Managing extended alternative assessment tasks and online exams

What is an extended alternative assessment task or online, timed exam?

COVID 19 restrictions have been a catalyst for changing the way traditional exam periods are run. Most units will be offering alternative extended assessments rather than a timed and supervised test or exam. These will generally open and become available online for a set period of time, such as 24, 48 or 72 hours, during which they will be completed and then submitted online at the end of that period. Alternatively, they may be opened, completed offline and submitted via other means (e.g. uploading a scanned version). As students will likely be completing these from a home environment, they will generally permit access to a range of resources such as texts and specific equipment.

An online, timed test or exam may:
- have several components open online for a limited time for each component,
- be supervised using web-cameras and auto timers. The cameras record certain aspects of the exam.

The cameras are not providing live supervision i.e. no one is directly watching you as you complete the exam.

It is very important to know and understand the expectations of your online exam or alternative assessment, in order to maximise your success.

**Be proactive** Make sure that you ask any questions beforehand, so that on the day you can focus on the academic content of your exam, rather than the process. All units requiring timed and supervised exams should provide you with a practice exam prior for you to test access issues and ensure you understand procedures and ways to get help if things don't go as planned.

**Preparation**

In the weeks before:

- Technology - check internet, check that assistive technology is working, that the software you require is already installed, that you are competent in using it and have valid trouble shooting support.
- Consider how you will organise and file electronic information such as unit materials, relevant web sites etc
- Prepare textbooks and readers if these are allowed e.g. sticky notes and annotations
- Design your revision schedules as you would for more traditional exam periods. Include time to relax and care for yourself so you can learn/remember more effectively.
- Practise screen-based study so that online timed assessments become more familiar.
- Know what referencing and formatting will be required.
In the days before

- Ask others in your household to minimise use of the internet to allow best quality streaming for your exam or extended assessment
- Clarify any issues with staff beforehand as much as possible. There will likely be issues that had not been considered, as these are new processes for all.
- Keep in touch with Unit Co-ordinators and relevant communications to make sure you are aware of any last-minute changes. Especially check your University email and MyLO communications!
- Consider the space you will be working in - room temperature – heating, cooling, blanket, quietness, interruptions etc
- Check ergonomic set-up – chair, screen height, brightness, text size, contrast
- Prepare a ‘Do not disturb’ sign for housemates, family
- Consider food, drink, snacks
- Have necessary materials organised for the actual day.

Online Exam Techniques

- Give yourself time to settle in your exam space 15 minutes before you login to start
- Ensure all equipment is working - webcam, Wi-Fi etc
- Read the instructions carefully, read the questions carefully, take notes if necessary
- Work out the time allowed for each question (not necessarily the time you would like to spend!!), include time to edit, proofread answers
- Have note paper on hand to help with planning and checking or to write ‘note to self’ as necessary
- Ensure you know if the exam format allows you to move freely backwards and forwards through screens to review or edit
- Set a timer for each task, allow breaks between where possible
- for longer exams make sure you include adequate rest and food breaks, be realistic! Remember to take regular medications if necessary
- Know how to contact academic staff as well as any other help points, to assist with logistics if needed.
- Know yourself, your concentration span and when you work best to address the more complex aspects of the exam
- No tv, play-station, turn off or use temporary blocks on social media, mobile phones etc
- Save work regularly to avoid internet glitches deleting vital work

Learning Access Plans

For students with a Learning Access Plan (LAP):
- check your Unit Co-ordinator understands and has considered your LAP adjustments for your designated assessment task. These may already be incorporated in the design of the task.
- Ensure the Exams Office has scheduled your assessment appropriately and in line with your LAP requirements.
- If you have any queries make sure that you address these early on (soon after the exam timetable release) with your Unit Co-ordinator, the Exams Office and/or your Accessibility/Disability Adviser. Being proactive will reduce your anxiety with the assessment!
Anxiety

General
- See a counsellor early in the semester to help you develop a ‘toolbox’ of strategies to manage anxiety e.g. breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, thought challenging, mindfulness.
- Recognise your negative self-talk and take time to address this and develop more positive supportive alternatives.
- Practise settling techniques regularly so that you become good at them.
- Schedule wellbeing activities in between assessment tasks to refresh your body and brain – e.g. stretch, deep breathe, practice mindfulness.
- After the exam limit the amount of time spent discussing the exam with classmates to limit the anxiety of second guessing your answers; move forward with your thinking and tasks.

COVID 19
- The consequences of Covid-19 impact everyone.
- Recognise any anxiety and look at the aspects that are within your control. Take responsibility to manage these as best as you can.
- For most of us, the situation (isolation, quarantine and lockdown) is just different and unusual, rather than dangerous or difficult. Most restrictions at present are do-able, and will not be forever.
- Get information as necessary from trusted reliable sources. Avoid sensationalist reports and conspiracy theories that create drama and anxiety.
- Use the extra time spent in your home environment to optimise your study techniques and learn new skills.

Motivation
- Establish daily wellbeing routines that help you to stay motivated - exercise, eat and sleep properly. Be creative around how you connect with those that support you.
- Remind yourself of your bigger picture and why it matters to you- why am I at university? Where do I see myself in the future?
- Try to visualise your future career/profession if all goes as well as it could with your studies.
- Short-term motivation can come by doing small, specific tasks followed by small breaks and rewards.
- Practise a ‘can do’ attitude and become more solution focussed when dealing with issues along the way.
- Just take one step at a time! Allow yourself to think about the current and immediate issues while allocating future concerns to a time after the exam/assessment period.

Perfectionism
- Know the available time for your assessment or exam, time allocation and marks per question, and the expectations for the quality of answers. This will determine the effort required for each question and help you be practical and realistic about what you can achieve. Doing more than expected does not necessarily mean a higher mark!
- Remind yourself that “I will do my best in the current situation”. The format of assessment may not be familiar, but everyone is having to do things differently at present.
- The University is also adapting to new ways of teaching and it may not be perfect yet! Staff are learning too!

For a perfectionist, the worst-case scenario is awful, but in reality, it is very survivable. What might you tell a friend with similar anxieties?