

## NOTES OF GUIDANCE 9

### Take home examination papers: guidance for tutors and course conveners

The purposes of this note are:

- to discuss the pros and cons of take home exams and contrast them with alternative forms of summative assessment;
- to review take home examination setting practice and promote good practice in this area;
- to give guidance as to how to support students who are preparing for take home examinations.

The guidance is directed first and foremost at e-MSc programme directors who are considering using take home exams as the main form of assessment for these programmes. However, it may prove interesting to other tutors and course conveners who are keen to explore different forms of summative assessment. Periodical review of examination formats is good practice. The guidance is based on practice identified in higher education institutions, in particular US universities, where this form of assessment has been used more extensively (especially in law faculties) than in the UK. It is also in line with the TLAC-approved guidance on take home exams that was published in May 2012 (<http://bit.ly/11eev5g>).

Before adopting take home exams as a form of summative assessment, it is recommended that academic colleagues discuss their pedagogical relevance with the Teaching and Learning Centre ([tlc@lse.ac.uk](mailto:tlc@lse.ac.uk)); possible technical issues with the Centre for Learning Technology ([clt-support@lse.ac.uk](mailto:clt-support@lse.ac.uk)); and administrative issues with their departmental manager.

#### Introduction

Over the last few years, higher education has seen a rise in the diversity of delivery mechanisms of its courses and programmes. In that context, a number of academic programmes throughout LSE have expressed an interest

in using take home examinations as an assessment method and some have already started to offer them (eg DV428, Managing humanitarianism). Take home exams, sometimes also known as 'seen exams', enable higher education institutions to make innovative and efficient use of digital technologies. They are described as 'a special type of open examination where students are provided with the exam paper and complete it away from an exam centre without the help of others over a set period of time' ([www.actheology.edu.au/.../Take home exams guidelines.pdf](http://www.actheology.edu.au/.../Take_home_exams_guidelines.pdf)).

While LSE remains committed to a traditional approach to assessment, we need to keep exploring alternative approaches and adopt them when relevant. In particular, e-MSc programmes, with their specific cohorts of students combining education with full or part time employment, lend themselves to the use of digital delivery mechanisms and, by extension, of take home examinations. As of October 2011, there were about 150 students registered on such programmes and their number is expected to rise considerably over the next five years.

Take home examinations can be most useful in the testing of certain skills, especially those of a more vocational nature such as required in law and management courses. This is especially the case with longer take home exams (eg of 48 or 72 hours), which allow for the use of more 'authentic' assessments that replicate the environment in which students' knowledge and skills will be used and the type of issues they will be facing.

#### Pros and cons of take home examinations

The potential benefits and drawbacks of take home examinations must be considered before using them at all. Some of the benefits include:

- the potential to further students' skills of critical thinking, critical analysis and argumentation - this

contrasts with the focus on memorization skills sometimes associated with unseen exams;

- a reduction in the sense of panic that often accompanies unseen exams (although they do not eliminate it completely);
- an enrichment of our repertoire of forms of assessment and, in catering to different learning styles, a contribution to greater inclusivity;
- especially in the case of longer exams, a potential development of students' ability to find and use information for problem solving and to deliver well structured and well presented arguments and solutions.

And, from a more practical perspective:

- take home exams are easier to read and faster to mark as submissions are prepared on a word processor and submitted electronically;
- thanks to the digital nature of these exams, students have the possibility to decide when and where they want to take their examinations.

However, among the potential difficulties associated with take home exams, it is worth noting the following:

- their administrative complexity and the potential for overlaps with other (traditional) examinations;
- the need to ensure the availability of adequate support to deal with any issues (technical, emotional or need for clarification) raised by students for the whole duration of the take home exam;
- the possibility that students will spend much more time in completing these exams than they would do for traditional ones;
- the substantial risk of improper collaboration;
- their lack of fit with the learning outcomes traditionally associated with some disciplines. For instance, take home exams may be more appropriate for disciplines relating to social professions such as law or management where case study questions can be used and less so for disciplines relating to humanities and social sciences where practical applications are less obvious.

Tutors and course conveners may therefore wish to consider alternative forms of assessment that offer some of the benefits of take home exams but do not come with some of their drawbacks. Summative essays, for instance which also allow students to demonstrate their ability to manipulate, synthesize and apply their understanding of the discipline, are increasingly used throughout the

School, especially for MSc programmes, and may provide a simpler, less 'risky' solution.

## Good practice

The following are suggestions on different aspects of take home exams that departments should consider for the setting of this form of summative assessment.

### Delivery

Tutors and course conveners may want to allow 'time shifting', which makes it possible for students to start when they want, provided this takes place within a limited time period. The clock only starts ticking when students download the exam paper at the appropriate local time, from which point they all receive the same amount of time to submit their scripts. Thus, time shifting creates the possibility of allowing students to self schedule their take home exams. For example, students could choose any 8- (or 24-, 48-, 72-) hour time period within a specified week, allowing them to work in the best circumstances possible and to take into account their other work, domestic or caring commitments. In the context of LSE, this could be done through Moodle but guidance from Centre for Learning Technology will be needed to set it up.

### Timing

Take home exams can vary from a short 3 hours with a 24 hour prior reading period, to 24 hours, 48 hours or 72 hours between release of the exam paper and the submission of scripts. The length of the exams should be determined by the learning outcomes identified for each specific course; and, obviously, the type of questions and the marking criteria will have to be modified according to the format adopted. Amongst current users of take home exams, there is some support for a 24 hour exam with a clear word or page limit.

In the case of shorter take home exams, there is also some evidence supporting the distribution of questions up to a week in advance of the actual exam so that students can prepare their answers. This is thought to be an effective way of encouraging students to think critically about the material covered in the course as opposed only to memorising it. In this scenario, students are warned that the questions will be slightly modified so as to minimise the possibility of collusion and plagiarism.

If used in conjunction with other types of summative assessment, the use of take home exams should be carefully planned at programme level to ensure that student assessment loads remain manageable, that students have enough time to revise for other exams, and that dates of summative take home exams do not

clash with submission dates/times of other formative/summative coursework. In that context, allowing students to decide the specific time at which they want to do their take home exams (see previous section) would minimise these problems.

### **Submission system**

LSE is keen to promote the establishment of a common School level system for downloading exam papers and submitting scripts so that students taking courses in different departments do not need to learn how to use a range of different systems. To this end, it is recommended that courses and programmes considering take home examinations use Moodle. Among its features, Moodle can keep track of the allocated time based on whenever the student first downloaded the exam questions. Moodle is already used for the setting and submission of assessed coursework and, as mentioned earlier, the Centre for Learning Technology is able to advise departments on its use for this purpose.

It is recommended that departments establish local back up systems (eg email system, fax) in the event that Moodle is down on the date/time of the exam. However, this will not eliminate all access risks - eg if a student's local internet provider has an outage - and it is advised, therefore, that additional measures such as allowing students to submit later be implemented.

### **Late submissions**

A further consideration is the possible establishment of a School wide policy concerning late submissions of take home exams. Obviously, such a policy should reflect the actual format adopted so that a student does not get penalised to the same extent for a one hour delay in the case of a 72 hour exam as with an 8 hour one, for instance. To this end, it might be advisable to send students a proof of delivery upon submission of their examination. The new version of Moodle due to come into operation by the end of academic year 2012/13 might be able to offer this functionality.

In a similar vein, departments should have procedures in place to deal with students who are unwell on the day (or days) of the examination. The Advice and Reception team in the Student Services Centre can advise on appropriate procedures.

### **Staff availability**

As with unseen exams, academic members of staff should be contactable (by the university administration and by students) for the duration of the exam period to clarify any problems/questions that may arise. Due to different time zones, this availability should be provided 24 hours a day for the period concerned. This requirement, coupled with

the need to operate a back up system in the event of Moodle problems, underline some of the higher administrative workloads associated with take home exams.

### **Length**

The length of papers should be limited to a set number of words/pages to ensure fairness among students and limit an unduly high amount of marking.

### **Plagiarism**

The possibility for consultation and/or collaboration among students on take home exams is, by the very nature of the assessment, significant and measures must be put in place to minimise their occurrence. Time shifting, mentioned above, increases the opportunity for students to collude as, for example, a student with six hours left in time zone A could contact a student who has completed and submitted the exam in time zone B.

Among the measures that could be implemented to minimise the problem are the following:

- Questions should be specific enough to prevent students from plagiarising anything via the internet.
- Multiple choice questions are to be avoided, pointing towards the use of long essay questions for qualitative disciplines.
- In the case of quantitative papers, where it is more difficult to minimise opportunities for collusion, tutors and course conveners may consider developing two or three versions of the questions and allocating them randomly to students.
- Students should submit a 'declaration of academic integrity' (or similar) with their completed scripts. The Teaching and Learning Centre can provide examples of such declarations ([tlc@lse.ac.uk](mailto:tlc@lse.ac.uk)).
- Students should be alerted to the School's Statement on editorial help - <http://www.lse.ac.uk/resources/calendar/academic/Regulations/statementOnEditorialHelp.htm> - that outlines guidance for students and examiners on all written work produced by students.
- Finally, assessment criteria designed to reflect the specificities of take home exams, and thus giving greater weight to criticality and originality, could also help against assessment misconduct.

### **Types of question**

The additional time given to students doing take home examinations allows for greater variety of, and less traditional, questions to be used. Obviously the types of question will depend on the department in which these take home exams are used. For instance, it should be

easier for disciplines such as law and management to ask students to apply their knowledge to specific applications (eg hypothetical clients facing a specific legal issue). Nevertheless, less applied disciplines, such as anthropology and history, might be able to come up with questions that exploit fully the potential of take home examinations for critical thinking and the application of knowledge, thereby reducing the risk of plagiarism.

The following questions would be useful for any discipline:

- Compare and contrast. For example, the question could ask students to compare and contrast three theoretical perspectives or three specific readings with particular detail to a number of points and the requirement to quote extracts from these readings. Similarly, it might be interesting to ask students to write a conversation or a debate between the course's main authors or readings.
- A more practical angle could be provided by asking students to answer a question using a number of 'real life' examples. They could also be asked to comment on a newspaper article using theoretical concepts from the course readings.
- Alternatively, students could be provided with a short essay and asked to identify theoretical perspectives related to the themes discussed in it.
- Longer take home exams are often based on case studies, such as the ones typically used in American business schools. There is some evidence for these case studies to be distributed to students at the beginning of the course so that they can become familiar with their nuances, relate the course material to the assigned tasks and produce pre-examination thinking and connections between the question and the material. Students may be encouraged to form study groups so that they can discuss and share ideas with each other.

## Student support and preparation

Tutors and course conveners should pay attention to the following points when considering how best to support students for take home examinations:

- In the case of long take home exams (three or more days), disabled students do not require extra time. However, in the case of shorter exams or in exceptional circumstances, the department may wish to extend the deadline. The Disability and Well-Being Service ([lse.ac.uk/disability](http://lse.ac.uk/disability)) would be happy to advise but would not get involved in activities to maintain the integrity of the exam, such as chaperoning, which should be the responsibility of the department.
- Good practice suggests that formative assessment should reflect the type of questions that will be asked at the summative stage. Moreover, the conditions around which these exams will be submitted should be replicated and students should be asked to submit their formative assignments through Moodle.
- Allowance should be made for slightly longer scrutiny meetings to make sure questions and instructions to students are clear, especially when offering take home exams for the first time. It might be a good idea to test questions and instructions with a sub group of students.
- Much time and care should be given to the preparation of the written instructions so as to minimise the number of emails during the exam period. Minor issues such as the number of words/pages, format, fonts allowed, referencing systems, etc., should be agreed and communicated to students beforehand. It might also be advisable to limit the materials students are able to use (eg only course readings and lecture notes versus any books/readings available) and it should be clear to students whether obtaining a Merit or Distinction is dependent upon them having engaged with additional readings beyond the course required readings.

## Further reading and resources

All Notes of Guidance are available at the Resources page of the LSE Teaching and Learning Centre website: [lse.ac.uk/tlc/resources](http://lse.ac.uk/tlc/resources)



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