Top marks

Dan Sandhu is betting big on the assessment market with his firm Digital Assess. **Julian Hall** meets the tech impresario to find out more

f you ran an assessment company five years ago, you might not have seen much benefit in rebranding your company to stand out from the crowd. But the market's got much busier since then which perhaps explains why the respected, if not hugely well-known, TAG Assessment decided to change its name in June. Now trading as Digital Assess, the firm has undergone a reorganisation and taken on £2 million in investment from new and existing investors with its ambitious chief executive, Dan Sandhu, still at the helm.

The company retains its core goals, delivering online assessment tools for accreditation bodies, distance learners, vocational institutions and higher education providers, but it's also branching out to offer innovative new tools like 'peer to peer' assessment. And it boasts a growing list of high-profile clients, including the University of Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR), the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) and Macmillan Education.

Given his early successes, it's surprising to hear that Sandhu doesn't come from a pure education background, having trained as a chartered account and then holding various roles, from chief executive to investor, at an assortment of firms. These include workforce management specialist Swift Shift, embedded technology providers ACIS and Indian customer management company Vertex, but he did invest in and lead the Indian vocational skills company Youth4Work.

"I was working in sectors or industries that were going through transformation and that were mainly tech driven," he explains. "I am now pulling the key threads of this experience to meet the demands of the ever changing educating market, which I think are fundamentally different to what they were five years ago or even two or three years ago."

'A perfect storm'

Certainly Sandhu has thought carefully about where Digital Assess fits in to the education ecosystem. What's different about the market, especially in ed tech, he believes is that the expectations of learners have finally taken centre stage. "People have bombarded education with technology without asking what the learner wants – what's really needed is face-to-face learning that is tech-enabled but not overwhelmed."

Assessment, he believes, could be key in this environment, allowing already capable educators to do their jobs better. He gives the example of on-the-job training, where assessment could help tackle skills gaps.

"Transformation is needed outside of schools. Growth is in the service industries, banking, HR, finance – so the question is how do you get graduates to have the right vocational skills, to have employability?

"For example, most teams don't work well or communicate well with each other and these skills are difficult for employers to assess or for higher education to administer."

Sandhu believes that a "perfect storm" is brewing in the education space, where too many of the solutions put forward don't pass muster. For example, much-vaunted massive online open courses (Moocs) – free courses provided online by universities – are simply not delivering good enough results with some having attrition rates of 80-90%.

"It makes no difference if something is for-profit or not-for-profit, it is intellectually and economically unsustainable to have that level of attrition; it demeans the value of the education given if people can nip in and nip out." Engagement, Sandhu maintains, comes through the feeling of "personal validation [and] gaining a deeper insight into a learner's knowledge".

Another crucial distinction Sandhu makes in his approach is that there has been too much "assessment *of* learning not assessment *for* learning".

At this point he invokes writer Malcolm Gladwell's quote, 'We have come to confuse information with understanding', and gives an example of this confusion to include the "box-ticking" multi-choice assessment.

"We have to assess above and beyond the summative process. You could test someone with multi-choice every week but that won't demonstrate someone's skills, and that's a pity given that we have all this technology available to us where we can capture audio and video."

Of course, Digital Assess hopes to change all this. Digitised evidence-based assessment, where notes can be embedded as text or audio, is a central plank of what it offers clients. However, the really cutting edge element is peer-to-peer assessment, an innovative way of achieving greater testing accuracy.

"We're taking the information sharing skills that learners use on social media," explains Sandhu, "and developing this intuitive collaborative mind set to provide somewhere where learners assess each other and learn faster themselves."

For the uninitiated, peer-to-peer assessment is simpler than it sounds, being derived from multiple, successive comparatives of two pieces of work against clear criteria. In essence, a large number of your peers mark your work (which is anonymised), building a layered assessment of "what good looks like". It is argued that this doesn't just benefit the learner but the assessor too, because they are informed about what they are doing right or wrong as much as the person whose work is being assessed.

Digital Assess adds some special sauce to this mix, in the form of measurement algorithms created by "bright data scientists" from various top universities. With clients who have piloted the service praising its high accuracy rates, it is easy to see why interest in the firm is coming from as far afield as South Africa, Australia and China.

Where next?

Getting clients to buy in to peer-to-peer methods on a big scale may take time, especially for use in certain types of tests. Currently, it's used mainly for low-to-mid stakes assessment rather than high stakes tests, such as end-of-term exams or professional qualifications. Reflecting

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THE FIRM'S ASSESSMENT PACKAGE COMPRISES FIVE KEY COMPONENTS:

Capture – digital evidence of skills in action, captured on video and audio and saved in the cloud

Annotate – embedding physical and audio notes on any type of content

Collaborate – peer to peer assessment, or 'adaptive comparative judgement' that uses "intuitive software" and takes "30-60 seconds to master"

Measure – collating results of the above and seeding them by using algorithms

Manage – a standalone tool for sharing information/feedback between learner, institution and awarding body

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this, Digital Assess also tends to focus on providing 'formative' assessment services but Sandhu feels its tools are perfectly adaptable to summative (exam-led) learning.

The fact the firm has an impressive customer base championing its services should help. Among those testifying to its work are former Edinburgh University Students' Association president Brianna Pegado, who believes that peer assessment lets the student gain insight on their work they wouldn't otherwise. "You get to see the ways that other students have tackled the same problems. It helps you develop work and general analytic skills," she said. From the other side of the fence, exam board OCR says that the digitisation of coursework assessment in general has made its operation more efficient, saving it time and money.

Currents in the assessment market favour the company too, with publishers keen to integrate effective solutions and assessment providers like Renaissance Learning and GL Education commanding high valuations. Speaking to *EducationInvestor* recently, Jonathan Wells, founder and managing director of ForSkills, a for-profit provider of functional skills assessments, claimed the money-saving element in formative assessment to be another driver of market growth.

Ditto David Patterson from e-learning consultancy Learning Light, who says:

"The transition in the workplace from the tyranny of continuing professional development to the demonstration of actual competence is happening, and happening now. I believe that this transition will continue and assessing competence in the workplace effectively and designing out the burden of paper-based assessment systems will be hugely exciting, as, in my view, assessment costs are out of proportion to training delivery costs now."

Sandhu is naturally feeling upbeat – not just about assessment but the ed tech market as a whole. At the recent EdTech Europe conference in London, he told delegates that we had reached "ed tech 2.0", by which he meant the sector is finally starting to mature. One of the main reasons for this is that it's starting to focus on learners and understand the recipe for successful products – scalability, agnosticism to device, territory and curriculum, along with a dual focus on academic and vocational learning.

"I think, in some ways, the UK is ahead of the US," Sandhu concludes. "Their recent adoption of competency-based education is an opportunity for UK businesses. We've got great pedigree, great technology, a strong pedagogy and the sector has been adopted by the investment community as distinct... Rather than being at the end of a bubble, we're at the beginning of a growth phase." ∎