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**Reasonable accommodations for online examinations: what is reasonable in remote assessment?**

The sudden imposition of lockdown in response to the global outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in the requirement to find immediate solutions to online assessment in HEIs, specifically for end of year examination. An essential part of examination and assessment practice is the provision of RAs to students registered with the Disability Service in each HEI. This document reviews current, emerging practice in the provision of reasonable accommodations (RAs) for students with disabilities, specifically in relation to the granting of additional time, assessment of clinical skills, and application of marking guidelines, where remote examination and assessment has been adopted in response to COVID-19. There is no clear understanding of to what degree such arrangements will become permanent, but it is helpful to review practices in other jurisdictions which may provide a comprehensive overview of options. Apart from the technical difficulties associated with online examination where students access these remotely, Disability Services were required to clarify the provision of additional time for each assessment type: MCQs, timed tests, open book examination, and OSCEs. To facilitate a clear and unambiguous strategy for applying additional time in future assessment and examination scenarios, a review of what is reasonable in remote examinations is helpful.

**National practice**

The need to provide alternative assessment choices at such short notice meant that, often, methods of assessment between modules, courses, Departments and Schools, was disparate and (anecdotally) dependent upon preferences of academic staff. Across DAWN institutions, most planned in-person examinations were converted to alternate modes of assessment delivered online. Students were provided with access to AT in place of readers and scribes, and usual practice for marking guidelines for spelling and grammar were applied in examinations. A standard allowance as per DAWN Exam Guidelines of 10 minutes per hour was applied as below. Exceptionally, additional time of 15, 20 or 30 minutes may be granted.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Exam period** | **Suggested extra time** |
| 48 hours | 8 hours |
| 24 hours | 4 hours |
| 3 hours | 30 minutes  |
| 2.5 hours | 20 minutes |
| 1.5 hours | 15 minutes |

There were examples of differing practice, for example, extra time not allocated to assignments where these replaced examinations, and only applied to assessments that contribute to final grades. In one or two HEIs additional time was not provided for exams of over 24 hours as this was deemed to be sufficient time to manage writing, reviewing and submitting; one HEI applied additional time of 15 minute per hour as standard. Extra time becomes problematic where, for example, two examinations require submission of assignments within a 48-hour period. Furthermore, where students are provided with a timeframe of five days to two weeks for the completion and submission of open book essays / examinations, the usefulness of this extended time period becomes questionable, especially for students who are challenged by organisation, procrastination, and managing time.

Students were provided with print / media guidelines in the use of AT to access exam papers and to submit exam responses. In a small number of cases where human support was requested this was provided by family members, PA or other member of staff via Teams or Zoom.

**International practice**

**UK**

The standard allocation of additional time across UK universities is either 10 minutes an hour additional time, or 25% extra time (=15 minutes per hour). In some universities this is allocated by disability type (e.g. 25% additional time for autistic students). Some examples of management of additional time include Cambridge University, where most formal examinations that were due to take place as face to face examinations were replaced with a Take-Home Online Examination. Students were provided with ‘take home’ exams to replace 2 / 3-hour exam papers and given a 48-hour window within which to complete and submit; it is the student responsibility to manage their time. For students with disabilities requiring additional time, rest breaks, individual exam room, or the use of a computer: ‘it is expected that the 48-hour period for completion of the Take-Home examination will allow you to manage these arrangements at home.’ No additional extra time is indicated, as an additional 45 hours has been provided within this model.

The same allowance is stipulated by the University of Edinburgh for 48 hour exams, whereby: ‘For take-home exams offered over a 48-hour time period, the amount of time being given is designed to take account of all students’ personal circumstances, including those who would normally be offered extended time in exams. No extensions will therefore be offered to these exams.’ Where 2 – 3 hour online exams have been maintained (e.g. for quantitative subjects), all students are provided with an additional hour to submit their work, and students who have extended time as a RA receive an additional one hour e.g. three hours to complete the exam, and an additional hour to submit work (i.e. a total of 4 hours).

Oxford Brookes have replaced face to face with take home exams with a 24-hour window which allows for any extra writing time or rest breaks that students normally have. No additional time is provided unless there is a shorter time limit for accreditation body exams, in which case arrangements to allow extra time and rest break entitlements will be made. Leeds Beckett University have applied a four-week extension to all deadlines, this period incorporates all extensions and are not in addition to previous extra time, for example, a student granted a two-week extension to the original date of submission, is provided with an additional two weeks.

**Australia**

The Australian Disability Clearing House on Education and Training (ADCET) is funded through the Australian Government Department of Education under the Higher Education Disability Support Program. ADCET provides information and practical guidelines to support disability practitioners, teachers and students, and disseminates good practice. ADCET acknowledges that the provision of additional time in examinations is: ‘a contentious and variable alternative assessment strategy’ for which ‘there does not appear to [be] either uniformity of decisions nor clarity about what are appropriate allowances for additional time across institutions, and that this particular strategy is perhaps the most difficult in which to set clear guidelines.’

Their suggested guidelines on provision of extra time are similar to those practiced in Ireland (i.e. additional minutes per hour) but are premised upon specific disability factors or cohorts as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Disability / health condition** | **Time allowance** |
| Physical / Repetitive Strain Injury     | 5 to 10 minutes per hour to accommodate slower writing speed |
| Learning disability | 20 minutes per hour for perusal/formulating/checking answers |
| Chronic pain | 15 minutes per hour for standing and/or moving around |
| Vision impairment | Double time for students who are blind, and time-and-a-half for students who have low vision |
| Hearing impairment | 20 minutes per hour for perusal / formulating / writing / checking answers |
| Anxiety | 10 minutes per hour for relaxation breaks |

The range of time provision is premised upon impact of disability at three levels, with only the Extreme category matching additional time allowances observed in the USA:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Impact / Effect of disability / health condition** | **Suggested extra time** |
| Slight | 5 to 10 minutes per hour |
| Moderate | 15 to 20 minutes per hour |
| Significant | 30 minutes per hour |
| Extreme | One and a half to double time |

Updated advice for online, remote examinations includes formats such as Set Standard time - students are allocated an exam at a set time and date, similar to the time allocation for the same on campus exam, or Flexible Standard time– students are given the standard time for the exam but are given a window of time within which to complete this, e.g. a 2-hour exam over 24 hours where the student can log in and out but may not spend more than 2 hours in total within the 24 hour period. Other options include additional time granted to all students e.g. if an exam would usually take 1 hour, all students are given 2 hours to complete, and extended time – whereby students may be given an untimed exam that needs to be completed in a certain time period, such as 8, 12 or 24 hours.

They raise the question of whether a student with a disability who normally has extra time in exams, should still be granted an additional amount above that which has already been allocated to all students. For example, if all students are given 2 hours to complete a one-hour exam is there a necessity for students who usually have an additional 20 minutes per hour, to be given 2 hours and 40 minutes? Their conclusion is that if the additional time frame allocated to all is sufficient to meet the needs of the student, extra time is not required. The rationale underpinning this argument is the need to consider the need and purpose for extra time, but also to bear in mind the effect of extending an examination to eight or 24 hours on energy and concentration. Additionally, the potential for exam scheduling issues may in itself cause additional fatigue, stress and anxiety and result in a disadvantaging for some students. For this reason, ‘rather than automatically providing that as a blanket provision it’s important to check in with the student about why they might need extra time and be guided by their needs’.

**USA**

Whilst there are slight differences institutionally, in principle RAs in examinations stipulate the following strategies:

**Timed exams**: sets of problems that a student must complete in a limited amount of time. Once a student starts the exam a timer counts down the amount of time remaining to complete the exam, the student cannot pause or reset the timer. When there is no time remaining, the exam automatically ends. Problems associated with this exam type include adjusting the timing within the VLE, so that students who needed extra time are not locked out; in practice this has been problematic (depending on platform used) necessitating extension of the available time range to all students.

**Self-paced or ‘take home’ exams** are not timed in a finite way but are designed for students to self-manage the time allocated to reading, taking notes and writing up material to meet a deadline, similar to an assignment.

**Breaks not counted in Testing Time:** usually 5-10 minutes in length and typically allocated at 5 minutes per 30 minutes, unless otherwise specified by Disability Services. These breaks need to be counted into the overall test allocation time to ensure they are provided. In a 60-minute exam, if 1.5 hours extra time is required this would be calculated as 1.5 hours for extra time plus additional 15 minutes for breaks not counted = 1 hr 45 minutes.

Additional time in US universities is generally allocated as 1.5 times the length of the examination, or 2 times (double) the length of the examination:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Standard Class Time | Extended 1.5X | Extended 2X |
| 45 minutes | 1 hour 8 minutes | 1 hour 30 minutes |
| 50 minutes | 1 hour 15 minutes | 1 hour 40 minutes |
| 55 minutes | 1 hour 23 minutes | 1 hour 50 minutes |
| 1 hour | 1 hour 30 minutes | 2 hours |
| 65 minutes | 1 hour 38 minutes | 2 hours 10 minutes |
| 70 minutes | 1 hour 45 minutes | 2 hours 20 minutes |
| 75 minutes | 1 hour 53 minutes | 2 hours 30 minutes |
| 80 minutes | 2 hours | 2 hours 40 minutes |
| 85 minutes | 2 hours 8 minutes | 2 hours 50 minutes |
| 1 hour 30 minutes | 2 hours 15 minutes | 3 hours |
| 1 hour 45 minutes | 2 hours 38 minutes | 3 hours 30 minutes |
| 2 hours | 3 hours | 4 hours |
| 2 hours 30 minutes | 3 hours 45 minutes | 5 hours |
| 3 hours | 4 hours 30 minutes | 6 hours |

A comparison of these allowances with guidelines in Ireland indicates significant cumulative differences:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Exam period | USA Extended 1.5X | Ireland 15 minutes / hour | USAExtended 2X | Ireland20 minutes / hour |
| 1 hour | 90 minutes | 75 minutes | 2 hours | 80 minutes |
| 2 hours | 3 hours | 90 minutes | 4 hours | 3 hours |
| 3 hours | 4 hours 30 minutes | 3 hours 45 minutes | 6 hours | 4 hours |
| 48 hours | 3 days | 2.5 days | 4 days | 3 days |
| 7 days | 10.5 days | 8.5 days | 14 days | 9.5 days |

Longer completion times potentially cause issues where multiple exams take place on the same day or which have competing deadlines – and may also present a difficulty to those students who are challenged in managing their time effectively. This in effect might mean that an accommodation of additional time is negating its advantages.

There is also a necessity to acknowledge that in addition to those students who have been granted extra time on an exam as a function of their registration with DS, there are also students who would benefit from additional time who may not be registered with DS. Not all students have access to evidence of a disability to support RAs, and this is likely to increasingly be the case in the light of changes to requirements in primary and post-primary education; the new allocation of resources model in schools does not require formal diagnosis, and therefore these students are not in possession of the documents required by DS. Thus, those students with fewer resources at their disposal are not accounted for.

**Notes on application of marking guidelines**

Notes for examiners in relation to marking guidelines are reasonably similar across HEIs internationally, drawing attention to the type of errors that may be noted and appropriate advice on providing feedback. However, there are additional notes included which relate specifically to academic expectations, for example, from Leeds University:

* + The University has an overall expectation that all students should be able to communicate their ideas and demonstrate their knowledge effectively in writing. This includes appropriate levels of English language literacy as demonstrated in the correct use of grammar, punctuation and spelling. The expected level of proficiency will differ depending on the nature of the programme.
	+ Technical accuracy in written expression should be stated as a learning outcome and linked to marking criteria only if it is deemed to be a competence standard for the discipline.
	+ Where accuracy in written expression is a competence standard, and therefore forms an explicit element of the marking criteria, students should expect to receive marks which reflect this element and clear advice on how to develop any areas of weakness. This advice may include referral to other sources of support within the University.

Many DAWN HEIs refer to marking guidelines as a Spelling and Grammar waiver. Marking guidelines highlight why errors in writing occur and how this might be acknowledged when assessing student work, rather than waiving the necessity to demonstrate academic skills. Liverpool University also provide marking advice specific to a range of assessment types (see Appendix), such as portfolios, blogs etc which may be relevant.

**Suggested recommendations for academic staff**

1. Streamline exam options across Faculties and reduce ad hoc or idiosyncratic assessment practices.
2. Stipulate word limits for exam and assignment questions and suggest a recommended amount of time for completion of the test / examination / assignment.
3. Emphasise that whilst students should take as much time as they need to complete the exam, it may not be necessary to take the full 24 hours, 48 hours, 5 days and so forth.

**Suggested recommendations for DAWN**

1. An additional section be added to DAWN Guidelines specifically relating to Remote Examinations.
2. Agree on baseline additional time allowances for each type of online assessment.
3. Ensure that all HEIs adhere to the use of ‘Marking Guidelines’ or ‘Disclosure of Disability’ when referring to inclusive marking principles as opposed to ‘Spelling and Grammar Waiver’, which implies an exemption from academic standards.

**Appendix**

Examples of how to apply the Appropriate Marking Guidelines to specific summative assessments (University of Liverpool).

**Exam essay**

The assessment provides students with the opportunity to write an essay in response to a question under exam conditions.

When grading work, markers should mark primarily for content, ideas, critical thinking, and providing focused responses to the question, without penalising the student for specific weaknesses of expression, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and spelling. Marking should not penalise poor handwriting, which is  common weakness for many students with SpLDs.

Omitted words or punctuation should not be penalised too much for essay exams but issues with sequencing the essay into a logical structure should, as this is fundamental to an essay.

**Exam short answer question**

The assessment provides students with the opportunity to provide short answers to a number of questions under exam conditions.

When grading work, markers should mark primarily for content, ideas, critical thinking, and providing focused responses to the question, without penalising the student for specific weaknesses of expression, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and spelling. Marking should not penalise poor handwriting, which is a common weakness for many students with SpLDs.

Simplified vocabulary should not be penalised too much for short answer exams as long as the responses presented are thoroughly described and focused on the question. Any statistical terminology should be accurate and reporting of statistics should be thorough.

**Qualitative report**

The assessment provides students with the opportunity to write a method, results, and discussion section of a qualitative grounded theory report.

When grading work, markers should mark primarily for content, ideas, critical thinking, and ability to present theory and literature in a style that is suitable for an academic audience without penalising the student for specific weaknesses of expression, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and spelling.

Omitted words or punctuation should not be penalised too much for qualitative reports but issues with sequencing the report into a logical structure should (particularly given the guidance provided on structure – sections, subheadings within sections).  Omitted words should be penalised when referencing quotes as they have had clear guidance as to how to do this.

Simplified vocabulary when writing should not be penalised too much for qualitative reports as long as the themes presented are thoroughly described and the theory presented is coherent and grounded in the data.

**Public engagement blog**

The assessment provides students with the opportunity to develop skills in disseminating research findings in a style and format that can be accessed and understood by members of the public.

When grading work, markers should mark primarily for content, ideas, critical thinking, and ability to present information and arguments in a style that is suitable for a non-academic audience (e.g. avoiding use of specialist technical language) without penalising the student for specific weaknesses of expression, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and spelling.

Omitted words or punctuation should not be penalised too much for public engagement blogs but issues with sequencing ideas into a logical structure and use of overly technical language should.

**Position paper**

The assessment provides students with the opportunity to develop skills in presenting a persuasive argument.

When grading the work of students with SpLDs, markers should mark primarily for content, ideas, critical thinking, and ability to present a persuasive argument (e.g. one that convinces the audience that the opinion presented is valid and worth listening to) without penalising the student for specific weaknesses of expression, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and spelling.

Omitted words or punctuation should not be penalised too much for position papers but issues with sequencing ideas into a logical structure and issues with developing a convincing argument that is

supported by evidence should.