

Examinations

Description Examination is not an assessment method, but denotes an assessment *purpose*. Exams are used primarily for grading or selection purpose. We call this activity, in educational terms, *summative* assessment. It can use many of the methods we discussed above. Since examinations can take on many variations, it is important to understand the range of possibilities in order to design examinations that are compatible both with outcome-based and student-centred education. Which form should your exam take – open-book, closed-book, or take-home? When should exams take place – end of term only, or throughout the term? These are primary questions, that we shall consider here.

Examples *Terminal Exams*

- **Terminal exams** happen at the end of a subject or programme. Some courses have one major terminal exam that contributes most of the grade for the course. The outcome of terminal exams usually determines whether the student can proceed to the next stage of learning, entrance to profession, or the degree classification, etc.
- **Continuous assessment** is an alternative to terminal exams. In continuous assessment student grades are determined by aggregating the performance on exams, tests, and other assessment activities undertaken throughout the semester or programme.

Open-Book, Closed-Book, Take-Home Exams

In planning exams, you often have to make a choice of how much time and reference material should be made available to students.

- **Closed-book exam** is the traditional mode of assessment. Students are not allowed to bring any reference material into the exam. They usually have a choice of exam questions and rely on their memory to answer them within a time limit. External professional and selection exams are usually closed-book and of an objective nature (MCQs and short answers).
- **Open-book exam** is becoming increasingly popular at the tertiary level. Memory plays a less prominent role in this form of assessment as students can bring a choice of reference material into the exam. However, students are still required to work within a time limit.
- **Take-home exam** substantially reduces both the memory and time factors in assessment. Students have access to references, but not assistance from others. They are expected to complete the exam within a given time limit (usually overnight or a weekend). The nature of questions in a take-home exam should not be of a factual recall nature (e.g. MCQ), since you will only encourage copying.

What Outcomes are Assessed?

- Terminal exams, because of their one-time nature, only take a ‘snapshot’ of student achievement at a particular moment. If, for any reason, the student is not performing optimally during those particular hours on that particular day, the measurement will not be an accurate reflection of his/her learning.
- Closed-book exams of an objective nature (e.g., MCQ) primarily measure factual recall and low-level comprehension of facts and

procedures. Open-ended questions, however, can assess students' application and interpretation of knowledge as well as their analytical and evaluative skills.

How Authentic is the Task?

Exams, by their artificial nature, are not authentic assessment activities.

What Kind of Learning is Promoted?

- It is undeniable that the exam carries a very negative connotation, especially in Hong Kong. With this baggage, even the best designed exam will invoke undesirable behaviour on the part of some learners. Because of the inevitability of exams in the current assessment environment, it is important to take all of these into consideration when planning assessment.
- An exam also promotes an unhealthy power relationship between teacher and students. Instead of perceiving teachers as guides and coaches into a life of learning, a teacher can be perceived as someone who holds the power of one's academic 'life and death'.