Guidance on Moving from Exams to Pass/Fail Assignments

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1. My comments in this document are directed to those of you considering a move from an exam to a pass/fail assignment as a result of disruptions caused by the current Covid19 pandemic. (Scroll down to see two exemplar assignments).

2. Like all of you, when I construct an exam or assignment I do so with high standards of student achievement in mind even though I know not all my students will perform at the highest level. In fact, experience has taught me that I will get a range of performances from poor to excellent. It's also true that along that continuum I will make a decision to pass some students because their performance on my exam or assignment was *just about good enough.* All of us make that decision about individual students on a regular basis, however, most of us **do not** write assignments with **that specific decision** in mind.

3. But now in these special circumstances you may be writing assignments with a pass/fail decision in mind - assignments that will allow your students to **demonstrate just enough competence** to allow them to move to the next phase of their learning; assignments that will capture the bare essentials of what we think are necessary for progression. I'm reminded of that song from the Jungle book: *Look for the bare necessities, The simple bare necessities, Forget about your worries and your strife, I mean the bare necessities* … and so on!

So what would **I** do

4. Well as always, I'd begin with the Learning Outcomes (LOs) for my module– the knowledge, skills and/or attitudes the module is designed to support. **But now my thinking needs to be somewhat different.** I need to ask myself: how can my assessment capture the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes for my module; which of my LOs are essential for progression; or are they all essential? I also need to ask: have my students had the opportunity to learn all the content in my module following the suspension of face-to-face teaching?

5. At this point I'll need to decide whether I am going to set a single assignment or a number of smaller ones while all the time being conscious of student workload. Whatever I chose to do, my assignments will be designed with a pass/fail decision in mind. And that will require that I am clear about the criteria for passing i.e. the success criteria, which in this case are focused on the cut-off point between pass and fail. This will involve drawing up a marking guide or scoring rubric that makes the basis of my pass/fail decision visible to others. For example, it should be clear to my students how individual elements of a single assignment or how multiple small assignments were combined to reach a pass.

6. **Because I need to make a pass/fail decision only, the assignments I create should, in theory, be less complex and easier to mark than assignments designed to capture the full range of achievement.**

7. Of course **you** can choose to design a complex assignment and then make a pass/fail decision only. That's up to you. But in the current special circumstances an assignment designed to capture **just enough learning for progression** would be fine for me and my students would be made aware that this is a "bare necessities" assessment and, as a consequence, is not reflective of what my assignments were like in the past or what they will be like in the future.

In essence, there are three things I would now do:
1. Revisit my LOs and decide which ones I'm going to assess
2. Design an assessment to capture the bare necessities of learning for progression (thinking of that song again!!)
3. Design a marking guide/scoring rubric focused on the pass/fail decision. This is also where I'll decide on my pass criterion e.g. 40%, 65%, 100%, all three elements correct, two of the three elements correct etc.

It's important for me to point out that in this document I have addressed the case of writing individual pass/fail assignments only. In situations where new pass/fail assignments and other assessment already completed or being completed need to be combined to make a final decision about a module, people should refer to the relevant *Marks and Standards* documents for their programme and consult with the key decision makers around exams in their School/Faculty.

Additionally, there are a number of other documents on the CARPE website that might be useful to consult. My colleague Dr. Zita Lysaght, who lectures on assessment at the IOE, has prepared a set of slides on designing rubrics. Zita has also written a very useful memo on criterion referenced assessment. Zita and I have also worked with colleagues at the TEU on a document called *A Brief on Guiding Principles and Actions for Assessment in Testing Times*

Below I have provided two exemplars of how an exam questions designed to capture the full range of achievement might be reconceptualised and rewritten as a pass/fail assignment. The exemplars are not perfect, as no exam or assignment is perfect.

Exemplar 1: Moving from an Exam to a Pass/Fail Assignment

Please peruse the rubric below. It was developed by a lecturer in Social Science to help with exam marking for a module focused on social science methods, models and public issues. It describes expectations for exam performance across four levels – exceeding, meeting, approaching and not meeting.

There is nothing particularly special about the rubric, but it does help to capture the distinction the lecturer is making between those students who meet a pass standard (#3) and those who approach it (#2) with respect knowledge of social science methods, models and public issues.

Social Science Rubric

	METHODS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE *Hypothesis Development, Document Analysis, Observation, Experiment, Measurement, Statistical Analysis, or Interpretative Analysis*	KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE *Major Social Science Concepts, Major Social Science Models, Major Social Science Concerns*	KNOWLEDGE OF PUBLIC ISSUES *Social Issues, Political Issues, Economic Issues, Moral Issues*
4 Exceeding	The student demonstrated a clear understanding of the relative merits of at least two of the methods used by social scientists.	The student demonstrated a clear understanding of the relative merits of at least two social science models.	The student demonstrated a clear understanding of the social, political, economic, or moral aspects of at least two public issues.
3 Meeting	The student demonstrated a clear understanding of at least one of the methods used by social scientists.	The student demonstrated a clear understanding of at least one social science model.	The student demonstrated a clear understanding of the social, political, economic, or moral aspects of at least one public issue.
2 Approaching	The student could distinguish between the methods of social science and other liberal arts disciplines, but failed to clearly describe even one social science method.	The student could distinguish between the concepts, models, and concerns of social science and those of other liberal arts disciplines, but misunderstood important elements of this social science knowledge.	The student could express the social, political, economic, or moral aspects of a public issue, but overlooked important aspects or made questionable judgments.
1 Not Meeting	The student could not distinguish between the methods of social science and other liberal arts disciplines.	The student could not distinguish between the concepts of social science and other liberal arts disciplines.	The student could not express the social, political, economic, or moral aspects of a public issue.

An exam question based on the rubric might read as follows: *Discuss some of the key methods and models social scientists use to investigate significant social, political, economic and moral public issues.* If a marking guide was to be created for the assignment, the pass criterion might be set at 40%.

Alternatively, guided by the set of criteria for *Meeting* expectations in the rubric above, the lecturer could, for example, write the following assignment and mark it on a pass/fail basis: *Discuss one method and one model that could be used by social scientists to investigate the fallout from the Covid19 pandemic.* This assignment is less complex, requires less knowledge to answer and should, in theory, be easier to mark than the exam question. In addition, the lecturer could decide that because this is a *bare necessities* assignment, the criterion for a pass needs to be changed from 40% to, say, 65%.

Below is another exemplar showing how an exam question can be changed to a pass/fail assignment. Here, a decision has been made that all four elements of the assignment need to be correct to achieve a pass.

Exemplar 2: Rewriting an Exam Question (originally designed to capture the full range of achievement for a learning outcome) as a Pass/Fail Assignment

Programme: B.Ed.

Module: Enabling Learning

Topic: Standardised Testing of Achievement

Learning Outcome: Interpret and communicate scores from standardised tests of achievement

Original Exam Question (50 marks)

Part A

Describe how you would communicate the following outcomes from the Level 4 Form A of the MICRA-T standardised test to Jamie's parents/guardians. Address all three types of norm scores in the grid and explain why the class and age norm scores for this child are different.

Name: Jamie Test: *MICRA-T* Level: 4 Form: *A* Raw Score: *40*		Standard Score	Percentile Rank	STen Score
	Class norms	116	85	8
	Age norms	107	71	7

Part B

Jordan and Danni's standard scores from an administration of the Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test were 115 and 97 respectively. The Standard Error of Measurement for this test is 4 standard score points.
(a) Construct a table to show the 95% Confidence Interval around each score.
(b) Decide on whether or not two scores are significantly different?
(c) Explain your decision.

Marking Guide

Part A	Marks
Norm Score 1	0 or 5
Norm Score 2	0 or 5
Norm Score 3	0 or 5
Refers to child's everyday in-class performance	0 or 5
Highlights measurement error issue	0 or 5
Age v Grade difference	0 or 5
Part B	
Calculation of Confidence Interval	0 or 5
Decision about difference	0 or 5
Explanation	0, 5 or 10*
Total	**50**

* A scoring rubric is used for this section

A Pass/Fail Assignment for the same learning outcome

Describe how you would communicate the following outcomes from the Level 4 Form A of the MICRA-T standardised test to Jamie's parents/guardians. Address **two** of the three types of norm scores in the grid.

Name: Jamie Test: *MICRA-T* Level: 4 Form: *A* Raw Score: *40*		Standard Score	Percentile Rank	STen Score
	Class norms	116	85	8

Pass/Fail Marking Guide

All 4 elements need to be correct for a Pass	
Norm Score 1	✓
Norm Score 2	✓
Refers to child's everyday in-class performance	✓
Highlights measurement error issue	✓