

Digital assessment: leave no one behind

COMMENT

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As the end of term assessment period looms, digital assessment offers a Covid-safe solution and improvements to accessibility, say Dave Kenworthy and Wayne Houlden.



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Throughout lockdown and during the summer, universities worked to ensure their online platforms were in the best possible condition in time for the new academic year.

The rise in coronavirus infections across campuses since September has meant that institutions have continued to rely on remote teaching and learning solutions to deliver course material.

It is highly unlikely that universities will be able to offer face-to-face invigilated exams this academic year, so it's never been more important to provide robust, reliable alternatives to traditional assessment practices. Going digital is the next logical step in replacing outdated, cumbersome, paper-based process fraught with complications.

Digital assessment is inherently more flexible at supporting accessibility than traditional methods of testing knowledge. Students can complete their assessment on a variety of devices and 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. Many assessment platforms also offer dashboards that can pinpoint areas for improvement, making it possible to tailor a learning plan to the individual.

The platforms are designed to be resilient against data security breaches, ID falsification, tampering, theft, loss of student responses and human error. And crucially, tests can be run in a locked-down environment. The technology that enables remote invigilation (also known as proctoring) is certainly complex, but secure end-to-end exam

Online proctoring has actually been around in certain formats for quite some time, but hasn't always garnered positive feedback and approval. Some have gone so far as to say universities are digitally spying on students to ensure they don't cheat on online tests.

In reality however, online proctoring providers have thought of everything to ensure that the rules of the virtual exam room are followed. Just like in a physical classroom or exam hall, activity is monitored and incidents are logged, but with the help of modern technology.

Making assessment accessible

Online assessment can also support those with disabilities. Platform features can be adjusted using a disability adjustment code to better suit students with visual impairments, hearing loss, mobility impairments, learning difficulties, mental health issues and disfigurements, making their test or exam experience as smooth and fair as possible.

By readily marrying with assistive technology, it allows for equity adjustments for all learners to access questions and evidence their answers themselves in an exam scenario. Compare, for instance, a quadriplegic student's ability to independently operate a computer using voice control or a mouth stylus, versus them having to communicate to a care worker who manually writes out their answers to a pen-and-paper exam. Or a blind student being able to sit the same exam as their peers thanks to a screen reader application and braille keyboard, as opposed to having to dictate their responses for someone else to write down.

Bridging the digital gap

Early in the Covid-19 lockdown, it became clear that poor internet access was exacerbating educational inequality. Students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, or those living in parts of the country with limited internet access, were at risk of being left behind, as higher education moved to the digital sphere.

Former universities minister Chris Skidmore raised concerns about the impact distance learning would have on the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students, saying that "face-to-face work is especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and they may find it harder to study in environments that are not conducive to learning, and that "remote learning must not allow these groups of students to become ever more remote".

Skidmore went on to highlight the findings of a [2017 study](#), which showed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds "consistently perform worse in an online setting than they do in face-to-face classrooms."

The ethos behind accessibility within online assessment is to ensure that no one gets left behind and to ensure equitable opportunity to access education. Online assessment delivery can now surpass such barriers via technology that allows exams to run uninterrupted even in parts of the world with an intermittent network supply.

As we prepare for the further challenges 2021 may bring, the race is on to get back on track, and offer students the very best experience possible. Switching to, or at least beginning to pave the way for online assessment tools, could help to deliver that.



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