

I COULD NOT HAVE SAID IT BETTER MYSELF – STUDENT INSIGHTS INTO ORAL EXAMINATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The traditional written examination has long been the cornerstone of student assessment in higher education. A student needs to show his/her progress by answering a premeditated question/s. However, this method often fails to capture the full spectrum of a student's knowledge, critical thinking, and communication skills. In higher education there are also so called metaskills to be embraced. This paper explores the efficacy of oral evaluations as an alternative assessment method in higher education. Oral evaluations, which involve students verbally articulating their understanding of the subject matter and responses to questions, offer a dynamic and interactive approach to assessment enabling to gain teachers deeper understanding of the big picture. This paper examines the benefits and challenges associated with oral evaluations. Benefits include the ability to assess students' verbal communication skills, immediate feedback opportunities, and the potential to reduce academic dishonesty. Oral evaluations can also foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter, as students must engage in critical thinking. Also, coherent articulation of their thoughts is required, and if necessary, also connecting the issue at hand to its larger context. Additionally, this method can accommodate diverse learning styles and provide a more comprehensive evaluation of student performance. However, the use of oral evaluations has its challenges. Logistical issues such as scheduling for one, the potential for subjective grading, and the increased time required for each assessment are noteworthy. The study also addresses concerns about student anxiety and the need for training both students and educators to effectively participate in oral evaluations. Data for this study were collected through interviews with students and faculty members who have experienced both written and oral evaluations and reflecting the findings to literature. The findings suggest that while oral evaluations may not completely replace written exams, they can serve as a valuable complementary, or occasional compensatory assessment tool. The paper concludes with recommendations for integrating oral evaluations into higher education curricula, including possibilities for preparation, execution, and grading. By highlighting the strengths and addressing the challenges of oral evaluations, this paper aims to contribute to the discourse on innovative assessment methods in higher education. The ultimate goal is to enhance the assessment process, ensuring it is fair, comprehensive, and reflective of students' true capabilities, while also taking staff's resource use into the equation.

Keywords: *Higher education, assessment, oral examination.*

1. Introduction

Higher education is about teaching the subject matter. Originally executed by the teacher reading the material out loud from a book and the students trying to take notes and/or remember the essence and simultaneously already starting to internalize the content. At those times the mere existence of books scarce. Today the situation is something completely different, development has been and is constant (Berggren et al., 2015; Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991; Hellsten and Kallionpää, 2023). The methods have evolved during the past years into something unprecedented. The universities and teachers therein have had to come up with new ways of executing their task (Kallionpää and Hellsten, 2023). Information is there in abundance. One thing has still remained similar though. In order to pass a course or a program the students are required to show and verify their newly acquired knowledge.

The traditional written examination has long been the primary method of assessing student performance in higher education. While this approach allows students to demonstrate their knowledge by answering premeditated questions, it often falls short in capturing the full range of a student's abilities, including critical thinking and communication skills. In an era where the so-called metaskills are increasingly valued, there is a growing need to explore alternative assessment methods that provide a more

comprehensive evaluation of student performance (Muukkonen and Lakkala, 2009; Prasittichok and Klaykaew, 2022).

This paper investigates the efficacy of oral evaluations as an alternative assessment method in higher education while taking the students' viewpoint into consideration too. The notions and the mere viewpoint to the issue are versatile. Both sides need to be taken into account. Oral evaluations require students to verbally articulate their understanding of the subject matter and respond to questions, offering a dynamic and interactive approach to assessment, whilst the staff member need to be able listen and evaluate what is been said. This method not only allows for the assessment of verbal communication skills but also provides immediate feedback and reduces the potential for academic dishonesty. The conversational approach may offer new possibilities to assess the knowledge about the subject matter. By examining the benefits and challenges associated with oral evaluations, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on innovative assessment methods in higher education, ultimately seeking to enhance the assessment process to better reflect students' true capabilities.

2. Design

Our master's program at the university has certain compulsory courses, as they do. The basics that the latter studies build on are brought in most part already in the bachelor phase. As it is possible to apply directly to the master's program, should one have already a suitable bachelor's degree, person may not have the necessary basics required for a successful completion of the master courses. Having said that, the study program is rather packed. We came up with an alternative solution. We offer the students of the master's program a possibility to independently study two of the basic courses and take an oral exam.

The courses *Basics of Information and Knowledge Management* and *Information Systems Management* make up the very basics and are prerequisites for the upcoming courses. First of the courses is lectured during the first autumn season consisting of 14 lectures and two assignments. The latter one right in the beginning of the second fall season. The question arises how is this mode and opportunity perceived by the students and also partly commented by the staff.

The paper scrutinizes the students' viewpoint and gives some notions on the approach the teaching staff have towards this execution. All the 35 of the students of class 2024-2025 were approached by a questionnaire of 22 questions and the two involved teachers were interviewed to gather empirical matter over the area under scrutiny. The questionnaire has scaled questions (1-5) and clarifying open ended questions. Due to unforeseen schedule-related issues the number respondents remained at 15 as the views of the participants were inquired. Having said that, already at this point the answers began to saturate, thus giving reliability to the existing findings.

3. Background

The Tampere University community was established through the merger of the former Tampere University of Technology, University of Tampere, and Tampere University of Applied Sciences. This merger took effect at the beginning of 2019, coinciding with the transfer of ownership of the University of Applied Sciences from the city of Tampere to the newly formed Tampere University. The individual universities were founded in the 1960s, while the origins of the University of Applied Sciences date back even further.

The newly formed university encompasses nearly all internationally recognized fields of study, with a strong focus on research and education in technology, health, and society. Tampere University is one of the most multidisciplinary universities in Finland, boasting a community of approximately 32,000 students and over 5,000 staff members across seven faculties. The university operates on three main campuses in Tampere, Finland's third-largest city, and has three university centers in Lahti, Pori, and Seinäjoki to address more localized needs.

This paper focuses on the teaching activities at the Hervanta campus, which was primarily the domain of the former University of Technology. It is important to note that the university has made significant efforts to ensure uniformity across all campuses, so the observations in this paper are likely applicable to other parts of the university as well, even if the cultural difference between the campuses is occasionally said to be there.

The daily routines of the teaching staff often include research work and research-related tasks, with few individuals able to focus solely on one area. The pedagogical and didactic expertise of the staff varies, as many individuals come from research backgrounds. Similarly, the technical proficiency of staff members ranges from those who use basic tools like PowerPoint and PDFs to those who are adept with advanced features of learning platforms. The tasks of the staff can be broadly categorized into teaching (the

main focus of this paper), research, and administrative duties. The latter category is somewhat ambiguous, as it may or may not be connected to the other two areas.

4. Findings

The respondents have a bachelor's degree, meaning that they have already experience on examinations from various classes and courses. Twenty per cent of the respondents had taken oral examinations prior to the occasion under scrutiny now. The general opinion was positive, that is pro oral examinations, a little over half of the respondents agreed strongly with the statements that they would prefer oral exams over written. Also, the rest agreed with the statement or were indifferent about their preference. The responses regarding the question how the different types of exams are to be prepared for varied quite a bit. The answers to this statement varied quite a bit. The open-ended questions shed some light on the answers: seems that the personal touch, the examiner being present, sitting opposite to the students that is, causes more pressure to do a proper job and willingness to prepare more thoroughly for the task. Still, only one student reported mild anxiety due to the 'pressurized situation' while majority, the rest, disagreed with that statement. This was mostly complied by the examiner interviews. Conversational approach was said to preferred also due to the nature where one could better express oneself. Oral examination was also described as 'lighter'.

Two out of three students believed that oral exams enabled a better way to demonstrate their knowledge base than the written ones. Remaining third were indifferent to this statement. Similar distribution was a result when the viewpoint of oral communication skills was inquired. The students are of the opinion that this way they are able also to brush up their skill set in this area. All respondents welcomed the direct oral feedback on the executed exam on the spot instead of the delayed feedback they may or may not receive for a written one. As to the fairness of the two ways of executing the examination, the possibility to express oneself more freely and perhaps eloquently seemed to be an asset. The flexibility in answering orally enables broader answering and hinders the effects of possible deficiencies, should one feel having such features in one's written skills, such as possibilities to misunderstandings based on poor choices of words or momentary lapses of remembering details in a written examination. However, the written exams were admitted having more time in disposal to reflect over the answer or returning to a previously written answer. The presence of both parties was also seen as a risk, should there be personal issues of any kind for either side of the table. Chemistry, and being on the same 'wave-length' was brought up in one of the open-ended mentions, as the verbal skills play a role in oral examinations. The oral exams' assessments were considered to be a bit less objective than those of the written ones.

When asked their own assessment on their performance in oral exams compared to written, the respondents answers were distributed in a form of a pyramid. Some feel they are more likely to do well allowed to express themselves orally and some feel slightly intimidated by the social encounter with the examiner. Some feel that the more traditional way is the way we should abide by. Majority of responses still acknowledged positive feelings towards oral examinations. Regardless of the mode of execution, the preparations is the key, giving self-confidence and security.

Just a notion, web-based oral examinations were not received as well as opposed to face-to-face meetings. So even if technically possible this is not seen as good a way to learn and show one's proficiency. Responses said even that the respondent wouldn't take part in such an exam. Whereas the 'normal' oral examination was agreed to be also a learning event rather strongly. The formulation of the answers, binding the details to a bigger picture, explaining the interconnections of the concepts, conversing with the examiner, but also to condense one's answer into concise sentence, etc., the useful skillsets expected to be required later in working life as well. This was credited at least partly to the conversational approach. This may have a lot to do with the examiners style and way how the exam is conducted.

5. Concluding summary

From teachers' point of view, the preparation of oral examination requires similar amount, and type of work as it does for a written one. Obviously, it differs in details. The questions, or themes, and their respective answers need to be well pre-thought. By answers it may be advantageous to have lines of issues covered what the correct and good answer must and should include. Centric themes, if one will. Also lines of extension through which a good answer becomes very good or even excellent. Similarly, the pre-thinking should have a key to prioritize the issues not critical for the answer, i.e. giving the answer breadth but not necessarily hitting the exact spot. This also means that the examiner needs to really concentrate on the moment and on the activity at hand.

The organizing of the oral exam may prove to be a laborious task. To open one's calendar will require good and thorough thinking, because the actions caused by reserved exam slots should be executed

in an organized manner. On some learning platforms there are tools to facilitate this. Similarly good preparation and perhaps rehearsed execution is required to ensure objective and fair running of the examination session.

The oral option seems to be well-liked by the students. Both in delivering 'the achievement' but also for getting simultaneous feedback on it and in some cases even simultaneous grading if planned for this. The individual feedback is a feature that is wished and also often asked for. General opinion seems to be more in favor of oral examination than against it.

Seems that oral examinations are well-placed choice for a realization of assessment for a course with moderate number of students, should there be such an option. There is a thought though to consider whether the oral examination gives better chances for the type of students that are more extrovert than introvert and more eloquent in the expression of their thinking. Having said that, it may be argued that this a one of the metaskills sought after also in the working life after studies, thus it may be argued that this is also something the students are actually advised to train.

This paper clarifies the attitudes, and the views the students have regarding the oral examination used in higher education assessment. Higher education is about teaching the subject matter. Having said that, in the area of information and knowledge management it is not uncommon that the questions to be asked and their required answers are not such that there would be only one absolutely right answer and all the others being wrong. For the students it is debatably more important to remember the essence and to internalize the content in its context to see and understand the bigger picture this seems to be easier to convey orally than in written form.

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