The Student Experience of Online Assessment

How third–level students managed a changed academic environment

Introduction

Assessment is a principal activity in higher education (Stödberg, 2012), both measuring and contributing to learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). The education sector is traditionally one of the least digitised sectors of the economy (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020), so when Covid-19 arrived, students experienced a seismic shift from traditional paper-based assessments to one where online assessment prevailed.

In May 2020 the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education published the findings of the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey, giving an insight into the digital engagement, experiences, and expectations of students and staff who teach in Irish higher education. The survey was conducted in late 2019, before the pandemic, which was a very different learning and teaching environment. Interestingly, it contained little about assessment.

Jisc, a not-for-profit organisation for digital services and solutions in the higher and further education and skills sectors in the UK, outlines many advantages of undertaking assessments online (Jisc, 2009). These include more efficient management of assignment submissions, better engagement from students, increased motivation, and the convenience of not having to travel to submit an assignment.

However, lack of access to appropriate IT equipment and infrastructure is a particular challenge. In Ireland, all students (both full- and part-time) in one of the largest schools at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) were surveyed to understand their experiences of undertaking

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The Covid-19 pandemic affected 1.2 million students in Ireland, with almost a quarter of a million in higher education studying remotely. It caused a shift in assessment design, from predominantly invigilated final exams to online assessment. Students at Dundalk Institute of Technology took part in a study to explore the student experience of undertaking final assessments online. This article outlines the key findings.

online summative assessments and how this information may be used in the future.

Positive and negative aspects of online assessments

The students surveyed had experience of many different methods of online assessment. The most frequent was open-book timed exams, followed by Moodle quizzes and online presentations. Many positives were identified in relation to undertaking final assessments online, but there were also significant negatives.

Undertaking assessments remotely can reduce students' stress levels (Rolim & Isaias, 2019), a finding reiterated by 40% of the student respondents of the survey. This appeared to be aligned with the increased flexibility and ease of access. The less formal nature and lack of invigilation also had a positive impact on stress levels for many students; however, a substantial cohort said that online assessments had no impact on their stress levels.

Flexibility and accessibility were overarching advantages. Students could undertake assessments in their own home, at a time that suited their schedule, and they saved time and money from not having to travel to a physical exam centre. However, not all students have the luxury of such peaceful accommodation. The catchment area of students surveyed is in a border area which, according to recent deprivation indices, includes some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country. In DkIT, 14% of enrolments are from disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA, 2019). It is therefore likely that some students live in accommodation that may not be suitable for undertaking assessments, such as flat shares, rented accommodation, and direct provision centres.

A key theme in the analysis of responses was the correlation of online assessments with practical application in 21st-century Ireland. Students identified the modern approach of this method, the use of up-to-date technology to undertake such assessments and the transferable skills learned that could be applied in employment settings. They recognised the importance of these practicalities, though it appears there is a dearth of information in the literature on the benefits to an employment setting.

Most students found that online assessments helped them engage, study, and revise more with the module, helping them build overall knowledge of the subject. These findings strongly support the work of Marriott and Lau (2008), who write that online assessments have an important role in teaching and learning, as they can enhance student engagement, student progress can be monitored easily, and poor student performance and instant feedback can motivate students to work harder.

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However, there were also some starkly negative experiences. One of the main areas of concern for students is the potential for technology failure (Kearns, 2012; Khan & Khan, 2019). Lack of appropriate IT infrastructure was cited by the INDEx survey as a major problem experienced by students nationally. Although speed and reliability of broadband, lack of computer hardware, and technology failures were identified as real problems and concerns, most students felt comfortable using IT for assessments and were not worried about the risk of IT failure occurring during that period.

When undertaking assessments online, students can feel isolated by the lack of physical contact with teachers and peer students (Kearns, 2012; Khan & Khan, 2019). Online group work can be difficult, increasing stress. Difficulties with maintaining concentration and focus meant that students were easily distracted, largely caused by operating in an isolated setting. These feelings can increase stress, which impacts on health, specifically mental health. Lack of contact can lead to misunderstandings and missed opportunities and can leave students with feelings of deflation and lack of motivation and morale.

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Where to for the future?

The results of this study suggest that undertaking final assessments online can have huge benefits for students. While this was a small-scale study in a single school of a higher education institute, the findings provide insights into students' experiences of being assessed in an online environment. They may provide insights that inform programme teams and individual academics in the design of online assessments going forward. In particular, academic and programme teams might consider a blended model of assessment. Additional consideration should be given to the type of online assessments used, and institutions should promote places on campus with high-speed broadband, accessibility from other IT devices, and additional skills-based training.

Students can be resistant to change and reluctant to embrace the change from traditional to online exams (Khan & Khan 2019). However, it appears that DkIT students did not experience this resistance, perhaps due to the lack of options during the pandemic. Educational institutions and students alike were forced to switch immediately from face-to-face to online teaching and assessments.

The majority of respondents said they would prefer that most final assessments be held online in a post-Covid-19 era. Unfortunately, the increased use of artificial-intelligence tools such as ChatGPT could have an impact on this. What can we learn as educators from this experience? Any proposed changes to assessment structures in the future should include student inputs. In the words of Benjamin Franklin, 'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.'

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On 10 February 2023, Jörg Widmann, former principal guest conductor of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, was conferred with an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Limerick.

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