

Higher Education
Dialogues – Deep Dive

How can universities conduct online assessment that is secure and credible?

Spotlight report
December 2020

Around the world, the increasing use of online teaching and learning in higher education has created many new challenges not just for course design and delivery but also for assessment. This last issue was in fact the focus of the third event in our [Higher Education Dialogue Series](#) for 2020-21. More specifically, this online session examined the issue of academic integrity and what universities can do to conduct online assessment that is secure and credible.

Over 95 participants from nine countries participated in the event, which was moderated by Carolyn Westbrook, Test Development Researcher with the British Council. Expert input was provided by [Professor Michael Draper](#) from Swansea University, [Dr Irene Glendinning](#) from Coventry University and Gareth Crossman and Simon Bullock from the UK's [Quality Assurance Agency](#) (QAA).

Overall, the main aims of the session were to:

- identify key challenges to the integrity of online assessment
- highlight good practice in responding to such challenges
- provide participants with practical advice for improving the integrity of online assessment in their institutions.

Key themes from the session are summarised below.

The importance of academic integrity

As defined by Dr Glendinning, academic integrity refers to the extent to which academic work – including assessment – is honest, ethical, fair and trustworthy. Academic integrity impacts on academic quality and standards more generally; it is, thus, not possible to achieve high quality and standards in higher education unless academic integrity is also ensured. This has implications for all forms of student assessment, but the exponential increase in remote education in 2020 has created additional threats to online assessment in particular and called for new strategies to combat them. The centrality of this issue is reflected, for example, in the latest QAA (2020a) guidance on combating cheating in higher education, which has been revised to take into account online assessment contexts. It must also be noted that while current heightened interest in online assessment has been triggered by Covid-19, it is likely that, even when the current crisis is over, elevated (compared to previous years) levels of remote teaching and assessment will persist. A concern for the integrity of online assessment in higher education, therefore, is an issue of longer-term relevance and one that everyone within higher education is responsible for. Overall, as the QAA (2020b, p.1) has emphasised, the integrity of assessment matters because 'secure assessment practices provide stakeholders, including employers and professional bodies, with certainty that students have achieved the expected academic standards'.

Forms of cheating

Academic integrity is breached when regulations relating to teaching, learning and assessment are violated, accidentally or deliberately. Dr Glendinning highlighted various ways in which higher education students can threaten the integrity of assessments:

-
- *contract cheating* – when students employ a third-party (particularly the ‘essay mill’ supply industry) to complete academic work for them
 - *collusion* – when students collaborate in sharing resources that are used in a way that violates academic regulations
 - *plagiarism* – when students present as their own the ideas and words of others
 - *exam cheating* – when students violate regulations in the course of an examination.

Online assessment has created added opportunities for cheating, as noted in a report from Australia by Garcia (2020)¹. In the absence of the kinds of close supervision that conventional examinations entail, students have, for example, been able to communicate in order to share answers during online tests and copy and paste answers from internet sources.

Factors that increase threats to the integrity of online assessment

Professor Draper and Dr Glendinning highlighted various factors within higher education that increase threats to the integrity of assessment. These include:

- assessment formats that facilitate cheating, such as tasks which assess low-level outcomes through discrete answers
- a lack of action when academic dishonesty is suspected
- the lack of clear policies regarding academic integrity
- lack of adherence by staff to the relevant regulations and policies
- poor communications with students and staff about the required standards of academic conduct
- lack of support for students who are unfamiliar with online assessment
- inconsistent or unfair responses to breaches of academic integrity
- admissions strategies which accept students who are unlikely to cope with the demands of their course.

Increasing the integrity of online assessment

Various strategies were identified (including during the breakout room discussions) that universities can and are utilising to increase the integrity of online assessment. These include:

- implementing proctoring software – this is commercially designed to enable students to complete an assessment remotely while maintaining its integrity
- explicit strategic commitment to academic integrity at an institutional level through, for example, mission statements, leadership involvement, and the allocation of resources
- a consistent institutional approach to academic integrity in teaching, learning and assessment

¹ <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/gut-reports-four-times-more-cheating-as-exams-go-online-20200930-p560m3.html>

- investment in strategies for detecting breaches in academic integrity; according to the QAA (2020a, p.7), it is important to ‘develop organisation-wide detection methods’
- a system of sanctions that is robust but proportional and fair
- consultation with students, to ensure that their concerns about online assessment are understood and addressed
- on-going communication and training for staff and students
- reviewing the design of assessments to make it harder for students to cheat — for example, avoiding multiple-choice questions and using authentic assessments which require the application of knowledge; also, using more frequent low-stakes assessments rather than single summative assessments²
- enhancing the user experience by ensuring that online modes of assessment are :
 - compatible with the technologies students have access to
 - regulated by clear instructions for users and markers
 - inclusive (i.e. they do not disadvantage particular students)
 - not dependent on (or a measure of) students’ digital skills
 - accompanied by access to technical support.

In their advice on combating contact cheating, the QAA (2020a) summarise this range of strategies under four headings: education (for students and staff), reducing opportunities to cheat, detection and regulations/policies.

Take-away questions

Here are some take-away questions from this session for universities and staff who would like to create more secure online assessments for their students.

- a. What institutional policies and regulations are available in your workplace in regard to academic integrity?
- b. To what extent do these policies and regulations make specific reference to online assessment?
- c. What kinds of online assessments are currently administered in your department or across the university?
- d. What is known about the needs of staff and students in relation to online assessment and to what extent have these needs been addressed through appropriate support?
- e. What concerns, if any, exist within your department or university about the integrity of online assessment?
- f. What mechanisms exist in your organisation for detecting, ruling on, and administering sanctions in relation to breaches of academic integrity in online assessments?

² See Bearman et al. (2020) for a detailed discussion of redesigning exams for online delivery.

- g. Which strategies from this Higher Education Dialogue event might be feasibly applied in your institution to improve the integrity of online assessment?

Resources



Session recording



Speakers' slides

- Bearman, M., Dawson, P., O'Donnell, M., Tai, J. and Jorre de St Jorre, T. (2020) Ensuring academic integrity and assessment security with redesigned online delivery. Deakin University, Melbourne: <http://dteach.deakin.edu.au/2020/03/23/academic-integrity-online/>
- Muir, P., McAllister, E. and McIntyre, J. (2020). Remote proctoring: Ensuring assessment opportunities in a pandemic. Presentation at the New Directions Conference, October 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9K5uRP1vg4c&ab_channel=NewDirectionsEastAsia
- Peter Sharma Associates. Podcast on cheating and online assessment: <http://www.psa.eu.com/episode-11/>
- QAA (2020a). Contracting to cheat in higher education (2nd edition): <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education-2nd-edition.pdf>
- QAA (2020b). Assessing with integrity in digital delivery: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/assessing-with-integrity-in-digital-delivery.pdf?sfvrsn=d629cd81_6
- QAA (2020c). Questions to inform a toolkit for enhancing quality in a digital environment: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/questions-to-inform-a-toolkit-for-enhancing-quality-in-a-digital-environment.pdf>
- QQI (2020). The impact of COVID-19 modifications to teaching learning and assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education: <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/COVID-19--Updates-from-QQI.aspx>

© Copyright British Council 2020