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Preparing for a second wave and keeping assessments relevant

Keeping crucial exams going and addressing long-term assessment issues in higher education

Questionmark Viewpoint

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Introduction

This academic year has witnessed a dramatic transformation in the way that learning technologies are used within higher education.

Covid-19 and the accompanying social distancing measures meant that many leading universities had to shift to an online delivery model. As fears of a second wave of the virus continue to grow, online lectures and remote seminars look set to continue for the next academic year.

Given the speed with which lockdown measures were introduced, students and stakeholders understood why crucial exams had to be canceled. But if social distancing measures are still in place next exam season, people's expectations will be higher. Institutions around the world have overhauled their digital offer. Leading universities have also demonstrated that robust online exams are possible, even when the stakes are high. Others will be expected to follow their example.

This white paper explores how we have worked with customers to keep crucial assessments going. It will demonstrate how, working with enterprise-grade assessment technology, they have moved exams online without compromising integrity or security.

However, if the introduction of online assessments is simply seen as a quick fix to a temporary problem, a defining opportunity has been missed. Current assessment methods are too often failing to meet the needs of 'education 4.0', the term used to describe the initiatives needed to properly prepare students for the contemporary workforce.

This white paper outlines the challenges faced in preparing for a second year of minimal social contact, recognizing the steps that many institutions are making in preparing for the more systematic delivery of remote learning.

It demonstrates how enterprise-grade assessment technology can help solve many of the immediate challenges. But it also explores longer-term challenges in the sector and how adopting the latest education technology can help provide students with a world-class learning experience.

Questionmark Viewpoint

Questionmark Viewpoint is a series of white papers and reports that we produce to explore the challenges that our customers are facing, and which we help them address. These papers are based on what we are hearing from customers, and on research from other experts.
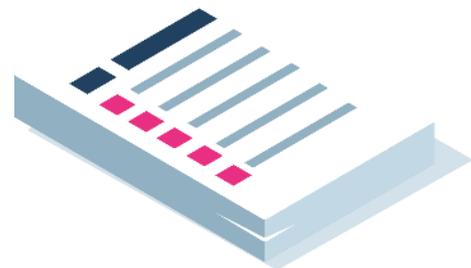
Preparing for a second wave

During the summer of 2020, speculation has grown that the US could be hit by a second wave of Covid-19.[1] As infection rates rise again in parts of Europe, many are bracing themselves for a resurgence of the virus.[2]

The fears of a second wave have huge implications for universities and other higher education institutions. Many have already decided to move all teaching and student interaction online.[3] Others will consider online learning with some small group and socially distant discussion.[4]

Given the speed and surprise with which the virus spread in the spring, universities had to quickly reimagine how to deliver and assess courses. Many felt they had little choice but to cancel final exams.

However, given the additional time to prepare for the eventuality of a second wave, students and stakeholders will expect a considered solution should this situation persist. According to a survey about this summer's assessments, moving exams online was the most popular option among respondents, with 42% stating it as their preference.[5]

Several respected universities have demonstrated that moving assessments online in high volumes can be done. In the UK, Oxford and Cambridge both delivered exams online this summer. Imperial College ensured that 280 medical students completed their assessments digitally.[6] Colleges in the US have also moved some exams online.[7]

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[1] https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/second-wave-covid-19-u-s-or-are-we-still-n1231087
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/07/five-months-on-and-eu-health-workers-cant-bear-to-contemplate-a-second-covid-19-wave
[3] Many universities, including Cambridge University have confirmed there will be no face to face teaching during the next academic year. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52732814. Harvard will not offer any face to face interaction during the next semester. https://www.hks.harvard.edu/more/student-life/coronavirus-covid-19-information-students
[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52732814
[5] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/hepi-poll-most-university-students-want-exams-continue-online
[6] https://www.studyinternational.com/news/online-exams-during-covid19/
[7] https://www.une.edu.au/current-students/my-course/examinations/olx-project

Online exams will become the expectation for students in 2021. They will be essential to the business continuity of universities if social distancing measures persist.

But what did the crisis of the spring reveal about the challenges that learning institutions have in implementing them?

1) *Security of the assessment and guarding against cheating*

It is essential that the results of crucial assessments can be trusted. If the integrity of the assessment is in question it risks the worth of the resulting qualification and damages the brand of the academic institution.

Whatever the assessment method, robust steps must be taken to guard against cheating. In a survey by the International Center for Academic Integrity, 68% of American students admitted to having tried to cheat at least once.[8] An investigation found that between 2014 and 2017, incidences of cheating in UK Russell Group universities rose by 40%.[9]

When assessments are taken in exam halls, proctors or invigilators can be present to supervise proceedings. Equivalent security measures must be taken when moving exams online.

2) *Privacy concerns*

To protect the security of online exams, many universities have invested in systems of remote proctoring or invigilation. However, students have raised concerns about alleged invasions of privacy. Proctoring services can involve using technology to scan head and body movements.[10] Many services need to take control of a test-taker's computer.

As we have discussed, compromising the integrity of the assessment is not an option. How can universities ensure that robust anti-cheating measures are in place at the same time as satisfying student privacy concerns?

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[8] https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2017/02/cheating_in_college_has_become.html
[9] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/may/01/university-students-cheating-tuition-fees-jobs-exams
[10] https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/01/online-proctoring-college-exams-coronavirus/

3) *Digital skills deficit among faculty*

At the beginning of 2020, the scale of demand for online exams could never have been anticipated. Do staff have the skills to keep up?

According to a survey of UK university staff conducted in December 2019, only 9% of teaching staff agree they receive reward or recognition when they develop the digital aspects of their role. Forty percent claimed they were not given any support when it comes to incorporating new technologies into their role.[11]

Questions therefore remain as to how well-equipped staff are to make widespread transitions to digital assessments. It also cannot be assumed that all students are sufficiently familiar with digital technologies.

4) *Lack of integration with assessment platforms*

Many have found that some assessment platforms only support customers with one part of the process. Teams often find that different parts of the assessment process, such as proctoring, content authoring, badging and managing e-commerce, have to be delivered on separate platforms. This can be both time-consuming and frustrating, making it difficult to deliver a seamless experience for the user.

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[11] https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/digital-experience-insights-survey-2019-staff-uk

Addressing long-term challenges

The process of migrating assessments to online exams is currently one of survival for universities and colleges. However, even without Covid-19, the delivery of assessments was widely deemed to need modernization. According to a survey back in 2017, only 74% of students were satisfied with the way they were assessed. This was significantly lower than the 87% who were satisfied with how they were taught.[12]

There are also many challenges around managing education in an online environment that are not directly related to assessments. However, the knowledge gained from assessments could help address them.

Six long-term challenges are common across the higher education sector.

- ***Limited variety of assessments –*** researchers have claimed that 'assessment practices in most universities have not kept pace with the vast changes in the context, aims and structure of higher education.'[13] Do the formats of current assessments allow for the real range of knowledge acquired at university to be tested? When students enter the workforce they are expected to create presentations or summarise findings in a video. Their university exams, however, may still consist of essay questions.

- ***Relevance to distance learners*** – almost seven million students in the US study through distance learning.[14] Gathering students who do not usually congregate together for 'in person' assessments is counterintuitive. If effective remote assessments cannot be introduced, universities risk losing students to Massive Open Online Courses (Moocs).

- ***Time-consuming process*** – designing, marking and feeding back on assessment takes up large amounts of teachers' time.[15] This time could be better spent elsewhere and it also limits the number of assessments that can be created.

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[12] https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/assessment_viewpoint_aug16.pdf
[13] https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/assessment_viewpoint_aug16.pdf
[14] https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=80
[15] https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/digital-experience-insights-survey-2019-staff-uk

- ***Digital literacy*** – with learning moving online, students will need to be familiar with digital processes to access courses. Without the ability to visit a physical library, they will need to access course materials digitally. Some students may need support to function in this environment. Do course leaders know which students might be struggling? Are they aware of what skills may be under-developed? This problem is heightened during social distancing but is part of a longer-term problem with a dependency on digital tools.

- ***Study skills*** - young students combine moving into a new phase of study with a radical lifestyle change. Universities need to provide support and encourage good studying habits. But given the variety of backgrounds students come from, do institutions know which study skills are lacking and which students may need additional support?

- ***Language skills*** - universities increasingly provide online courses, which can be accessed by international students. For courses to be taught successfully, course leaders must have a clear read on the spoken and written language skills of new students.
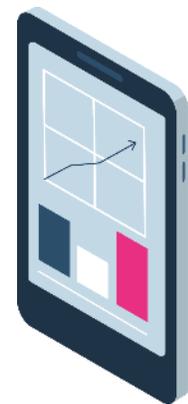
Keep exams going

Robust and secure online assessments will be the most effective way for universities to keep exams going during the next academic year. Working with an enterprise-grade assessment platform can help overcome challenges and barriers.

- ***Protecting the integrity of the assessment and guarding against cheating*** – Questionmark Record and Review records the test and flags anomalies for future analysis. These might include irregular head movement or two heads appearing on the screen at the same time. Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology can scan the test-taker's face and notify the test-setter that footage of the test should be reviewed.

  Questionmark Proctoring Online is the most robust form of remote invigilation. It enables exams and tests to be taken remotely without compromising security or the integrity of the assessment.

  An online proctor or invigilator supervises a test-taker using the webcam and audio built into the test-taker's computer. The proctor confirms the test-taker's identity and can pause or terminate the assessment if they see suspicious behavior.

- ***Protecting student privacy*** - many proctoring solutions require the proctors to take control of the test-takers computer. This raises concerns about whether the proctor could access other files and applications. Questionmark Proctoring Online does not require this, because the proctor is connected directly to Questionmark's service and can manage the exam without going through the participant's computer.

- ***Easy and accessible*** - Questionmark customers find the platform easy to use. It is straightforward to create assessments, to reuse content and analyze results. Advanced digital skills are not required to be a successful user of our platform.

- ***Provides a one-stop-shop solution*** - our online assessment platform gives customers a one-stop-shop to deliver remote assessments. We combine:

  - Secure test-taking with a range of proctoring services
  - Authoring content
  - E-commerce
  - Reporting
  - Badging for successful candidates

Embracing education 4.0

Adopting the latest assessment technology can do more than help academic institutions survive a second wave of Covid-19. Integrating enterprise-grade technology across the curriculum and support functions of a university can help ensure students graduate with the skills to compete in the fourth industrial revolution.

- **Variety of assessment formats** – our assessment platform makes it easy to create a variety of assessment formats. This broadens the range of skills that can be tested. It can also hone the focus to test the right skills, such as understanding a subject rather than ability to use a computer.
- **Increase revenue streams** – institutions that perfect online assessments can serve students anywhere in the world. This increases the distance learning offer and helps universities to compete with Moocs.
- **Instant marking of results** – with our platform, and depending on the assessment format, results can be instantly marked and compiled. This saves time on marking and makes it easier to spot patterns and trends and to analyze results.
- **Identify student skills gaps** – course leaders need to know which students might struggle to access digital learning or which may need to develop additional study or language skills. By assessing the relevant skills of future students before they join, universities can determine what additional support might be needed and where it should be targeted.

We have worked with higher education institutions around the world, helping them to make better decisions and meet the challenges outlined in this paper.

If you are interested in beginning a conversation with us please visit our website and book a demo: https://www.questionmark.com/sectors-and-uses/higher-education/

We're offering higher education institutions unlimited use of our 'Record and Review' service until the end of January 2021 for a flat fee. This will help universities and colleges move exams online quickly, should the circumstances require. To take advantage of the offer for unlimited usage, email sales@questionmark.com.

About Questionmark

We help organizations and their people unlock their potential to deliver better performance. Questionmark provides a secure enterprise-grade assessment platform and professional services to leading organizations around the world, delivered with care and unequalled expertise. Its full-service online assessment tool and professional services help customers to improve their performance and meet their compliance requirements. Questionmark enables organizations to unlock their potential by delivering assessments which are valid, reliable and fair, which can be defended.

Questionmark offers secure powerful integration with learning management systems (LMS), learning record stores (LRS) and proctoring services making it easy to bring everything together in one place. Questionmark's cloud-based assessment management platform offers rapid deployment, scalability for high-volume test delivery, 24/7 support, and the peace-of-mind of secure, audited U.S., Australian and European-based data centers.

Working with Questionmark

To further explore how Questionmark could work for your organization, or to book a free consultation and demo, please see: https://www.questionmark.com/request-demo/

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