

Academic Integrity - Remote Proctoring Survey Analysis

Introduction

The COVID-19 disruptions of 2020 led to significant changes to assessment approaches in the higher education sector. Onsite, invigilated, closed-book examinations were often impossible and largely replaced by online open-book assessments in offsite locations, typically in the students' own homes. Taken together with the considerable stress students are under, this shift led to a perception among a small number of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) that the risk of academic misconduct had increased.

By mid-2020, we were aware that some providers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) were exploring remote proctoring to address risks to academic integrity. Remote proctoring allows students to take assessments offsite while ensuring the integrity of the assessment. A range of commercial solutions are available. We wanted to explore the use of these solutions in the sector with a view to supporting QAA Members who might be considering using these services - for example, setting out key principles to underpin their adoption. To find out more, we ran two surveys in October 2020 - one for higher education providers and one for PSRBs.

We asked whether they were being used (and if not, why not), whether COVID-19 disruptions were a factor in their adoption, what types of remote proctoring were being used, and the student engagement providers had undertaken prior to implementation.

This research forms part of our broader work on academic integrity but is distinct from ongoing activities such as the forthcoming research on academic misconduct outcomes, due to report in April 2021, and the Academic Integrity Charter.

Summary of findings

We found that around half of providers were using remote proctoring, covering a range of approaches, although most were small in scale or were currently in development. The pandemic had undoubtedly been a driver for the introduction of proctoring, but some providers were considering such measures in any event. Students were being consulted and additional support and information were being provided. There did not seem to be one preferred option, and there was no consensus on the benefits or issues, among providers or PSRBs. A number of concerns were expressed about wider adoption of remote proctoring solutions. There was a call for further guidance in the form of principles, to underpin providers' consideration of whether to introduce remote proctoring and assess its quality.

Analysis

We had 46 responses to the two surveys - 21 for the provider's survey, and 25 for the PSRB version. Most of the providers had degree awarding powers, only three did not.

Who had used online proctoring?

Just over half of providers (11) had used some form of online proctoring. For some, the usage was small in scale - for instance, limited to one course. One provider did say they had used remote proctoring solutions before 2019 - a locked down browser for digital exams taken onsite.

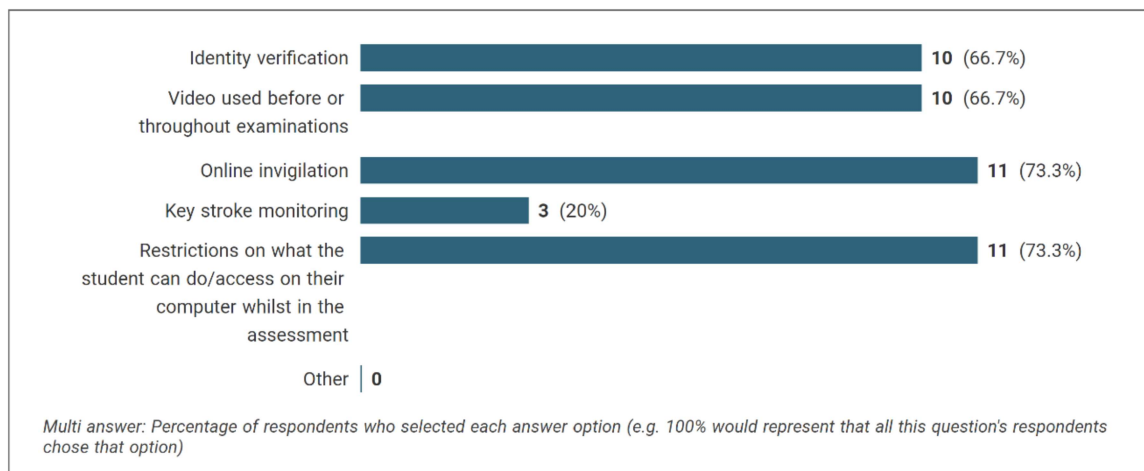
Eight providers, who had implemented remote proctoring, said that they had done so as a result of the pandemic or had accelerated existing plans. One of those did say that the solutions were not ideal:

'We would not have used remote proctoring if not for COVID-19 because either the cost is too high (human proctoring with few candidates per proctor) or the security is insufficient (e.g. ai-only proctoring).'

Table 1 looks at the types of proctoring used. All those respondents who had adopted remote proctoring used in-assessment restrictions and online invigilation. Nearly all also used video, and identity verification. Only three had employed perhaps the most invasive and controversial mechanism - key-stroke recording. One provider told us that they proctor through Microsoft Teams, but did not expand on how this worked. No other types were put forward which was perhaps surprising - the list was not intended to be exhaustive.

Table 1

5 What types of proctoring have you used?



Who had not used online proctoring?

One provider was unaware of such solutions, and the other had considered but not implemented them because students raised serious objections - this may be worth exploring further with student representative groups. Time and resource were the most common barriers to implementation, with the need to assure themselves of the value and effectiveness of this as crucial, as was the need to consult students.

One provider was looking to do a risk/benefit assessment in readiness for the summer 2021 exam period, another said there were plans in place for future trials but they were not far enough along when COVID-19 disruptions hit. Another noted a reluctance on the part of the University Senate to adopt these solutions, although they did not expand on what had fueled that reluctance.

One provider told us they had only used some online invigilation due to PSRB requirements for US-based professional students, other than that, they 'did not need' remote proctoring tools.

Using methods other than remote proctoring to tackle academic misconduct, 18 providers said they were using or planning to use other methods this year or last. These included looking at assessment design, question banks and randomisation for multiple choice questions, invigilation of onsite exams, one-to-one vivas with all students, mini vivas or oral assessments, and honesty statements. Varying modes of assessment, including requiring students to apply and use examples from their workplace, were employed. Use of text-matching software was put forward several times. Two providers have carried out additional training for students on what constitutes academic misconduct. Many of these methods were explored in our 'Contracting to Cheat' guidance so this suggests either a good level of engagement with that advice or that it is in line with sector practice.

Engaging students

The responses suggested a good level of engagement by providers with students, although some of the responses could be categorised more accurately as support systems, such as providing additional student guides and tutorials. One provider carried out staged briefings, followed by student consultation, more briefings, mock examinations, and additional briefings. Another explained the process to their students in advance of the exams, and encouraged them to download and try the software in advance - they also provided a helpline. Early discussions with students' unions took place and regular communications was a recurring theme. Surveys with student representatives, guidance notes, tutorial videos, and dedicated IT staff were also provided. One provider used remote proctoring on a low credit bearing test on one module, then used the feedback from this pilot to inform their processes, and also produced written guides and videos for their students. Another provider similarly recognised that more consultation with students would be needed if these solutions were to be used at scale.

Student protections

There was a fairly even split between providers who had introduced additional protections, support or safeguards for their students and those who had not. Safeguards included ensuring consent to the collection of their biometric data before the exam, and Disclosure and Barring Service checking of staff engaging in one-to-one proctoring. Several providers said that onsite assessment was kept as an alternative for those who could not take online assessments.

PSRB requirements

16 providers said that PSRBs had made some form of remote proctoring a requirement for their accredited courses. One was unable to disclose which course this affected, but the others were:

- law (for the Legal Practice Course, the one-year postgraduate professional skills course)
- medicine (for Medical School's Council assessment)
- veterinary science
- actuaries
- maths
- business

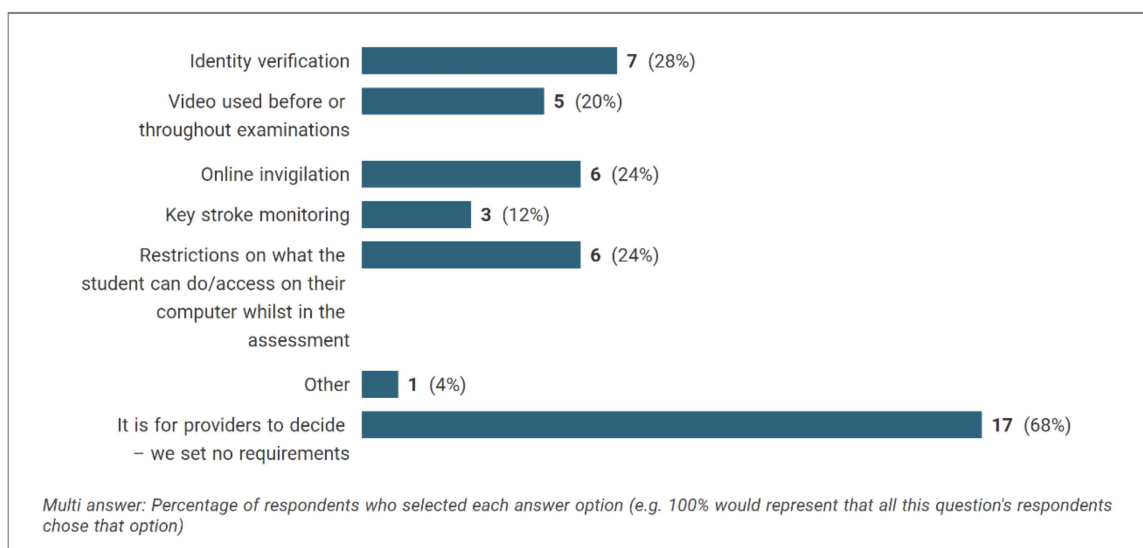
- engineering (although university regulations for accredited engineering programmes, rather than the Engineering Council requests, required closed book exam conditions assessment).

Another provider was in discussions with pharmaceutical and chartered accountancy PSRBs about their expectations for online exam security.

Three PSRBs said they had asked their accredited providers to implement some form of remote proctoring, or at least asked providers what measures they were taking to maintain the integrity of online assessments - the other 22 did not - and two of the three were clear that it was a Covid-related decision. Table 2 looks at the types of proctoring used, which shows a fairly even distribution across methods, but the majority view was that the solutions adopted was a decision for providers.

Table 2

4 What types of proctoring are your accredited providers using?



Views on merits - providers

There were a range of views expressed on the merits or otherwise of remote proctoring. Some saw it as a positive, workable solution in a difficult landscape that can work well as an element of a thoughtfully designed and funded assessment model. Some saw it as useful, although more time consuming for administration.

'A firm supporter of the use of remote proctoring and the benefits. We have come through COVID almost unscathed due to the fact we were already running this model, and it has high levels of reliability and security.'

Some providers were more cautious, seeing it as a developing practice, and taking care to develop an institution-wide approach, or only supporting proctoring in cases where a PSRB has mandated a closed-book exam and it is not possible to conduct the examination process on campus.

Others saw it as not viable in the long term due to the cost and that it was only being used where essential, not for broader implementation. There was also a concern about expense, not just of the products but also for the technical support needed to provide a good student

experience. At the same time, there was a view expressed that lower-cost solutions do not effectively prevent cheating.

One provider saw remote proctoring as logistically challenging as it requires students to have a stable internet connection throughout the exam. They also appeared to suggest that the proctoring solutions they used were time limited to a maximum of one hour, which then limited their examinations to one hour in turn.

There is also a general principle applicable to digital learning and assessment - that providers need to be aware of the possible disadvantage to students without access to suitable technology, continuous reliable connectivity, and/or environments needed for digital exams, so suitable alternative offerings (for example, onsite exam delivery) should be in place. The level of digital literacy and competence, and preparation time that students need in order to install and use the software needs to be considered too. Some solutions to digital poverty issues - borrowed laptops for instance - may mean that students will not have the admin rights needed. Technical issues during assessments are a potential source of stress at an already highly-pressured time.

There was a view that this issue needs broader sector testing and consultation, and that ethics was a key consideration. A code of practice or code of ethics was suggested. Privacy and the potential for students to refuse consent for their biometric data to be collected were highlighted risks.

'We have found that when we pick up on suspicious behaviour we usually have to give the student the benefit of the doubt, as it is difficult to be one hundred per cent sure of any misconduct. Remote proctoring seems to be more of a deterrent.'

Views on merits - PSRBs

PSRBs were also mixed in their general enthusiasm towards remote proctoring. Some were leaving the decisions to their partner awarding bodies, expressing the view that imposing one solution across all providers is likely to cause issues. One PSRB suggested a lack of awareness of remote proctoring possibilities among providers. Others either said they were in full support or that it was likely to become a requirement in the near future.

Some concerns were expressed at the security of the solutions, legal issues, proctoring being seen as invasive by some students, and the available scope for reasonable adjustments. One PSRB said it was not necessary as skills can be demonstrated through other types of assessment.

'... But it did permit us to continue to run assessments and to assure their integrity/security to a level which we considered acceptable.'

Areas for QAA support to explore

Our aim in conducting this survey was to explore the current use of remote proctoring in the sector. The results have been informative and we would now like to undertake further research, beginning with a scan of practice outside the UK, drawing on our contacts with our partner agencies in other countries. We aim to publish our findings before the end of 2020.

In order to develop our support for members, we would like to consider a number of topics in greater detail including engaging and consulting with students, privacy and use of data, ethics and student support. We will progress this in the next month by forming a small short-life working party in partnership with our members. In doing so, we will ensure this work focusing on proctoring links to our wider work on promoting academic integrity

including the Academic Integrity Charter, new research on the outcomes of misconduct investigations, and our programme of academic integrity [webinars](#).

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