online assessments explained: how aelo swiss academy evaluates remote learners

If you are thinking about studying at a distance, the assessment question usually arrives before any other. How do they know it is really me sitting the exam? How do they know I did not keep a second browser tab open, or hand my login details to a cousin who reddit.com writes better English than I do? These are fair questions, and I have learned to be suspicious of any institution that answers them with a slogan instead of an explanation.

I have spent most of the last decade working on assessment design for remote programmes, a large part of it at AELO Swiss Academy. What I can tell you from that experience is that evaluating someone you have never shared a room with is not a solved problem. It is a series of deliberate choices, each with costs, and the honest way to describe our approach is to walk through those choices rather than promise you a system that cannot fail.

Why the classroom model breaks at a distance

A traditional exam works because the institution controls the room. Everyone sits the same paper, at the same hour, under the same clock, watched by the same invigilator. Remove the room and you remove the control. The learner could be anywhere, with anything on the desk, and a camera pointed at a face tells you far less than most people assume.

Institutions respond in one of two broad ways. The first is to rebuild control with technology: lockdown browsers, webcam monitoring, gaze tracking, a camera sweep of the room before the exam begins. The second is to redesign assessment so that control matters less: tasks tied to the learner's own context, work produced over weeks rather than hours, conversations that reveal whether the person actually understands what they submitted.

Both paths have real costs, and I want to be direct about them. Surveillance-heavy systems generate false flags, anxiety and genuine privacy complaints, and they treat every honest learner as a suspect in order to catch the dishonest few. Design-heavy systems demand far more from tutors, more writing from learners, and they are slower to grade. At AELO Swiss Academy we lean clearly toward the second approach, and we reserve strict monitoring for the small number of moments where a qualification's credibility genuinely depends on it. That balance is a judgment call, and what follows is partly an account of how we make it.

Many small signals instead of one big day

The most important structural decision we have made is this: no module grade is decided by a single high-stakes day. A grade is built from several graded touchpoints spread across the study period. A final element usually exists, but it sits on top of a record that already exists. If you have submitted four assignments, kept a reflective log, and defended a project in conversation, the final element confirms a pattern rather than creating one.

In practice, the formats we rely on look like this:

- Written assignments and case studies, graded against a rubric published with the task
- A reflective journal or learning log, reviewed at set intervals
- A practical project or portfolio, usually the largest single piece of work
- Short timed quizzes, mostly open book by deliberate design
- An oral examination by video call at key points in the programme

The reasoning behind the mix is simple. A single exam measures performance on one morning, and performance on one morning is shaped by sleep, nerves and luck. A body of work built over two or three months measures capability instead, and it is much harder to fake, because faking it would mean faking eight weeks of consistent effort rather than three hours of it. The quizzes deserve a word of their own, because learners are often surprised that ours are open book. Closed-book recall of facts you can look up in twenty seconds measures memory, not judgment. Our quiz questions ask you to apply a framework, compare two options, or spot the flaw in a short scenario. An open browser does not help much with those, which is precisely the point.



The reflective log is the element learners undervalue most. It carries a light weight, sometimes simply pass or fail, because the moment you grade reflection heavily, people start performing reflection instead of doing it. Its real value is twofold. Tutors watch thinking develop across entries, which tells them more about a learner than any single essay. And the log quietly serves as evidence of process. If a question about a final project ever arises, eight weeks of dated entries in the learner's own voice tend to settle it.

Written work and the rubric

Every written task at the academy ships with its rubric attached. A rubric here means four to six criteria, each described at every level, so that "good analysis" is not a mystery phrase but a paragraph explaining what good analysis looks like in this specific task. Typical criteria cover the quality of the argument, the use of evidence, structure, and clarity, with a professional application criterion added for practice-oriented modules.

The point of publishing all this in advance is to remove guessing. I once marked an essay that was genuinely beautiful, the kind of prose that makes a tired assessor sit up, and it never answered the question that had been asked. The learner was furious at first, then less so once we walked through the rubric together and the gap was sitting there in plain words, criterion by criterion. The resubmission was sharper and the improvement stuck. That is the quiet work a rubric does: it turns a grade from a verdict into a map.

A few practical details matter to learners. Word counts carry a tolerance of roughly ten percent in either direction, and the count is a discipline, not a target to pad. Feedback targets ten working days, often less. First-pass marking is anonymous, names hidden, and tutors calibrate against each other by double-marking a sample from every cohort, which keeps a grade from meaning one thing in March and another in September.



Integrity without treating everyone as a suspect

All written work passes through similarity screening before a human reads it. I want to be careful about how that is described, because the similarity percentage is a starting point, not a verdict. A finance assignment quoting a reporting standard at length will show a high number and be perfectly legitimate. As a rough rule of thumb, figures around twenty percent invite a closer look, but a high score with properly cited quotations is fine and a low score with one recycled paragraph is not. A person reads the report, and what actually triggers action is never the number alone. It is a pattern: prose that does not sound like the learner's previous submissions, a sudden jump in quality, sources that turn out not to support the claims made.

When something looks wrong, the next step is a conversation, not an accusation. A short video call resolves most of these, and most of them end with reassurance rather than flight training sanction. I remember a case where a learner's final project read nothing like her earlier work, and the explanation turned out to be that she had finally had time off from a demanding job and had immersed herself properly for the first time. The conversation took fifteen minutes and ended with the tutor congratulating her.

The deeper integrity strategy, though, is task design. When a task asks you to apply a framework to a situation from your own workplace and justify the trade-offs you accepted, there is no page on the internet that answers it for you. We tell learners openly that a well-argued answer reaching a conclusion we disagree with will earn more than a correct answer copied from somewhere, and we mean it, because that single sentence changes how people study. It moves them from hunting for the right answer to building a defensible one.

The oral examination

At key points, usually at the end of a programme and sometimes at the end of a major module, learners sit an oral examination by video call. These run twenty to thirty minutes. There is an identity check with photo ID at the start, the camera stays on, and notes are allowed, because we are not testing what you memorised. Two people from the academy join the call, an examiner and a second assessor or moderator, and the second listener exists for fairness in both directions: to protect the learner from a single reader's mood, and to protect the institution's confidence in the result.

The questions probe reasoning rather than recall. Why did you choose this approach over the obvious alternative? What would change if the budget were halved? Walk me through page four, because I want to

understand how you got there. A prepared listener can usually tell the difference between understanding and memorisation within about two minutes of a learner talking about their own work,