

Assessment And Score Delivery of Advanced Courses Programs in Distance Education: A Challenging Task

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Abstract:

The most unique characteristic of distance education, undeniably, is distance – imparting education from a distance. The distance feature means the student and the instructor or teacher are physically separated. This has a myriad of implications for the student learning and assessment processes. This paper will focus on the student assessment process, that is the administration of assessment and the automated computerized scoring method and the current score delivery service on the Web. Assessment involves assignments and testing or examination. Assignments, as they are in conventional education, are integral components of distance education. They serve the purpose of assessing the student learning process and achievement. Due to Indonesia's geographical features with over 6000 small and big islands, within two big oceans, distance education is perceived the most effective form of instruction delivery for people in remote areas to attain university degrees. The UT was established by the government in 1984 and has been the only distance education university in the country.

Currently The UT offers Advanced Courses Programs (ACPs) which are at postgraduate level. The ACPs are designed to be transferable to masters degrees in the future, hence, the candidates should have completed their undergraduate degrees to be admitted. Three areas of ACP are involved at the moment: management in economy, public administration, and management of education. Taking Advanced Courses, students are expected to submit project reports on the required courses which are evaluated. Whenever necessary, a minimum amount of practical training will be imparted to students in a designated place. Apparently, it is not only the administration of the assessment that is critical, but also the scoring and the delivery of the student scores. The critical point in the delivery of student scores occurs because it takes too long for the scores to reach the students if human scoring on the paper-and-pencil tasks and testing along with the surface or mailing system are used. For this, The UT should employ an automated computerized grading system using the World Wide Web, which will reduce the time required to provide accurate feedback for the students. The UT has posted the students' scores on its website, however, it is unknown how well the service has been and how many students have used the service which can be accessed using the student number. The use of the World Wide Web as an assessment tool in distance education courses has grown rapidly over the last decade (Shermis, Koch, Page, Keith, & Harrington, 2002).

The most unique characteristic of distance education, undeniably, is distance – imparting education from a distance. The distance feature means the student and the instructor or teacher are physically separated. In his overview for Handbook of Distance Education, Moore (2003) defines distance education as all forms of education in which for all or most of the time, the teaching happens in a different space from where the learning happens, with the effect that all or most of the normal or principal means of communication is through an artificial medium, either printed or electronic. This characteristic has a myriad of implications for the student learning and assessment processes (Suen & Parkes, 1996).

This paper will focus on the student assessment process, that is the administration of assessment and the automated computerized scoring method and the current score delivery service on the Web. Assessment involves assignments and testing or examination. Assignments, as they are in conventional education, are integral components of distance education. Testing or examination usually takes place at the end of learning process as summative evaluation. This can come along with formative evaluation that happens either in the middle of learning process or during the on-going learning process. Regardless, both assignment and examination serve the purpose of assessing the student learning process and achievement. A study with meta-analysis method on the existing evaluation data about distance learning indicates that distance learners generally do as well as their traditional counterparts in terms of grades and test scores (Sherry, 2003).

Due to Indonesia's geographical features with over 6000 small and big islands, within two big oceans, distance education is perceived the most effective form of instruction delivery for people in remote areas to attain university degrees. The UT was established by the government in 1984 and has been the only distance education university in the country, especially in reaching out to the very remote areas. To serve students from big cities to remote areas, The UT employs 35 regional centres all across the country.

Currently The UT offers Advanced Courses Programs (ACPs). The programs are designed for postgraduate level, which is to be transferable to masters' degrees in the

future. Hence, the candidates should have completed their undergraduate degrees to be admitted. Three areas are involved at the moment: management in economy of the Faculty of Economy, public administration of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, and management of education of the Faculty of Education. Each area consists of three packages of advanced courses relevant to the area.

The student evaluation includes students' participation in the face-to-face and electronic tutorials, scores of the assignments that are given during the tutorials as well as those that are attached to each written course book, and a written final examination for every course taken. The written examinations are held at the regional centres and should be mostly given in an essay format. Taking ACPs, students may also be expected to submit project reports on the required courses which are evaluated. In addition to participation and completing assignments of the face-to-face and electronic tutorials, project reports, and final examination for each course, whenever necessary, a minimum amount of practical training will be imparted to students in a designated place.

The completed project reports, assignments except those given via the electronic tutorial, and final examination administration are designed for paper-based format. Therefore, the submission of those is supposed to use either surface or mailing system. The delivery of feedback on the paper-based assignments if there is, and of the examination scores is also designed for surface or mailing system along with manual scoring method. Consequently, the whole assessment process can take from a few weeks up to a couple of months or so. It will be too long and therefore, a more efficient method is necessary, such as the use of the Internet or to be online. Assignments that are given during the electronic tutorial are supposed to be returned electronically, that is via the Internet or online. Online submissions will enable instantaneous evaluation of a submission as well as instantaneous delivery of a score and feedback wherever applicable.

Apparently, it is not only the administration of the assessment that is critical, but also the scoring and the delivery of the student scores. The critical point in the delivery of student scores occurs because it takes too long for the scores to reach the students if manual scoring on the paper-and-pencil tasks and testing along with the surface or mailing system are used.

Although the UT has posted the students' final examination scores on its Website. It is unknown, unfortunately, how effective the service has been and how many students have used the service which can be accessed using the student number and the date of birth as password. The scores are supposed to be available on the Website as earlier as two months after the examinations. However, the regional centres will send the scores, via mail, to the students in their areas at about the same time when the scores are posted on the Website.

Concerning the ACPs, pressure is quite high on both sides, The UT and students, to complete the ACP packages within the allocated time giving the tuition fee is paid for each package. Currently, the first package fee is Rp 4,950,000 (four million and nine hundred and fifty thousand rupiahs) which must be paid after the student has passed a relevant required admission test. Each package is expected to be completed within one semester or, practically, five months.

To overcome such a pressure, The UT should employ an automated computerized grading system using the World Wide Web. The use of Internet or Web-based method for assessing student learning from the submission of assignments and project reports, the administration of final examinations, the automated computerized scoring of the examinations, and up to the delivery of the final score, should reduce the time required in providing accurate feedback for the students.

The use of the World Wide Web as an assessment tool in distance education courses has grown rapidly over the last decade (Shermis, Koch, Page, Keith, & Harrington, 2002). There has become apparent how the Web or Internet can be an essential component of assessment in every aspect: task and test administrations, test score delivery, feedback on students' task as well as on their examination or testing. Immediate information and feedback on students' task and examination will also increase student learning.

Therefore, I am proposing the use of the Internet or Web-based method for assessment and score delivery. The Internet as a global network of networks connecting millions of computers and computer users, is a relatively new resource for educators, as well as for students. Nonetheless, even at this early phase, there is emerging evidence that

the Internet offers a variety of valuable supports to student assessment. Among the positive supports are as follows:

- The Internet provides up-to-date information on a variety of teaching-learning topics, hence should enhance the assessment outcome. Using the Internet, students should be able to find the latest research finding and information to help them completing the assignments as well as preparing for final examinations.
- Computer networks are increasingly supporting as an aid to communication and to the storage and retrieval of information. In that sense, the Internet can be thought of as a valuable tool for an administration of student assessment or testing as well as for the delivery of assignment feedback and assessment results or testing scores. It has become evidence that more and more reports of the educational research on print materials, telephone, radio, television, and video have been carried over to the Internet. However, since all of these media are combined on the Internet, this is a new and challenging area of educational research (Moursund & Smith, 2000) as well as that of educational assessment.

Presently The UT has about 200,000 active students. If each student took five courses per semester, there would be millions of assignments that required feedback and millions of final examination scores to be stored and retrieved each semester. There will be millions of millions scores after many years which can be solved with the computer networks.

- The delivery of Internet material does not face boundary as it does with printed material. Computer networks connect people across the world and hence, can deliver information within seconds. Using the Internet to submit assignments and to administer examination will accelerate the processes, and so will for a faster delivery of assignment feedback and examination scores to students. It is safe, because every student has a unique password to access their personal information which is made available on the Web and to sit for a final examination as well. In addition to speeding up the material delivery, reducing the use of printed materials will certainly decrease printing fees.

- If the assessment or testing is available on-line, the availability could, virtually, reach 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. Although, practically, the administration of a test on the Web can not happen 24-hours a day, the students can have more alternatives in terms of the final examination times to sit for final examinations of the courses whenever they feel prepared. There should relatively be less time boundary in the testing administration.
- Cheating prevention. Some previous studies have found that administering examination on the web opened the door to cheating (such as Zimmaro, 2003). Cheating prevention is necessary to yield a fair test and hence, a fair assessment result and score. Herein I am suggesting that for cheating prevention to occur, a sufficiently big data bank will be required for a Web-based testing method with an automated computerized grading system. The data bank should contain a large number of test items in any formats as intended, so that each test administration will show virtually different items to the examinees. With this strategy, those who have taken the final exam at any time will not be able to successfully inform their classmates that are to sit for the next examinations. This should prevent other students that are to take final examinations from having an opportunity of cheating.

The provision of feedback and score on an examination until an examinee has completed all questions or test items can be more efficient and more economical (Horton, 2000). There are two advantages of providing feedback and evaluation at the end of the test. First, it reduces the number of screens the examinee must see and hence, testing time. Secondly, feedback can be more meaningful and targeted. There is a time, however, when instant feedback and scoring is not possible. If a test requires complex responses that need to be carefully considered by an instructor or evaluator, then feedback and score will have to be delayed for a while.

An estimation of Internet users in Indonesia by the end of 2004 is 12 millions (APJII Statistics, 2003), while in 2002 it was 4.2 millions (Widofdo, S., 2002). The number had seen growth double than it was in the end of 2000 which was 1.9 millions. Hardhono (2002) suggested that it was necessary to utilize the Internet to support the distance education system. There is some problem with UT's Internet thus far. The

system has been found shut down during weekend, mostly, and in some or so occasion, also shut down during off-office hours. One should keep in mind that the most likely timing for students to use the system will be during weekend and/or off-office hours, considering most of UT students are workers or employees. Therefore, if the Web-based testing and the automated computerized grading system will be used for ACPs' assessment and score delivery, The UT will have to make the system accessible, and easy to access, all time 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Otherwise, the proposed assessment method will not work at all. Moreover, supporting tools, that is computers with Internet accessibility, may have to be provided at each regional centre, and perhaps also in some remote areas to widely open an opportunity of using the Internet to students throughout the country. Providing easy access to The UT Website by all means will be quite challenging to UT considering its current Website condition. The question remains, can The UT provides all the needed tools and system to support the use of Web-based method for the whole assessment process? This is a big challenge to The UT for the next years to come, but it does not suggest that it is impossible to accomplish.

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