Co-Managed Trials School Case Study

School	Palmerston North Boys' High School	MoE Id	202
Roll Year 11 cohort	1,781 390	Region	Manawatu
School Type	State Boys Yrs 9-15	Decile	8

Palmerston North Boys' High School was involved in the previous digital examinations:
2015   eMCAT and Online Practice Examinations
2017   Digital Trials and Pilots in L1 English and Classical Studies

Situation

Palmerston North Boys' High School wants their students to be digitally literate. They have a BYOD programme in place and feel this has largely been successful.

Most of the students have access to a device for their learning and the school has some spare Chromebooks available. The school restricts device use to laptops only and uses Google Classroom as its main platform.

The school has been through the School Network Upgrade Project but has had wi-fi issues relating to the use of Windows 7 on some student laptops. The school had to set up a separate wi-fi system and the wi-fi was inconsistent until recently. The school has updated, repaired and replaced their wi-fi when necessary.

In 2017, 61 students sat the English Digital Trial examination and 27 sat the Classical Studies Digital Trial. For English, the school entered their accelerated Year 10 class and two Year 11 classes, one of which included some students who have learning difficulties.

Examination Management

The Principal's Nominee (PN) and Exam Centre Manager (ECM) both felt well-supported by NZQA in the Digital Trials. The ECM commented that supervisor training would be enhanced, if the ECM and supervisors had opportunity for hands-on experience with the ECM dashboard, prior to the Digital Trials.

Both the PN and ECM spent some time preparing for the Digital Trials. This included supervisor training, assigning students to rooms, physical room set-up, communicating with teachers, organising back-up devices and equipment, as well as, onsite IT support. Both commented that this would become more challenging as the numbers doing digital examinations increase.

The English Trial examination was conducted across two rooms. One room had 25 students and the other had 36. Both rooms were arranged with a set of desks set in a U shape around three walls and a set of desks in the middle - students either faced a wall or the middle of the room. This arrangement appeared to work well, with screen-peeking minimised, and afforded the supervisor a good view of most of the screens at any one time.

The Classical Studies examination was conducted in one room using the same desk arrangement.

In both examinations, there were two supervisors per room and the ECM moved between the two. In the English class that has learning support, there was additional support provided with logins at the start of the session.

Some students had issues logging in at the start of their examination; others commented that their answers were slow to load in the examinations. Several students experienced the "loading hang" issue during the Digital Trial examinations. This was resolved by refreshing the browser window, with the autosave feature ensuring no work was lost.

The school internet service provider undertook a series of tests while the Classical Studies Trial examination was on. This used up significant bandwidth and resulted in a number of students being disconnected from the wi-fi. Many of the students had completed and submitted their answers, but there were some affected and they had to wait until they were reconnected and were able to logon and continue. No work was lost and all students were provided with the full time to complete their examination.

One student continually triggered the anti-breach function during his English examination. This is likely to be a result of the energy saver set-up on his device. Another student commented that he found the anti-breach function sensitive.

Staff Impressions

Staff were comfortable with the idea of digital examinations, but had taken the cautious approach of not including the whole cohort, and being selective regarding the participants.

All classes were taken through the Familiarisation Activities, albeit in different ways. The activities were used as a practice essay in the English class that has learning support. The Year 10 students used the activities as a practice English assessment. The Classical Studies class, and remaining English class used the activities to enable the students to become comfortable with navigating the assessment.

Staff were impressed with the level of engagement they observed – particularly those students who normally struggled with examinations. Teachers reported their results were either as expected or slightly higher, with the Year 10 students and Year 11 students with learning support showing a marked improvement. The Classical Studies teacher commented that his students' results were as expected based on their classroom work.

Teachers felt confident that their students were well-prepared for the Digital Pilot examinations.

Student impressions

Prior to the Digital Trial examinations, students were intrigued by the concept. One of the students commented that they are "the most connected generation" and these examinations are a continuation this. Another student commented, "It is normal, we are born with this".

In the English Digital Trial for AS 90851 (*Show understanding of significant aspects of unfamiliar written text(s) through close reading, using supporting evidence*), many students used the paper resource to plan their answers. Some used the digital resource though the interactions with the digital resource were limited.

One student commented that the font size in the examination was too small and seemed unaware of the zoom function or the ability to customise the user screen.

All students, with one exception, said they preferred digital examinations to paper examinations. Reasons they gave included the ability to type faster than they can write, messy hand-writing, the ease of editing their work, and changing from one achievement standard to another. Students commented that they are used to using computers in their learning, and sitting digital examinations is a natural extension.

The student who preferred a paper examination, felt that paper examinations require greater discipline as answers have to be more concise, and it is not as easy to edit.

2017 Digital Pilot experience

The Digital Pilot examinations went very smoothly for Palmerston North Boys' High School. The ECM and her staff were well-prepared, and the school felt that the support and communication provided by NZQA was organised and helpful.

The school was more aware of the hiccups associated with online examinations. These included students logging in too early, then being timed out, or getting impatient leading them to leave the URL, power saver issues, devices doing updates at the start of the examination, using "refresh" to remedy the "loading hang" issue, and student awareness of various functions such as Spell Check. Students were made aware of the issues prior to the Pilot examinations, and support was provided for examination supervisors who were not used to dealing with spontaneous student or computer issues. Examination supervisors logged onto the dashboard on their computers on the days prior to the examinations.

On the day of the examination, a piece of paper with the student's name, login details and examination URL, was placed on each student's desk. While this was easy due to the small numbers involved, the PN commented that it would not be practicable for large numbers of entries.

In the future, Palmerston North Boys' High School is likely to increase the number of examination sessions done digitally.