

Universities should learn from assessment methods used during the pandemic—and cut down on exams for good

August 11 2020, by Naomi Winstone and David Boud



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Timed written examinations continue to dominate university assessment. In most professions, the need to recall and write down specific

information from memory under timed conditions is rare. Yet every year across the world students are crammed into exam halls to do just that.

The coronavirus pandemic gave universities no choice but to radically rethink [assessment](#). Many formal examinations were [cancelled](#) and replaced by a greater variety of assessment tasks.

As universities start to imagine a post-pandemic future, they are faced with a choice—to simply return to the way things were, or embrace this opportunity to change assessment for good.

Meaningful learning

To manage the challenges created by the shutdown of campuses, many universities [reduced the number of assessments](#) students were required to complete. They still made sure that the tasks enabled students to demonstrate their learning against all of the stated learning outcomes. These are the essential expectations for a course as a whole.

Students often complain of bunched assessment deadlines. Courses with lots of pieces of assessment occurring at the same time—such as final exams—can drive what are known as "surface" learning behaviours, such as short-term memorisation of required knowledge.

In contrast, "deep" approaches to learning involve students integrating new learning with what they already know, and seeking to engage meaningfully with knowledge rather than just trying to remember it. A smaller number of assessment tasks can encourage this deeper approach to learning. It leads students to look beyond the content of what they are learning, towards its meaning.

In assessment, less can be more. In university courses, tasks that contribute to students' grades are known as summative assessments.

Tasks that focus instead on helping students to learn through practising key skills and benefiting from [feedback](#) are called formative assessments.

[Research](#) shows that students typically experience eight times as much summative as formative assessment on their courses. By reducing the number of summative assessments, we can instead focus on meaningful learning and formative feedback.

Rethinking examinations

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, many exams have been replaced by coursework tasks or open book examinations. These forms of assessment better represent the ways in which information is synthesised and applied in real life situations. Tasks that represent what graduates are likely to do in the workplace are often called [authentic assessment](#).

There are countless ways to assess students' learning authentically. From learning journals to blog posts, and from podcasts to client reports, students can demonstrate their learning through a wide range of tasks that represent the kinds of activities they will encounter in their future working lives.

Whilst there are often concerns that such forms of assessment are more susceptible to cheating than the conventional examination, [research](#) now equips us with strategies to minimise such risks.

In a few cases, examinations are set and required by the professional bodies that accredit courses. But where there are viable alternatives to timed unseen examinations, we can envision a future where we no longer cram students into exam halls and ask them questions they will rarely encounter outside of an educational institution.

Reclaiming feedback

As we think of new ways of assessing our students' learning, perhaps we can re-establish feedback as important in its own right and not just an afterthought to an assessment [task](#). Our [recent research](#) argues that for too long feedback has been something that mainly happens after assessment has taken place. Instead, feedback can and should be designed into courses in ways that help students to learn through understanding and using feedback information.

Examinations often occur at the end of the academic year. This means that if students receive any information at all on their performance, they do not have an opportunity to use it. The neglect of feedback as a learning tool has meant that often comments provided on students' work merely justify the grade awarded, rather than supporting students to learn how to improve their work in the future. Supporting students' learning is the true purpose of feedback.

University assessment has resisted change for far too long. This pandemic has forced a large-scale shift in approaches to assessment, not just in terms of how we assess students, but why. Under immensely challenging circumstances, universities have been handed an opportunity to change for good. They should use this opportunity to focus on methods of assessment that put learning first.

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