you wish to make.

CONTACT US:

www.lta.hw.ac.uk

LTAcademy@hw.ac.uk

 @LTA_HWU

