

## ASSESSMENT METHODS

### Some potential pitfalls in grading computer-produced examination scripts

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The ubiquity of computers in the contemporary world is inevitably leading to calls from students to be able to type their examination answers on computers. A number of U.S. law schools now permit computer-generated examination scripts and Bond University, Australia, has done so since its foundation eleven years ago. There are now a number of software packages that overcome the security problems attendant on students writing their exam scripts on their own computers by creating a sealed, discrete section of the computer's hard drive on which the examination answer must be written. At Bond, security problems are overcome by providing non-networked computers with clean hard drives for students wishing to use them for examinations. This can be managed only because a small proportion of students seek to type their examination answers.

The potential major issue is the difficulty of grading typed and handwritten exam scripts consistently. Unless all students produce their exam answers on computers, which is highly unlikely, the difficulty of producing comparable grades should not be overlooked.

Faculty are accustomed to grading assignments produced on a computer with the benefit of spell-check, grammar-check and, most of all, adequate time for their preparation. Computer-produced examination answers look like assignments, that is they are typed with sub-headings and good spelling. All the hallmarks of traditional exam answers, namely, poor spelling and structure and near-illegible writing, are absent. The risk is that if it looks like a duck and sounds like a duck, faculty will assess it as a duck, i.e. subconsciously faculty will expect more of a com-

puter-generated exam script than a hand-written one because the former looks like an assignment.

A typed script removes most of the uncertainty in interpreting an exam answer. Grading of a typical, hand-written script involves guesses by the faculty member. Many words and phrases are unintelligible and examiners tend automatically to fill in the gaps while reading. Particularly late at night when attempting to read script number 187, it is easy to assume a sentence says what it should. There may be an indecipherable hieroglyphic in the handwritten script but, as the sentence makes sense without it, the student gets the credit for the issue. However, if script number 187 is typed, the hieroglyphic will be revealed as the student's mangled attempt to write 'not', and the student will forfeit the marks for that issue.

How often, in marking handwritten examination scripts, is student ignorance hidden by poor writing? How often do law faculty resolve ambiguities in our students' favour? How often will students who produce their examination scripts on a computer suffer when being graded against their cursive cousins?

The impression of the majority of faculty in the author's law school is that the results of students who produce their examination answers on computer accord generally with the faculty's expectations but there is a significant minority of faculty who believe able students using computers tend to receive lower grades. What is clear is that, for reasons no one can divine, a higher proportion of the less able students choose to produce their examination scripts on computer. However, as the proportion of students who elect to use a computer is usually small, around five percent, we are precluded from undertaking a meaningful statistical analysis of their results.

Research reveals that schoolteachers tend to give higher marks to assessment written in good handwriting, whereas handwriting quality does not appear to influence marks given by university

teachers. One suggested reason is that, unlike schoolteachers, university teachers do not feel obliged or inclined to penalise poor handwriting. Such research is now required for computer-produced exam answers.

As law schools begin in greater numbers to permit the use of computers in writing examination scripts, a unique opportunity will arise to test: (1) whether there is a general difference in ability between students who choose to produce examination scripts on computer relative to those who write their scripts; and (2) whether the results on computer-generated scripts suggest there are discrepancies in the marking standards applied to such scripts by faculty. As such testing will need to be on students who commence their degrees writing their answers and shift to computers during the degree, the time to test these hypotheses is probably near.

### Assessment to promote learning

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In investigating alleged over-assessment in higher education, it is argued that an excess of one form of assessment over another limits student learning. The power of assessment to influence student behaviour has perhaps never been so obvious. In fact, the assessment on a course may well have a greater influence on students than any teaching. Students to a greater or lesser extent will take a strategic approach to assessment, looking at ways to enhance marks. The strategic approach may well be used by certain students to secure a first class degree. But, more importantly, strategic learners include students keen to gain a lower class degree, but who otherwise have little interest in learning.

Given its power to influence student behaviour, assessment should be geared to beneficial aims. In particular, the assessment should promote the form of learning desired. Given this, it is important to consider what is the assessment

practice in higher education and its intended purpose.

To a great extent, the purposes are subsumed by the theories of summative and formative assessment. If the assessment is formative, its prime purpose is to help the students improve. Formative assessment frequently involves oral or written feedback with a view to improving student learning. If the assessment is summative, it is measuring the achievement of students. Assessment is often both summative and formative. Thus an end-of-year examination would appear to be primarily summative, but a grade does give some feedback, however imprecise, on student performance. An assignment set early in the course may well be providing both summative and formative assessment. Thus it has the potential for useful feedback, but also contributes to the overall marks for the course.

From a lecturer point of view the increased marking load is one of the ill effects of the diminishing resources available to each student. Yet the increase in student numbers is not alone in causing the increase, because a law degree typically now has many more formal assessments. The increase in the number of formal assessments has been observed in legal education and higher education generally, but it is important to appreciate this shows an increase in summative assessment. This increase in the measurement of student performance is not accompanied by an increase in formative assessment. In fact, the feedback that students say they seek and which is vital for the learning process is diminishing.

A significant change in higher education since the 1960s is the development of coursework. This arose from concerns about the reliability of examination assessments. Initially coursework was only used to moderate examination marks, but in time has become part of formal assessment. It is now realised that continual assessment has widened the skills that can be assessed which can include vocational skills. Thus a case study can demand not only research and problem-solving

skills, but also group and presentational skills. Although providing the potential for formative assessment, this development has increased significantly the number of summative assessments.

An assessment system dominated by the needs of summative assessment can encourage mere surface learning. Those taking a deep approach to learning have been shown to be more successful in formal assessments. The favoured semester system, by concentrating a learning workload into a few weeks and placing on students the constant pressure of formal assessment, does not encourage the reflection needed for deep learning.

The student who is both a strategic and surface learner may well successfully complete his degree. The fact that his time as a student produced little learning is perhaps less important than the fact that his experience is that assessments are a mere chore. Thus negative attitudes to learning are encouraged at a time when it is becoming universally recognised that undergraduate studies soon become out of date and the goal should be to create independent learners.

To complete this rather depressing picture, one must comment on the effect the current system has on lecturers. Given the lecturer has constantly to assess his student to produce marks, the student perception of the lecturer is likely to be that of an assessor rather than a teacher. This changing emphasis may in fact discourage the student from admitting difficulty with study and generally alienate the teacher from the student. The system also creates major workload problems on lecturers, who might spend their time better on preparing for classes and on research into their discipline.

Given the tendency of students to gear their performance to gain maximum marks, higher education could increase formative assessments to motivate students into further learning. The preferred strategy would be to reduce drastically the amount of formal assessment. If students did not have to meet the constant demands of formal assessment, they

would have the opportunity to adopt a deeper approach to learning and time would be available for informal formative assessment.

The need for assessment reform is vital in order to encourage deep learning and life-long learners. It will only come about when institutions fully understand the power of assessment and take steps to encourage the desired student outcomes. Formative assessment promotes learning, whereas the constant burden of summative assessment will not encourage the appropriate behaviour and will impede independent learning. Students need to reflect on their studies, to make mistakes and ask questions. They need feedback to improve their performance.

#### **Students' self-assessment in law: report of a pilot project**

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Student assessment enables the teacher to know if he or she has run a successful course; it enables students to know how they are doing, motivates them, helps them to learn and directs their attention to issues that matter. Assessment in general may be formative (relating to assessment tasks generating qualitative feedback and contributing to the formation and development of the student or learner) or summative (i.e. used mainly as a type of measurement to provide evidence of learning outcomes, eg, an examination). Although it is beneficial to students in that it encourages and improves the quality of learning and allows the accreditation of knowledge, it is, however, relatively time-consuming and can cause high levels of stress in students, which can be counter-productive.

Self-assessment may be said to be an umbrella term describing a process whereby some responsibility to make judgments about the quality of their own work or that of others is given to students. Thus, it is basically assessment by students of their own work, although that is usually not final. By involving students in the