**On-line Examinations: Guidance**

*Moving to fully on-line assessment requires teams to replace exams with an alternative assessment strategy or revise their operation for on-line delivery. Any changes to the mode of assessment will have been made through COVID module/programme amendment processes or through approval from the relevant School Director and Faculty Registrar. This paper focuses on revisions to enable on-line exams.*

**Background**

The shift from in-person, time-limited, written unseen examinations to remote assessment requires a revision of exam questions and processes. The key to this is that any replacement enables the student to demonstrate that they have met the relevant learning outcomes.

The value of examinations is that they encourage students to recall previously learned material. This tends to focus on breadth of learning rather than depth of analysis. The intention is often that the examination will force students to engage with the syllabus more broadly than would be the case with an essay that would focus on specific curriculum areas. As a result, an examination is generally seen to work best when it assesses relatively lower order thinking skills such as description and understanding.

Examinations also test students’ ability to articulate ideas quickly and efficiently, as well as their time management skills, and capacity to perform under pressure.

There is a perception that the physical presence of an invigilator in an examination reduces the likelihood of cheating.

**The Nature of On-line Examinations**

The disadvantage of on-line examinations is that they cannot be effectively invigilated. Therefore, they are *de facto* open book examinations, as students will have access to a range of physical and online resources. As a result, questions that previously relied on students recalling information are problematic. This is because they reflect information that is relatively easy to find. Consequently, such questions will not provide a useful indication of students’ engagement with the subject. Instead, they are more likely to establish how good they are at finding and paraphrasing information. Questions need to be re-conceptualised to demonstrate comprehension. Application to a case study, for example, will better test students’ engagement with ideas. In other words, students would be able to do something with the information available to them and not just locate and summarise or rewrite. Marking criteria should be weighted towards comprehension and critical thinking.

Multiple-choice questions can be easily managed on-line. Devising effective questions is a skill, and there is a risk that poorly designed questions may test a student’s logic as opposed to their understanding. Careful testing of questions should reduce this risk. Canvas offers the option for a set number of questions drawn from a larger pool. This can reduce the risk of collusion, but it is important that questions are of comparable difficulty.

An advantage of on-line exams is that the format is relatively familiar to students. However, the process will feel very different. Therefore, students need an opportunity to practice in order to feel more at home with both the process and technological requirements. In addition, staff need to be available on-line and by phone to support students who have issues with IT or internet connection.

**Key Messages**

1. Examination questions should test higher order thinking skills such as application, interpretation, analysis, synthesis, generating ideas, and critical reflection. In light of this, accuracy should be seen as a threshold concept, rather than graded.
2. Students should have an opportunity to practice the exam, both in terms of sample questions and using the exam set-up.
3. Students need to be advised as to the appropriate format (e.g. word) for submission.
4. Staff need to be available to reassure and support students in the event of any IT failure.

**Types of On-line Exam**

1. **Time-limited On-line Exams**

These are the delivery of on-line exams though Canvas where students have a specific amount of time to complete the task. As such, they are closest to conventional scheduled exams. They are potentially the most convenient on-line alternative as they reflect existing work. This affords a degree of familiarity to staff and students and can offer a sense of continuity.

Strict time limits mean that examiners need to put mechanisms in place to ensure that students aren’t disadvantaged by equipment or internet failure. In addition, the nature of some cohorts may make time-zones a challenge. If students are sitting exams at different times, it may be difficult to identify a time that is convenient for all students. Finally, examiners need to bear in mind that some students need special arrangements for examinations. The provision of extra-time will not pose a significant challenge, but other needs (such as specialist equipment or readers) may.

* Staff need to be available throughout the examination period to offer advice, guidance and support if students have technology problems.

Time-limited exams can be offered in a fixed period or over a longer window. If assessors opt for the latter, the exam needs to be set up in Canvas Quizzes and these are time-stamped to ensure that students stick to the time limit. It is also advised that a time-limited exam is relatively short to avoid the risk of browser related problems.

1. **24 hour Assessments**

This assessment offers students a longer period to complete the assessment. The advantage over a shorter window for completion is that it affords the student more flexibility to manage the exam in relation to their personal circumstances. Nonetheless, the relatively small window means that students would still be encouraged to engage with the syllabus more broadly rather than focusing on specific questions and associated curriculum areas. In comparison to time-limited exams, 24 hour assessments mean that students will be able to reflect and improve the quality of their response. As with timed-limited exams, questions should require students to go beyond information recall and reporting concepts that are easily found on-line. However, given the longer period, they can encourage a greater degree of original thinking and critical assessment. Getting students to apply evidence and ideas will benefit those students who are familiar with the syllabus. They can use their time to apply their understanding, whilst their peers who have been less engaged will need to spend more time reviewing course material and readings prior to application.

It is important to recognise the difference between the available time that students will have to complete and submit answers and how long they are expected to actually work on the answers. Assessors should stress that this is not a 24-hour writing exercise. Students should be provided with an indication of how long they should spend on the whole exam and, if relevant, each answer. In line with this, setting realistic word-limits will avoid the risk of students adding more and more information. It will encourage them to be concise and selective, whilst making marking easier.

1. **On-line Vivas (oral examinations)**

In oral examinations, students are interrogated about selected parts of the syllabus through various questions. MSTeams offers an online platform to facilitate such examinations. They help students develop verbal communication skills, but care needs to be taken to ensure that assessment does not over-emphasise the quality of ‘performance’. In addition, Assessors need to establish careful protocols to avoid the risk of leading questions. Following EVA (Educational Video & Audio Recording) policy, vivas can be recorded for the purposes of moderation.