Reflections on COVID-19 and Academic Integrity

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"You don't have to change anything because you're already online!" squealed my stepmother. My colleagues at non-digital institutions expressed similar sentiments. They were right on the one hand; we did not have to transition from face-to-face lectures, but could not have been more wrong on the other hand. Yes, our course materials are online and yes, many of our exams are taken on computers, but the vast majority of these exams have always been invigilated in person. Our online exams are similar in content and structure to paper exams given by instructors at brick-and-mortar institutions, so when the invigilation centres shut down, faculty were faced with hundreds of students at once needing alternatives to invigilated exams. Using e-proctoring software, creating take-home exams or oral exams, and skipping the final exam entirely were some of the suggestions.

One of the reasons for invigilated exams at my institution is that it is the only assessment in which learners are required to show government identification to ensure that the person doing the work is the person who registered in the course. All other assessments are uploaded to the learning management system, with few checks for originality. This means that it is difficult to determine if assignments are written by the learner's friends, parents, or via paid contract cheating. Invigilated final exams make it much more likely that learners are doing their own work. Furthermore, final exams in psychology (my field) examine students' understanding of the breadth of a course and are weighted heavily to reflect this.

When the pandemic hit, the Administration told us that the preferred alternative was to use e-proctoring software to invigilate students taking their exams at home using their home computers. The University had been offering e-proctoring on a voluntary basis for a few years, so many students accepted this alternative. However, many issues precluded other students from using this remote invigilation service. Some learners did not have cameras on their computers, or their cameras were not working. At least one student living abroad did not have access to e-proctoring software due to government restrictions. Other students who used to take their exams at one of the free university invigilation centres (now closed), could not afford the fee for e-proctoring. Some could not find a quiet space in which to take the exam because their family members were working from home, and/or because they had to take care of young children who would walk into the testing room. Internet connection was not stable in some areas in which our learners lived, and some did not pay for Internet for the device that would be compatible with e-proctoring software. (For example, tablets are not compatible with the e-proctoring software

used.) After a short while, dates for e-proctoring got booked up, and students could not get appointments before their contract deadlines approached.

Having discussed the barriers, I must say that some learners went to extraordinary lengths to complete their courses using e-proctoring software. Anecdotal evidence revealed that some scheduled their exams in the middle of the night, after their children went to bed and the house was quiet. Others had their spouses take the children away for the weekend so they could concentrate on studying and taking the exam.

When learners were unable to take exams via e-proctoring, requests started coming in for them to be able to skip the final exam and just use their course marks. Their rationale for this was that some of their other instructors were allowing this. However, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers and the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfers approve most of my courses for transfer credit. This means my courses had been pre-approved as being equivalent to the same courses taken at other institutions in these provinces. I could not guarantee that letting some students skip the final exam would allow the courses to continue receiving transfer credit, or that individual students would receive transfer credit.

Take-home exams were another common request. Academic integrity issues with this included the fact that students could easily send the exam(s) to one another, with little to prevent this activity. Unlike some brick-and-mortar institutions, Athabasca University did not have a Spring or Summer break in which to launch changes. New assessments had to be created almost instantly. How many different versions of a take-home exam did I need to create for each course? Because of continuous enrolment (learners can start a course on the first day of any month), I had already created three to four versions of the final exam plus four to five quizzes for each of my courses. In addition, with so many questions, answers, and assignments from my courses being posted onto websites providing "study resources", it was difficult to generate new questions. Furthermore, I had already created questions for a test bank for a Canadian version of a textbook I had co-authored. My ideas for original questions were exhausted! Furthermore, how would I know if the new take-home exams were equivalent in difficulty to the invigilated exams that I had been giving students for years? Were students being treated equitably if some took invigilated exams while others took take-home ones? Thanks to help from a colleague, I learned how to use security features for PDFs to help prevent test takers from copying the questions. At first, I also added watermarks with the student's name to minimize their motivation to put the exam online. However, after a while I found the volume of students made this too difficult to do each time.

One suggestion for preventing academic misconduct in take-home exams was to put a time limit on them. One of our professional staff agreed to monitor learners by proxy. I requested data on the average length of time students took to complete my invigilated exams and used that to guide how much time the staff member should allow students to have access to their exam. Once that

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time was up, the staff member removed the exam. The hope was that the time limit would prevent students from looking up answers and from downloading the exam onto their computer to be able to send it to other students or upload it online. I do not know whether that was successful.

Because there are hundreds of students who take many of my courses each year, I have 12 tutors who mark course assignments and exams. I had to contact each of them to find out what they were willing and able to do. Would the take-home exams take longer to mark? If so, and assuming they were paid for their time, did they have the time to do the extra work? If some learners took oral exams, did the tutors have the time to give those and mark them? Did the institution have the money to cover these extra costs? I had no rubric for oral exams; would tutors mark them reliably? I had no evidence to substantiate whether oral exams were equivalent in difficulty and breadth to the invigilated final exams. Would it be inequitable if some students took oral exams and others took written ones?

In sum, although I work at an institution that uses online course delivery, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic created many sudden challenges related to academic integrity. Protecting the security of exams while upholding academic rigour was a challenge. I will not recall this period of time fondly. Instead, I look forward to when I can focus on helping students learn, and creating interesting and educational course materials. More time for research would be nice, too. Wear a mask, everyone!