

## **Exam forms for GLODE first year**

### **Report from programme reviewer, draft version**

Axel Borchgrevink, 29.11.2024

The task given for this year's review report was to reflect on possible changes to the exam forms for the first year of the GLODE master programme. This first year consists of four courses, and three of these courses have a home exam (the fourth has a pass/fail group exam). I was asked to reflect on options for exams that offered greater variation in the forms of assessment, that could contribute positively to students' learning, that would not imply significant rises in the costs of holding the exams, and which would respond to the perceived challenges to assessment methods posed by the recent developments of artificial intelligence, AI.

The report starts with some general reflections on assessments: what they are to achieve, the merits of different forms, the challenges posed by AI. Thereafter, some thoughts on what forms might be most appropriate for the individual courses are presented.

A major limitation of this report is this reviewer's lack of knowledge of AI and its potential applications. It is beyond doubt that AI is and will continue to be of increasing importance for academia, higher education, professional work and the world in general. Higher education will have to reflect and adapt to this. Students must learn how to make best use of this new tool. Assessment needs to evolve in order to also capture whether students are using the tool in an academically sound and productive way. Given the recent and still evolving character of this new technology, no agreement exists on what 'an academically sound and productive way' should mean. Due to my limited knowledge on the use and abuse of AI, the following reflections point more in the direction of how to avoid AI, rather than to how to integrate it into teaching and assessment.

### *Exams*

Assessments in higher education are held for several related purposes. Most fundamentally, they should as reliably as possible gauge the extent to which the individual students have acquired the knowledge, skills and competencies that the courses and programmes aim to teach. Moreover, assessments assign grades that give society and future employers indicators of this (external accountability). Furthermore, exams provide incentives for students to apply themselves to their studies. Assessments can also serve pedagogical purposes, by giving students (and teachers) feedback on where the students are in their learning trajectory, and by the exam form itself providing an arena for the student to acquire knowledge and develop understanding and skills. And the results from assessments may also be important input for continuing course and programme development and improvement within the teaching institution.

When considering alternative exam forms, it may be useful to consider how well they serve each of these functions, even if clearly some of them are more critical to fulfill than others.

Fundamental decisions to be made include whether the exam should be individual or group-based, and whether it should be graded A to F or simply pass/fail. In the following, this report assumes that the three courses for which new exam forms are being considered, individual

exams graded A to F will be retained. This seems warranted since the fourth exam of the first year, GLODE 311, is a group exam with pass/fail. (Should GLODE be open for one of these exams being group-based and/or with a pass/fail grading, the options for thinking creatively about new forms of assessments will be considerably wider.)

Different universities have different practices regarding examiners: Does there need to be more than one examiner to grade, and, if two are required, must the second examiner read all exams? Must there always be an external examiner? Can the course teacher be the one to grade (maybe with a sample cross-checked by an external person)? The answers to these questions have implications for the economics of the exams, and may make some potential forms too costly. As I do not know the details here, I can only indicate the need for such considerations. GLODE will have to dig deeper into this side of things.

The form of the exam should fit the course in question. This means that it should be appropriate to the course contents and match (or test) the learning objectives of the course. Carrying out a test research project in the methods course could be an example. Assessment can also be directly linked to the teaching and learning methods. This could be in the form of portfolio or formative assessments, where grades are based on student activities throughout the course. But it could also be in assessments being linked to specific activities of the course (a fieldwork exercise, for instance).

As mentioned in the description of the assignment I have been given, the development of AI poses challenges for exams – written home exams in particular. This is a great pity, as the home essay appears ideal for testing students' level of understanding, and can also be a significant learning process for those students who take it seriously.

To avoid the perceived problems of AI, the obvious solution from the standard university social science course repertoire would be to either have supervised written exams without internet access, or to have oral examinations. Multiple choice exams are another alternative. This would be the simplest solution to the new challenge: simply sidestepping it by organizing exams in ways that prevent AI from being used.

I have not personally had any experience with multiple choice exams, but I have been assured by those who do that contrary to what one might expect, they can be designed to test students' understanding as well as their knowledge of facts. There is a one-time investment in the work of creating them the first time, but they can be re-used and work is saved on grading. Re-using them requires ways of keeping questions hidden from next years' students.

There are other ways to minimize the problems of AI. Linking exam questions to specific experiences from the course (field visits, mini-studies carried out in or by the class, reflecting on course work and group exercises) would mean that AI is unable to provide empirical content for exam papers (even if it can still help with form). Assessment would need to focus more on concrete contents than on form.

Possibly there are other ways of doing something similar. Analyzing written texts that are not digitalized may be one option. Photocopying old evaluation reports on aid projects and asking students to analyze the reports or the projects could be one idea. However, possibly students with high IT competence could use text recognition software to digitalize and AI to do the analysis? Someone knowledgeable about the state of AI development would have to judge whether this is a real risk.

There are good arguments for having a variety of exam forms across a higher education programme such as GLODE. Some students perform better in oral than in written exams, for others it is the opposite. Considerations of fairness would imply that combinations of these forms would be best. Moreover, exam forms differ in what knowledge, skill and competences they test. A combination of exam forms gives a better overall assessment of students and their learning.

Some possible forms of exams or assessments that could be considered for GLODE

- Written school exam
- Oral examination
- Oral presentation
- Multiple choice test
- Home essay linked to particular course experience
- Mini-research project
- Research proposal
- Portfolio/formative assessment
- Video/podcast
- Seminar participation

#### *Horses for courses*

What combination of exam forms could work for the courses GLODE 300, GLODE 308/309 and HEM 303/304?

It seems reasonable to aim for exams that are similar for the specialization courses GLODE 308 and 309, so that students do not feel there to be unfair differences. The same goes for the qualitative and quantitative methods courses HEM 303 and 304.

#### HEM303/304

The methods courses are particular in that they focus on developing a specific skill – that of doing a qualitative or quantitative study. This makes it appropriate to have the exam focused on testing this specific skill. The course could be tweaked to have the students design and carry out a small research project. In a report they could show their ability to use some of the methods they have been taught, to reflect on the relevance of these methods, and even consider the ethical implications. As it would be an exam form directly linked to the learning outcomes of the courses, it would be a highly valid form of exam, to use a term from scientific method literature. At the same time, it would be a very relevant learning experience, thereby contributing to the students achieving the expected learning outcomes.

What kind of mini-study could this be? It would obviously differ between the qualitative and quantitative courses. In HEM303, one might consider attending a meeting of the city council, or some other public meeting, and make observations of the procedures as well making brief interviews of a couple of participants. This could be done groupwise, while writeup was individual, with the student asked to focus on the methodological choices, challenges, limitations and ethical aspects, rather than results or outcomes of the study. Not being a quantitative methods person myself, it is difficult to make recommendations for HEM 304. But

perhaps what Kent-Waters et al (no date: *A Compendium of assessment techniques in higher education: From students' perspectives*) call 'data analysis' is an idea that could be adapted:

Data analysis involves processing large amounts of raw data so it can be understood and used efficiently. This involves a variety of statistical techniques, such as data aggregation, pattern matching, and tabulation. This can be achieved using computer programmes such as Excel and Python. The analysed data is usually presented in a report explaining how it has been processed and what the results show.

(<https://teachingexcellence.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2018/10/PUGHcompendiumcomplete.pdf> page 20)

Alternatively, rather than carrying out a study, the exam assignment could be to develop a research proposal for a thesis project. It is quite early for students to start developing their thesis projects, and experience from the course Development practice and the Internship course (for those who choose this option) will often lead them in new directions. But it need not be required that the proposal they develop in this course is for the project they will eventually do for their thesis. They could still choose a theme and research question that interest them and develop a proposal that may or may not be eventually used for their thesis. Again, it would be a task inherently linked to the content and learning outcomes of the course.

#### GLODE 300 and GLODE 308/309

As appears from the learning outcomes in the course descriptions, these courses are aimed at developing more abstract sets of knowledge, skills and competences. It is therefore not so easy to link them to practical exam assignments as in the case of the methods courses.

**PBL** Problem-based learning is mentioned in some of the course plans, and could be used for formative assessment or assessment based on student participation in seminars/workshops. If teachers follow the group sessions, they might grade participation of individuals or the whole group. This could be supplemented by grading presentations from the groups, or individual reflection papers on the process and results. It may be complicated to arrive at grades for individuals rather than for the group as a whole (although it is possible to set a joint grade for the group and adjust that individually on the basis of individual papers or oral presentation/examinations).

From the course descriptions, it appears that PBL is used in GLODE 300 and GLODE 309, but not in GLODE 308. If this is correct, and if similar exam forms are to be used in 308 and 309. Then it would seem that the 300 course is the one that might have an exam based on PBL.

A disadvantage of this form of exam is that it only tests knowledge of the course literature to a very limited extent. Therefore, it also does not incentivize the students to read the curriculum. If it could be matched by an oral examination on themes from the reading list, then this shortcoming would be compensated for.

**Oral exams.** While many students are quite frightened of oral examinations, in my opinion they are useful and ought to have a place within the combination of different exam forms in the GLODE master programme. They can complement another type of exam (as suggested above) or stand alone as the one assessment form for a course. If there are suspicions of written texts being the product of AI (or copied from somewhere), oral examinations offer a useful additional test. It could be considered in any of the courses (but of course not be used in all).

**Written exam under supervision (school exam).** While takeaway essays offer more interesting texts and allow students to demonstrate deeper levels of understanding, the traditional school exam can be a useful alternative. It can be in the form of a single question requiring an extended argument to answer, or of many briefer questions, or any combination of these two approaches. It is likewise an alternative that could be used in any of the courses.

**Multiple choice.** If the GLODE staff wishes to develop such an exam for one of the courses, it would be an interesting complement to the other assessment forms. It is probably best suited as a complement to one of the other exam forms, and not as a stand-alone exam for any of the courses.

### *Summing up*

In my opinion, if anything in this report will be useful for the GLODE staff in further developing its programme, it is probably the general reflections on exam forms. You know so much better than me the contents, teaching forms and particularities of your courses. It is therefore presumptuous of me to suggest how exam forms could be distributed across the courses. But as a way of summing up, the following would be one way of doing it:

GLODE 300

Formative assessment based on PBL

Complemented by an oral exam.

GLODE 308/309

Written exam under supervision (is six hours still an option?)

Could be complemented by a multiple choice test

HEM 303/304

Report on mini-study or project proposal

Possibly complemented by other exam form (oral or multiple choice)?

## GLODE staff response to report

The report by Axel Borchgrevink (AB) on exam forms was discussed by GLODE staff briefly in a meeting on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024, and more in-depth in a meeting on January 20<sup>th</sup> 2025.

We are pleased to see the thorough work that AB has done in reflecting on and suggesting how assessment could look like in the GLODE programme as a whole. Even if we cannot necessarily implement all his suggestions, they have sparked several ideas for our future assessment portfolio. Here we comment on the main suggestions presented in AB's report.

1. We find the suggestion of a combination of a formative assessment and an oral exam to be relevant. For GLODE300, we have decided to put emphasis on writing practice with supervision and have hence suggested to our teaching board to implement a portfolio consisting of three written essays. Two of them will be as part assignments given during the course, and one if these will be supervised through written feedback one time. The third essay will be a bit longer and written after all other teaching activities are done.
2. For GLODE308 and GLODE309, we agree with AB that they should have the same assessment form. AB suggests supervised written exam (school exam). Due to the precarious economic situation of the Faculty of psychology we are not allowed to introduce more exams of this type. However, in line with AB's suggestion for GLODE300 we are now considering if we in these courses can implement two assessment element of which one is an oral exam. As AB reflects, this could be one assessment form that is able to assess students' knowledge and insight that AI cannot help with in the assessment situation. The other element could be a written essay. Again, considering the constrained economic situation we are encouraged to be mindful of costs when we suggest and decide on assessment forms. Hence, it could be that oral exam would be the only assessment form in the course.
3. HEM303/304: These two courses have gone through several rounds of changing assessment form and now have a home exam. Previously the course assessment was a project plan on students' own thesis project. The suggestion of carrying out a study seems intriguing and would likely facilitate much learning. However, we view it as a bit too ambitious for the course as it is currently organized (with teaching across four study programmes), but there may be a need to change the assessment form and writing up a project plan on a hypothetical project could be relevant, e.g., as part of the assessment.

In sum, we find the suggestions of AB very inspiring and plan to use the report actively as we move into a phase of concretising changes in assessment for the courses. We also found the compendium by Kent-Waters et al. (no date: *A Compendium of assessment techniques in higher education: From students' perspectives*) inspiring in this respect. Again, we thank AB for the thorough work and efforts on this topic.