

# Building Bridges to the Future: Assessment which Promotes Learning post coronavirus

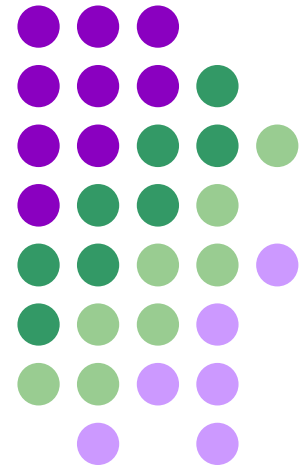
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# The world changed in Spring 2020 and so did university assessment!



- In Spring 2020, just about every university globally was faced with a requirement to move from a substantial diet of unseen, time-constrained, invigilated exams in person to methodologies that could be undertaken remotely.
- HEIs moved at breakneck speed to introduce new ways of assessing, aiming first and foremost to ensure that no student was disadvantaged in the current crisis conditions, while at the same time ensuring quality imperatives were met.
- Achieving this target was undertaken notwithstanding substantial challenges, with HEIs ensuring that the perfect did not become the enemy of the achievable.



# This has been a really tough time for all concerned with assessment



- **Students** had to battle with the new situation, often working from home with sub-optimal kit, poor broadband access, caring responsibilities and often nowhere peaceful to work as well as working beyond their comfort zones against a background of high anxiety about the health of family, friends and themselves;
- **University staff** faced often exactly the same conditions and **academics** were trying to move quickly to do the best by their students without any loss to the quality of the assessment process that assured their ultimate qualifications;
- **Quality assurance staff, technical staff and learning support colleagues** similarly were facing unprecedented demands on their time to help ‘keep the show on the road’;
- **Senior managers** were under huge pressure to manage the process under conditions that changed rapidly and unpredictably.



## Concerns were raised as we make these rapid changes including how could we:



- make exam alternative assessments equivalent in terms of authenticity, validity and reliability when developing reasonable alternatives, while maintaining the integrity of the assessment process?
- ensure consistency of marking and grading under these new conditions? and
- ensure all staff understand the transition and difficulties faced by students who are likely to be struggling with the practicalities of lockdown?

At this point we started working on how to help university staff cope with the crisis.



# These resources around assessment during times of coronavirus give more detail of our approaches:



- Brown, S. and Sambell, K (2020a) 'Contingency planning: exploring rapid alternatives to face to face assessment' Downloadable from <https://sally-brown.net/2020/03/13/assessment-alternatives-at-a-time-of-university-closures/> (accessed May 2020)
- Brown, S. and Sambell, K (2020b) Fifty tips for replacements for time-constrained, invigilated on-site exams Downloadable from <https://sally-brown.net/2020/04/02/kay-sambell-sally-brown-coronavirus-contingency-suggestions-for-replacing-on-site-exams/> (accessed May 2020)



# In our view there were five basic strategies programme teams could adopt short term:



1. **Defer or re-schedule deadlines:** allowing students more time to complete work, particularly if they themselves are ill. Deadlines for return of assessed work with feedback were also relaxed beyond the normal 21 working days where assessors are affected. This also meant in some cases that announced dates for awards were delayed by weeks/months.
2. **Assess only what has been taught *before* the time of the campus-based restrictions.** When it was difficult to reschedule some teaching with activities that were not possible to move online, universities sometimes chose to adjust assessment so that students were assessed only on material that had been delivered to date, so long as the course didn't include exams that were required by professional bodies as exemptions for professional exams.



# More strategies



3. Review remaining outstanding assessments and **waive further assessment** if it wasn't deemed absolutely essential, for example, by averaging grades for work already submitted, (not possible of course in professional courses where there are requirements for all learning outcomes to be demonstrably met).
4. **Change the mode of submission:** work that was formerly submitted in hard copy could now be submitted electronically, ideally through established university e-submission systems but also, in the final resort, via email to a named contact.
5. **Offer alternative assessment formats:** these were reasonable adjustments in times of crisis, which didn't exactly replicate the original assessments, but offered manageable alternatives in challenging times.



**So then we started thinking that we don't want to go back to how we did things before, do we?**



- **Unseen, time-constrained exams have been known to have their limitations for some time and this seems like a wonderful opportunity, not just to make changes in crisis conditions, but also to improve university assessment forever!**
- **Some things have had to be changed at great speed to cope with the restrictions of lockdown, but other changes have been more profound and could end up long term making assessment overall more authentic and fit-for-purpose**





**The RSA argue that there are transformational opportunities that can lead to lasting change for the good, coming out of the current crisis:**



**“As we think of ‘bridges to the future’, we are thinking too of the variety of measures and activities that have been put in place during the crisis response, from those which may be most promising signs of new ways of doing things to those we see as only ever temporary.” (RSA,2020). They suggest four potential post-crisis response measures:**

- **End: We’ve done these things to respond to immediate demands, but they are specific to the crisis;**
- **Restart: We’ve had to stop these things to focus on the crisis, but they need to be picked up in some form;**
- **Let go: We’ve been unable to stop doing things that were already or are now unfit for purpose;**
- **Amplify: We’ve been able to try these new things and they show some signs of promise for the future.**



# So what should future assessment be like, building on current work?



- Old-style traditional exams should be used more **rarely**, recognising that they have limited value as authentic assessment methodologies. A case will need to be made as to why these are used, rather than relying on them as the default methodology
- As part of techniques to **risk-assess and design for future crisis planning**, where these types of exams are used, questions will need to be designed in future that can be used in different scenarios, face-to-face on site, remotely managed or virtually.
- **The language of assessment questions** should be radically reviewed to focus less on recollection and memorisation of information, and more on its usage within specific contexts: we need to consider the ‘learning outcomes’ required by each exam question to promote more explaining, reasoning, applying and arguing, and less describing and listing (Hendry 2020).
- **Feedback**, especially generic collective guidance should become an integral part of new assessment processes.



# Further changes



- There should be a greater reliance on **reflection on practice** in examinations to ensure that students' alignment with the work being produced is authenticated.
- Greater use should be made of **asynchronous assessments**, since these are less susceptible to crisis contexts, and can cope better with students accessing exams in different time zones.
- Exam-based assessment should not result in **'sudden death'** of students' progress and life chances, with less reliance on performance on a single occasion.
- Off-site exam questions should have **clear notional workloads** (e.g. if 24 hours are allowed, a guidance note could indicate that students are expected to spend no more than three on the task) and prescribed word counts (otherwise the workload for the markers is likely to be unmanageable).
- Replacements to exams must be **inclusive** and allow for reasonable adjustments for students with special or additional needs, as indeed do current exams.



# Working in partnership with students to improve assessment



Many of these innovative approaches can offer greater possibilities for students to contribute to the assessment design, development and quality assurance processes, which Healey *et al* (2016) for example consider offers significant benefit to both staff and students. Students, we suggest, can in redesigning assessment post-Covid19, potentially:

- Help us **design briefings** that are clear, meaningful and recognizably authentic, thereby helping to avoid excessive numbers of queries from students who don't understand what is required.
- Advise us about **special difficulties** students might have complying with requirements, that might not be obvious to the assessment designers.
- Provide feedback on formats and approaches that require **technologies and applications** that students may not have at home (good broadband, exclusive use of laptops, the correct software, quiet places to work etc.).
- Advise on the extent that **feedback** could be helpful on replacement assessments.





# Conclusions

- It is likely that we will see further significant churn before the situation is fully resolved. That **things can never be the same** as formerly is unquestionable so it is more important than ever, to design assessments that minimise stress for students, boost their sense of authenticity and reduce the temptation for poor academic conduct.
- Now is a chance like never before to be **radical, innovative and powerful** in making changes borne of these difficult times that can ultimately improve assessments in universities for all stakeholders.
- We've advocated for many years the importance of making assessment **truly for learning**, and in making the most of the current situation to reengineer assessment for the future, we need to maintain this principle.
- We need to make them **manageable for staff and students**, while maintaining the assurance of standards, avoiding over-assessment wherever possible
- Our thinking continues about how we could build on these ideas in the longer term, to make **radical and substantial reconfigurations to assessment** in the future.





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These and other slides are available on my website at <http://sally-brown.net>

