ACCA's remote invigilation journey

We have been exploring remote invigilation for some time. While the technology has improved enormously over the years, before Covid-19, we were monitoring its potential future use, rather than actively looking to change delivery from our center-based exams. We have been adopting technology in our exams for some years, actively transitioning all exams to computer-based (CBE) to better test application of knowledge. Before the pandemic, that roll-out had been our focus.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic changed that. We first felt the impact of the pandemic when China went into lockdown in February and we had to cancel local center exams in March. This was distressing for students who had been studying towards the session as they had to postpone to the next session. Later in March, countries across Europe went into lockdown and we then realized that our June exam session was at risk.

So it was late March that we escalated our investigations into remote invigilation to explore whether it could be an option for ACCA students.

Learning from others
Academic institutions around the world were very quick to move to online exams, using different forms of remote invigilation and their learnings were very useful.

A major concern for anyone looking to introduce remote invigilation is how to make sure there are no opportunities to cheat and while we were greatly reassured from the academic experience that rigor and the protection of exam content can be much higher than perceived, this still had a major impact on our final solution design.

Academics also highlighted that as the responsibility of setting up for an exam moves from the organization to the student, this can be problematic and strong, clear communications are necessary. This has been true of our experience. We have been able to move fast on remote invigilation as it was on our roadmap and most of our exams are already available as CBE.
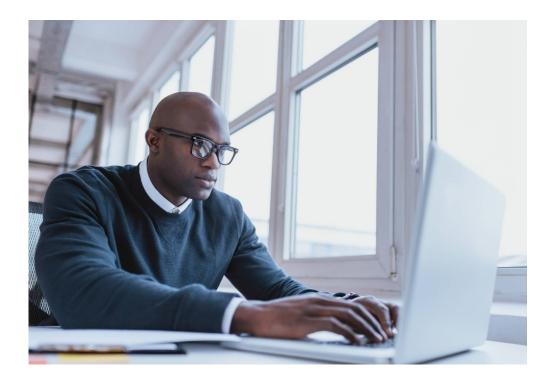
Despite Covid-19, our students, their employers and learning providers were keen to continue their progression towards ACCA membership and to take exams even when it was clear that centers could not open.

The key stakeholders we had to bring along with us were our regulators and education partners. We worked with them very closely throughout the development process, sharing findings from the pilot we ran in July 2020 to ensure that remote invigilation maintains the rigor and security of our exams.

Remote invigilation tailored for ACCA's exams
ACCA offers two different types of exams. Our entry level exams are Objective Test exams, drawn from a large bank with equating and balancing rules in place. We were quickly able to offer these remotely as they are offered on-demand, with students selecting a time that best suits them.
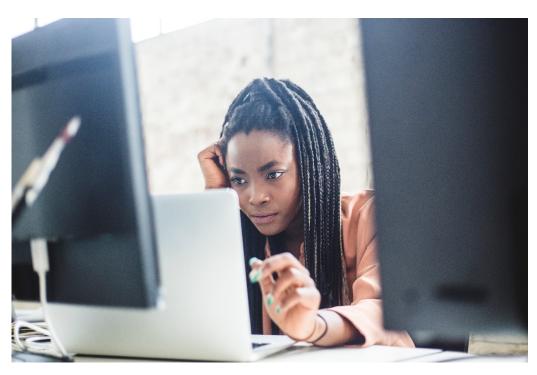

Our move to remote invigilation for these exams has been positively received and student satisfaction levels are incredibly high. If a student encounters a technical issue they can quickly reschedule at another time, with support from our customer service teams on how to resolve the issue and improve their experience on their rescheduled exam.

Our higher-level exams are offered four times a year at fixed sessions. While there is an element of question banking, exams must be taken in scheduled windows. Our Test Security model ensures content cannot be shared from students in earlier sittings to the advantage of those taking exams later.

This also holds in our remotely invigilated exams, but means the key challenge is one of logistics, ensuring we have enough remote invigilators to keep the scheduled windows and protect the security exam content. To do this we work with our exam delivery partner Pearson Vue, using their remote invigilation platform, and the British Council to invigilate the exams.

As all our exams are high stakes, we chose proctoring models which include the use of AI and human invigilation. We use live invigilators to monitor students taking exams. The student first logs into the exam and performs several checks, such as demonstrating the room is empty and there are no materials that could facilitate cheating. The exam software locks the student's computer to ensure they cannot access any material during the exam and the student, and their exam screen are then monitored throughout the exam. The students must keep their webcam and microphone on for the duration.

Privacy and GDPR compliance are essential as remote invigilation uses biometrics to check the student into the exam and record them while they are taking their exams. We have had to ensure both ACCA and our partners are compliant in all markets where we offer exams. Our Data Privacy and GDPR teams have been closely involved in the design and supplier selection, ensuring compliance.

Learnings from Remote Invigilation Exam Sessions
We ran a small controlled pilot session in July with approximately 2000 students, alongside our center exams, resulting in two key learnings:

- The first, the same as that of academic institutions - the importance of strong communications to students. In remote invigilation, students must do more themselves, such as setting up their desk and running diagnostic tests. For the exam to run successfully it's important that students follow instructions so we ran webinars, designed infographics, set up dedicated support webpages, all to help students successfully run the exam, so they can focus on their response and not the delivery or set up.
- The second has been in reassuring ourselves and our regulatory partners that there are no differences in results between students sitting in centers or remotely at home. In July we had exams running in centers in some markets as well as the pilot group and were able to draw comparisons between the two cohorts.

These findings gave us confidence to offer more remotely invigilated exams in September and we had approximately 18,000 students taking their exams remotely, alongside approximately 130,000 center-based exams.

ACCA's student body is very diverse, as is the technological infrastructure of the countries where they were taking remote exams. This has impacted the success of exam completion rates. The key component to running a successful remotely invigilated exam is a strong and stable internet connection, and many of our students live in countries with interrupted power supplies, making it difficult to maintain a good connection for the length of the exam.

Our key lesson from the large September session is to set expectations. So, in future sessions we will share our experiences more widely, explaining that remote invigilation, while a great opportunity to progress while centers are closed, is not suitable for all students. We will help students to understand if remote invigilation is right for them so that they make the right choice.

Most students were able to complete their exam without technical issues and their feedback is very positive. Students who experienced technical issues were frustrated, especially as the reason for the technical issue is not always obvious to them. We are working to understand if more concrete guidance can be given to students, to help them troubleshoot problems, resolve them, and complete their exam.

Summary
ACCA has moved swiftly to introduce remote invigilation to allow students to take exams while centers are closed.

While the effort has been enormous, we are happy with how we have been able to respond with such agility. The effort involved in moving our exams to the remote model cannot be underestimated. We very quickly asked several ACCA teams from across the organization to focus their efforts on the delivery of this model, ensuring as smooth a journey for as many ACCA students as possible.

Quick decision-making, clear lines of responsibility and close collaboration have enabled us to introduce remote invigilation to thousands of ACCA students around the world.

Importantly, the feedback from the majority of students has been very positive, as many have continued progressing towards ACCA membership despite the pandemic.

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