



### The Pros and Cons of exams

- Important to align learning outcomes with assessment and to specify assessment criteria. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005)
- Students are strategic with their time with reference to what will be assessed. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005)
- Criterion referenced assessment is superior to norm referenced assessment as it allows grades to reflect learning. (Biggs, 2003)

### Pros of exams

- The main advantages of timed examinations are as follows: (Biggs, 2003)
  - They are convenient in that they are held at a set place and time.
  - Invigilation – easier to prevent cheating.
  - Conditions are standardised – no unfair advantage.
  - Can be viewed as modelling real life – work swiftly and well under pressure.
  - Can have the positive backwash of targeting a holistic view of the course, however it is more likely that the negative backwash of memorising specific points will occur
- The time constraint in exams is more for administrative reasons than educational reasons – convenient and less cheating (Biggs, 2003)

### Cons of exams

- Exams result in memorisation related activities which only leads to an acquaintance with many topics, Assignments on the other hand result in application related activities which lead to deep learning of one topic. (Biggs, 2003)
- In comparing the responses in an essay exam versus an assignment, the responses in the exam are very similar (cloned) whilst assignments elicit greater creativity. (Biggs, 2003)
- The use of multiple choice questions in exams can result in anger as student are not able to express higher level skills. (Biggs, 2003)
- Marks in coursework assignments are shown to be higher than marks in exams. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005)
- Students consider coursework assignments to be fairer than exams in that they measure a greater range of abilities and allow them to organise their own work patterns. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005)
- Coursework assignments have been shown to be much better predictors of the long term learning and retention of course content than exams. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005)
- A disadvantage of exams is that they have the effect of students concentrating their study into an intense period at the end of the course. - Frequent assignments or tests can distribute effort across the course. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005)

### Alternatives to exams

- **Open book timed exam** – remove the memorisation of detail and allow higher level thinking. (Biggs, 2003)
- **Assignment or take home exam** – leads to deeper learning as students consult more sources, however the problem of plagiarism arises. (Biggs, 2003)
- **Ordered outcome items** – allows students to illustrate a broad range of skills, from basic data retrieval to higher level analytical skills. (Biggs, 2003)
- **Group projects** – gives a decreasing marking workload and teaches cooperative skills, problem in that it doesn't take into consideration individual contributions. This problem can be minimised through allowing peer evaluation and also getting students to explain how their contribution holistically fits in to the assignment as a whole. (Biggs, 2003)
- **Reflective journals** – can be used more to establish evidence of quality thinking rather than as an assessment reporting tool. (Biggs, 2003)
- **Case studies** – allow students to apply knowledge and exhibit professional skills. (Biggs, 2003)



- **Gobbets** – eg. looking at newspaper article and responding with how it fits into the context of the course. This allows students to access the bigger picture. (Biggs, 2003)
- **Peer and self assessment** of problems and assignments can be useful in allowing students to internalise expected standards so that they can supervise themselves and improve the quality of their own assignments. In addition to enhancing student learning this can decrease marking time. (Biggs, 2003)

### References

Biggs, J. B. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university*, Buckingham, UK: SRHE and Open University Press.

Gibbs, G., & Simpson, C. (2005) Conditions Under Which Assessment Supports Students' Learning, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, Issue 1, pp. 3-31.