

Remote learning means we need to radically rethink assessment

Students have not had an easy year, with recruitment fears as they joined our universities over the impact of Brexit; staff taking industrial action on an unprecedented level, and now universities closing down or changing study patterns as the Covid-19 virus sweeps through.

Responsible educators now need to plan ahead, ensuring that our students have robust, transparent and equitable assessment processes that enable successful progression and exit qualifications.

How can we be sure?

The challenge is: How can our rapidly approaching assessments be fair and equitable to all, yet maintaining the quality of our degrees, and meeting the standards demanded by professional bodies and future employers?

Those of us advocating strongly for the digital approach may already have the skills to move learning online, to embrace and encompass digital making, align our courses with online digital pedagogies and can work with our learners to motivate and even inspire those we lead through their brave new learning journeys. Institutions need to start realising the huge potential of our Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), and move from transmission models – from the VLE as repository, to the VLE of inspirational and critical pedagogy.

Much of the current advice is around moving learning online, and it will be just that for level 4 and 5 students. Creating material and recording lectures and uploading them to a VLE seems like it should not be challenging or onerous. However simply expecting staff, many of whom are not experienced, to deliver a weekly mashup of their usual lectures/seminars online will not be serving our students well. Neither is it fair to colleagues. For final year students, the Easter vacation (almost upon us) is the period where they move from the classroom to completing their dissertations/projects.

Technical problems

Already across the UK we have examples of students trying to access virtual classrooms on substandard wifi, with connections dropping out. Hasty moves to online conferences are not going well; an article on “student satisfaction with online learning” has become the most read piece of the month on the Association of Learning Technology website.

Staff are in some cases being given a break until after Easter to manage the transition, others expected to seamlessly pick up online and carry on. There are huge numbers of academic staff reporting problems with online provision, and with online meetings. Replacing like with like in terms of the closest tool is an understandable hasty response – but because synchronous (real time) tools are there, synchronous real time decisions where those able to use the technology have the loudest voice may not be the most effective. Power relations can and do still play out online.

The Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) commissioned a report by Ball et al (2012) to review [assessment](#) in Higher Education. It concluded:

assessment practices in most universities have not kept pace with the vast changes in the context, aims and structure of higher education. They can no longer do justice to the outcomes we expect from a university education in relation to wide-ranging knowledge, skills and employability ”

And still we carry on. What if, however, we step back and think about our student experiences this year, put our students at the heart of our strategies and genuinely do something different?

Another option

Rather than trying to move everyone online, staff and student, expert and non-expert, where evidence tells us our most vulnerable widening participation students will have least access to robust internet, top specification laptops and quiet and comfortable learning spaces; we offer a long Easter break, and spend our time collegiately, working with professional bodies and employer stakeholder groups, to think about meaningful assessments as the next assessment round approaches, and think pragmatically. How might this play out?

Competency based professional courses are a challenge that need to be picked up by our leading bodies. A student nurse unable to show the full competency rate because of lack of access to University skills labs should not be disadvantaged. Neither should an engineering student unable to run tests in the laboratories, or a multimedia student not able to access specialist packages as the Universities have closed down their campuses. Our careers services and industry leaders need to create meaningful pathways to bridge pathways into work, with longer inductions and partnering with Universities to ensure the full range of competencies are met.

We can be innovative with our assessment. For example, there is no reason why our level 4 students couldn't have formative work used as a proxy for their level 4 grade. Although level 4 often doesn't contribute to the final grade, it is essential that we start to build their academic pathway.

Depending on course regulations level 5 students are being assessed for 30 to 40 percent of their final degree classifications this summer. Given the absence of regular teaching this year, we could consider a 'sliding scale' of examinations. Instead of four questions over three hours, we could look at the ration of class time, and scale down accordingly. How much extra do we really get when a student writes for two hours rather than three? Open books exams are now common-place –so it could be an option to release a timed assessment to students, giving them the questions, and asking for a file upload within a given time period. Working through exams as coursework could also be an option.

Those potentially at risk, and most deserving of careful consideration are our current Level 6 students . How do we get the balance of qualification success and mitigate against a lack of a holistic learning environment? Setting assessment tasks online may be an option, with the condition for academics to viva those whose mark/s seem to be out of alignment on our final assessment spreadsheets.

Through the sophistication of the algorithms for our assessments panels , and drawing upon the wisdom of our external examiners, we can offer our students thoughtful, mindful and appropriate assessments. However, it is important that changes to assessment patterns are not undertaken simply to get us through this crisis. As a sector, we need to start to start thinking about addressing the needs of 21st century education, and to constructively consider the whole blend of teaching, learning and assessment.

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