Testing Times: Traditional Examination and Asynchronous Learning

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ABSTRACT Because assessment reflects course pedagogy, aims, objectives but also broader institutional and cultural expectations, traditional examination still has a role in the new media of asynchronous, distance learning. This paper recounts experiences of incorporating such examination within an Internet-delivered, GIScience programme, outlining some logistical and learning limitations of doing so. A pedagogical dualism for or against traditional examination is argued to be narrow and unnecessarily restrictive; focus is instead given to modifying traditional assessment to meet learning needs. A hybrid of seen and unseen examination is discussed. Feedback from students suggests the approach is welcome but unequal access to learning resources is a problem.

KEY WORDS: Asynchronous learning, distance learning, examination, GIScience

Introduction

It is widely accepted that assessment must be designed to reflect course pedagogy, aims and objectives. Networked courses require the course designers to rethink the assessment strategy if it is to reflect the aims of the course and appropriately assess the skills developed during the course. (Macdonald et al., 2002)

In this reflective paper, consideration is given to the role of ‘traditional examination’ as a means to assess the learning and knowledge of students who study within an asynchronous learning framework, giving focus to a course in geographical information science with an international cohort of students. By traditional examination is meant formal, end-of-year, timed examination papers to which students respond in the form of written (essay-style) answers to a limited choice of previously unseen exam questions, set in advance and answered in examination centres where invigilators (examination supervisors) prevent...
communication between students and prohibit the use of notes or other revision aids. Traditional examination is therefore distinguished from multiple-choice quizzes, coursework, project-based work, peer review and open-book exams, amongst other styles of assessment. Here, then, the term traditional examination is shorthand for an end-of-year summative assessment method with the primary purpose of auditing students’ comprehension and learning of core theory and course content. It contrasts with more formative methods of feedback and other diagnostics tests that are often argued to be more ‘progressive’ and more attuned to students’ needs and circumstances (Boston, 2002).

Of course, there is a potential anachronism when talking of traditional examination in the context of asynchronous learning, particularly when the delivery of the course takes place within new electronic media (as for e-learning). It is to be recognized that information and communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate innovation in assessment and that many authors particularly see these technologies as an opportunity to develop online collaborative and interactive assessment (see, for example, Macdonald et al., 2002). In this journal, Solem et al. (2003, p. 240) have viewed ICTs as having “paved the way for experiments in teaching and learning”, identifying collaborative learning and inquiry as an appropriate pedagogy for what they describe as an internationalization of geography education.

Yet, against this backdrop of technological and pedagogical innovation is a sense of plus ça change, plus la même chose: a frustration that in the rush to ‘go online’ many instructors actually graft existing methods of teaching, learning and assessment into the new media of ICTs and electronic delivery (see, for example, Stephenson, 2001). The fact that traditional examination persists not only in conventional higher education courses but also in e-learning programmes appears to be viewed with a sense of collective antipathy within much of the relevant literature—rightly so, if as Elton & Johnston (2002, p. 8) suggest, “traditional assessment practices, in particular the heavy reliance on timed examinations, may also be unsuitable for traditional approaches to teaching and learning”; also, presumably, for new approaches. Nevertheless, a seemingly incidental comment made by the same authors (ibid., p. 5) is revealing. They write: “an attempt at establishing a body of good practice for a very traditional institution . . . was made recently by one of us . . . It is worth noting that one of the constraints was that it has to fit existing Registry regulations!”

Institutional constraints such as that are not uncommon and this paper is written with reference to an institutional expectation for traditional assessment. It is also written with a desire to avoid portraying such expectations as invariably preventing good practice. It is suggested that traditional examination need not be inconsistent with the learning objectives of a particular programme—for reasons that are outlined in the course of the paper.

On a personal level, the current author is neither dogmatically for, nor vociferously against, traditional examination on such a course and, in order that the author’s comments are not misunderstood, it is instructive to note that an earlier paper considers the merits of using collaborative learning and peer assessment as part of the same course that is discussed here (Harris, 2003). The course is GIScOnline—a predominantly part-time MSc degree with an interdisciplinary focus on the principles and applications of geographical information science (GISc). The course uses the Internet as its teaching medium, the only exception being for the traditional examinations for which the students are physically present at one of the University of London approved examination centres across the world.
Ultimately, reflection on the role and difficulties of traditional examinations in one particular course may shed more light on the peculiarities of the UK university system or of the conventions of the University of London with, perhaps, only a penumbra on more generic issues in distance education. However, any charges of national parochialism or introspection are defended as follows. As the UK expands its export of higher education courses to an international market through distance-learning initiatives such as the University of London External Programme (http://www.londonexternal.ac.uk), then, assuming the traditional assessment model endures as it has to date, the issues and problems associated with it will be encountered by many more tutors and students to come. Similar problems may be encountered by other institutions that attempt to translate a traditional model of university teaching and assessment into a distance-learning framework.

**Traditional Examination as a Method of Assessment**

The use of traditional examination is (at the risk of tautology) an extremely entrenched practice in higher education institutions, in the UK at least. Critiques of such methods are wide ranging but the sentiments of Light & Cox (2001, pp. 170–172) are broadly representative:

> Working purely for marks or grades can be an indication of a cynical and purely strategic approach to assessment. Traditional finals, for example, have often elicited these approaches, primarily with respect to course content, frequently enabling students to evade some of the more serious deeper demands of their course and pass. [T]he idea [is given] that exam results provide a grand verdict on a student’s academic worth. Criticisms of such traditional assessment include: too much emphasis on memory; too much stress on factual knowledge; too great a reliance on speed of writing and thinking; too great an element of luck; too much pressure of a kind seldom found in later life; too little scope for originality and sustained writing; too little opportunity for constructive feedback.

Such comments are a little emotive and arguably one-sided but perhaps they need to be if, as Race claims (2001, p. 5, cited by Elton & Johnston, 2002), the balance of practice is very much in favour of traditional approaches: “something like 90 per cent of a typical university degree depends on unseen time-constrained written examinations, and tutor-marked essays and/or reports”.

Simonite (2003) considers the effects of different assessment methods on the degree performance of individual students taking a modular degree programme at Oxford Brookes University, England. The methods she considers are post-module, summative assessment (what she refers to as ‘examination assessment’), more formative ongoing assessment (‘coursework’) and a mixture of both. In modules in which all or part of the assessment was based on coursework (and having corrected for factors such as class size and at which stage of the degree programme the module was taken) students achieved higher marks on average than they did in modules using examination assessment only. Coursework assessment was also found to reduce the variation between student grades.

However, the general trends vary by subject. For example, Simonite records (ceteris paribus) a mean difference of +1.7 in marks achieved in 100 per cent coursework and 100
per cent examination-assessed modules for the subjects of computing and mathematical science but with a standard error of 1.37 (therefore not significant at a confidence of $p = 0.05$). For business, humanities, social science and law the mean difference is $+3.0$ with a lower standard error, of 0.67 (significant at $p = 0.01$). Similarly, differences were found by subject between mean marks achieved in modules using 100 per cent coursework and modules using a mixture of coursework and examination assessment. The greatest, significant gains ($p \approx 0.05$) were in law ($+3.8$, s.e. 3.8), biology and molecular sciences ($+2.8$, s.e. 1.02), and hospitality (3.8, s.e. 1.84).

It is Simonite’s argument that though these mean gains may seem low, with an observed 25.9 per cent of students within 3 marks of a degree boundary they may still prove sufficient to change the final degree classification assigned to students. A problem with this reasoning is that it is not actually known whether those marked near the boundaries of degree classifications are the same ones who benefit from the effects of coursework raising grades on average. In any case, the Oxford Brookes University cohort need not be representative of students in other institutions and the initial grouping of subjects into computing and mathematical sciences on the one hand, or business, humanities, social science and law on the other, seems a little broad brushed. Despite these caveats, the variation in the effects of coursework by subject are interesting (though not necessarily significant) and suggest that traditional examination is not unconditionally the bête noire it is sometimes portrayed to be. Rather, it may be better suited to some types of knowledge generation, codification and testing than it is to others. The same may be said of coursework, recognizing that coursework can come in many ‘shapes and sizes’—ideally, as best fits the intended learning objectives of the module (for example, Light & Cox, 2001 consider: portfolios; open-book exams; prior-notice exams; problem-based learning; self-assessment; peer assessment; ‘consultants and assessors’ exercises; group projects; ‘learning contracts’; reflective commentaries; and clinical examinations).

Exaining the Rôle of Traditional Examination in Asynchronous, Distance-learning Programmes

GIScOnline is administered by Birkbeck, a college of the University of London, and it is the university, not the college, that awards the final degree. Statute 66(2) of the University of London states “Candidates granted degrees and other awards shall have attained the same academic standard irrespective of mode or place of study or examination”. Consequently, the standard of assessment for degrees obtained by distance learning is the same as that for students studying face-to-face at a college of the university. The statutes of the university do not require assessment solely by formal examination. Indeed, paragraph 14.1 of Birkbeck College’s Regulations for Degrees states that “the questions and other tests at all examinations in the College will be so selected as duly to represent any different schools of thought or modes of dealing with the subject which may exist among Teachers of the University”. Furthermore, the college’s Programme Specification Guidance Notes require the balance between coursework and examination to be identified, giving consideration to whether “the assessment procedures provide students with prompt and sufficient feedback to assist them in the development of their intellectual skills?” and whether the assessment performs a formative function.

Although GIScOnline has a mixed assessment strategy, it has been dominated by traditional examination: 44 per cent (assignments, 25 per cent; dissertation 25 per cent;
‘virtual conference’, six per cent at the time of writing). The balance, then, is towards summative assessment, as it was in the University of London External Programme. In 2003, that programme promoted postgraduate courses in 37 different subjects, of which one-third were assessed either solely by unseen written exams or, for most master’s degrees, by a combination of written exam and an individual research report/dissertation. The remaining two-thirds of courses also incorporated some coursework, usually written assignments. But assignments typically were weighted at only 30 per cent of the final degree, relative to unseen examinations at 70 per cent. The only course making explicit reference to collaborative learning as part of the assessment procedure stated that “some assessment may be by online contributions to conferences and activities”. This was a course in Open, Distance and Flexible Learning and recognition, perhaps, that a reliance on traditional examination, research dissertation and essay writing is not necessarily the best model for Internet-based learning.

A crude typology of assessment does, however, disguise the potential flexibility afforded to tutors to align the particular style and format of specific tasks to the learning objectives of that piece of work, or of the course more generally. For example, many of the assignments set for GIScOnline are more applied and project based than essay tasks; and in the next section is shown how the traditional examination format was modified to better reflect the learning needs of students. The same sort of ‘defence’ can also be applied to the University of London’s External Programme. For reasons considered below, the requirement to undertake traditional examination is prescribed but the exact styles and formats of the exam papers are not. In this light, any pedagogical dualism for or against traditional examination is simplistic if traditional examination is always cast as a single, enduring edifice that is somehow immune to (and has no possibility of) rebuild or modification. An alternative discussion might be on the imagination and creativity of examiners to set ‘the right sorts of questions’ (personal communication)—in the ‘right’ way.

Nevertheless, from a logistical perspective, the fact that traditional examination is central to the University of London’s various distance-learning programmes is surprising given the effort required to administer it. By 2004, the External Programme was promoting over 100 degrees and diplomas, attracting 32,000 students in 180 countries. These countries lie, of course, in different time zones and this raises the risk of collusion. It is possible for a student to complete an unseen paper in one country and then inform a student in another country of its content.

GIScOnline also attracts applications from an international audience. In the years 2000–2003 there were participants from Australasia, the Far East, the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East, Africa, South America, North America and (continental) Europe, as well as the UK. The distribution of students by time zone was in the approximate range ± nine hours from Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)—a difference of some 18 hours!

Until recently, the risk of collusion has been resolved by preparing different exam papers for different world regions. In practice, each unseen paper then had up to four different versions. This created a demand on tutors to produce questions that were not actually identical but still broadly equivalent on each paper (using as a guide the declared learning objectives of the course units). Meeting this demand became more difficult as the number of countries represented on the course grew. In principle, a three-hour paper requires eight different versions to prevent any collusion across a time range of 24 hours,
a two-hour paper requires 12 versions, whilst a one-hour paper requires 24 versions exhibiting both difference and equivalence!

The External Programme’s choice of assessment strategy might also be surprising given the often vociferous, pedagogically centred objections that are raised against traditional examination, particularly when new technological media could offer opportunity to innovate. A counter to these sorts of arguments might be that if the learning objectives of a course are to transmit factual knowledge to participants, then one way to check that the required knowledge has been well learnt by and is now ‘second nature’ to students is to test those students’ ability quickly, accurately and articulately to recall the facts and core course content under some degree of pressure. For example, the examiners of GIScOnline may want to check the students’ familiarity and comprehension of aspects of the ‘core curriculum in GIScience’ (www.ncgia.ucsb.edu/pubs/core.html; Kemp & Goodchild, 1991, 1992) and to do so is not inconsistent with quality assurance issues or setting benchmark standards for a degree course. Precept 19 of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s Distance Learning guidelines (QAA, 1999) states that:

A providing institution [of distance learning] should be able to demonstrate publicly that summative assessment procedures used for programmes studied at a distance are appropriate for the mode of study, for the circumstances in which the programmes are studied and for the nature of the assessment being undertaken; that assessments are conducted and marked, and results promulgated, in a reliable and properly regulated manner; and that, in all respects, assessment procedures accord with the requirement to safeguard academic standards. It might also be asserted that making decisions under pressure and being ‘placed on the spot’ to offer an opinion may be more representative of subsequent life circumstances than the critiques of traditional examination sometimes claim—notably, in fast-moving business environments.

However, the most persuasive argument for requiring students to attend traditional examinations is that it is a useful and necessary check on the identity of students, helping to prevent forgery, plagiarism and impersonation, and ensuring that performance of students is generally adjudged on individual merit. Accordingly, the QAA guidelines for distance learning also state that “in making arrangements for student assessment, matters which institutions should consider include: … its ability to demonstrate that it has appropriate processes for checking that students’ work is their own” (the QAA also recommends that institutions consider “the effects of time zones, and the opportunity for the ready transfer of information about examinations, when administering time-controlled assessments in widely differing locations”).

Admittedly, new technologies do raise the possibility of computer-mediated assessment (see, for example, Steven & Zakrzewski, 2002), for which students need to log in and register their presence, and a variety of teleconferencing and biometric sensors are now available which could be used to monitor student activity. But, whether these do offer a credible alternative to ‘simpler’ (less technologically dependent) approaches given the cost implications of adopting such technologies and ensuring they are available equally to all students on an international course seems doubtful, at least within the immediate future.

Finally, although we may rightly be uncomfortable with the notion that exam results provide “a grand verdict on a student’s academic worth”, the personal discomfort exists
precisely because of wider societal and cultural expectations that this is what traditional examinations should and do achieve. We need not agree with the expectation, just recognize it exists, being sensitive to the fact that the extent or desirability of either learner-centred or collaborative teaching (to give the two ‘alternative’ teaching models most promoted alongside distance learning) are not a universal cultural or political norm. Regardless of whether traditional examinations really do succeed in judging individual merit and performance, there is evidence that distance-learning programmes that do not offer this type of assessment are simply not permitted by the governments of certain countries to practice in those nations (personal communication). Such expectations do not align with a business age where knowledge, innovation and creativity are seen as key business advantages, encouraged by collaborative approaches to expand and enhance existing knowledge (Wesley, 2002). Yet, they are consistent with the commodification of knowledge and teaching (Clear, 2002) and the growth of an industry in which various institutions promote themselves as brand leaders and standard bearers, and are companies entering into contractual agreements with customers who pay (not insubstantial) sums of money, expecting a tangible product in return.

The issue, then, is not an Orwellian dichotomy of ‘coursework good, unseen exams bad’ but of alignment, ensuring the type of assessment reflects the nature, purpose and learning objectives of the course concerned. Given that the stated aim of GIScOnline is “to introduce students to the principles and applications of Geographical Information Science at an advanced level through the development of scientific knowledge, technical expertise and practical experience”, the near 50:50 balance between traditional examination and other forms of assessment is defensible: the exams lend themselves to testing principles, core theory and knowledge; applications and practical experience are tested in other ways.

Nevertheless, we also need to take seriously the charge that traditional examination is a test of speed of writing and thinking because what this actually translates to in (most) UK institutions is a test of writing and thinking in English. In a distance-learning medium, this clearly places native English speakers at an advantage and risks assessing students not actually on their scientific knowledge and expertise per se but rather their ability to convey these in a language that is not necessarily their first.

Adapting Traditional Examination to the Learning Needs of Students

At the end of the academic year 2000–2001, the role of traditional examination was reviewed on GIScOnline. A modified system of assessment was developed that was believed to be an effective compromise between the purposes of traditional examination and also the perceived advantages of a more open and less pressured approach. This change followed concerns from course tutors and external examiners that the quality of the students’ responses to the end-of-year examinations was not always indicative of the students’ true knowledge and learning, this situation being due to the deficiencies of the traditional examination methods observed by Light & Cox (2001: see above); also that this type of assessment and the weight given to it in the final degree grade is often not what students are used to who have previously studied outside the UK.

The method of assessment introduced was based on an idea by the course’s American administrator, formed from her experiences of studying in the United States. The method was a hybrid of seen and unseen examination whereby a set of questions was issued to students approximately one month in advance of exams. From this set of seen questions,
a subset was randomly drawn to appear on the final, unseen exam paper. For a typical paper, 10 seen questions were issued, of which four were drawn for the unseen exam and students were required to answer three of them.

Feedback suggested that this approach alleviated some of the fear (of the unknown) students encounter when preparing for conventional unseen exams. However, it also required that for each paper (of a maximum of four) students had to prepare nine exam answers to be certain that at least three of the questions they had studied would appear on the final exam paper. This was combined with the expectation that, having seen the questions in advance, the answers the students gave really ought to be of a better quality than if they had approached the exam ‘blind’.

Our own impression of marking these exams was of them being better but uninspiring. More specifically, the majority had done what was required to pass the exams but with little evidence of much self-directed study or personal knowledge discovery. With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see why this strategic approach had been adopted: the number of questions students were required to prepare was too great and left little time for personal pursuits, particularly given that the majority of students were part time with work, family and/or social commitments also vying for their time.

In the year 2002–2003 we therefore adapted the approach so that for a typical paper eight questions were issued, from which five were selected and students had to answer three. This meant that the number of questions students had to prepare to be certain of their inclusion decreased from nine to six, giving students greater opportunity to specialize in areas of the course of most interest to them. Students’ reactions and reflections on this method of assessment are recorded in section 5, below. Overall our impression of this method of assessment is consistent with Light & Cox’s (2001, pp. 180–181) observations on prior-notice exams:

While prior-notice exams relieved the constraint on memory, many students feared that the standards expected would be correspondingly higher. However, they provided the more independent students with the opportunity to explore issues in depth and to take risks and express what they themselves thought about issues rather than reproducing textbook answers.

An administrative advantage of the seen–unseen hybrid paper is that it undermines any gains that might be achieved from collusion across time zones. If a student prepares answers to six questions chosen from a potential set of eight, then the student already knows that at least three of those answers will be relevant to the unseen exam paper. Knowing for certain what the actual five questions are offers little advantage. Students who have not prepared answers in advance could not do so thoroughly in the remaining time available, even assuming other students were prepared to collude. Consequently, the method permits the same paper to be disseminated to all time zones. Tutors no longer need prepare different but equivalent questions for different world regions. This is not to suggest that different versions of the papers are never required. In fact, our experience is of public holidays and religious festivals that are also not synchronized across the world and which sometimes come with little prior notice! Nevertheless, it is clearly less of a burden on administrators and tutors to undertake further random selections from the same pool of questions than it is to create a wholly new set of questions.
The hybrid method is not without its limitations. A truly random draw of questions creates the possibility of excluding certain broad themes in GIScience from the final exam paper. This, in fact, happened in the first year of using the method when questions concerning remote sensing, which formed a substantial proportion of the intent of one paper, were not drawn and were therefore omitted from the unseen paper. The overall distribution of questions consequently was not especially representative of the overall course content, a situation that was subsequently remarked upon by the external examiners. Changing the draw to five from eight (as opposed to four from 10) reduces the likelihood of an unusual distribution and employing stratified sampling techniques (grouping questions by theme and ensuring each theme is represented) eliminates it entirely.

A second problem is collusion of a different kind to that previously considered: the possibility that students would work together to produce standard answers to each question and, in effect, reproduce the textbook answers without any independent, creative edge. There is a clear contradiction between encouraging students to share ideas and explore topics throughout the course but then discouraging the practice when it comes to the exams. The issue is how to nurture the online equivalent of study or reading groups (active learning) whilst at the same time preventing students from simply logging on to the course message boards and ‘free-riding’ their way to a model answer without participating in the discussions (inactive learning). This is difficult to regulate although the following advice was issued to students in response to a specific enquiry that appeared on the course message board. The question was:

Can anyone give any advice about the use of GPS in question 1.5? Specifically, assuming that the 1:50000 map is up to date, has 10 m contour intervals and was surveyed using tools as accurate as handheld GPS, then is there any value in surveying the site using GPS, in view of the fact that handheld GPSs will only give a vertical accuracy of around 5 m or more?

And the reply given:

Dear all,

The following is important, so please take time to read through carefully.

Given the focus on group learning which we like to promote on this course, I can understand and fully appreciate why a question like the one that follows has been raised. It is entirely my fault for not making our position clearer earlier on; however, I cannot permit questions like the following to be raised on the message board. To raise and to answer detailed questions in this form is the virtual equivalent of ‘talking in an exam’ which is not, of course, allowed.

You may ONLY post to the message board a problem with the questions that you feel need to be brought to the attention of the Board of Examiners. Examples would include a spelling mistake or a question which stands the risk of being misinterpreted. Obviously we would hope that neither of these eventualities will
actually occur (having been eliminated during the process of proof checking) but we can never be 100 per cent certain of that.

What I can permit is for you to organize yourselves into small study groups, in which you share ideas, reading materials, notes and thoughts. I would not expect these groups to consist of more than 3–4 people and they would be the equivalent of studying with friends or flatmates in a ‘normal’ University course.

Ultimately each exam is a formal assessment of individual learning. Please be warned (politely!) that if we find that larger discussion groups are forming and, through that discussion, ‘standardized answers’ are emerging which are then reproduced verbatim by each student on their exam scripts, then such a circumstance could lead to a lowering of the degree marks awarded to each candidate; and might, in extreme circumstances, be interpreted as ‘copying’ by the exam board.

Our position, then, is one of balance and good sense. I am happy to encourage active learning and study but not one where students can ‘free ride’ on the back of others’ efforts. Hopefully, this message will have helped to clarify where the boundaries are drawn.

Whatever the merits or otherwise of this reply (which some see as heavy-handed), to his or her great credit, the student who had posted the original message accepted entirely the reply as given. However, in so doing he/she also raised a more problematic concern: one of inclusion and equal access to resources.

Thanks for the clarification, this was my misunderstanding. The most important thing is the rules are clear, so your reply has clarified this.

The next most important is that the rules are fair. I think Birkbeck needs to review this issue in the future. Some people are in a situation where they have access to experienced colleagues, or where they are near (or know well) fellow people on the course. Others are in remote locations, where there are no other resources apart from the Internet. For some students the message board is the main way to resolve questions other than discussing them with staff. For others, the message board is of little relevance as they have other resources available to them. I think the idea of publishing exam questions in advance but not allowing open discussions on the message board disadvantages some students.

Undoubtedly, the student was correct in his/her concerns and, to be honest, the issues raised are not ones that had occurred to us from the comfort of our offices in London. Differences in opportunity exist on face-to-face courses but at least the tutor can be fairly confident that students have the same access to the university or public libraries, computer workstations and so forth. The same is not true of distance-learning courses. Although digital libraries and archives try to compensate for this, the materials they contain are often limited.

A partial solution is to make greater use of material that is freely available on the Internet. However, many tutors prefer to make reference to the (more scholarly?)
Table 1. Students’ comments and reflections on this paper and the hybrid examination model

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<td>Equity of examination</td>
<td>Interesting paper. It appears to me your central question is ‘how can one make exams more challenging yet fair in a distance learning environment?’ If so, I would perhaps try to emphasize this question more. As to the question of comparative advantage between those students in isolated places and those with colleagues and/or resources nearby, I tend to think that is a much overstated concern. I found that the standard course texts and materials plus some investigation on the Internet—in other words, all resources available to everyone on the course—were all that I had time to utilize. And, I think, those resources were all that it would have been profitable and sensible to try and utilize. [There is a need] to be even more explicit in the structuring and quality control of the exam questions so that is clear for a student what type of work they need to produce to achieve certain grades. You pretty much did this by providing the marking guidance to the students. I guess the only areas that were missing were: i) making sure all students had access to relevant information; ii) improving the quality control on the questions to make sure each of the ‘grades’ could be achieved (for some of the topics it was fairly clear what ‘cherry’ you could add to the question to show improved understanding, for others it was near impossible).</td>
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| Relevance of examination     | Another area which is worth considering is the relevance of exams in the information technology age. For most people, or at least most working in information science related disciplines, completing most professional tasks without the access to a word processor and the Internet is akin to completing complex trigonometric calculations using only a small scrap of paper and a log book: it is possible, but unnecessarily tortuous, irrelevant outside of academic study and is likely to lead to the production of work that does not reflect the ability of the author. Are such examinations relevant in the information age? For me, the crux of the matter perhaps does not lie in the debate relating to exams. It is the fact that quality control of performance in assessments is difficult, especially where most institutions rehash coursework assessments year on year and students complete the same tasks. While the debate about exams is interesting, I think the real value lies in the discussion about how to improve course work type assessments. Why is it that we believe someone’s performance in the workplace is a measure of their skills whereas we really aren’t quite so confident about coursework? This, I guess, is a discussion for another paper. I think that concern (over comparative advantages) relates to the ambiguous tension inherent in the examination process: are we being tested against each
Table 1. Continued

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<td>other (the assumption behind</td>
<td>other (the assumption behind that concern and, of course, inherent in the grading and merit-rating process) or are we being tested for our knowledge of the subject?</td>
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academic books and journals that are used for teaching on conventional courses. Here is a return to the issue of standards. Recalling that Statute 66(2) of the University of London states “Candidates granted degrees and other awards shall have attained the same academic standard irrespective of mode or place of study or examination” the question of whether freely available material is of the same perceived standard as more academic material is a pertinent one. If not, then the issue of how to best support students so that the end-of-year examination does not become a test of socioeconomic advantage is important.

Closing Reflections

This paper has reflected on some of the learning and logistical difficulties of incorporating traditional examination as part of an asynchronous learning programme. It has tried to avoid debunking such forms of assessment but instead to offer a more balanced case, noting that this form of examination can be both an institutional and cultural prerequisite for a course.

It is customary to conclude with a short précis of the paper, combining this with some final thoughts and observations. In part this convention is maintained but, given the focus of the paper, the final word and opportunity to critique is given to the students examined on GIScOnline. In Table 1 is a sample of their reflections on their exam experiences, and also their comments on a draft version of this paper written to this point. Their comments are structured ex post facto around themes of equity, relevance, flexibility and general comments concerning the examination method, and usefully articulate from the students’ perspectives some of the debates regarding traditional examination that have been explored in this paper.

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Notes

1 For further details see http://www.londonexternal.ac.uk/external_programme/quality.shtml.
2 Internal college documents.
3 The External Programme also offers undergraduate course that are assessed by traditional examination (see: http://www.londonexternal.ac.uk/faq/) and short courses that need not be.

References


