

Digital Assessment in 2021

Experiences in Digital Learning Webinar series event 4 February 2021

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The Centre for Distance Education is collaborating with Goldsmith's College in London and the University of London Institute in Paris to run a series of webinars throughout the 2020-21 academic year, each addressing a different issue in digital learning. The fourth seminar, on February 4, brought experts together to discuss one of the trickiest issues raised by 2020's switch to digital: that of assessment. The session picked up on many of the challenges raised by the need to deliver 2020's assessment wholly online, but, with an overall title of *What will digital assessment look like this year?* it was focused on the future as much as on the immediate past.

The session was chaired, as previous webinars in this series have been, by the head of the CDE, Dr **Linda Amrane-Cooper**. It featured two talks by three presenters. Firstly, the CDE's executive leads for research and dissemination, Professor **Stylianios Hatzipanagos** and Professor **Alan Tait**, discussed the University of London's online assessment in 2020, and then Professor **Simon Walker** of University College London described how that institution is dealing with similar challenges.

The high attendance figures and lively discussion during and after both talks reflects the value that academics place on rigorous and fair assessment, and the challenges posed by its sudden and unexpected move online.

Alan began by explaining that he and Stylianios would be presenting an evaluation of online assessment at the University of London in 2020 that they had carried out in collaboration with Linda Amrane-Cooper. He then looked back a mere 11 months to early March 2020 when the University of London, like every other HE institution, had been planning for the usual summer dominated by traditional exams. At the start of the first lockdown, they realised that every piece of assessment would need to move online: in London's case, that meant over 110,000 exams for 35,000 students in 600 centres and 180 countries worldwide. There were questions about exam formats, integrity, the availability of hardware and software, and sheer student numbers, but it had to be done: and, throughout the summer, it was done.

The evaluation of online assessment was commissioned early on, and a report was produced in December. Its headline results were very encouraging. Online assessment had provided no barrier to access: in fact, the proportion of students who chose to sit their exams was up slightly on 2019. A majority of the students polled believed that they had been examined fairly and efficiently, and a majority would also like online assessment to continue. One odd finding, which will need to be looked into more deeply, was that some programmes had noticeably higher pass rates.

The evaluation highlighted the importance of proctoring, or invigilation, in the online environment. This is an essential issue because of potential conflicts between protecting student privacy while ensuring the integrity of the system and preventing cheating. 'Personation', in which the person taking the exam is not the registered student, can be a particular issue where assessment is held at a distance. The answer to this, and similar problems, is wherever possible to design assessments with academic integrity in mind, but how this works in practice varies between disciplines and is not always clear.

Stylianios described interviews with a representative group of programme directors about their experience of online assessment. All still viewed exams as important, often because of the close relationship between formal awards and professional accreditation. However, coursework had been used for assessment more often in 2020 than in previous years. They had provided resources to support students' preparation for assessment, generally as webinars and revision sessions, and had re-designed assessments for the open note format and to discourage plagiarism. Many programme directors found that the move to online assessment had been a valuable one, with one describing it as 'a silver lining of this terrible pandemic'.

Examiners' attitudes to online assessment had also proved more positive than negative, and the prevalence of typed scripts over poorly hand-written ones was greatly welcomed. About half those polled thought that the move online had led to higher student standards, with 'more logical and coherent' answers although they too were concerned about plagiarism. Even with a greater emphasis on academic integrity in study skills training, online invigilation will often be required.

Finally, Alan turned to the current academic year and beyond. Currently, most of the world is still under pandemic restrictions; the University of London will not be returning to its 180 physical exam centres in 2021, and perhaps may never do so. So, what is valuable about online exams, and what do we want to retain when the pandemic has passed into history? The crisis has accelerated a re-assessment of pedagogy to, at the very least, reduce the reliance on pen-and-paper exams; student attitudes are not a barrier to online assessment and a long-term move online should benefit them, as long as issues of academic integrity and grade inflation can be addressed.

The lively discussion concentrated mainly on the issue of integrity and on plagiarism prevention, with a range of views aired for and against plagiarism detection tools and particularly Turnitin. Designing assessments to test students' understanding rather than factual knowledge should also help here. There were also questions about online exams' accessibility to students with disabilities, while acknowledging that traditional exams also raise accessibility barriers, if to a different range of students.

Simon Walker, the academic lead of the UCL Arena Centre for teaching and learning, looked forward to a 'new normal' for assessment at an institution where, in 2019, there had been about 2500 centrally managed exams. Educationalists Williams and Lowendahl have described assessment as 'one of the final digital frontiers in education'; Simon explained how, just before lockdown, he had visited Brunel to find out how they did digital assessment there and what UCL could learn from that experience. Then, of course, 'the tsunami hit' and a digital assessment system had to be designed from scratch. He set up a project board with representatives from IT systems, academic faculty and the exams office, aiming to provide both a short-term solution for 2020 and a software platform that could be rolled out long term. Ideally, the same platform should be used throughout the exam process, from paper authoring through proctoring, marking and grading.

The long first phase of the project, during the academic year 2020-21, involves setting requirements, identifying a platform, proof of concept and testing: with the last stage involving a group of student volunteers taking mock exams. The proof-of-concept stage, in December and January, used a range of different assessment methods and subject areas; while both student and staff feedback was generally positive, there were a few glitches in the system that should be fixed even before this summer's online exams.

No software system, however, can completely 'fix' all challenges related to assessment. The exercise of choosing and validating a platform has revealed some longer-term problems. Research into how current assessments can be improved for students that began before the pandemic should continue; it will be worth investigating a wider variety of assessment types including research-intensive ones and questioning the current dominance of the exam format.

Simon concluded by suggesting that, for assessment, 'the genie is out of the bottle'. Although the software solutions put into place in 2020-21 will evolve and be replaced, assessment as a whole will look very different after the COVID crisis. In-person exams will probably return but they will not return to dominance, and the many advantages that online assessment methods offer will remain long after the pandemic has passed.

Much of the discussion centred around technical issues, with Linda asking about the role of artificial intelligence. Simon agreed that there are promising applications for AI in assessment, but few if any are in use. If AI – and text-mining – do become important assessment tools, this may be in checking for plagiarism. However, simpler solutions to this thorny issue, such as 'face-to-face digital' with students using their own devices in invigilated exam halls, are also expected to play a part in the post-pandemic future of assessment.

Linda agreed to make the University of London report on online assessment available on the CDE website. The next webinar in this series will take place on Thursday 4 March 2021 and will cover accessibility issues.