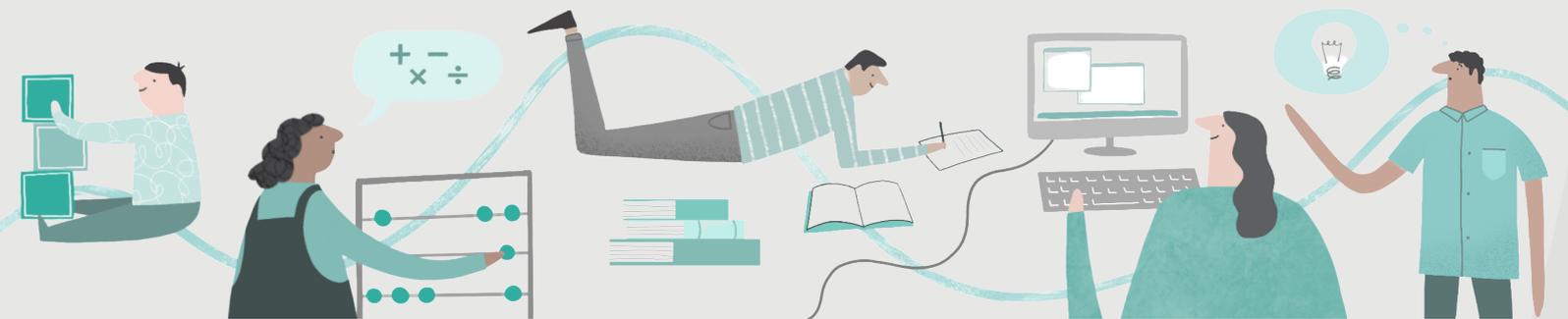# On the line

Exploring students' views about the
switch to online assessment

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Virtual whiplash

The COVID-19 pandemic forced universities across the globe to move examinations online. Whilst this was only one of the challenges posed to the higher education sector, its difficulties were two-fold: both ensuring that the appropriate technology was in place for students to complete assessments online, and that virtual examinations were just as rigorous as they have been in previous years[1].
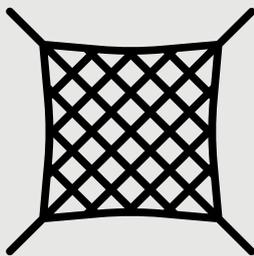
A recent set of guidelines published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) highlights some of the **confusion and concerns associated with this sudden move** to online examinations[2]:
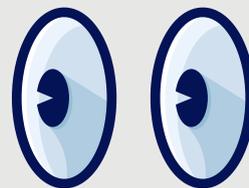

How are providers communicating with students about any changes?

Can the solutions applied to completing students also be applied to continuing students?

Should providers adopt a 'no detriment' or 'safety net' approach to grading?

Is online proctoring or invigilation a reliable way of assuring academic integrity in online assessments?

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From zero to sixty

Globally, students' and higher education providers' **responses to online assessment have varied.**

• Some universities were faced with record amounts of **cheating**, as at the National University of Singapore where a significant number of students "allegedly shared their answers and plagiarised each other".[1]

• Meanwhile, University of Technology Sydney students reported being "**less anxious** about online exams than traditional sit-down examinations". This was because they were able to do practice tests online, allowing them to better pace their revision and not feel they have to cram for the final exam.[1]

• Furthermore, some online assessments can be marked by a **computer**, which could save money and lighten the workload of academic staff. Recent innovations in this area even include the development of software that can mark essays.

Jisc had called for an update to the "archaic pen and paper" exam practice at the beginning of 2020, saying that if they were to go beyond these "traditional forms of assessment", universities could begin to "make use of innovative assessment methods that may be impractical without digital help"[3]. This in turn could continue to widen access to higher education for a global student body that is becoming increasingly diverse.

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Some courses have made good use of e-proctoring, or online invigilation tools, and here too is an area in which there could be significant development — allowing invigilators to virtually monitor a group of students simultaneously. Whilst these innovations are far from widespread, **the COVID-19 pandemic has forced acceleration** in this area[1].

As 2020 came to a close, we conducted an **online survey with 1,055 students** asking them to share their experience of online assessment, and the impact they felt it had had — to uncover what lessons could be learned ahead of a second year of virtual examinations.
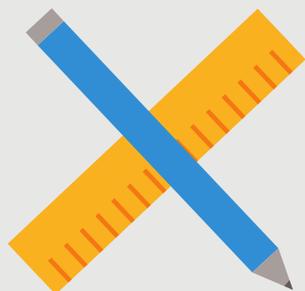
Curbed enthusiasm

Almost all of our respondents (79%) had experienced online examinations or coursework instead of in-person assessment in the past academic year. Of these, 22% were 1st-year students who may have answered based on their experience of FE online assessment.

To assess how students felt about their experiences, we asked them to respond to a set of statements using an agreement scale. **Overall, students' assessments of their experience were lukewarm** — recognising the positives but not demonstrating a resounding enthusiasm:

59% agreed that they were satisfied with their online assessment*

61% agreed that assessments were well-organised

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* Satisfaction agreement statements base n = 1055; respondents were asked on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = strongly disagree and 10 = strongly agree.

The numbers above saw a significant drop for Architecture students, with only 38% agreeing they were satisfied, and 50% neither agreeing nor disagreeing they were well-organised.

Dissatisfaction was also high amongst Art and Design students: 26% disagreed that they were satisfied, compared with only 18% in the overall sample. **This could point to limits for online assessment in more creative subjects.**

Overall, students did not appear concerned with data protection or privacy issues: 50% disagreed when asked if this was a concern, compared with 18% who agreed — 4% of whom strongly agreed it was a concern. Although this represents a small proportion of students, universities should take extra care to **reassure these students** to ward against any potential escalation of these feelings.

Respondents were **less positive about measures taken to prevent cheating in their online assessments**. When asked whether they were satisfied with the invigilation of their online assessment, only 42% agreed, 26% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 32% disagreed.

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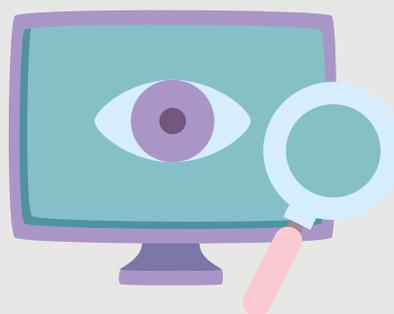
The future's in the eye of the beholder

Despite this mixed response, when asked if they would be happy for online assessments to replace in-person examinations in the future, just over half (54%) of students agreed — with 25% of those selecting 'strongly agree'.

However, this was not the case for all subjects. Unsurprisingly, 53% of Architecture students, and 44% of Art and Design students, disagreed that assessments should continue online. This further indicates that for students who need to **demonstrate more creative skills** in their assessment, an online set-up was not desirable.

Postgraduate students were marginally more supportive of online assessment, with 57% stating they would be happy for assessments to continue online in the future — compared to 54% of undergraduates. The flexibility of online assessment may be more appealing to older students who are more likely to be juggling their studies with work or other responsibilities.

It is worth noting that 1st-year students, who had only ever experienced university assessment online, were 3% more likely to agree that it should continue than 3rd or 4th year students, who were slightly more likely to disagree. This potentially suggests that students **were more open to online assessment when the results had lower stakes**.

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Integrity is integral

When asked to predict the longer-term impacts of a move to online assessments in the future, students indicated the potential positives:

Almost half (48%) felt it would increase access for all students

A third (33%) felt it would lead to a decrease in student stress levels

However, their responses also indicated concern around how online assessment might decrease the value of their degree:

40% thought it would decrease their ability to demonstrate their learning

40% thought it would lead to a decrease in recognition of their qualification by employers

72% predicted an increase in risks of cheating

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On all counts, those who did not want online assessment to replace in-person assessment in future **felt these concerns even more strongly**. They were:

- 7% less likely to think that it would increase access for all students.
- 17% more likely to predict it would decrease recognition by employers.
- 20% more likely to think it would decrease their ability to demonstrate their learning.
- 10% more likely to fear that it would increase cheating.

The cheaters and the cheated

Perhaps most striking is the high concern that online assessment would lead to an increased risk of cheating. To support this, just over a fifth of respondents (22%) said that they **knew someone who had cheated** in their university assessments in the last academic year.

This increased suspicion around cheating could be influencing students' fears that their degree would be less recognised amongst employers.

Lessons learned?

• Whilst students were overall open to the benefits of online assessment, **enthusiasm for a permanent switch was still weak**, largely due to concerns over quality assurance and the ability for them to demonstrate their capability to future employers.

• Those who were against continuation of online assessment beyond the pandemic had some very strong concerns about the robustness of this assessment mode. Before taking online assessment further, **universities need to alleviate these concerns**, particularly around cheating and academic rigour.

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• Universities should be open and clear in **assuring students of moderation and invigilation measures**. They should also take into account that students may not want this mode of assessment indicated on their degree certificate, due to fears that employers would not take online assessment seriously.

• While the question of attracting new applicants is not explicitly covered in this research, concerns around online assessment will likely be **front of mind for prospective students**, having already experienced disruptions to their further education qualifications. It would be worth considering how to alleviate these concerns for new students as well as current ones[4].

About Shift Insight

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References

[1] https://www.qs.com/how-universities-are-assessing-students-remotely/

[2] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/covid-19-thematic-guidance-academic-standards.pdf?sfvrsn=cbcccd81

[3] https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/how-covid-19-has-changed-student-assessment-for-good-15-jun-2020

[4] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/online-cheating-learning-students-schools-b1787289.html

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