Online Exams Guide

What is an Online Exam?

An online exam is a formal exam that takes place during the University of Manchester exam period in a computer cluster typically being answered on Blackboard.

Types of Exams

The FSE eLearning team support three different types of online exams.

Blackboard

Questions are delivered by Blackboard assessment tools and students answer in Blackboard. The most common exam formats are a mixture of multiple choice and essay questions.

Software

Exams where software (such as MATLAB, Mathematica and Excel) play an integral part of the assessment. These types of exams must be requested well in advance of the exam period, as extensive testing and preparation is required.

Hybrid

A mixture of an online and paper exam; taken in a single session, in a computer cluster. These types of exam allow you to maximise the benefits of online exams without being restricted by the limitations of the software.

Assessment Desktop

Before the start of every online exam, the computers in the cluster are moved into the Assessment Desktop. The Assessment Desktop creates a secure assessment environment by restricting access to the Internet, Network and software programs. Large cohorts of students can be split across computer clusters in parallel sessions.

Figure 1 Simon Building PC Cluster logged into the Assessment Desktop before the start of an online exam.

Advantages of Online Exams

- Students expect technology to be used as part of the assessment process as it improves the reliability of marking and adds value to their learning experience. (Dermo, 2009)
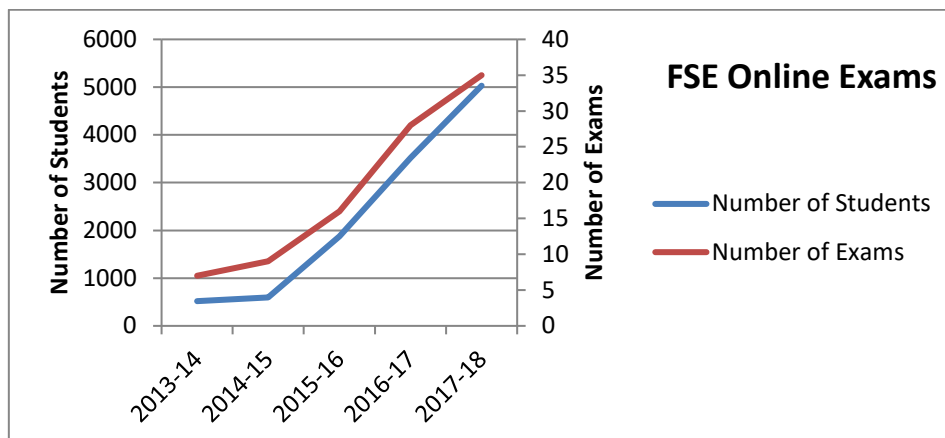
- Students find online assessment less stressful, dyslexic students find online assessment a benefit. (Ricketts and Wilks, 2002)
- Some question types such as multiple choice questions are marked automatically by Blackboard. This can save the academic a significant amount of time, especially with large cohorts of students.
- Essay questions answered on Blackboard prevent any difficulties reading poor handwriting.
- Blackboard can generate reports to help analyse how students performed in the exam. The reports also help identify poorly written questions and indicate question difficulty.
- Online exams promote assessment authenticity within computational subjects.

Limitations of Online Exams

- You are restricted by the limited number of question types in Blackboard. It is often required that aspects of a paper exam are redesigned for online delivery.
- Questions where students are required to create drawings, graphs or charts are unsuitable for online delivery as Blackboard does not support this activity.
- Whilst it's possible to present equations within questions asking students to input complex equations as part of their answers is not efficient for online delivery and paper alternatives should be considered.
- There is a small risk that Blackboard, hardware or network failure could prevent an exam from taking place. However, this has not happened for several years.

Increase in Online Exams

The number of online exams and students has increased year on year since 2013-14. In the last academic year (2017-18), FSE eLearning supported 35 online exams with a total of 5030 exam sittings.

Contact

If you would like any more information and/or are interested in creating an online exam, please contact Ryan McGeown from the FSE eLearning team ryan.mcgeown@manchester.ac.uk.

Dermo, J., 2009. e-Assessment and the student learning experience: A survey of student perceptions of e-assessment. British Journal of Educational Technology, 40(2), pp.203-214.

Ricketts, C. and Wilks, S.J., 2002. Improving student performance through computer-based assessment: Insights from recent research. Assessment & evaluation in higher education, 27(5), pp.475-479.