

Conducting SpLD diagnostic assessments and access arrangements assessments online - SASC position paper - March 2020

We have been asked if during the current COVID-19 crisis, online assessment could offer a viable alternative to replace face-to-face diagnostic sessions. Public health guidance and measures in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic have increasingly stressed the importance of 'social distancing' to slow down the rate of infection. Assessors are fully aware that face-to-face meetings with individuals being assessed would be to go against current government policy and public health advice, and risk further spreading of the coronavirus.

SASC is aware that assessors work extremely hard to provide a high-quality assessment service to children and adults. SASC has been listening to assessors' questions and concerns and understands the desire to explore alternative ways of working under the current circumstances. We hope that this statement explains why, regrettably, there is not, at present, a viable online alternative that maintains the quality and consistency of diagnostic assessment practice.

Whilst we appreciate the difficulties caused by the current COVID-19 crisis, we cannot ignore important principles by making alterations that undermine assessment validity and practice.

Whereas online applications [like Skype and Zoom] offer a workable virtual environment for tutorials, and the opportunity to conduct an interview exploring the reasons for seeking assessment and relevant background information, they do not provide a suitable, reliable setting for either JCQ access arrangements or full diagnostic assessments using standardised tests that were not designed for that form of delivery.

Key reasons:

- Copyright
- Test confidentiality
- Test validity and reliability
- Variations due to technology
- Consistency of delivery
- Assurance of best practice
- Data protection and safeguarding consideration
- Undermining future practice

For these reasons it is not acceptable to conduct diagnostic assessments online.

We would encourage assessors to (i) assure the agencies, schools, colleges, universities, employers etc that they work for, in whatever contractual capacity, that they can return to face to face assessment as soon as public health guidance allows this and (ii) discuss their contractual position concerning temporary cessation of and eventual return to work.

This guidance does not preclude providing generalised support facilities.

KEY CONCERNS: REMOTE ONLINE ASSESSMENT

Public health guidance and measures in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic have increasingly stressed the importance of 'social distancing' to slow down the rate of infection. Judging by contributions to assessor online forums, assessors have a growing awareness that face-to-face meetings with individuals being assessed would be to go against the grain of public health advice, and risk further spreading of the coronavirus. Following on from this, it has been suggested whether online assessment using Skype or Zoom could offer a viable alternative to replace face-to-face encounters.

Whereas online applications [like Skype and Zoom] offer a workable virtual environment for tutorials, and the opportunity to conduct a diagnostic interview exploring the reasons for seeking assessment and relevant background information, they do not provide a suitable, reliable and valid setting for either JCQ access arrangements or full diagnostic assessments using standardised tests that were not designed for that form of delivery. The main reasons are as follows:

COPYRIGHT

Every single test that is used for assessment, including the stimulus material for that test, is explicitly covered by copyright. For example, the AAB states that test material 'May not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or by any means without written permission of PAR,' while, to take one of the key tests, the CTOPP-2, the phrasing is equally prohibitive: 'All rights reserved'. No part of the material protected by this copyright notice may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission of the copyright owner.'

It does not matter whether it is a test of attainment (e.g. reading or spelling), of ability (e.g. the WRIT) or cognitive processing (e.g. the CTOPP-2; the SDMT), all tests require written permission from the test developers/company concerned.

- It is likely any professional organisation or single body (e.g. SASC, PATOSS, BDA, DA etc) would be refused an application on behalf of its members for permission to use test materials online because they can offer no certainty that material will be taken down at the end of any agreed period or that it will not be copied and used later. There is also the obvious problem that the person being assessed may be recording and saving the whole assessment session including all the test material. Copyright protects a revenue stream; it is hard to see how this barrier would be overcome. Where any exceptional guidance has been released there are very strict conditions and the tools for which they apply are not ones which are used in our diagnostic assessments.
- The alternative is that individual assessors apply for permission. For the reasons touched on above, it is unlikely any company would give permission. In addition, it would be hard for them to keep track of what scores or hundreds of assessors are doing with material that the company has developed and financed.

TEST CONFIDENTIALITY

The SASC 'Formats for Pre- and Post-16 Years DARS for SpLDs: Additional Guidance and Explanatory Detail' says, 'It is important that assessors do not inadvertently disclose sensitive test details (e.g. the wording of test items) when reporting performance in assessment reports. Feigning or preparation/practice effects in cases where examinees have detailed prior knowledge of test constructs can affect and sometimes invalidate assessment outcomes' (June 2019; p. 11).

Once any test material is online, test confidentiality cannot be safeguarded with any certainty. For Skype (and perhaps other platforms like Zoom), test material can be sent in a shared file which would then be downloaded by the person being assessed. Once the assessment is over, how would the assessor know the shared file had been deleted by the recipient? A second possibility is that assessors use the 'shared screen' feature instead. This is closed at the end of the session, but it is relatively simple for a person to get around any checks for this and record the entire assessment (which would be in the form of a video).

'ONLY CONNECT...'

When it comes down to it, being online is a mediated experience, not an immediate one. What appears clear, precise and instant at one end may not be so at the other:

- Even allowing that an assessor has a good, fast internet connection and a powerful computer, we do not know that the person at the other end being assessed has. They could be using a phone, a tablet or an older computer. The connection could be slow or intermittent. The assessor cannot see or hear if there is a technical issue at the student or client's end.
- As the assessor cannot actually see or hear what the individual being assessed is seeing and hearing on their computer, it could undermine the validity of the test. The clarity of what is received by the examinee and the assessor may be compromised and could affect accuracy of reading tests, spelling tests, phonological awareness measures among others. Can we really assess for phonological awareness when the sound quality can be distorted and uncertain? It is often difficult to hear what is said in 'normal' conversation over Skype and similar, let alone the subtle observations needed in a diagnostic assessment situation. What about the impact of interrupted or intermittent connection on memory tests like the CTOPP-2 PM or TOMAL-2 ACI? For these tests, the assessor cannot repeat a sequence or missed sound, letter name or number. Delays in connection speed, intermittent and interrupted connection are also very problematic for the administration of all timed tests. For the CTOPP-2 RSN subtests, for instance, each second of delay would translate as a five point reduction in standard score.
- Another concern is that in asking people to manage a computer at their end, we are adding to their cognitive load and, consequently, even in a subtle way, the testee may not therefore be wholly focused on the particular task.

There is a risk that we are adding 'covert' instructions for each test ('Speak clearly'; 'Can you move nearer the microphone?'; 'Would you drop back so I can see your position when you're writing?').

- Again, we do not really know about the environment the person is doing the test in. There may be distractions which the assessor is unaware of: someone out of shot in the same room and just listening to their son or daughter or friend; someone off camera signing whether a person wants refreshment; a mobile that's on the desk etc. There is also the possibility of a third party prompting the person being assessed. The assessor also does not know whether the room the person is sitting in is too cold or too close and stuffy.
- No test has been developed and standardised on the basis of a sample that completed the tests online. Online screeners cannot be used as substitutes for full assessment.

QUALITATIVE INFORMATION

Under Test Conditions, assessors are expected to state whether they consider the assessment represents a fair and reliable profile of a person's abilities and skills. Our experience is that those being assessed are often rather apprehensive at first and then settle as they feel more at ease. There is an opening phase in our assessment encounter, the purpose of which is to reduce the anxiety and stress that affect performance. During a face to face assessment session there will be constant monitoring of responses, adjustments to the assessment session etc as well as reassurance, where necessary.

It is fairly straightforward accomplishing this in a real-life setting; considerably more difficult to strike up a rapport through the virtual medium with someone the assessor has never met before.

SASC also asks that each test is accompanied by qualitative information. The most robust reports have observational detail that tells us a great deal about how the individual being assessed went about the various tests. There is a risk that we do not see or miss what the person is doing in their approach to each task.

SAFEGUARDING

When creating video links into people's homes there are safeguarding issues to manage. Parents will have to be present throughout which will also impact on assessments; however, the presence of parents may well affect the assessment as the child is likely to behave differently than if they were alone with an independent professional.

MAINTAINING INTEGRITY OF THE ASSESSMENT

For all the above reasons there will be no basis for assuring delivery is consistent for each assessee. In addition, where assessment tools were designed, developed and validated using face-to-face delivery, if delivered online the reliability and validity of results will not be comparable to any standardised results. The integrity of the assessment tools would be lost.