



Evolution, not revolution

A steady enthusiasm for e-assessment was in evidence at a major conference on the subject. Steve Smethurst gauged delegates' opinions

Delegates at the e-Assessment Question conference lived up to its title by asking some tough ones. "I want to ask the panel what I should say to my physics teacher," said one. "He came to complain about 'Mickey Mouse experimentation' on his students. His argument was that there are tried and tested methods for assessing physics knowledge – why change them for electronic versions that aren't tried and tested?"

Another delegate – a former physics teacher – was quick to follow up with a question about Greek letters. "They're used all the time in physics, but they're not on the keyboard," he said.

A third pointed out that one of the biggest advantages of e-assessment – the quantity and quality of data it produces – is also its biggest drawback. "Is there the capacity within the teaching profession to use this to the full?" he wondered.

Overcoming the barriers to e-assessment clearly isn't going to be easy. That's probably why the e-Assessment Question annual conference and exhibition, held in London

in March, has proved so popular. Now in its fifth year, the two-day event aims to help answer questions just like those posed by the audience. Among those who attended were senior managers at schools, colleges and training providers, heads of curriculum development, ICT co-ordinators, school leaders, e-learning specialists, and managers at awarding bodies, government agencies and local authorities.

Kathleen Tattersall, chair of the IEA, was one of several high-profile speakers at a forum on developing an e-assessment strategy. It is important to remind people that e-assessment is not change for change's sake, she reminded the audience. "If the exam system doesn't move forward it will lose public confidence as it will be out of joint with what's happening in schools. We'll have pupils who haven't picked up a pen for five years battling with an exam system that hasn't changed for 30 years."

Stuart Jones, assistant director of knowledge systems at Becta, moved to reassure delegates, saying his organisation

approached the issue as educationalists looking to use technology, and not the other way round. "We're still on the bottom part of the adoption curve," he said, "but as we see what the early adopters are finding, we can use that to convince the rest using case studies and best practice."

Lack of confidence

Jones suggested that much of the concern around e-assessment was caused by a lack of confidence. Most teachers use a spreadsheet for attendance and marking, he said, but they are less adept at extracting the rich intelligence from their management information system. "We're trying to address that with Becta's self-review framework," he said.

He added that teachers need confidence to use the technology, something that pupils have in abundance. "It's like the old cliché of the kid teaching dad how to work the video recorder," he said.

Another panellist, Martyn Ware, business manager for computer-assisted assessment at the Scottish Qualifications Authority, said

that the only way to introduce the concept of e-assessment to older assessors who may not be as IT-literate as younger colleagues, was "gently".

"Ideally, it should be done through material in their subject that is introduced by colleagues who have used it. They need to understand how it can benefit them and their learners."

For Tattersall, a major step forward would be more training on assessment in initial teacher training programmes. "We need to embed assessment as part of teaching – and all assessment, not just e-assessment. We also need more research to ascertain which methods of delivery are reliable, fit for purpose and offer value for money."

However, it's not only teachers and assessors who are sceptical. Ware added that when he had been talking to learners in Scottish secondary schools, even they were not totally sold on e-assessment.

"One told me that he found inspiration easier to come by when staring at a blank page rather than a computer screen; another that she would encourage it for learning, but not for exams. We can't assume it's what all learners want," he said.

This was supported by delegate Mike Docker, director of information, communication and learning technology, at the Sixth Form College, Farnborough. He told MTG: "We ran a survey recently and most of our students were happy to do some of their exams on screen. But there was a significant minority who were more comfortable with the traditional ways of testing, especially in subject areas where they have a lot of stimulus material to read."

He also warned that rules on security can be "loosely laid out", but this was not insurmountable. He had resorted to writing a program he christened "Invigilator-pro", which logged all the students' key strokes, took regular screenshots and captured all of the network traffic to and from their workstation.

However, another delegate, Stuart Dethick, progression tutor at Newark College, stressed the upsides. He has seen e-assessment brought in for electricians, sports students and hairdressers.

"We've increased our pass rate in key skills by 20 per cent in 12 months," he said, "and that's in no small way thanks to online testing. From the learners' point of view, they can sit at a computer they've sat at before, it's comfortable for them."

He added: "We did an assessment with some adult learners about a month ago. A woman came in who'd never used a computer before. We showed her how to use the mouse to point and click – she took the test and passed."

Dethick also stressed that e-assessment helps candidates with physical disabilities. "We have a Royal National Institute of the Blind unit in the college, and have had people who've needed a large screen, we've had

wheelchair users who use an adapted desk or an adapted mouse – and routinely people who need screen-readers or people to do the keying for them. We have overcome any difficulties relatively easily."

The problems Newark has had to overcome include losing all power in a thunderstorm – although fortunately no work was lost – and inexperienced invigilators.

"They were very fearful about the procedure, especially if something went wrong," noted Dethick. "It was usually around someone keying in the wrong number to get logged in, which would cause them a bit of a panic. After training, they are much more comfortable."

However, as Ware pointed out, "quality assurance is key to the integrity and currency of any assessment". There are a number of ways e-assessment can strengthen quality assurance. These include provision of assessments from a central bank rather than those developed by individual teachers, and automatic marking, where possible, to ensure consistency.

Immediate feedback

He also said the potential of technology to support formative and adaptive assessment is strong, particularly the ability to mark learners' responses automatically and provide them with immediate feedback.

However, he warned that e-assessment is not a panacea for either assessment or quality assurance. The good news is that it can bring significant benefits when combined effectively with more conventional forms of teaching, learning and assessment.

Besides, with so many pupils now owning MP3 players, visiting MySpace and using wikis, the climate is changing. Ware said that against this background the SQA is exploring the use of wikis and blogs to support the summative assessment of groupwork.

"It is in its early stages but we believe that it has potential to enhance the validity and reliability of this type of assessment. The challenge is to do so in a way that maintains the integrity and standard of the assessment and that recognises that by no means all learners live through these technologies."

Tattersall concurred: "The pen is virtually redundant. However, our biggest challenge is not to lose richness. If we reduce everything to simplistic multiple-choice questions you lose an awful lot. I want more research and development to come up with more sophisticated testing techniques."

Other speakers and exhibitors at the conference were keen to stress that such research and development is under way. The consensus was that e-assessment is slowly but surely meeting all the challenges put in its way – and that it will eventually become the norm rather than the exception. But it's a process of evolution rather than revolution. ■

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One student said she would encourage e-assessment for learning but not exams – we can't assume it's what all learners want

