



# NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:  
Moving Forward Together



## Ten Things We Have Learned About Assessment



**This Forum Insight examines assessment practices in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and closure of campuses in 2020, foregrounding assessment principles previously developed in collaboration with sectoral partners and stakeholders, and reflecting the outcomes of two National Webinar series events in spring 2021 on the future of assessment in a changed higher education landscape. We thank the webinar presenters and participants including representatives of disciplines, agencies and networks from across Ireland and capture their contributions as *Ten Things We Have Learned About Assessment*.**

### **1. Strategies for alternative assessment have largely worked well and continue to be developed**

Following campus closures, five exam formats were used widely: continuous assessment, non-proctored (invigilated) online examinations, examinations with a long time-window, non-proctored online examinations with a short time-window, and proctored online examinations. A report by QQI (2020) found this range of strategies to be robust and that learning outcomes had been met. New alternative assessment strategies additionally implemented used experience from continuous and authentic assessment in programmes over many years and included a variety of 'open book' options such as project-based assessments, practical formative simulations, essays and reflections. Such strategies facilitated student choice, formative feedback and dialogue, enabling students to learn in a scaffolded way. Given a choice, many students did not defer assessment and found they could perform equally well or improve their performances (QQI, 2020, p.112).

### **2. Equity is a priority; diverse requirements and perspectives must be considered**

Institutions have collaborated with professional services and students' unions to address equity and access issues affecting new assessment arrangements. Recognition of the diverse perspectives and requirements of different groups (e.g. staff, students, programme, institution, accreditation bodies) must continue. In addition, the needs of particular individuals and groups should be considered, such as students with disabilities, mature students, distance students, and students with caring responsibilities. AHEAD (2021) reported that more than 13,000 students annually require special arrangements to be made to facilitate exam-taking, and 86% of students with disabilities receive accommodations to support them in exams. Alternative assessment strategies are often more appropriate and effective for students with additional needs. Regarding staff, additional workload associated with continuous assessment approaches may require more time marking and providing feedback. How is such work recognised and rewarded, and how does this affect workload for staff employed on a part-time vs. full-time basis? Consultation with a wide range of students and staff is required so that diverse requirements and perspectives are considered, and equity is ensured to the greatest extent.

### **3. The role of the final examination is being re-appraised**

Exams have persisted as the leading mode of assessment in many programmes of higher education while a blend of other modes has developed. Exams afford the assessment of large numbers of students simultaneously, in a controlled environment designed to ensure academic integrity. Exams are appropriate in contexts where continuous assessment is not feasible, and can supplement other modes of assessment for practical reasons. But the use of written exams is being widely questioned. Few settings in professional life require someone to handwrite continuously for long periods under controlled conditions. If this skill is important, should it be included in programme learning outcomes? If not, does this raise questions about the integrity of our assessment design? And can one assessment format adequately assess wide-ranging learning outcomes?

### **4. Student partnership in assessment is essential**

The experiences of the pandemic have demonstrated that it is essential to engage students in assessment and include them as active partners. We should work with students to determine how they believe they can show they have achieved learning outcomes. Student ownership of assessment processes develops buy-in, enhances learning and supports academic integrity. Dialogue between students and staff would build shared understanding. How can we develop a shared understanding with students of assessment strategies and agreed ground rules for how staff and students proceed with it? As part of this dialogue, staff have a responsibility to revisit and redesign assessment strategies to make them as effective and equitable as possible, to support students in understanding the purpose of various assessment modes, and in approaching them effectively.

### **5. Changes in assessment must be accompanied by support for teaching staff**

Exams are perceived as a gold standard which has served as a robust form of assessment over many decades. Exams are also likely to have been the key mode by which those designing programmes have themselves been assessed. But recent experiences point towards changes in assessment practice which must be accompanied by support for teaching staff to design alternatives. Many staff have no such experience, and additionally, specific approaches need to be developed and tailored to different disciplines. The relationships between many programmes and professional bodies or regulatory agencies depend on assessment and accreditation, usually structured around exams. Teaching staff may require support to open dialogue with other bodies and agencies where possible, and to co-design robust alternatives to exams.



## 6. Ensuring academic integrity remains an ongoing challenge

The physical and verifiable presence of a student in the exam venue which is strictly controlled is designed to assess each individual student, to be fair to all students, and to ensure academic integrity. The continuing use of written exams in controlled conditions assumes that this is the optimal mode of assessment and that grading and agreement of results will be equally robust (Rust, 2015). Online assessment has raised concerns about the scope for plagiarism or help from other people or materials. Even when students appear on camera during assessments, some staff were concerned when they had not met students previously and did not know them. The experiences of distance education institutions over many decades can inform remote examination processes and other forms of remote assessment. We can also learn from successful and effective experiences during the pandemic.

## 7. Remote proctoring is contested

Remote online proctoring (also known as algorithmic proctoring) describes software products that 'watch' students complete exams or other assessments in an attempt to replicate on-campus invigilation conditions for students who are off-campus. The aim is to ensure academic integrity by preventing cheating and to try to detect 'cheating behaviour'. Proctoring software was used in several Irish higher education institutions during the pandemic. Student experiences of remote proctoring have been mixed. Literature shows that some students perform less well in these conditions, perhaps due to the control imposed or higher levels of anxiety experienced (Dawson, 2021). There is little evidence that remote online proctoring detects cheating and its value appears to be as a deterrent. Remote online proctoring has been found to cause high levels of stress to exam candidates, and to demonstrate racist and ableist bias in reporting the actions of specific students. It has also raised concerns regarding surveillance, privacy, the gathering of personal data by third party vendors and the transmission of that data across borders. All involved in assessment must be involved in considering questions regarding the use of remote proctoring.

## 8. Assessment should be built on a pedagogy of trust

Practitioners have highlighted that academic integrity ultimately relies on trust between those learning and those teaching and assessing. We should engender dialogue with students around what academic integrity means, and how assessment relates to their intended learning from modules and programmes. All forms of assessment are susceptible to issues of integrity. The outlawing of so-called 'essay mills' and the use of plagiarism detection software have been widely discussed. Experience internationally points towards the development of a culture of trust and pedagogies of trust with students, as total assessment security is unlikely to be achievable. We need to identify actions that can be taken across programmes to develop and sustain pedagogies of trust.

## 9. What we already knew is still very valuable

While many new challenges arose in the context of campus closures and the pandemic, there is much valuable and useful work already in existence to inform assessment design. The National Forum enhancement theme for 2016-18 focused

on Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning. This theme addressed particularly the empowerment and engagement of students in an authentic assessment approach. An over-emphasis on examination as a means of assessment was identified and a list of principles for assessment produced. We highlight the ongoing relevance and value of this work and encourage practitioners to revisit it using the links included at the end of this Insight.

## 10. The future of assessment requires collaborative, programmatic and institutional strategies and approaches

The experience of the pandemic has provided opportunities to reconsider the place of the exam and to develop authentic forms of assessment, constructively aligned with the purposes of modules and programmes, and using the affordances of digital technologies. While the pandemic has surfaced the vulnerabilities of systems reliant on high stakes terminal exams, issues of 'bunching' resurfaced as students attempted to complete clusters of assessments across modules with conflicting deadlines. Continuous assessment had increased in many programmes pre-pandemic, but also led to concerns about fragmentation. Key questions for consideration include: what assessment strategies are most appropriate to programme learning outcomes? Are these strategies mapped to individual modules and to module learning outcomes? Where are the gaps, and where is there over-assessment? Is each mode essential, in the context of limited access to physical spaces? How might we reinvent the Exams Office as the Assessment Office, recognising diverse forms of assessment as part of the organisational and cultural norms of a higher education institution?

## Conclusions

Higher education institutions were shocked into new ways of functioning by the pandemic. Initial responses understandably focused on any available means to implement existing assessment strategies. Where this was impossible, rapid redesign took place in extraordinary circumstances, with significant stress for staff and students. At some distance from that initial shock, it is important that we take time to focus on the most effective and equitable ways to assess students' learning.

Use of the physical campus space by large numbers of people simultaneously was the norm for most institutions. We face a changed higher education landscape, potentially for years to come. Future pandemics and/or emergencies such as extreme weather events are likely. Changing demographic patterns are influencing how learners want to engage with higher education. A greater variety of assessment types, in addition to its pedagogical advantages, may be less susceptible to the requirement to bring people together in physical venues, and help to future-proof our sector. The pandemic has evidenced the strengths and reliability –albeit with challenges– of alternatives to the traditional exam.

We suggest that the identified lessons shared here, as well as the unanswered questions, can support ongoing discussion and decision-making in institutions as we progress from the emergency phase into an uncertain future. It is an important moment to ask how we can best focus on assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning.



## References

Dawson, P. (2021). *The remote proctored exams dilemma*. Keynote for National Academic Integrity Network, QQI, 20 May 2021. <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Past-Events.aspx>

Rust, C. (2015). *Curriculum design and assessment*. Keynote, DIT/TU Dublin, 14 January 2015. <https://ttcshowcase.wordpress.com/keynote-presentation-prof-chris-rust/>

## Resources

### National Forum resources

- [ENHANCEMENT THEME Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning: Continuing the Debate and Creating a Focus](#)
- [Principles of Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning](#) (Insight)
- [Expanding our Understanding of Assessment and Feedback in Irish Higher Education](#) (Insight)
- [Students as Partners in Assessment](#) (Insight)
- [Profile of Assessment Practices in Irish Higher Education](#) (Insight)
- [Profile of Assessment Practices in Irish Higher Education](#) (Full Report)
- [Authentic Assessment in Irish Higher Education](#) (Insight)
- [Staff Use of Technology-Enhanced Assessment in Higher Education: A Systematic Review](#) (Insight)
- [Enabling Policies to Support Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning in Irish Higher Education](#) (Insight)
- [Enhancing Programme Approaches to Assessment and Feedback in Irish Higher Education](#) (Case studies, commentaries and tools)
- National Forum [Open Course in Programme Focussed Assessment](#), in partnership with Dundalk Institute of Technology and Trinity College Dublin
- [National Forum Seminar Series 2020-21](#)

### Response to Covid-19

- [10 Ways to Ensure Online Assessment is Accessible and Inclusive](#)
- [10 Points to Consider in Choosing Alternative Assessment Methods for the Online Environment](#)
- [Selecting Online Alternatives to Common Assessment Methods](#) (Insight)
- [Collaborative Resource Sharing](#) including resources on assessment

### Collaborative work with QQI

- [Let's Talk About Assessment: Exploring QQI's Green Paper on Assessment in Higher Education](#)
- [National Academic Integrity Week 2021](#)
- [Work-based assessment event series 2020](#)

## Additional resources

- [Students as Partners in Assessment \(SaPIA\)](#) by Teaching Enhancement Unit, Dublin City University
- Covid-19 Assessment Collection by Kay Sambell and Sally Brown
- [Guide to designing non-invigilated \(open-book\) exams with academic integrity](#) by BEL Faculty Education Team, University of Queensland
- NAIN Academic Integrity National Principles and Lexicon of Common Terms [https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Final\\_AcademicIntegrityLex\\_pagesv3.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Final_AcademicIntegrityLex_pagesv3.pdf)
- NAIN Academic Integrity Guidelines <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Academic%20Integrity%20Guidelines.pdf>