

Unit 3:
**Report on a project to pilot the use of on-line social
bookmarking in student learning**

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Introduction

This report discusses a pilot project undertaken during the spring semester of AY 2007/08, with the support of a UEA Teaching Fellowship. The project aimed to develop and test the use of www.delicious.com (an on-line social bookmarking site) in student learning and assessment. This report will outline the rationale and objectives for piloting social bookmarking for this purpose and reflect on the outcomes of the project and the implications for rolling out this use of delicious in first year undergraduate teaching.

The rationale for the pilot project

This project, funded by a UEA teaching fellowship, consisted of a pilot to develop and test exercises using www.delicious.com as a method of student learning and as a form of assessment for undergraduate students. 'Delicious' enables individuals to bookmark internet sites and save them to their own space within the site, to 'tag' (or categorise) them, to write a few comments about these sites and to share them with others. These characteristics of 'delicious' provide an excellent opportunity for developing a number of independent research and critical thinking skills that are essential for students in higher education. Meanwhile, the 'social' aspect of 'delicious' facilitates assessment and evaluation by others (including the tutor/lecturer). In this respect, the project aimed to enhance the quality of the learning experience of

UG students, as well as ensuring that learning is enriched by (student-led) research.

'Delicious' is part of a new generation of web-based applications, termed Web 2.0, which depend upon 'user-generated content' and 'sharing'/'social-networking'. Other Web 2.0 applications include Wikipedia, MySpace, blogs—amongst many others that our students already use outside the classroom. Within this pilot, student volunteers¹ undertook two different exercises involving the use of 'delicious' to undertake independent research for specified purposes.

As far as I know, no other UK-based academic has tested the effectiveness of 'delicious' in the context of higher education learning. According to a 2007 report on Web 2.0 usage in higher education, 'educationalists do not yet know how the increased use of Web 2.0 technology will interrelate with learning and teaching, and in turn demand new pedagogies and new assessment methods' (Franklin and Harmelen 2007): 21). Anecdotal evidence from our teaching tells us that students use the Internet to look for resources for their studies, including researching and writing essays. Despite the common claims that our students belong to a new generation of 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001), who are literate and familiar with the Internet (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005), students are not necessarily 'net savvy'—that is, they do not possess the skills to find and use on-line resources appropriately in their studies (Lorenzo and Dziuban 2006). The home page of a current study on student digital literacy reports that there are **'claims of a crisis in student literacy,**

¹ Despite advertising for volunteers throughout the HUM faculty, via email, distribution of flyers and attendance at one of the large 1st year PSI lectures and despite the fact that the fellowship enabled me to offer an honorarium to volunteers, only 8 students came forward to participate in the pilot. Of these, only 6 completed exercise 1 and, of these, only 4 completed exercise 2. I do not have any conclusions about why the response rate was so low for this project. In future, if I am to undertake another project that involves student volunteers, I will integrate the pilot into my actual teaching so that students are obliged to participate in the project as part of their module assessment (as was the case when I undertook a project to test the use of Wikipedia in student learning in AY 2006/07).

including the **suggestion that students are no longer able to engage effectively in traditional academic tasks such as essay writing**. The use of the web is also blamed for an inexorable **rise in plagiarism**' (The Open University n.d.) (author's emphasis).

In general, textbooks and other information for students only briefly examine the issue of using the Internet for research and almost always note that Internet sources should be used with discretion and caution because anyone can create a webpage without being subject to peer review or verification (for example, (Leach 2008): 280(Walliman 2004; Place, Kendall et al. 2006): 97-98(UEA Dean of Students Office n.d.). Whilst these guides are useful, their existence does not mean that students will utilise them effectively—or even at all. Moreover, providing rules to judge the utility of an on-line resource has limitations because, ultimately, the utility/appropriateness of a source relates to the objective for which the student is reading it. To ensure that students learn to use the Internet effectively to enhance their studies, it is necessary to actively encourage them to do so and the best way to do this is by explicitly assessing this skill.

Through this pilot project, students used 'delicious'—including tagging and annotating book-marked sites by using the description box—in order to fulfil specific research-based exercises that aimed at developing relevant skills for the use of on-line resources in student learning.

Anticipated outcomes of this project were to develop appropriate forms of exercises and assessment criteria that would encourage independent research and critical thinking skills in relation to students' studies. It aimed to specifically:

- 1) Enable students to find and use on-line resources for the purpose of enhancing their learning;
- 2) Enable students to evaluate the usefulness of on-line resources for their field of study;
- 3) Enable students to apply social networking skills learned through experience outside the classroom to the process of learning;

- 4) Motivate students to engage in the research process.

The findings of this pilot were used to inform assessment methods in a new 1st year unit in PSI (autumn 2008).

Description of the project

Student volunteers completed two exercises. The first exercise was to undertake internet-based research and to record findings on 'delicious' in response to the question: 'Can shopping change the world?' Students were not actually required to write an essay but only to do the research needed to answer the question. For the second exercise, the student volunteers undertook on-line research and built up bookmarks to help them in writing a particular essay for coursework for one of their modules.

In addition to being given written instructions on how to complete the exercises (including instructions to 'tag' and to use the description box) and opportunities to meet, in person, with me, students were informed that the learning outcomes for the exercises were:

- To demonstrate an ability to conduct research on-line for the purpose of successfully completing coursework;
- To demonstrate an ability to use internet sites appropriately for informing their learning;
- To demonstrate an ability to evaluate on-line sources for their scholarly relevancy to completing coursework.

Outcomes

Following each exercise, I looked at the volunteers' delicious sites (to which I had access because they informed me of their usernames once they had set up their own accounts). Specifically, I was looking for the following:

- What variety of on-line resources has the student collected? (for example, organizational websites; electronic scholarly articles; media articles; think tank reports; blogs?)
- How many resources has the student collected?
- What tags have students used to categorize on-line sources?
- How have they used the description box?

In the case of the second exercise, I also looked at the respective student's written coursework (these were all essays). Specifically, I was looking for the following:

- To what degree are the on-line resources used in the coursework?
- Are the on-line resources used appropriately for a scholarly context?
- Are they appropriately complemented with 'hard copy' resources?

In the first exercise, I found divergent usage and achievement of the objectives of the exercise. Students found a variety of sources, including websites for ethical consumer organizations and labour rights groups, blogs about consumerism and the environment, as well as names of books and articles found through on-line searches such as GoogleScholar and UEA library's Metalib. Approximately half of the students demonstrated evidence of attempting to follow the instructions for the exercise by collecting more than 10 different sources, tagging them and writing a description about them. The other half of the students collected less than 10 sources, used only 1 or 2 tags and did not use the description box or used the description box in a limited way.

The tags that were chosen varied in terms. In order to enable me to examine their bookmarks in relation to this pilot exercise, volunteers were asked to make the first tag 'shopping'. Subsequent tags were their own choice. Some of the tag names chosen included, 'ethical', 'consumerism', 'vegan', 'pro', 'anti', 'clothing', 'charities', 'food', 'blogs', 'articles', 'books'--demonstrating a choice between tags that describe the content of sources and those that describe the type of sources. Interestingly, no single person combined these approaches to tagging. Only one student told me that he chose the tags on the basis of how he intended to answer the question.

The description box was used to different degrees and in different ways. For example, two different students bookmarked a Guardian article called, 'Can shopping change the planet?' In the description box, one wrote:

Guardian article, evaluating the premise, 'shopping can save the planet'. good content and ideas, and links at the bottom of the page to 'related' articles and sites is very helpful to help with more research.

The other wrote:

Article says that business presents a contradiction and will not be helping the environment only themselves.

The first student attempts to evaluate the usefulness of the article for the question that I posed but does not make clear why she thinks that it is useful. The second student provides a synopsis of the article's argument. Given that the students did not write the essay, it is not possible to conclude which type of description is more useful in completing coursework. However, the first description would necessitate that the student returns to the site at a later time to discover what was 'good' about the article, whereas the second description enables the student to make a decision about whether to return to the article in the context of a particular exercise. In other words, the second student

postpones the evaluation of whether the article is 'good' or not until the moment when she needs it and, in the course of using it, she demonstrates her evaluation.

I asked students to reflect on the following, which was the basis for a feedback session to which they were all asked to attend (but only half of them did so):

- Did your research help you to think about how you would answer the question? Or did you already have a good idea of how to answer the question and, this, in turn, shaped how you undertook the on-line search and classification of resources found?
- What search engines did you use? (Google; Google Scholar; Metalib?)
- Did you look at other people's² bookmarks on delicious?
- How did you choose tags? Did this affect the way that you thought about the question?
- How did you decide what to write in the notes section?

Finally, I gave them an example of how I would attempt this exercise by addressing the questions above.

Student feedback on exercise 1 included:

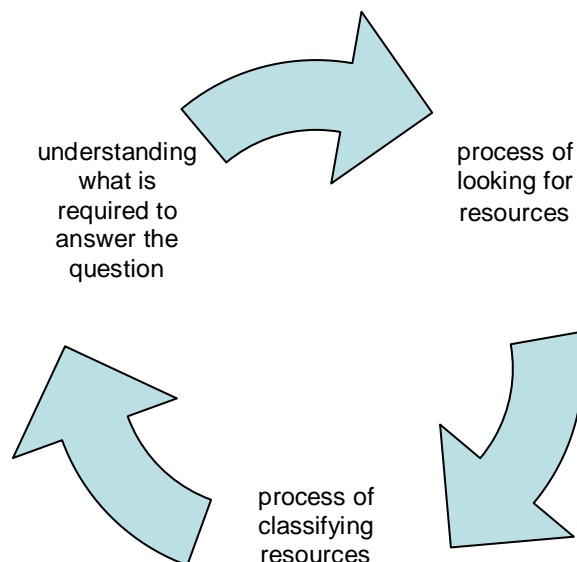
As I was researching [on-line], **I thought about** how to answer the question.

Doing the research opened up more areas [in response to the question] than **I may have originally thought of.**

(my emphasis)

² Other people refer to other delicious users who are located worldwide and do not have knowledge of this particular pilot project.

The two quotes above are from two students who completed exercise 1 successfully. Their use of words demonstrates a process of reflecting on their learning in the process of the task. This appears to be in line with the ‘deep approach’ to learning, as discussed by Paul Ramsden (Ramsden 2003), based on a number of studies by other researchers. The (limited) student feedback suggests that some students demonstrate a link between the process of looking for resources, the process of classifying resources and an attempt to link these processes to an understanding of what is required to answer the question. These processes are not necessarily linear—which I attempt to capture in the diagram below:



The diagram above suggests that those students who have strengths in understanding what is required to answer the question are also strong in finding and classifying resources. Equally, one could argue that those who are strong in searching for and classifying resources will be strong in understanding how to answer the question. Given that students were not required to write an essay in answer to the question in exercise 1, it was not

possible to conclude whether student engagement in the process of searching for and classifying resources was necessarily linked to student ability to understand the question posed.

Another observation concerned the use of the 'social' nature of delicious. One student explicitly stated that she searched other people's bookmarks (and found this useful—in other words, students can learn from their peers through delicious). Another student took the independent initiative to network himself to me (that is, to reciprocate the network link that I made with him as a necessary part of being able to assess student use of delicious). In other words, he opened up the possibilities of learning from me through observation of my bookmarking activities.

Exercise no. 2 required that the student volunteers bookmark web-based sources that were relevant to a particular piece of written coursework. In addition to looking at their delicious sites, I also read their finished essays. I found that all students had made improved efforts to find more diverse types of sources (for example, electronically available journal articles, on-line reference sites, blogs, Google books). However, they had not increased the number of sources that they collected, nor did they improve their use of the description box.

The essay enabled me to see how they used the bookmarked sources that they had collected. It was interesting to note that, except for one student, the resources bookmarked were of limited use in completed coursework. This was possibly due to the nature of the subject matter. One of the essays was for English Literature (on Waste Land and Heart of Darkness), one of the essays was for Politics but was concerned with events that happened in the past (the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe) and one of the essays was for History (about fascism between the two World Wars). In these three cases, the on-line resources bookmarked were mostly general reference websites. Whilst these provide a good starting point for further research or an effective reiteration of the major lines of discussion concerning the topic, they

cannot/should not be used to provide evidence to make particular arguments or to provide appropriate illustrations since they constitute a synthesis of the field. The person who managed to bookmark a significant number of resources for his essay wrote about free trade and global wage differentials (for Economics). The nature of the topic appeared to naturally lend itself to the collection of on-line resources—in the form of think tank reports and media articles. This highlights the possible difference in availability of resources by subject matter or the limitations to the research skills of the students (that is, the inability to expand search terms to catch relevant resources).

Another interesting observation with regards to examining the essays with the delicious sites is that students did not use all of the resources that they bookmarked—not only the general reference sites but also electronically held journal articles. In some cases, this was due to the fact that the resources found were not relevant to answering the question and, therefore, suggests some process on the part of the students of evaluating the utility of on-line sources (as per the learning outcomes). However, in some cases, particular bookmarked sites appeared to be potentially useful for writing the essay but they were not used. There was no way, on the basis of the exercise and the difficulties of obliging students to provide a particular type of feedback, to ascertain why that was but it could be due to the challenges that students face in applying what they have read to answering a specific question. In other words, there is a possible link between the process of looking for and classifying resources, the process of understanding the question and the process of applying knowledge gained from reading resources and that these are mutually reinforcing. However, the limited sample of pilot volunteers makes this difficult to know conclusively.

Finally, the bibliographies at the end of the essays demonstrated that not only do students struggle with how to provide full bibliographic details for hard copy resources (a perennial problem) but they also struggle to provide full bibliographic details for on-line resources. This includes failing to indicate to the reader the exact part of a website referenced (for example, citing www.imf.org but not specifying the page used) and not differentiating between

search engines (such as, Google.com), digital archives (such as, JSTOR) and the articles hosted on sites found through search engines or articles in academic articles held digitally in particular archives.

Feedback and findings

The student feedback that I received after the second exercise was:

- Student 1: 'I found it really useful because you could browse through things and then come back to them later when you wanted to write the essay ... Also the tags helped organise the websites so you could find what you wanted for each topic within the essay.'
- 'It makes bibliographies easy, as I'm sure I'm not the only one who's had to go through their internet history to find the website they were using again! Being able to use tags makes finding your work easy, and also you can look up pages that other people have tagged. I found this more useful
- 'I found delicious somewhat useful, so far as collecting resources in one, easily accessible and organised 'area'; but I don't find the site all that easy to navigate, all too many clicks on the mouse!!!'

In other words, students appreciated the ability to collect resources in one place and to be able to retrieve them at a later date for use in writing particular coursework—in other words, they liked the organizational value of delicious. However, the skill of finding and classifying resources did not necessarily deepen students' learning experience.

From my point of view, the exercises suggested the following with regards to student learning:

- Understanding the question is part of the research process (that is, looking for and classifying resources). However, it is not possible to conclude that this is a linear process. Some students may indeed

attempt to understand the question before they embark on research (on the basis of lecture notes or seminar discussions) but the process of looking for and reading different sources of information helps to deepen understanding of the requirements of answering the question (e.g. the different lines of discussion relevant to a question). Therefore, it is important that students understand at least some of what is expected in answering a question before they embark upon the process of searching for and attempting to classify information. They may gain this understanding through their own analysis (as they did in regards to the first exercise) or through support from their teachers (as they may well have done in regards to the second exercise).

- On the whole, students do not look at a sufficient number of resources for the purpose of their studies. In the case of 'hard' resources, students are able to claim that they could not get access to particular books in the library because of high demand (which is plausible). However, students should have almost unlimited access to resources available on-line. Even those students who bookmarked more than 10 websites did not bookmark more than 20. This seems to me to be too low a number—particularly in light of the fact that surfing the Internet is a relatively fast, easy and cheap way of looking for resources. Therefore, students need to understand why it is important to spend time looking for resources and, with this, reading them. One way of doing this is to assess them on this and to make clear your expectations with regards to how much time students spend on this part of the process. It may be necessary to emphasise to students that they must plan their coursework completion timescale to include the searching process. However, it is essential that students engage with the process in a way that enhances their learning rather than in an instrumental way (that is, to go away and find 30 on-line resources without thinking about how these relate to their learning). Within this context, it is important to think about the type of assessment and marking criteria to be used.
- The feedback that I received following the first exercise suggests that, despite our assumptions, students possess limited skills in doing on-

line searches. They are not necessarily aware of different search engines. Therefore, as teachers, we need to inform students of how to conduct effective on-line searches.

- If students have difficulties in following referencing conventions for 'hard' resources, they similarly have difficulties in following referencing conventions for on-line resources. Therefore, these need to be indicated to students (although, that does not guarantee that they will follow them!). This includes discussing with students the differences between different types of on-line resources and between websites, search engines, digital archives, reports, articles, etc.
- Observations based on completion of exercise 2 indicate that students are not necessarily able to apply the information derived from those resources that they bookmarked to the process of writing essays (or completing other coursework). In other words, some students may be able to acquire skills in searching for and classifying information but these skills are irrelevant if they are unable to use information to inform their learning. This suggests the need for students to think about the use of delicious beyond its organizational utility to include how it fits into a process of independent research and learning.

Using the findings of this pilot in 1st year assessment

Autumn semester (AY 2008/09) sees the introduction of a new module aimed at 1st year students in the School of Political, Social and International Studies, called 'A Globalizing World: Self, Power and Politics' (convened by myself). Based on the pilot conducted during AY 2007/08, I have designed the assessment for this module in the form of four assignments based, in one way or another, on the students' use of delicious. (See appendix at end for details of the assignments and the marking criteria to be used). In particular:

- I have dedicated the first lecture of the module to providing instructions on using delicious and also for thinking about delicious in relation to student learning. I have also included written notes on

using delicious for the purpose of completing the assignments and marking descriptors for these assignments in the module outline that students receive at the beginning of the semester;

- I have designed marking descriptors to assess students' use of delicious in terms of its relationship to student's learning;
- Students are required to network themselves to 2 or 3 other students and to compare the number and type of resources found as a means of encouraging students to reflect upon their own use of delicious;
- Students are required to write a reflective report about the process of searching for and classifying resources on delicious and comparing with other students in order to assess their understanding of the links between the processes of searching, classifying and understanding the question.

On a practical level, the pilot indicated the obstacles to using delicious on university-networked computers due to not having access to the delicious toolbar. The toolbar makes the use of delicious quick and straightforward. Without the toolbar, students need to copy and paste URLs and, hence, the process of posting to delicious takes much longer (and why one volunteer complained that it involved "too many clicks on the mouse". However, one of my colleagues informed me that it is possible for students to download the delicious toolbar onto Firefox that is, in turn, downloaded onto a memory stick/flash drive.

In line with the university's new requirements for anonymised coursework, it is also possible for students to choose a username for delicious that is not reflective of their real names. So long as the tutor knows which username corresponds to which student number, students may remain anonymous in the assessment process.

Conclusion

The piloting of the use of social bookmarking in student assessment indicated that there are learning outcomes to be derived from this method of assessment in terms of students learning to: see the research process as an important stage in the completion of coursework; classify resources for later use in coursework; conduct on-line searches; and learning how to reference correctly on-line resources. However, the achievement of these learning outcomes depends on students understanding the question posed in coursework and also being able to apply what they have read to composing coursework. In other words, acquiring skills in searching for information on-line (or even in the form of 'hard' information in the library) and classifying this information is not a replacement for the process of learning to understand the subject being studied. Nevertheless, the use of Delicious for assessment purposes can enhance student learning by encouraging students to think about the research process and also because of the organizational features of Delicious. In other words, this pilot confirms that, 'facts and skills are by no means the opposite of understanding, but they are of little use without it' (Ramsden 2003): 7).

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Appendices

Assignment 1 (using delicious for on-line research)

Using social bookmarking (www.delicious.com) to collect electronic and on-line resources in order to answer the question, 'Can shopping change the world?'

Learning outcomes

- To demonstrate an ability to conduct research on-line for the purpose of successfully completing coursework.
- To demonstrate an ability to use internet sites appropriately for informing their learning
- To demonstrate an ability to evaluate on-line sources for their scholarly relevancy to completing coursework

Objects of assessment

- What variety of on-line resources has the student collected?
- How many resources has the student collected?
- What tags have students used to categorize on-line sources?
- How have they used the description box?

Work will be marked according to the degree to which you meet the learning outcomes and through observation of the assessment objects. These criteria are demonstrated as described below.

	marking descriptors
70-79 Excellent standard	A large and diverse number of on-line resources collected (20 + and include organizational websites, academic journal articles, media articles, blogs, amongst others); clear and sophisticated classification of resources through the use of several different and appropriate tags, demonstrating that the student has an excellent understanding of the question; notes in description box make it clear what the resource is and its significance to answering the question.
60-69 Proficient standard	A good number of on-line resources collected (15 +) and of diverse types; clear classification of resources through the choice of tags that are relevant to addressing the question and demonstrating that the student has understood the question adequately; notes in description box make it clear what the resource is but it is not clear what is its significance to answering the question.
50-59 Majority at a competent standard	An adequate number of on-line resources collected (10 +) but little attempt to include academic articles, Google books or other scholarly sources; obvious attempt to classify resources through tagging but the number of tags per source tends to be 2 or 3 (including the obligatory tag for this coursework), demonstrating that the student has not considered all angles of

	the question; notes in description box provide some details of what the resource but no attempt to state its significance for answering the question.
40-49 Acceptable standard	A limited number of on-line resources collected (less than 10) and no scholarly sources (academic journal articles, Google Books, etc.) are included; attempt to classify resources through tagging but choice of tags is limited and not always appropriate, demonstrating that the student does not fully understand the question; notes in description box are limited and do not demonstrate that the student has read the source properly nor considered its significance to the question.
30-39 Marginal fail	A limited number of on-line resources collected (less than 7), none of them are scholarly sources (that is, academic journal articles or Google Books, etc.) and their overall relevancy to the question is weak; no attempt to classify resources through tagging; no notes in description box.

Assignment 2 is assessed through demonstration in Assignment 3

Create networks with a limited number of other students (2 or 3) in your class to compare the types of information collected for the above exercise (accompanied with in-class discussion).

Assignment 3 (writing a reflective report)

Writing a reflective report of 800 words on the process of researching for assignment 1, the types of resources you found and what you have learned from doing the assignment in addition to what you have learned from doing assignment 2.

Learning outcomes

- To demonstrate an understanding of how to conduct research on-line
- To demonstrate an understanding of how to evaluate the appropriateness of on-line resources for use in academic coursework
- To demonstrate an understanding of how to classify resources

Objects of assessment

- To what degree is the student able to describe what they did when researching on-line and why they did it that way (and not another way)?
- Does the student demonstrate evidence of learning through ‘trial and error’?
- To what degree is the student able to evaluate the way they conducted research on-line?
- To what degree is the student able to describe why they selected the on-line resources that they did to post to delicious?
- To what degree is the student able to describe why they used the tags that they did and why they used the description box in the way that they did?
- Does the student demonstrate evidence of learning through comparing their delicious postings to those of others?

- To what degree is the student able to evaluate the usefulness of using delicious for researching?

The reflective report will be marked according to the degree to which you meet the learning outcomes and through observation of the assessment objects. These criteria are demonstrated as described below.

	marking descriptors
70-79 Excellent standard	This report contains everything that is expected of reflection. It includes a good description of what the student did, why they did it that way, lessons learned from doing the assignments and an evaluation of their performance. This report demonstrates that the student will be able to improve upon their performance in future coursework.
60-69 Proficient standard	This report contains a good description of what the student did and why they did it in that way. The student also identifies some lessons learned from completing the assignments, leaving little doubt that they will be able to apply their understanding to completing the next assignment. However, the student also needs to be able to evaluate their own performance in order to be sure to improve it in the future.
50-59 Majority at a competent standard	This report contains a good description of what the student did and begins to reflect on this by writing about why they did it in that way. However, the student also needs to be able to draw out the lessons learned from the assignments.
40-49 Acceptable standard	The report consists principally of a description of what the student did. Whilst this is a good start, the student still needs to examine why they did it like that in order to be engaged in a process of reflecting about the assignments.

30-39 Marginal fail	No evidence that the student has reflected upon doing assignments 1 and/or 2. The report consists of some description of what the student did but no evidence of why they did it like that that.
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Assignment 4

Writing an essay of 2500 words. The essay will demonstrate your own critical engagement with the theme of globalization.

All assessed work should be word processed (i.e. typed on a computer), contain full bibliographic references and a word count. Advice on how to reference your essay can be obtained from the Dean of Students Office website—along with other study skills tips

(http://www1.uea.ac.uk/cm/home/services/students/let_service/advice_resources/study_guides). You are required to keep electronic copies of all assignments for the duration of your study at UEA.

Of course, it is expected that you will make appropriate use of on-line resources to enhance the essay. The use of resources (or ‘sources and evidence’ is one of the elements that the tutor will assess). Other elements include: argument and understanding; and written communication (please see the HUM student handbook for full details of the marking criteria for essays).

Essay question:

‘Identify and evaluate the impact of globalization upon your life’.