

SILVESTER DRAAIJER (VU UNIVERSITY AMSTERDAM):
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REALLY EXPECT ANYTHING ELSE.’

PHOTO: DIEDERIK VAN OPIE-VAN

DIGITAL TESTING

Digital testing and test-driven learning occupy an important place in SURF's recently published Strategic Plan. Both can contribute to solving problems such as students dropping out and the work pressure on teaching staff. We talk to Silvester Draaijer (VU University Amsterdam) and Lambert Schuwirth (Maastricht University).

Silvester Draaijer is the ICT and Education Adviser at VU University's Education Centre. Teaching staff at the university have been able to administer digital tests since 2005, assisted by the Education Centre.

What does VU University do in the field of digital testing?

'We already gained experience with digital testing in the 1990s and there has been a steady increase in its use since 2005. About half the faculties administer tests digitally, including medicine, dentistry, literature, and earth and life sciences. The annual language test for four thousand first-year students is also digital.'

What are the advantages?

'You can use other kinds of questions and multimedia material, for example images and film clips, and students can do practice tests at home whenever they like. Those were the reasons for instructors to start using digital testing. If you build up a database of questions, then you can be very efficient about creating the next test. Students get feedback faster and they think digital testing is completely normal in any case. They don't really expect anything else.'

What facilities do you need?

'In the first place, you need testing software. Whether you use a test as a diagnostic tool or so that students can practise, or as a final test, you can quickly start using the test module in an electronic learning environment. When you have large numbers of test questions or large groups of stu-

dents, or when several instructors are collaborating, the university has special testing software such as Questionmark Perception. Official examinations have to be taken under proper exam conditions, in a room with enough PCs and where students can't copy from one another. If you want to utilise digital testing on a large scale, then you have to invest.'

Is digital testing in higher education different to in other educational sectors?

'Digital testing is on a smaller scale in higher education than at secondary schools. At secondary schools, there is a national educational programme and you can create final examinations on a much larger scale. This is already being done by the teachers' unions and by the CITO testing and assessment organisation. For higher education institutions, it is very complicated to develop national tests for each subject. At VU University, it was difficult to set up the language test for the whole university because every faculty has its own requirements. But we can share know-how and experience, and I see a clear role there for SURF. I'm therefore very pleased with the digital testing master class organised by SURFacademy last fall. We also need more research on the effects of interim testing on students' academic performance, because we don't really know much about that.'

Lambert Schuwirth holds the endowed chair of research and development in innovative testing at Maastricht University. Together with four other medical faculties, the university has created an interuniversity progress test for medical education.



PHOTO : BERT JANSSEN DE BEEU, REDAKTIE

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SURF's Strategic Plan 2011-2014

Digital testing and test-driven learning occupy an important place in SURF's new Strategic Plan. They can help improve both the quality and the success rate of the teaching and study environment by early detection of problems regarding the student's transition from secondary to higher education and providing tailor-made teaching.

 **MORE INFORMATION**
www.surf.nl/eng/mjp

How do you see the role of testing in higher education?

'Tests are normally used as an assessment of learning, in other words to determine whether someone passes or fails. What has been neglected until recently is the use of tests as an assessment for learning, i.e. to encourage and direct learning, and where necessary to give the student specific guidance.'

What does 'assessment for learning' involve?

'You need to be able to determine whether someone is making progress. To do so, you need more information than just the number of points that they have gained. You also need such things as the instructor's assessment of the student's paper, or of how he or she has carried out a medical intervention. That requires a combination of testing tools, and you need to be able to base your assessment on feedback in the form of both figures and descriptions. These are the kinds of things that we are researching in Maastricht.'

What role do digital tests play in this broad approach to testing?


'When people talk about digital testing, they usually mean using computers to administer multiple-

choice tests. Whether that is always the best solution is open to question. You really need to first analyse the situation and the problem areas concerned. The range of ICT support that's available to make the testing process better, simpler, and more efficient is so great that it's sometimes better to decide to put off administering the test digitally for a time.'

The interuniversity progress test in medicine is a good example of test-driven learning. How does it work?

'We administer the progress test four times a year to assess the level of knowledge of all ten thousand medical students at Maastricht University, VU University Amsterdam, Leiden University, Groningen University, and Radboud University Nijmegen. A longitudinal test like this gives you material for comparison, and it shows up any gaps in the curriculum. That allows the faculties to increase the quality of their teaching and it enables students to track their progress over time. It would be impossible without ICT. But we don't yet administer the test digitally: it's on such a large scale that that would cause more problems than it would solve.'

What role can SURF play as regards test-driven learning?

'A project has just been completed to enable students to call up their individual progress results for the medicine test. They can track their progress over time, compare their results with those of their fellow students, and predict their level in the future. The results of the project were greeted with enthusiasm, and that was largely thanks to SURF. SURF is the right organisation to combine expertise and enable people to share lessons learned.' 

Daphne Riksen

 **MORE INFORMATION**
CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN TESTING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
www.surfspace.nl/toetsen

Innovation programme for 'Testing and Test-Driven Learning'

The three-year 'Testing and Test-Driven Learning' programme involves developing and utilising digital tests and 'brush up' material to tackle the problems of students dropping out and the work pressure on teaching staff in higher education. Project subsidies are made available so that institutions can combine existing material for each discipline and develop ICT solutions for the utilisation, development, and implementation of digital tests and practice material. Knowledge and good practices are made available within a nationwide expertise network and via a national portal.

 **MORE INFORMATION**
www.surffoundation.nl/toetsen