Assessment Choices Post-Covid-19

How Covid-19 challenged and changed assessment – perhaps permanently

Covid-19 required higher education institutions to change their assessment practices, particularly in relation to summative, time-constrained, closed-book examinations. With various alternative assessment approaches having been used successfully during the pandemic, the question now is whether to return to pre-pandemic assessment practices or to continue to embrace and develop the changes introduced. We have the opportunity and responsibility to choose well.

Introduction

When the then-Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, announced a national lockdown on 12 March 2020 to prevent the spread of Covid-19, higher education institutions (HEIs) were forced to change their practices overnight. The first and most obvious change required teaching and learning to move from physical classrooms to remote online delivery. What was less clear was how the pandemic would challenge and change higher-education assessment practices.

For many years before Covid-19, HEIs had embraced the central importance of assessment. Nationally accredited programmes were designed around minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs), with constituent modules delivering related minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOs). Programme assessment strategies routinely ensured the *constructive alignment* of assessment practices (Biggs & Tang, 2011), encompassing assessment *of*, *as*, and *for* learning (NFETL, 2017a).

This provided continuity of alignment from individual module assessments, to MIMLOs and MIPLOs, and to discipline-specific and generic national award standards of knowledge, skills, and competences on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Before Covid-19, higher-education assessment seemed to have reached a stage of mature development, offering comprehensive, scaffolded, well-considered, robust, and reliable assessment systems.

The arrival of Covid-19 disrupted many forms of learning and formative assessment. Classrooms, labs, and studios were abandoned to ensure the health and safety of learners and teachers, requiring learning and assessment opportunities to be entirely recreated, often within the limits of online Zoom sessions and breakout rooms. This compromise proved particularly limiting

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in creative disciplines, where learners tried to complete practical assignments such as film-making that required close group work. Specific assessment challenges also arose in teaching and healthcare programmes, where opportunities for workplace learning and assessment were severely curtailed.

Covid-19's effect on summative assessments affected most programme disciplines, as it was no longer possible to gather hundreds of learners into examination halls to sit traditional closed-book, time-constrained exams. Unlike secondary education, where the State chose to replace the Leaving Certificate exams with teacher-assessed grades, in general, HEIs chose to remain as close as possible to the prescribed assessment by moving to online exams.

Online assessment

Online exams have been used for many years, for example by professional regulatory bodies in accountancy, and for the State's driver theory test. These require learners to present to test centre facilities with preconfigured computers, where the learners' computer usage is closely monitored throughout their test. Covid-19 restrictions precluded these options, because learners could not be gathered safely into test centres.

Proctored online remote exams allow learners to take exams from remote locations, typically using their own computer. Online invigilators monitor the learners throughout the exam using the learners' webcams. More sophisticated systems are configured to take control of the learners' computers, restricting their access to test-related software resources during the test.

The cost and availability of proctored online remote exam services presented challenges for HEIs, as demand during Covid-19 far exceeded supply. The technology that was required to allow learners' computers to be remotely restricted also generally exceeded their internet broadband capacities for uploading. While invigilators could monitor learners throughout their exams using the learners' webcams or phone cameras, the closed-book nature of exams had to be substituted with open-book or 'open-source' examinations.

While open-book and open-source exams have been used for many years in exam hall settings, their sudden imposition in an online format as a substitute for the previously prescribed exam-hall closed-book exam presented challenges for learners and teachers alike.

For teaching staff, the move meant they had to reimagine and redesign their exam on the basis that learners would have access to open-source material throughout the test. Teaching staff were supported by the institutions' teaching, learning, and assessment departments and nationally by the resources provided by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning (NFETL, 2017b).

In order to ensure the continued approval of the learners' awards throughout the pandemic, HEIs were given freedom to use alternative assessments and

to implement appropriate emergency contingency arrangements agreed with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, 2020).

For many learners, the prospect of doing exams online was scary. Learners raised various concerns about their lack of experience of doing exams online; their computer, laptop, or tablet resources; their typing speeds; the time constraints involved; and their broadband speeds. To allay their fears, institutions organised mock exam sessions online, allowing learners to practise under no-stakes conditions. To allow for different typing abilities, institutions extended their scheduled exam times to allow for additional settling-in and uploading time. Institutions also retained the option for learners to complete their exam using pen and paper, and to upload scans or photographs of their completed scripts within the allocated time.

More significantly, to encourage learners to make the leap towards online exams, and in line with national and international developments, HEIs adopted various forms of 'no detriment' policies. These assured learners that regardless of their performance in online exams, they could repeat the exams later without limiting the grades available to them.

Collectively, the supports, encouragement, and assurances given to learners were highly effective in managing a successful transition to online exams by the summer of 2020. In particular, there was no evidence of any increase in learner requests for deferrals. Indeed, for a brief period in June 2020, there was an expectation of a full return to on-campus provision in the autumn, and a sense that things would return to normal.

As Covid-19 continued to present further waves of infection, with different variants of the virus threatening public safety, higher-education teaching and learning remained largely online apart from a brief reprise before Christmas 2020. This resulted in online exams, initially adopted under emergency contingency arrangements, continuing throughout the entire 2020–21 academic year.

Future assessment
Eighteen months from the start of the pandemic, as HEIs face into 2021–22, the external environment has once again been transformed. Thanks to the development and roll-out of vaccines, learners and teachers can again look forward to enjoying an on-campus learning experience.

Higher education, having learnt to adapt and transform teaching, learning, and assessment practices during Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns, now faces the question of to what extent it should return to pre-Covid-19 norms and how many of its practices during Covid-19 it should retain.

The choices ahead for assessment strategies are many and varied, with each having its advocates and detractors. Some teachers and learners may long to return to the certainty of the pre-Covid-19 days, when time-constrained exams offered trusted standards of measuring attainment and protection from plagiarism and collusion.

Others will point to the tendency for closed-book exams to emphasise rote learning and recall rather than assessing higher-order learning,

their limited suitability to the needs of particular learners, and their poor accommodation of universal design for learning (UDL) principles.

All will concede that gathering people into rooms and having them write with a pen and paper for hours at a time, while removing all available support resources, is at the very least artificial and contrived. All accept that it does not reflect real-life situations in which learners, as graduates, are expected to apply the knowledge, skills, and competences they've learnt on their programmes.

The future of assessment practices post-Covid-19 will depend on the choices made by HEIs. Learners on film programmes are likely to embrace the return of group work, and those on teaching and healthcare programmes will welcome the return of work placements. However, the return to on-campus, closed-book, time-constrained exams for learners from other disciplines need not be inevitable.

As we enter the 2021–22 academic year, teachers in higher education are actively re-evaluating and fundamentally challenging the merit of their previously prescribed or chosen assessments. If learners on music-production programmes can be assessed on the basis of their music compositions, and fashion designers on their collections, how might learners on more traditional programmes in business and computing have similar opportunities for authentic assessments instead of closed-book, time-constrained exams?

Higher-education learners are also reflecting on how they wish to be assessed. In particular, learners in the later stages of degree programmes, who have completed two years of 'open-source' exams, are already petitioning their faculties and academic councils to ensure they do not have to undertake closed-book exams for the first time as part of their award. Such requests warrant detailed consideration.

Rather than automatically returning to the same-old pre-Covid-19 assessment practices, higher-education teachers and learners now have the opportunity and responsibility to choose which way to proceed from the many authentic and diverse forms of alternative assessments available. Their challenge is to reimagine and repurpose assessments anew, to suit an altogether changed and exciting post-Covid-19 world.

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