Options for alternative testing methods, Period 4.

Faculty Board and Examination Board, Faculty of Science-Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 16 March 2020.

Introduction

This document sets out the preconditions for alternative testing methods (see Examination Board Rules and Guidelines, Article 8) for examinations that cannot be held in the regular way because of the measures relating to Covid-19. Measures relating to practicals, fieldwork, and work placements will be announced later.

Five possible alternatives for testing during the forthcoming examination week are being discussed, as is the procedure for implementing any such alternatives. The aim is for Periods 1 to 4 to be successfully concluded in this way, to prevent students falling behind schedule in their studies as much as possible, and to prevent excessive workloads during Period 5.

When determining what type of alternative testing should be used, it is useful to make a distinction between two main groups of subjects being tested: group I, where individual tests are the norm (Ia) or where this could be used as an alternative (Ib), and group II, for which individual assessment is virtually impossible. Most Bachelor’s subjects will be in group II - those with a uniform written examination that to a significant extent determines the final grade. Subjects with a large practical component (computer-based or otherwise) and projects come under group Ia, while in the case of those with only a few students (Ib) it is often possible to substitute the uniform examination with individual assessments. For groups Ia and Ib, alternatives A) to C) are easily suitable. For group II, alternatives D) to F) are the most suitable.

Possible alternative forms of testing

A. Changes to oral presentation only are needed

Subjects for which students are assessed on the basis of work they hand in (reports, theses) are relatively easy to deal with. This can continue as usual, with due observance of the normal marking deadline. Only the oral presentation and discussion are an issue in this category. The lecturer may decide to substitute this by having students hand in their PowerPoint presentations or videos of their presentations, and/or (if feasible) having them give online presentations. There are number of online options for feedback and discussions (ask ih2ls.beta@vu.nl). Lecturers may also decide to postpone these presentations – if these specific skills feature later on in the programme, it may be possible to scrap the presentation in the current course.

B. Substituting the examination with an assignment

In this case, the examination is substituted with an individual assignment, the report of which is assessed. This option requires more work on the part of lecturers, but it does uphold levels of quality: anti-fraud checks will still be possible, and submission and marking deadlines can be announced and adhered to in good time.
C. Oral examinations using Skype

This option requires a lot of work and planning by the lecturers, but is feasible with small groups, in principle. With Skype, it is possible to check the discussion afterwards, by recording it. Fraud is possible because answers can be given out of shot, but the risk is limited. A precondition for this is that the oral examination be recorded and stored by the lecturer, for verification purposes (peer-review principle) and any possible appeals later.

D. Partial exams determine the final grade

This is only possible if the partial exams already taken cover most of the learning objectives. If a remaining component (for example, a final presentation, to be given orally) is tested elsewhere in the curriculum, this can be omitted during the examination stage, in this exceptional situation. The final grade can then be determined on the marks for the partial exams. With this option, the resit and appeal options will have to be applied flexibly.

E. Online assessment

This is the most fraud-sensitive solution and requires a clearly different method of testing, which should be carefully prepared by the lecturer. Having students do a standard written examination at home is not an option.

The preconditions for this are, in particular, that the ability of students to communicate with each other and with external experts should be hindered as much as possible. It is important in this connection that there be a limit on the amount of time available for each question. In other words, do not simply allocate three hours for a whole examination, but instead allow a maximum time for each question. There are two types of question.

1) Open-ended questions that focus on the application of knowledge and understanding in practice. The assignments here are formulated in such a way that ready knowledge is less important and where, because of the limited time available, only those students with a good command of the material will be able to complete the assignments in time.

2) Modifications to multiple-choice questions and other fill-in-the-blanks questions (numbers as answers, filling in the right word, etc.). Necessary measures are:
   a. offering no opportunity to look again at questions already answered,
   b. working with a subset of questions from a large database of questions, so that each student takes a different examination,
   c. randomizing answering options, so that students who do get the same questions see the options in a different order.

Given the greater degree of unreliability associated with this form of testing, the means by which test scores are converted into marks will have to be adjusted, so that it will only be possible to establish whether a candidate has passed or failed. This means the greater uncertainty when determining the mark will have less of an impact on any possible cum laude designations. A normal examination will be organized in the regular resit period for those students who fail.

F. Postponement of an examination

Obviously, this will not affect the quality of testing, but could lead to students falling behind schedule in their studies and interfere with other teaching in Period 5. Another disadvantage
is that it does not fit in with our aim of testing students as soon as possible after the teaching they have received. Possible if other options are not workable.

Procedure

When selecting any of the aforementioned options, it is always a precondition that alternative assessment methods should be as close as possible to the methods and content of the learning objectives and teaching formats used in the subject. Care should also be taken that students are able to prepare for the alternative assessment methods.

The procedure assumes that stages 3 and 4 will have to be carried out in only a small minority of tests (in addition to stages 1 and 2, which always are).

1. The lecturer chooses one of the options and proposes it to the second examiner.
2. The second examiner determines whether the examination meets the above preconditions and whether or not he/she agrees with the request for an exception.
3. In exceptional cases, proposals for alternative assessment are initially assessed by the Director of Studies.
4. If the Director of Studies agrees to the proposed form of assessment, he or she will present it to the Examination Board who will decide whether an exceptional case is deemed to exist.