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Empowering universities with digital assessment

James Silcock, commercial director at CoSector – University of London, discusses the next steps for the adoption of digital assessment in higher education

Why digital assessment is a logical step for HE

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It seems like every process is now becoming digitised – from paying bills to ordering our shopping online. It has become almost impossible to remember a time when everything was done on paper in our day-to-day lives. Despite this however, in some sectors, it appears that paper still rules.

Whether it is driven by a reluctance to change, we often see our data still being processed by pen and paper by clinicians in hospitals. Meanwhile, students across the country still have to fill out handwritten test papers when it comes to their assessments; all of which are physically collected, transported by vehicle and marked by hand.

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This academic testing process has been in place for a number of decades, and is incredibly well controlled. But it is manual, slow, and there is plenty of room for human error, not to mention the costs this

cumbersome process incurs. In a world full of digital solutions there has to be an easier, more reliable way.

To add to this, the Office for National Statistics found with the latest National Student Survey that students are still reporting lower rates of satisfaction with the assessment and feedback on their courses compared with other areas covered by the survey. The criteria was based on fairness, transparency and feedback of the current system.

> 66 *Perhaps it's time for assessment to follow the lead of many of our other processes and digitise.*

In response, Chris Skidmore, minister of state for universities, science, research and innovation, commented to the Office for Students (OFS): "These results show that we have further to go to ensure every student has a positive academic experience. We have a world-leading university sector but we must not get complacent."

I believe he is correct – to avoid this complacency we need to innovate and continue striving to improve the student experience. Perhaps it's time for assessment to follow the lead of many of our other processes and digitise.

Why is paper-based assessment no longer fit for purpose?

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.

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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.

How does digital assessment improve 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.

> **"** *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.*

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.

One of the biggest bonuses is how digital assessment can improve fairness for students with accessibility issues, or international students for whom English is not a first language. Tests can be quickly edited or created to level the playing field for those who may be at a disadvantage. Some students are already permitted to use a computer to complete an exam if they have certain disabilities.

What are the biggest challenges with the adoption of digital assessment?

Some of the bigger concerns around digital assessment are around security and reliability.

CoSector partner Wayne Houlden, founder of Janison, an international provider of online assessment and learning platforms, explains that most universities are considering making the switch to an online platform to provide formative assessment, but there are a few misconceptions. Such myths include the idea that placing exam-related data online is risky, and that digital exams will increase cheating. In truth online assessment platforms, Wayne says, "are designed to be resilient against data security breaches," and as for cheating, "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."

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 a leap and trust digital assessment.

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