

Testing, testing: how digital assessments could empower HE

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At school, we deliver our homework through a portal, and get our GCSE and A Level results by email.

We choose our HE course and halls online, and expect a digital progression, and then our University brings us back down to paper, document wallets and printer ink. In the HE sector, paper rules; paper tests, paper coursework, paper exams.

Putting the right tech in place

Digital transformation is not actually about bringing in exciting new tech, it's about being good at putting those technologies in place, and making an actual difference. Digital assessment outside of higher education isn't a new concept, yet we still see students across the country having to hand write test papers; all of which are physically collected, transported by vehicle and marked by hand.

This academic testing process has been in place for decades, and although it has been incredibly well regulated, it is manual, slow

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Testing/testing, how digital assessments could empower HE



Paper-based testing is undoubtedly flawed. The main issue is the cumbersome manual process required to design, deliver and mark the papers. This operation takes thousands of hours, is costly and has a wider impact on the environment, due to the amount of paper used and transporting it across the country.

There is also room for human error and cheating. Examiners, working to tight deadlines, can be unclear with their written marking, and there have been instances of test papers going missing. If discovered, this can affect the entire university; every student's test results are compromised and they often have to retake an entirely new test, meaning the whole process begins again.

Paper-based testing also poses issues for accessibility. Although certain processes are in place to support students, such as extra time if you have a learning disability or a translation dictionary if English isn't your first language, this requires plenty of organisation by the student and faculty, and not nearly enough support is available to make this easier for them.

Improving testing for staff, students and examiners

Digital assessment is already available, and we're starting to see a rise in digital-based platforms that allow universities to quickly create engaging exams. Students can answer these easily on a variety of devices, and their responses can be quickly and accurately marked. This means that students could receive their grades faster, with less room for error.

The paper system is flat, with questions comprising of only text and often grainy images, but a digital assessment can include interactive multimedia displays where users can drag and drop answers. Examiners can also add video and visual tests, as well as other digital media. Digital assessments are also a bridge into wider learning analytics strategies. Many online assessment platforms offer dashboards that can pinpoint areas for improvement, making it possible to tailor a learning plan to the individual needs of students.

Addressing the myths

Some of the bigger concerns around digital assessment are around security and reliability. To respond to these concerns, and confirm if they are justified, we asked our partner Wayne Houlden, Founder

According to Wayne, most universities are considering making the switch to an online platform to provide formative assessment, but there are a few misconceptions.

They're not secure

Placing your university's exams and all their related data online is risky. It makes them vulnerable to attacks and opens the possibility of students being able to access confidential exam content.

Potential attacks include data security breaches and denial-of-service attacks that can render systems unavailable during important times.

Online assessment platforms are designed to be resilient against data security breaches, ID falsification, tampering, theft, loss of student responses and human error. Audit trails identify all human touch-points, which means that unlike paper exams, submissions can't be lost or go missing. Virtualising all assessment-related data makes it easier to see any rogue activity and quickly isolate the source.

They're not reliable

Online exams are only as reliable as the infrastructure and internet connection they're running on. This can be especially true if you're in a location with patchy or poor network connectivity.

Technology is making unreliability largely a phenomenon of the past. Reliability that approaches 100% is achievable in many parts of the world. In fact, when it comes to delivery, online assessment may eventually become the mode in which stakeholders have the most confidence.

They could increase cheating

Running exams on large screens presents the temptation for students to copy each other's work, and exams are vulnerable to security breaches in which questions can be viewed or stolen ahead of exam day.

The digital format means that cheating and plagiarism are actually easier to detect. Invigilators can see an audit log of a candidate's test attempt at any time, in real-time. Tests can be run in a locked-down environment, so that candidates can't access other applications or websites.

Wayne continues:

“ Large-scale online assessment platforms are continually becoming more sophisticated, with features that build in security, reliability and efficiency at every step of the exam journey.”



Going digital empowers universities

To echo Wayne’s sentiment, online assessment tools have advanced in leaps and bounds in recent years, and through using and testing the technology can only improve. Going digital empowers universities to take control of exam timelines and streamline formerly cumbersome manual processes – especially marking.

Online is fast becoming the most economical and reliable method to deliver academic assessment, and it is the natural next step in an outdated paper-based process fraught with complications.

It’s time for universities to take the leap and trust digital assessment.



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