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Adapting Assessment



A White Paper on introducing new assessment methods which are safe, reliable and inclusive.

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Abstract

There is little doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the way businesses operated overnight. Although organisations routinely create business continuity plans to mitigate against internal and external shocks that might stop operations in their tracks, the velocity and intensity of the pandemic left many realising the inadequacy of their plans. With very little time for analysis, scenario building or hypothesis testing, the reaction of businesses globally were varied but appeared to involve one or a combination of the following responses:

- Freeze - do nothing, it'll be over in a few weeks
- Delay - wait and see
- Act - recognise the risk and adapt.

In the context of international education, this paper examines the consequences of the first two options and the importance of minimising disruption to learning journeys and assessment. We look at the process of transitioning to remote learning and open book assessment and present a case study on the lessons learned during this process, designed to contribute to the body of evidence and experience in adapting assessments.

We also provide recommendations which will to help to enable leaders, government and policymakers across the awarding sector to plan effectively for future disruption.

The impact on international education systems

Unfortunately for many the 'do-nothing' option has proved ruinous, and at the point of realising the consequences of this approach, it was often too late to deploy the act strategy. Some larger companies were able to delay and 'wait and see' as the government furlough scheme, loan schemes and company cash reserves could allow them some headroom to take their time to decide their next move. In a hyper-volatile situation, with customers, investors and boards demanding the reassurance of a firm position, this strategy had negative implications on brand reputation and customer confidence. Business leaders know that brands are forged by how well they respond publicly to a crisis, and their ability to innovate under pressure. Many SME compaines with limited cash reserves and restricted financial firepower struggled to access government loan schemes and recognised quickly that finding a new way to continue doing business was the most assured route to maintaining business continuity.

In the global education and skill sector there was a mixed response, some education institutions have had to close their doors and have been unable to adapt succesfully to remote delivery, whilst others have been able to quickly remodel and change smoothly to remote delivery to ensure students continue on track. The UNESCO Global Education Coalition documented that '58 out of 84 surveyed countries had postponed or rescheduled exams, 23 introduced alternative methods such as online or home-based testing, 22 maintained exams while in 11 countries, they were cancelled altogether'[1]. It remains to be seen how far reaching the implications of closure, postponement and cancellation will be on the education of this 'Covid-19 generation' of students. At the peak of the pandemic 1.5 billion students were locked out of classrooms.



[1] <https://en.unesco.org/news/exams-and-assessments-covid-19-crisis-fairness-centre>

The vulnerable populations of developing countries were hit especially hard. Replacing in-person teaching with online learning has proved challenging enough in rich countries. In Germany, a recent study found that time spent on schoolwork was halved from 7.4 hours per day to only 3.6 hours. With time spent watching TV, gaming and using social media increasing to 5.2 hours per day. More than a third of students studied for less than 2 hours per day.[2] In the UK, UCL's Institute of Education estimates that children have been spending an average of only 2.5 hours a day on schoolwork, with 71% of state school children receiving no more than one online lesson a day[3]. Whilst the technology exists to transition lessons online, maintaining engagement, mentoring and momentum has been a real challenge.

Although private sector innovation has driven steep increases in connectivity across the developing world, around 3.8 billion people have no access to the internet, making access to in-person education vital. Protracted school closures look set to turn back the clock on gains made in gender equality. For many households across the developing world, lockdowns have seen incomes and savings disappear. Families can no longer afford school fees, and where they can, it is likely that boys will be prioritized. Research from The Malala Fund reveals the pandemic will have lasting effects for the most marginalised girls and estimates that 20 million more secondary school-aged girls could remain out of school after the medical emergency has passed[4].

Educating girls is vitally important for breaking the cycle of gender inequality, as well as eradicating sexual abuse and child marriage in high prevalence countries. Before Covid-19, analysis suggested that global efforts by 2030 would lead to gains in well-being for populations reaching more than \$500 billion annually. Globally, the benefits of lower under-five mortality and malnutrition were estimated to reach more than \$90 billion annually by 2030[5].

Educated girls are safer, healthier, more financially secure and experience less discrimination. The economic consequences of disrupted education are likely to filter through to the labour market, holding back innovation and productivity as well as lifetime spending, a particular problem for poorer households. Defining the economic consequences of schools and college closures is difficult and controversial, but if we assume that in the UK someone might earn £1.2 million over their lifetime, a fall of just 2% represents a loss of £24,000, or £24 billion in total for every million young people who are currently missing out[6].

Students impacted by closures today will make up around 25% to 30% of the workforce in 10-15 years' time. Research from the OECD finds that the learning losses so far are the equivalent to missing one-third of a school year on average. The long-term economic costs range from \$504 billion in South Africa, to \$14.2 trillion in the US, to \$15.5 trillion in China.

[2] University of Munich, IFO Centre for the Economics of Education

[3] <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research>

[4] <https://malala.org/newsroom/archive/malala-fund-releases-report-girls-education-covid-19>

[5] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage>

[6] <https://iea.org.uk/school-closures-carry-a-heavy-economic-price/>

Deciding on a way forward in a crisis

At ABE Global we were clear that we had to ensure students could continue with their education and we had to find solutions that would work across different regions, all were experiencing various lockdown restrictions at different times.

Our mission is to empower people to transform their lives and communities through gaining high-quality, business, management and entrepreneurial skills. This mission remained a focal point for ABE and helped to frame our decisions. It is important that a mission statement is an authentic representation of the purpose and values of an organisation, and that it acts as a touchstone for decision making, and the allocation of resource and capital under normal conditions. Companies which are not mission-driven are likely to have experienced a chaotic reaction to Covid-19. The other decision-making tool that proved valuable in this instance was the application of second and third order thinking, the importance of which is described further on in this paper.

We had to quickly work out how we could change from having more than 11,000 students globally sitting in exam halls in June to thousand of students having to stay at home under social distancing rules.

Delaying exams for our markets was not an option we wanted to pursue. In the first instance, our delivery partners rely on having three opportunities per year to assess students and guide them through their qualifications, delaying would have had a serious detrimental effect on the financial stability of the many private sector schools and institutions we work with, with many smaller colleges teetering on the brink of insolvency, as well as having a catastrophic impact on the communities and life chances of many students. Forward integration was key, keeping the supply chain moving was a driving factor for the success of our organisation and our partners.



Deciding on the new assessment method needed to be rapid, but robust, this is where the importance of our network really came into sharp relief.

Having a good network of knowledgeable experts globally, alongside a widely experienced academic team was essential to ABE making the right decisions and implementing them at a fast pace. In under two weeks we had commissioned the writing of a series of Open-Book Exams (OBE's) these could be taken at home and would allow students the opportunity to be assessed via a valid 'tried and tested' method, we were not alone in this adaptation as many UK universities recognised the importance of continuing to deliver and assess and opted for similar methods. As discussed above the UNESCO Global Education Coalition highlighted that out of 84 surveyed countries, 23 introduced alternative methods, so it is clear for many organisations adaptation was the only option to avoid a lost generation of students.

Adapting the method was just one part of the complex eco-system. We needed to ask ourselves a number of questions:

- a) How could we ensure this short notice adaptation would not disadvantage students and centres?
- b) How would we communicate this change to create buy-in from our customers?
- c) How would we maintain quality and compliance and ensure robust and valid assessment?

In the following pages we outline how we answered these important questions and the obstacles we faced. At the point where we had already commissioned the writing of our adapted exams, Ofqual (The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, which regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments in England) had announced the launch of the Extraordinary Regulatory Framework (ERF).

This helpfully allowed for short notice adaptation and came with a series of webinars supported by the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) and pro forma documents to track and monitor the emergency changes awarding organisations needed to make. Ofqual offered a number of options which awarding organisation could consider under the ERF in relation to the summer 2020 examinations, they could: calculate grades, adapt assessments or delay.

Safeguarding and calculated grades

At ABE we had already started our adaptation, we did not deviate from this strategy even when the option to calculate grades was presented. Whilst calculating grades would have saved the cost of developing, marking and moderating the adapted assessments we did not feel it was the right solution for our markets and hindsight would suggest it was not the right solution for any markets. We work in some regions where Transparency International [1] has reported there is a high risk or history of corruption, bribery and exploitation. We did not consider adopting a calculated grades approach in these settings viable or safe

At ABE we are well aware that such an approach could place young people, particularly young women, in dangerous situations, leading to the possibility of exploitation in return for higher grades, we made this position absolutely clear to the regulatory and the Department for Education. In an international setting, particularly in developing countries, the maturity of the education market and local legal and regulatory challenges needed to be fully considered as well as the safety to students in the application of this approach. Our extensive experience in these markets is that the level of audit trail that would have been required for some qualifications to ensure that calculated grades were valid and reliable and ultimately trusted by end users was extremely difficult to achieve. The capacity for malpractice, malfeasance and exploitation is greatly heightened in some regions (not all) with reliance on local marking and therefore was not an option we considered. Delaying was never part of our strategy as keeping our customers serviced with assessments to keep the supply chain moving was our main focus.

[7] <https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb/global/global-corruption-barometer-2017>



Adaptation and avoiding disadvantage

The launch of the ERF helped us maintain quality and compliance and gave us the freedom and flexibilities to act at pace, although we were still concerned about the wider disadvantage that could possibly be posed to students by the change in method and the impact of the pandemic, so we decided to implement a 'No Detriment Policy'.

This policy recognised the short notice change to assessment method and the disruptions to the students learning and as such allowed for a 'safety net'. We guaranteed that we would compare all results with previous unit performance data (data which we had collected over the last 3 years, since the start of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF)). If a unit under-performed we would consider that this could be due to the short notice change in methodology and suggest an uplift of grades to mirror the performance curve 'typical' to that unit, this formed part of our assessment board agenda, under the stewardship of the Chief Assessor and a regulatory oversight committee.

This was a positive policy so if students performed better than the 'typical' performance curve they were not downgraded. The introduction of this policy allowed for confidence to remain and emphasised to students and centres that we had fully factored the consequences of changing methodology late in the day. We did not need to implement this policy in the end, but having it ensured customer confidence.

We needed to consider all outcomes but foremost in our minds was the student experience and the need to make certain there was no disadvantage, whilst maintaining quality and compliance arrangements.



No One Left Behind

By far the largest piece to this puzzle was the communications strategy, we had implemented large scale changes and in some of our regions an open-book assessment was an unfamiliar concept. Building trust and confidence around our decision to change methods was imperative, communicating the benefits of such a change and convincing our stakeholders they were necessary to keep the supply chain moving forwards were foremost in our minds.

We adopted a forward integration approach where we purposely needed to get closer to our students and centres and adopt a narrative of togetherness where we could ensure that the 'no one left behind' campaign was truly just that. Further consequences of delaying the educational journey would be the talent gaps that would appear in the very communities and countries which would need skilled entrepreneurs and leaders to help aid economic recovery and create jobs.

We launched our 'no one left behind' campaign, which was run over a series of weeks across more than 40 countries. The campaign was pushed out via all social media platforms and was designed to reassure students and centres that we were mindful of the consequences of delaying assessment and had therefore opted to adapt to keep them on track.

Alongside the 'no one left behind' campaign our senior executive team held a number of key stakeholders zoom meetings. The meetings were designed to inform our heads of centre about the adaptation and how it was necessary to keep the supply chain moving and students progressing.

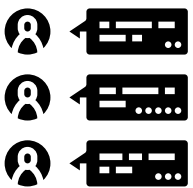
We expressed the importance of not losing valuable time in gaining skills and qualifications and how those very skills would help rebuild economies during and after the pandemic had passed. The success of this campaign was due to the fact that we deployed a 'repetitive post' tactic to ensure everyone who could be reached would be reached. For the duration of our assessment booking window we posted twice a day and over the weekends and with every second or third post being a reinforcement of the no one left behind message.

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Altogether the campaign reached around 1.3 million people. The campaign was warmly received and many of our centres expressed their gratitude for our rapid response. We continued with the campaign after the assessment window closed and used the genuine positive messaging we received from centres and students to continue the message of 'no one left behind'. Without the assessment adaptations some centres in remote regions just would not have survived and those students would have lost out on a chance to recognise their potential. Other centres mirrored our adaptation for their Degree level courses and a network of sharing and support became an essential part of our wider eco-system. Central to the success of our fast-paced adaptation were these 4 principles:



Invoke your company mission.



Understand your customers and their challenges (delivery partners and students). Use all of your touchpoints to capture data and co-ordinate groups and feedback loops.



Act fast!
Do not ignore second and third order consequences.



Communicate, strongly, positively and frequently, both internally and externally. Don't ignore the basic need for constant information and reassurance.

Benefits and constraints of the Open Book Exam (OBE)

OBE's provide a valid and fair assessment of unit learning outcomes and assessment criteria. They come in various guises, some are released with 24 to 72 hours to complete and submit, other are released and submitted within 2 weeks and some allow 4 to 6 weeks completion, the strategy really is dependent on the individual awarding organisation's rationale that best fits the units being assessed, the type of qualification and the requirements of any higher education institutions or employers.

Unlike timed exams OBE allow for research and greater application and synthesis, that is not to discredit timed exams, they are proven to be a very valid and repeatable methods of assessment and test the recall memory knowledge of a student, both methods will test the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit.

In a pandemic situation the only solution to maintaining timed exams was to use an online assessment and proctoring, some universities opted for this with a mixed response from students, mainly due to not having any practice time to get familiar with the proctoring software. At ABE, many of our regions experience intermittent internet and power cuts and many students do not own their own laptops so proctored exams were not an inclusive option. The OBE offered a solution, students could hand write their exams if they did not have the technology and they could study and research at home.

The downside of any type of open book assessment is the risk of plagiarism, collusion and ghost writing, this paper is not looking to argue the point for OBE validity verses invigilated exams. At ABE we recognise the risks of this type of assessment and have effectively mitigated by ensuring this type of assessment is scrutinised by a combination of anti-plagiarism software and marker vigilance, we encourage our centres to also use the software and have found that through education and communication the instances of failure by this type of cheating has dropped from, a 19% instance of academic malpractice (in June 2019) to an average of 9% across the December 2019 to June 2020 assessment windows.

With the rapid growth in Artificial Intelligence (AI) products and the constant development of assessment software tools the arguments for open book assessments not being as robust and valid as timed exams are diminishing and the benefits of research, application and synthesis of answers are now more widely recognised and valued.

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The UN reported in their policy brief: Education during Covid-19 and beyond[8] that studies project that working-hour losses will represent up to 400 million full-time jobs, the link between education and employability must get stronger, but to do that we need to ensure that students are not permanently dropping out of education. UN Secretary-General warns of an education catastrophe, pointing to UNESCO estimate of 24 million learners at risk of dropping out[9].

UNESCO data shows that nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries, 94% of the world's student population, were affected by the closure of educational institutions at the peak of the crisis, a figure that stands at 1 billion today. As many as 100 countries have yet to announce a date for schools to reopen.

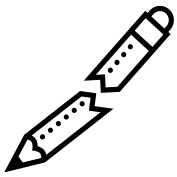
The Policy Brief points to UNESCO's projections whereby 24 million learners from pre-primary to tertiary education risk not finding their way back to their studies in 2020 following the COVID-19-induced closures. The largest share of learners at risk, 5.9 million, live in South and West Asia. Another 5.3 million students at risk are in sub-Saharan Africa. Both regions faced severe educational challenges even before the pandemic, which is likely to worsen their situation considerably. These studies emphasize the need for avoiding delay and working to find a way to reach learners to ensure they do not drop out of education for good.

Whilst online learning is generally heralded as a disruptive force, there is still a long way to go. Only 2% of the world's learning content and activity is digitised. The pandemic has elucidated the inequalities in access to broadband internet and computers. Finding solutions that can also circumvent the need for strong internet connectivity and computers is another reason why the open book assessment is a useful tool and universally applicable exam method.



[8] https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

[9] <https://en.unesco.org/news/secretary-general-warns-education-catastrophe-pointing-unesco-estimate-24-million-learners-0>



24 million

The number of learners at risk of permanently dropping out of education.



94%

The percentage of the world's student population affected by lockdowns.



2%

Going into the pandemic, only 2% of the world's learning was digitalised, despite technology-enhanced learning being available for more than a decade.



3.8 billion

The number of people globally who have no access to the internet.



2.5 hours

Since school closures began in the UK, children have typically been spending less than 2.5 hours per day learning.



-£24,000

Potential average loss in lifetime earnings for each young person who has missed out on learning so far (UK).



Lessons learned

It is clear from the recent experience in the UK that the option to calculate grades did not run smoothly and resulted in thousands of students feeling disadvantaged, distressed and confused. The UK government had to U-turn on decisions and confidence in the government's expertise in education and assessment is currently very low. How they tackle the second and third order effects of the pandemic on students' educational journeys is critical.

Currently there have been very few changes announced to 2021 summer examinations (for General Qualifications (GQ's), with only minor changes to some of the content. For Vocational Technical Qualifications (VTQ's) a consultation for the Extended ERF is underway, this will allow awarding organisations to continue adapting assessment where applicable, it does not currently cover GQ's, suggesting no contingency plans are in place as yet should traditional summer 2021 exams not be able to go ahead. With no vaccine and no guarantee of when the pandemic will end, this is a high-risk 'wait and see' strategy for GQ's and with the recent impact of the calculated grades fiasco, still raw for many, it is deeply concerning.

The opposition has suggested delaying the summer 2021 GQ exams by a few months to allow for more teaching time, this is also a high-risk strategy and shows a lack of second and third order thinking, the consequence of which could potentially disrupt the educational supply chain for years to come.

Internal lessons learned

Making any changes at pace it will be inevitable that mistakes will happen, to minimise this risk we made sure we engaged all teams to input into how the new adapted assessments would be processed and handled.

The adapted method had workload implications affecting internal staff processing time and our academic marking team. This, coupled with remote working and the stress of trying to cope with the issues the pandemic presented, meant there was a need for very clear and frequent communications. Our team quickly adapted to the remote working model and embraced the use of 'Teams' keeping processes and communications on track.

We made changes to our timelines to ensure results dates could be honoured and, working with our network of sector experts, we devised a risk-based sample approach to our anti-plagiarism processes. That change made the processing of this new method robust and feasible and it is a feature we are carrying forward.

We relied heavily on the goodwill of our freelance academic team, who occasionally at short notice, had changes thrust upon them and managed with little problem, for which we made sure our gratitude was felt.

We cannot emphasise the importance of our all network working towards one mission, this was a critical factor in the successful implementation of our adapted assessment



Recommendations

The government must identify and scale the best practice examples which have emerged in the sector.

There is no time for randomised trials or pure scientific modelling. The government now needs to look to the success stories of the summer 2020 series and draw learning from those. There is time to adapt assessments and if this means that exam boards need government subsidy to commission this work then this would be a better use of resource than the fall-out from a 'wait and see' strategy or a 'delay' strategy.

The government must work directly with education sector professional membership bodies and associations to convene an Advisory Panel.

The 'use cases' are out there for government to access and with the help of education sector professional bodies and associations, an advisory panel could quickly be deployed to ensure the right choices are made for summer 2021, it's the government's duty to safeguard against the next cohort of the 'Covid-19 generation' of students not being further disadvantaged. Consulting with a broader range of stakeholders and sectors rather than just the regulators will ensure solutions are valid and achievable.



Conclusions

In this paper we have shared how deploying an 'act and adapt' strategy to the situation we found ourselves in back in March 2020 has been hugely successful, the purpose has not been to publicly congratulate ourselves but to share our experiences with similar organisations in the education and skills sector. Whilst we are happy that our students and centres were supported and not disadvantaged, we are now focused on what will be a critical 12 to 18 months, and we must ensure that we continue to prioritise forward integration and closely monitor the challenges our markets are facing. For example, this may require us to engage directly with our students if centres remain closed or offer centres more direct support with remote teaching delivery.

We have seen that:

- a) markets react best to decisiveness when everything around them is unpredictable and our markets have confirmed this through their gratitude, feedback and support for ABE.
- b) strong and clear communications are essential for the success of any change strategy the 'no one left behind' campaign gave us a laser focus; it was a useful shorthand for decisions and focusing energy efficiently
- c) a network of experts and internal and external stakeholders is key to implementing rapid and successful change, building a strong team and trusting their decisions.
- d) building a sense of support and community, taking people with you and ensuring no one is left behind has been instrumental in the success and acceptance of the changes.

To conclude, adopting a 'wait and see' approach or to try and second guess what will happen with Covid-19 is not a recommendable option. Acceptance of change and finding the opportunities that arise from change has been the most positive outcome of this terrible global medical emergency.

Sharing positive experience and learning from emerging best practice is the most proactive way to tackle this situation and secure the future of education and skills organisations and ultimately their end users, the students.



About our research

ABE undertakes and commissions independent research, white papers and industry reports which are available to download for free from our website.

Our research and campaigns are designed to address key issues in contemporary education, development and business across a range of international settings. We aim to influence public policy development and promote best practice in business and education communities around the world.

About ABE

ABE is a not-for-profit skills development specialist and a regulated awarding organisation providing internationally recognised qualifications in the fields of business, entrepreneurship and employability.

Over the course of five decades we have built a network of delivery partners across four continents. Our partners offer ABE courses from Key Stage 3 to Level 6. Together we develop the skills that support businesses, empower individuals, reduce gender inequality and promote prosperity. Since we started around 1.5-million people globally have gained an ABE professional qualification.

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ABE invites comments on the proposals set out in this White Paper by contacting info@abeuk.com

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