Guidance for the development of alternative assessments at The University of Aberdeen

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BACKGROUND

This paper outlines guidance that will enable the development of alternative approaches to assessment. The guidance is relevant to all taught provision across the university. There **may** be some exceptions associated with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirements.

The following principles underpin this guidance:

1. Students will be given the opportunity to do what is required to progress or graduate and to determine overall degree outcome.
2. All students should be given the opportunity to undertake assessment no matter what their circumstances.
3. Students' wellbeing is at the heart of our approach.
4. Flexibility should be embedded within any assessment approach to enable 1.
5. Students should be given the opportunity to undertake assessment over a period of time to enable them to access the assessment when their personal circumstances allow.
6. The integrity of assessment should be designed in, i.e. assessments should be designed to minimise the possibility for students to plagiarise, contract cheat or collude with other students.
7. Inclusion, disability and equality should be considered in the development of assessments in order to reduce the need for adjustments to accommodate individual student needs. This ensures that the University is meeting its legal duties under the Equality Act 2010 to anticipate the needs of disabled students.
8. Examinations should be replaced with alternative assessment(s) wherever possible. However, where there is no alternative to timed exams (e.g. for PSRB requirements, or subject pedagogy) these exams must normally be accessible to students for at least 48 hours. Where students have a provision for additional time this should be allocated only to the timed exams not the window of availability e.g. a student entitled to receive 15 minutes extra per hour would be given 2.5 rather than 2 hours to complete the assessment within the same window of availability.

To enable this flexible approach, we will:

- Work with Schools to ensure that quality assurance of assessment is maintained.
- Liaise with External Examiners and Schools to keep Externals informed.
- Support Schools to identify appropriate timings for assessment opportunities to support principle 3 above.
- We recommend staff continue to reflect on their assessment plans and consider whether further refinements can be made, taking into account the principles outlined above. We are mindful of the wellbeing of our staff, and the resources available to our staff. The Centre for Academic Development (CAD) and the Dean for Educational Innovation will work with Schools where required to ensure that they are supported in the development of alternative assessment.

GUIDANCE

Replacement of a traditional end-of-course examination

(i) Design open-book assessments which can be made available for an extended period of time to complete. A period of a minimum of 48 hours is recommended as an inclusive measure which provides the greatest flexibility for all students, irrespective of their circumstances (e.g. caring responsibilities, short-term illness, time zones, internet access, learning differences). It should be noted that an 'open book' assessment is not simply release of the existing exam paper in a non-invigilated format. Rather, it should be an assessment specifically designed for non-invigilated open-book delivery.

(ii) Non-exam options that you might wish to consider could include the following, further discussion of each is included in Appendix A. (Please note this is not an exhaustive list, if you are aware of other examples that might be useful for colleagues please feel free to email (cad@abdn.ac.uk) and we will add these.)
- Use of an essay
- Series of short answers
- Undertake a recorded presentation on a topic
- Annotated anthology
- Poster sessions (with or without peer critique)
- Annotated research bibliography with introduction
- Fact sheet
- Reflective paper

(iii) Ensure that assessments can be delivered, submitted and graded in electronic format through MyAberdeen. For Medicine, BDS and Physician Associate degrees, that use MyMBChB, MyBDS and MyPA, ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place for delivering, submitting and grading assessments electronically.

(iv) Design-in integrity
One concern about non-exam-based assessment is "cheating". It is likely where the stakes are high (i.e. 100% assignment) that students may be more tempted to cheat. Therefore, one way to reduce the temptation to cheat is to reduce the stakes of each individual component, by splitting the assessment into smaller constituent parts.

Please remember that both staff and students may be working outside their comfort zones and that support needs to be provided for those struggling with new approaches. As with all forms of assessment, account will need to be taken of reasonable adjustments for disabled students including students with specific learning differences such as Dyslexia and students with long-term health conditions (For further information see the FAQs for Staff, there is also FAQs for Students).

Where examinations must take place due to PSRB and subject specific requirements:

(a) Avoid use of specifically timed examinations delivered in a fixed time window and instead deliver the exam as a non-invigilated open-book/take home examination to be taken during a defined time period [see principle 8 above].

(b) If designing a test with multiple-choice style questions or equivalent, ensure answers are randomised. Consider the use of questions banks, different question types and additional randomisation options, if applicable, to enhance the integrity of the test. It is recommended

that tests are designed to enable students to complete these in any order and to revisit and revise answers within the timeframe. For certain question designs this may not be suitable (e.g. where information given a later question provides the answer to an earlier one). For further guidance refer to MyAberdeen Assignment & Test Workflows for Exams.

(c) Deliver the assessment through an online test function which has a variety of question types including MCQs, short answer, upload word document and other approaches. For further information in regard to MyAberdeen see Blackboard Help 'Create Tests and Surveys'.

(d) CAD will provide technical support to all staff setting up an examination.

APPROVAL

All changes to assessment format and weightings should be submitted for approval by the Quality Assurance Committee. For more information refer to QAC Approved Alternative Assessment web page.

SUPPORT

All Schools have been assigned a named contact from the Centre for Academic Development and they are available to assist colleagues with use of MyAberdeen and other tools to support delivery of alternative assessments.

APPENDIX A

Adapted from resources at [Berkeley University](#).

Essay

Structure of Essay (Trigwell, K. (1992)

1. ### Role Play Essays
   Students respond to the essay as if he/she is performing a specific role in the essay.
   For example: Write a letter to the local county council, explaining the environmental issues in the area, and requesting them to produce some measures; giving evidences and social arguments from government reports.
   This type of essays allows the students to become involved and see the relevance of the task.

2. ### Structured Essays
   Structured Essays are essays which have specific questions or topics that require answers.
   For example: In Shakespeare's play – Hamlet, discuss and compare some of the soliloquies in terms of its style, syntax and imagery.
   This type of essays is useful if the assessors wish to test specific knowledge and techniques, it is also easier to mark as the assessors know what type of answers to expect.

3. ### Interpretation of Data Evidence Essays
   Students are asked to write an essay based on data from a report/experiment they produced or from an external source.
   For example: Using the measurements found in the laboratory, explain and discuss the chemical reactions between the two main elements found.
   This type of essays is greatly pragmatic, using data the students collected, allowing students to reflect and analyse.

Series of short answer questions

- These are harder for students to "purchase" as they can be highly contextualised to the course material

- Can include "meaningful paragraph" style where students are given a list of specific terms to use in a paragraph that demonstrates their understanding of the terms and their interconnections

- Can also include bullet point answer style questions

- Start each question with "in your own words…" as this allows a zero grade to be awarded to any question where students have simply copied text form another source

Asking the students to prepare and record a presentation on a topic

- Many courses lend themselves to presentations. These could be designed to be for delivery to a lay audience or an audience of peers.

- An alternative approach would be to ask students to prepare a short academic lecture on a topic.

- Can be relatively easy to generate large variety of topics, being mindful of comparability, therefore reducing collaborative submission

Annotated anthology

- Students prepare a selection of works they have read during the term as a thematic anthology—they create the theme, choose the works, write a paragraph introduction to each, and an introduction to the anthology. This could also be used to summarise key literature in a scientific topic

- If the works themselves are short (e.g. poems) they should be included. For longer pieces, just a table of contents, the introduction, or citation (whatever is relevant to your discipline) and the introduction to each piece

Poster sessions (with peer critique)

- Students prepare a poster on a given topic

- Consider adding a presentation aspect with asynchronous pre –recorded presentation

- Consider an asynchronous question component where tutors or students ask questions through discussion boards and the presenting student is required to answer

Annotated research bibliography with introduction

- As an alternative to an essay or a research paper, students could compile a bibliography on a problem or question.

- This requires them to identify the key literature, read and comprehend the information, critically evaluate the accuracy and contribution to the field, and provide an explanatory introduction to the bibliography.

- Students can also be asked to compare the relative usefulness of comparative sources, authors' points of view, biases etc.

- For ease of marking the topic can be preselected by the tutor (or for large classes a selection of topics) or can be left to student to select a topic (this reduces the likelihood of collusion but increases the burden on markers). Alternatively, students could work on topics in groups.

Fact sheet

- A more demanding assignment than it first appears to be

- Useful for health issues (smoking, HIV, etc.), economics or sociology (school board budgets or trends in enrolment), history or political science (fact sheet on the 1960 Presidential Election), engineering (fact sheet on the new Bay Bridge), etc.

- Students must learn to search the relevant databases for the discipline, evaluate material, and present it in a concise, readable way.

Reflective paper

- If the class is experiential in nature (e.g. student teaching, performance), ask the students to write a reflective paper/critique of their experience.

- The key here is to make them tie this to theory or themes in the course so that it doesn't become an effusion of personal feeling.

- Even in non-experiential/performance courses, a reflective paper can be very useful.

Exams

All exam will be conducted remotely in a non-invigilated format. Although there are various companies offering online proctoring services and software this is not something we currently have facilities to implement therefore we should set all exams in a form which assumes they are non-invigilated.

Non invigilated open book exam

- The type of question in an open book exam differs from a traditional closed book exam in that the responses require more application of knowledge rather than fact recall.

- Rather than using an existing planned exam, questions can be reworked to contextualise them and enable students to demonstrate application of knowledge.

- You can use either additional coursework/continuous assessment or a timed take-home exam. (Note: a take-home exam is a mix of coursework and open book exam, where the student can access notes, internet and any books or resources, with the expectation that the final submission will still be in the students' own words.)

- A take home exam normally has a longer time period for students to prepare their submission (i.e. 1 or 2 weeks would be reasonable)

Some question types to consider in a non-invigilated exam

- Explanation of a multiple-choice answer (students must explain why the answer they chose to a multiple-choice question is correct, or why the alternative answers are wrong)

- Meaningful paragraph (given a list of specific terms, students must use the terms in a paragraph that demonstrates that they understand the terms and their interconnections)

- Short-answer exam (rather than asking multiple-choice questions, make some questions short-answer, to require students to show their understanding of key concepts)

Marking

- If using MyAberdeen for submission of assignments through the assignment submission area or the MyAberdeen test function this can be set to allow anonymous marking. Only once all scripts have been marked and grades agreed will the anonymous marking be removed and then grades will be visible against each student name in the grade centre.

- For assignments using Blackboard assignment submission within MyAberdeen, multiple markers can be marking at the same point

- If using MCQ Test (quizzes) style questions in the test function of MyAberdeen the computer can be set to mark these. All that is required is a moderator to check these for any errors, marks assigned by the computer can easily be overwritten if required by the marker

- For MCQ Test based assignments only 1 mark can be entered per question therefore if double marking is required it is best to enter marks per student per question into separate document (Excel works well for this) then compare and agree marks, only the agreed mark is then entered into the student test. The data base containing the shared marks should be emailed to school administrators as evidence of adherence to the marking process

- For MyAberdeen Tests with questions (essay/short answer) that require marking, you can use the grade centre/gradebook in MyAberdeen to independently record the grades of 2 markers and then to agree a grade, thus ensuring there is evidence of the marking process within the course area itself, which makes things transparent for all involved