

How did undergraduate students in the Social Policy department experience the online assessment period during Summer Term 2020?

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See this project presented by the researchers: <https://youtu.be/nSPp6XmSGVE>
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Background

This research seeks to investigate how the switch to online assessments in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the student experience. The online examination format has conferred great opportunities for the design of future assessments, but its first school-wide implementation has also presented challenges to students with inclusion plans and/or those who lack access to conducive examination environments. Hence, the role of the student's particular learning environment would arguably be amplified as compared to in-person examinations, with those who are already disadvantaged left worse off. In examining their experiences, we aim to understand and elucidate:

1. The different types of challenges that students faced throughout the assessment period
2. What the department could have done to better support the students over the summer exam period.

This has implications for the design of future examinations particularly on whether the Department could continue to issue 'take home' assessments in lieu of in-person examinations, and how they can better manage and support students' learning.

Methodology

We conducted a mixed-methods study, beginning with a department-wide survey with 38 responses evenly split between 2020 first- and second-year Social Policy undergraduate students. We then conducted a focus group with 4 survey participants as well as a 1-1 interview to include the perspective of neurodivergent students. Our survey and focus group/interview aimed to understand in greater detail the collective barriers to performance that students faced as well as their experiences of the support offered by the school. We then analysed our findings based on three themes: barriers to performance, departmental support, and examination format. We also compare our findings to the schoolwide survey conducted by LSE in 2020.

Literature Review

The key to online examinations lies in its ability to deliver a fair and accurate assessment of academic abilities while meeting the increasingly diverse needs of students (Butler-Henderson, K., & Crawford, J., 2020). Studies have found generally positive attitudes toward online examinations with no significant difference in achievement as compared to traditional in-person examinations. The open-book format allowed students to concentrate on their understanding of the material rather than memorisation. However, key challenges have included the anxiety due to unfamiliarity with digital platforms, as well as difficulties in accommodating the diverse needs of students with different home and personal circumstances (Ilgaz, H. & Adanir, G.A., 2020).

Studies have recommended the use of more flexible forms of assessment such as projects and asynchronous assessments. They also recommended designing examinations to measure the application of knowledge rather than the capacity to recall memorised content (OECD, 2020). Properly designed examinations can enhance equity and transparency by adhering to the principles of universal design and in making accommodations for students with disabilities (Luna-Bazaldua, D. et al 2020). Our study thus aims to reconcile LSE student experiences with the wider literature.

Data Analysis and Findings

Barriers to performance

From our survey, the most common barrier that students faced was mental health strain, followed by uncondusive home environments. While most found the open-book format less stressful than in-person examinations, participants also noted that they felt isolated both while preparing for and sitting their exams:

"It can get a bit lonely...in terms of motivation to study, that made it harder"

"When your world becomes your home and you can't really go out and see people, your world becomes so fragmented and life becomes so blur, every day blurs into one long experience"

This was especially so for those who had returned to their home countries during the pandemic. This echoes the findings of the school-wide survey, in which students identified being away from campus as one of the most significant challenges. While some participants noted that being at home offered them familial support, others faced the pressure of adapting to stressful living conditions due to strained familial relationships. Regardless, all students found themselves having to manage added expectations and home responsibilities while involved with schoolwork and preparing for their examinations.

Departmental support

Despite these challenges, survey respondents and focus group participants felt that the school was able to address the issues that they faced and had a generally positive experience with departmental support. Participants expressed their appreciation for the undergraduate programme support team, and one was especially grateful for how they had helped her with applying for a deferral:

"I'm really grateful to our department...I felt that we could actually approach them with our difficulties"

Respondents made use of a variety of services that LSE offered, with departmental support such as office hours being the most common point of contact. This was in line with the wider trends in the school-wide survey, where students reported that the most useful support was at the departmental level and where 30% of students made use of subject-specific teacher support in preparing for their examinations. Still, some participants noted that they were unaware of informal sessions outside the slots available on StudentHub, and would have appreciated knowing if teachers were open to being contacted outside of their office hours:

"I feel that a lot of people may not really dare to email teachers [informally]; if there was more institutionalised support that would be nice"

Hence, students suggested more pro-active forms of support such as check-in emails, as well as clarifying expectations on contacting departmental staff outside dedicated office hours.

Examination format

From our findings, most students preferred one-week take home papers. The extended period of time for the exam was reflected to be particularly helpful for neurodivergent students. However, focus group participants highlighted that this led to overlapping examination periods which some felt was unfair and stressful. In addition, the low word count for certain assessments combined with the week-long period also caused uncertainty for students regarding the expectations of their work:

"Even though they explicitly said that the expected effort was three hours, it is very difficult to reconcile that with the fact that you have one whole week."

Nonetheless, participants appreciated the increased flexibility offered by the open-book format and longer time period as this allowed them to focus on their understanding of the material and quality of their arguments. Despite the challenges they faced, students still felt that online examinations were an accurate representation of their academic abilities.

Recommendations

Bringing together the above results from the literature, survey and focus groups, our team has tabulated the following recommendations in response to the challenges faced by students:

	Recommendation	Rationale
School & Department	Evaluating effectiveness of communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better communication (e.g., via subscription-based emails to reduce spam, more concise information) Better promotion of LSE Life (Exam preparation / essay writing workshops, etc.) 	Improves information delivery and encourages better use of resources
Department	Delivering clear, timely information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear instruction on examination formats, submission documents, etc. in advance Greater clarity in mark schemes specific to online examinations Clarity in difference between learning outcomes/examination expectations in online examinations vs usual in-person examinations More concise delivery of information 	Reduces uncertainty, gives students notice on what to expect, and sufficient time to plan their exam schedules
Department	Increasing department outreach <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining engagement between student and the school to reduce feeling of isolation Continue providing as an avenue for students to seek help regarding academic enquiries and general well-being/mental health support 	Alleviates the isolation that students feel from being physically away from campus
Department	Offering office hours/teaching support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater flexibility of office hours, especially for those outside the UK timezone Greater clarity with regard to unofficial office hours More staff sensitivity towards individual student needs 	Improves outreach for the channels of help students are able to access
School	Reviewing exam format <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standardising formatting requirements Revising policy on strict word counts 	Reduces bureaucracy for students; more time spent on content
Students	Organising study groups with coursemates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage online study groups and group office hours to maintain interaction with peers and staff 	Provides students opportunities to clarify doubts and to maintain sense of community within the Department