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Take-home and online timed assessments at an ODL institution

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Abstract

The University of South Africa (Unisa), Africa's largest open distance learning institution, was forced to explore different possibilities to move away from the traditional venue-based examinations due to the astronomical cost and limitation of venues all over the world to assess students. Alternative technology-enhanced assessment types were identified and it included take-home and online timed assessments. As the Unisa systems did not provide for alternative assessments, it had to be reconfigured by way of action research to accommodate different forms of technology-enhanced assessments. Various parties had to be consulted and the needs of the academics and stakeholders from support departments had to be addressed. Feedback was provided by the module lecturers and students who participated in the pilot. The positive feedback and high participation rate of students expressed their readiness for online alternative assessments. This project provides a huge opportunity for future research on alternative assessments and the way we incorporate technology-enhanced methods to a much greater intent in the way we teach.

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1. Introduction

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is Africa's largest open distance learning (ODL) institution. Every year more than 350 000 students from over 130 countries register at Unisa (Unisa 2016). A total of 839 formal

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qualifications were offered by Unisa in 2013 while 355 240 students were registered. According to the student profile 90,4% of these students were part-time students and only 9,6% were full-time students. Of all the registered Unisa students, 8,5% were not South African residents (Unisa 2014).

Unisa has an online platform (learning management system [LMS]) called myUnisa that makes online access possible to registered students. Study material is provided via myUnisa and via couriers and/or the postal service. In order to communicate with registered students, discussion forums and announcements on myUnisa as well as sms's are used. As the number of venues is limited and the cost of renting venues all over the world to assess students is astronomical, Unisa management took the decision to explore alternative assessments and to move away from traditional venue-based assessments.

All approval processes were followed and task teams were formed with academics and representatives from various support departments. These support departments included business analysts and personnel from the Information Communication and Technology (ICT) section, representatives from the Directorate: Student Assessment and Administration and other stakeholders. Take-home assessments, timed assessments and multiple-choice questions (MCQs) generated by random selection were grouped together and formed one of the task teams. Two other task teams investigated other forms of alternative assessments. Portfolios, e-portfolios and research portfolios were grouped together in another task team. The third task team consisted of the remainder of alternative assessments namely webinars, peer review and continuous assessment.

The aim was to develop a process to perform alternative non-venue-based assessments and action research was used. The focus of this paper will be on the action research performed on the take-home and online timed assessments (including MCQs). Conclusions were drawn from the findings and the research conclusion as based on the literature review and the recommendations are summarized.

2. Literature review

Related aspects relevant to alternative assessments in an ODL environment are discussed in the literature review. Students in an ODL environment do not have the benefit of a full-time lecturer and have to study through self-instruction. At Unisa study material is provided online on myUnisa by way of official study material or learning units, additional resources, discussion forums, announcements, and so forth, in addition to printed material delivered via the postal service and/or couriers. Therefore students are encouraged to think and build knowledge at their own pace (Goolamally et al. 2010).

According to a guideline compiled by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Teaching and Learning Centre (2013), take-home assessments can be very useful in testing certain skills in for example law and management qualifications. It may even allow for more 'authentic' assessments due to assessments over a longer time period (e.g. 48 or 72 hours) in order to try to replicate the environment in which the students' knowledge and skills would be used. In a study by Norcini et al. (1996) it was found that candidates who completed a take-home assessment for recertification purposes preferred this type of alternative assessment and the scores they obtained compared similar to many closed-book (venue-based) assessments. Kim et al. (2008) found that the nature of every module (e.g. the history, purpose and student characteristics) determined the impact on the assessment method used. Therefore, not all types of alternative assessment are suitable for all modules, and careful consideration should be given to select the correct type of assessment. The research design and methods used are discussed in the next section.

3. Research design and method

At the stage the alternative assessment project originated, little was known about alternative assessments and it was decided to start with a pilot project. Action research was used as the pilot project occurred in an experimental environment. Mouton (2001) states that action research usually has exploratory, descriptive or action-related purposes. It was confirmed by McNiff (2002) that action research combines diagnosis, action and reflection. Denscombe (2003) and Ponte et al. (2004), identified a number of characteristics of action research. These characteristics included that action research must be:

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