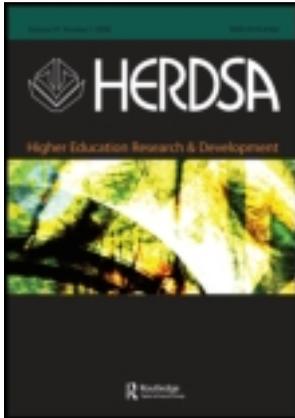


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Robyn Muldoon ^a

^a University of New England, New South Wales, Australia

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POINTS FOR DEBATE

Is it time to ditch the traditional university exam?

Robyn Muldoon*

University of New England, New South Wales, Australia

A dominant theme emerging from contemporary university assessment literature is the need to enhance student learning through effective formative feedback and the need to improve current practices (Boud & Associates, 2010). However, there is an inherent conservatism in universities towards new or alternative assessment approaches (Chalmers, 2008) and there is general agreement that a serious review of institutional assessment policies is overdue (Duck, Hamilton, & Robb, 2011).

Change is now imperative. As students are drawn from a larger variety of social and educational backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) and arrive at university underprepared for institutional expectations (Trotter & Roberts, 2006), traditional approaches to teaching and learning in higher education may not suffice (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Assessment is of particular concern for students with little or no prior exposure to the rules and conventions of higher education (McDowell & Sambell, 2005). Alarming, without changes to traditional teaching and learning methods, entrenched patterns of disadvantage are likely to inhibit students' full development (Edwards & Coates, 2011, p. 151).

Of particular concern is the traditional university examination. There is a growing body of opinion that the handwritten extended-prose examination is an outmoded assessment type (University of Edinburgh Assessment Futures Task Group, 2011). There is also recognition of the negative or limiting impact of exams on student learning approaches (Havnes, 2004) and on teaching methods (Birenbaum et al., 2006) and also the better quality outcomes associated with coursework assessment tasks (Bridges et al., 2002) and formative feedback, which is of critical importance to student learning and retention (Yorke, 2001, p. 116). Indeed, questions have been raised about the fairness and fitness of exams in the assessment of student learning for many decades (Elton, 2004).

Ironically, the online teaching environment, which universities have not been hesitant to adopt (Ellis, Ginns, & Piggott, 2009), may hold the key to this dilemma. Virtual learning environments offer innovative and sophisticated opportunities for effective assessment practices that are themselves rich interactive learning experiences (De George-Walker & Keeffe, 2010) and which expedite the provision of rapid feedback to students. They also offer effective means to ensure authenticity of students' work – a current issue of some concern in higher education – and to provide summative assessment where that is required for accreditation purposes.

*Email: rmuldoon@une.edu.au

A clear and urgent point for debate is this: is it time to ditch the traditional university exam given that it appears to be an assessment practice that is outmoded, irrelevant and inappropriate for many, if not most, learners and also very expensive to run?

Imagine a direct reallocation of saved examination expenses to academic staff to support the adoption of assessment for learning practices that truly support the development of students from all backgrounds. This will simultaneously achieve two outcomes imperative to the success of the next generation of students: the removal of a serious impediment to effective learning; and the provision of more resources to university teachers to engage in meaningful formative assessment practices in order to promote effective learning. Only when widening access includes widening the possibilities for progression and completion will the social inclusion agenda be truly realized in higher education.

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