# Why universities must consider the online mode of exams and how

(A step-by-step approach)

# Contents

# Disruptions never end

Since the onset of the contagion, the world has been amid lockdowns of varying degrees, some sweeping, others localized. And going back to the olden ways of life has dominated our thoughts ever since. I don't assume I was alone in the fallacious assumption that this was, but a passing phase and the pandemic was a matter of months, a year at best; that was in 2020. Considering the many ebbs and the protracted global tussle to contain the damage, I wonder whether the malady lasts much longer. COVID-19 continues to ravage geographies, and a definitive timeline for going back to "normal" eludes us still.

I don't wish to instill anxiety about how the pandemic may unfold in the coming months. The rationale, instead, is to offer a succinct overview and make educators aware of the many unknowns and the challenges amid which continuity in education and examinations must prevail. After all, we live in unpredictable times, and disruptions will continue to manifest in different ways.

Last year, when the pandemic impacted education and, by extension, examinations, universities, colleges, schools, and education centers scrambled to find the means to maintain continuity in their established examination schedules.

**87.6%**
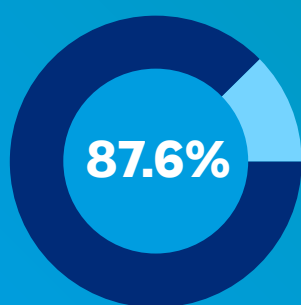
**As per UNESCO, "1.53 billion learners were out of school. There were 184 country-wide school closures, impacting 87.6% of the world's total enrolled learners."**

Regrettably, this setback cost countless students valuable opportunities to learn and continue with their education. Many students on the cusp of their professional lives stared at an uncertain future as the education sector found the going tough, especially in shifting exams online.

The education sector's unfavorable perception of online examination platforms – that they are complicated, challenging to navigate and deploy, and hard to use for students and faculty – resulted in its staggered and slower-than-expected adoption. Consequently, many institutions preferred postponing assessments indefinitely or contemplated rescheduling them, awaiting the situation to improve, factoring in the health and safety of all stakeholders.

And things did start to get better, but the second wave of the pandemic hit many countries and disrupted continuity plans, resulting in another set of deferrals in examination schedules. As a result, students voiced their concern, who had spent months preparing for their assessments, only to stare at an unpredictable future yet again.

The sector's lack of preparedness to deal with unpredictable disruptions was apparent, leading to avoidable confusion and stress.

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# The early adopters

Amid the doom and gloom, there are silver linings too! While for some, the situation continues to remain the same even in 2021. For others, adversity led to innovation. For instance, rather than deferring assessments or waiting for the situation to improve, several premier universities and educational institutions such as CHRIST, IIMs, Amity University, Howard University, Cambridge Assessment, etc., addressed the challenges in the early phases of the pandemic and moved their exams online.

## 56%

According to an extensive survey conducted by Mercer | Mettl to understand the state of online examinations in 2021, "56% of respondents never conducted online examinations before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Therefore, these entities chose to continue in the "new normal" by reshaping their education and examination strategies. These agile educators ensured students did not lose out on their academic year and enrolled for subsequent terms or acquired their degrees to seek employment by going digital. These forward-looking institutions understood the lasting advantages of going digital- what many considered a drawback. And they did it all from ground zero, with no prior learning or preparation. Their nimbleness and swift decision-making ensured they remained unfazed by recurring surges of infection, providing themselves and their stakeholders a safe passage for continuity.

**Let me state some noteworthy examples:**

- IIM Bangalore has an enviable legacy of building empowered leaders through holistic, transformative and innovative education. It went online by launching a set of preeminent digital learning programs, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), in 2014 as a pathway for professional growth. However, after witnessing a positive education revolution with MOOCs, the institution didn't rethink moving its mainstream exams online during the pandemic.

- Similarly, IIM Calcutta migrated thousands of learners and all its prestigious courses online to ensure digital enablement. It believed that embracing distinct digital initiatives was the only way of ensuring student and staff safety, sustaining their academic rigor and preserving their unique teaching and learning experiences.

- Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies (NMIMS) successfully managed the disruption by moving all its courses online. Digital solutions and approaches were ideal for continuing education in the lockdown and beyond, it believed.

# Why just legacy institutes?

- This shift from offline to online has not been limited to national or international entities, but kindergarteners, middle school-goers, senior school students and parents are also trying to make online exams work to ensure continuity and build resilience.

  For instance, a progressive school, namely Silverline Prestige School, moved to the online mode to ensure students' safety while maintaining continuity, which was of paramount importance. It had little experience of giving exams online but incorporated digital processes without hiccups when the pandemic set in.

It is prudent to say that the pandemic catalyzed educational institutions' pivot toward online tools and techniques they had not used before. The education sector defied overwhelming odds, demonstrating remarkable alacrity in moving tests to the online ecosystem.

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# The increased pace of new innovations from the Edutech industry

Now, I am tempted to give sole credit for this transition to the educators who let go of their long-held beliefs. Despite no prior experience of conducting online exams, they familiarized themselves with the process and established the necessary digital infrastructure swiftly, ensuring continuity. However, I think the Edutech sector must share the laurels for the commendable progress in the transition to 'online.'

In the backdrop of COVID-19, various service providers helped shape the way education stakeholders responded to the digital form of assessments. Their continuous innovations made good products great.

The Edutech sector has grown exponentially over the past few years. But the pandemic has accelerated its growth substantially.

> **The Indian Private Equity and Venture Capital Association (IVCA) report said that the Indian Edutech sector attracted fundings worth approximately USD2Billion during the year 2020.**

Similarly, companies like Mercer | Mettl have spent substantial resources to enhance their platform's efficiency and develop their AI, with an eye on future requirements and needs. Imagine the level of capital being pumped into the industry to change the way education is being conducted online!

I have often been asked why such massive investments into a sector are often considered short-lived by critics. Why such a boom in a business vertical that is yet to gain the trust of parents, students and faculty? I'll tell you why- players in this sector have a disruptive vision for their customers. Their idea is to shift the education landscape in favor of digital adaptability, not by servicing various challenges and hindrances but by streamlining and smoothening processes that meet user requirements effectively. For example, aiding educationists familiarize and internalize the shifting landscape by offering them the same academic integrity as the traditional setup.

## Do you know?

As per Mercer | Mettl's State of Online Examinations report 2021, "Three-fourths of all respondents believe that online examination service providers have addressed either all or most of their exam-related requirements."

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# Why academia needs to experiment with the online mode

To avoid sounding repetitive, I simply ask you to revisit the beginning of my article. The underlying theme of this article is my appeal - experiment with online examinations!

As per Mercer | Mettl's survey report 'The state of online examinations 2021, "Every one out of two respondents reports the lack of familiarity with online examination platforms and processes as the most significant challenge in giving digital assessments."  This finding essentially means that an overwhelming dependence on the conventional means of examinations has led to a slower-than-expected adoption of the digital medium and academia that is not enthused about adopting online methods of assessments.

We constantly experiment to improve efficiencies and streamline processes, then why keep innovation and experimentation out of bounds for the education sector? Giving new processes and methods a try enables you to understand and appreciate hitherto unused means, helping obviate your apprehensions, opening you to untapped ideas.

And take my word for it, here's is how it would help you:

# 1. Creates continuity

When the timeline for transitioning to the old-school routine is unknown and in-person contact risky, experimenting with the online model is the only way to ensure continuity and maintain resilience. You can't have a system that makes you inevitably postpone exams or halt an entire term. Such an arrangement will have repercussions in the long term, hamper and hinder education, impacting learners. It can cause an untold social, academic and emotional impact on students and impact educational sustainability. But, with a tried-and-tested online examination system, disruptions become less disruptive. Maintaining momentum in education and preserving continuity in a student's academic life ensures that education continues unabated. Moreover, faculty are confident, and students are empowered to continue and reach their educational goals.

In response to the pandemic, a progressive institute like ISB also transitioned a majority of its upcoming, on-campus courses and exams online only because it had experimented with the online mode in the past. And it continues to mobilize it with the same rigor as its on-campus programs.

# 2. Builds a tech-savvy image

The disruption has accelerated the pace of tech adoption ahead of time for many of us. But technology is a way of life for today's generation. Hence, it expects a pedagogy that stays abreast with new technologies and integrates them into teaching and examinations. For them, such educators are role models or leaders. They perceive them to be divergent, flexible and dynamic. Suppose you've built a sound understanding of digital tools and mechanisms by simply conducting experiments. Then new-age learners will be more in sync with you because of such an approach.

However, if you, as an educator, are still harboring fallacious assumptions or continuing with an inward mindset toward digital adoption, you will not only curtail your chances of expansion but also create a major disconnect. Hence, you should experiment with the online mode to engage and connect with the new generation.

# 3. Technology has become an enabler

The Edutech sector has a keen eye for the future. It recognizes the imbalances ahead and is preparing for it to ensure that countless universities and institutions worldwide can pursue their learning and examination schedules amid emergencies. Hence, all its efforts have made allying with digital tools for online exams easy. For instance:

- ## Anti-cheating technologies have gone to the next level

We all know how cheating defeats the purpose of an examination, brings a bad name to the exam-giving institution and hampers the education sector in the longer run. Therefore, service providers have invested massive time and resources to plug in the loopholes and improve the quality of cheating prevention mechanisms and functionalities. From a time when teachers had to spend hours monitoring students online via video conferencing apps to a time when the latest advances in AI-based proctoring do the needful for you, anti-cheating technologies have come a long way. They've become highly credible and robust in eliminating a myriad of unsavory instances associated with online exams. Whether through facial recognition software, audio scanning devices, on-screen monitoring software, or onboarding biometric equipment, persistent concerns on online cheating have now come to a close.

- ## Evaluation systems have taken a new form

Did you know that a future-ready online question paper-marking and evaluation software has been introduced to help assess virtual exams, enabling a seamless process for administrators and evaluators? This software allows for a hassle-free assessment of subjective and objective questions, making it a well-rounded solution for all kinds of exam evaluations. This approach is highly cost-effective, productive, and offers business continuity by eliminating management hassles concerning offline pen-and-paper exams. Further, a controlled and well-defined access safeguards the integrity of the evaluation process, with no leakages, loss or theft of personal data, question banks or answer sheets.

- ## Plug-and-play proctoring, to LMS, to avoid additional investments

Until now, LMSs, i.e., learning management systems, could not administer exams safely. No invigilation mechanism existed anywhere during the digital examination process that secured the drive and safeguarded the test-takers' experience. Until certain players innovated and allowed exam administrators and faculty to customize and initiate cheat-proof exams without leaving their LMS environment. How did they do that? By enabling a plug-and-play system, shifting online is now a breeze. A plug-and-play system is a cloud-based location-agnostic AI-powered layer of supervision that can be integrated with any system, software or platform. Exam administrators and faculty can customize and initiate online proctored exams successfully, anytime. Proctoring integration is a new-age solution that is readily accessible, affordable and addresses all remote proctoring-related concerns on an LMS.

- ## The test-taking experience has improved

Not just for the test creators, the test-taking experience for students has also improved. Test-takers often faced challenges with the online system, such as not finding a conducive exam-taking environment or hassles with technical connectivity. A level of discomfort was always there in taking online exams. But today, the exam experience has improved immeasurably. By solving simple concerns with basic internet connectivity, negligible software setup, refining the invigilation system, and removing other systematic barriers, proctoring solution providers have warmed the test-takers to the idea of taking exams online. Technically advanced devices offer a similar, sometimes even a superior, means to support a fair, trustworthy and seamless test-taking experience for students. For instance, Mercer | Mettl conducted one hundred and seventy thousand tests in one day! It has massively upgraded its technology to create a seamless user experience at scale.

Interestingly, many educators complained about exams- that they couldn't be written on computers as they either involved writing exceptionally lengthy answers, drawing diagrams or solving equations. Similarly, many students were not comfortable writing online as they were attuned to writing by hand rather than typing. Hence service providers created a unique examination solution, enabling students to write their answers on paper. Once done, they could scan the document using a QR code and upload the image from the phone directly onto the examiner's system. Doesn't this offer a level playing field to all?

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# 4. Tech adoption has become efficient

That technological advances have lent online examinations high efficiency, security, accessibility via different devices, customization, reliability and the ability to interact, with reduced turnaround time, is stating the obvious. Even as per Mercer | Mettl's State of Online Examinations report in 2021, "close to 46 percent of respondents report managing the online exam evaluation process, assigning answer sheets to examiners and declaration of results as the feature or step where service providers have matched the experience of conducting a center-based exam." Now how is this possible? As mentioned above, the Edutech sector now offers multiple benefits in transitioning to the online mode of assessments. You have all the information you will ever need at the click of a button. You can view the candidate list, understand who would proctor the examination and have a ready-reckoner of those evaluating the examination. Such a ready-made and one-point repository of information lend you complete control of the test, enabling efficient administration and quicker decision-making.

Robust online examination platforms can help you host hundreds of thousands of test-takers simultaneously without being concerned about technical glitches and how students would attempt them.

For instance, Mercer | Mettl offers a robust platform with the ability to conduct over 200,000 exams in a day, which helps many entities save exam-related costs. Similarly, the emergence of the on-screen evaluation saves ample resources by efficiently managing the entire evaluation process using real-time analytics and a dashboard.

# The right approach to getting started with online examinations

However, understandably, one can get overwhelmed while initiating one's maiden online exam, which comes with its technical intricacies. But who said one has to go big or bold to take a leap of faith? If you are not ready for your mainstream exams yet, why not use the opposite approach, and start small?

Begin experimenting with low-stakes exams such as internal quizzes, mock tests, non-final year exams and experience the process first-hand. Even Mercer | Mettl's State of Online Examinations 2021 report states that "54% of respondents used digital assessment platforms for small internal evaluations and not necessarily high-stakes exams."

Trust me, a tried and tested arrangement can be beneficial. The online mode can be an easy default option- should you face another continuity-related challenge. So how do you initiate this process?

Let's look at this graph to understand the approach better:
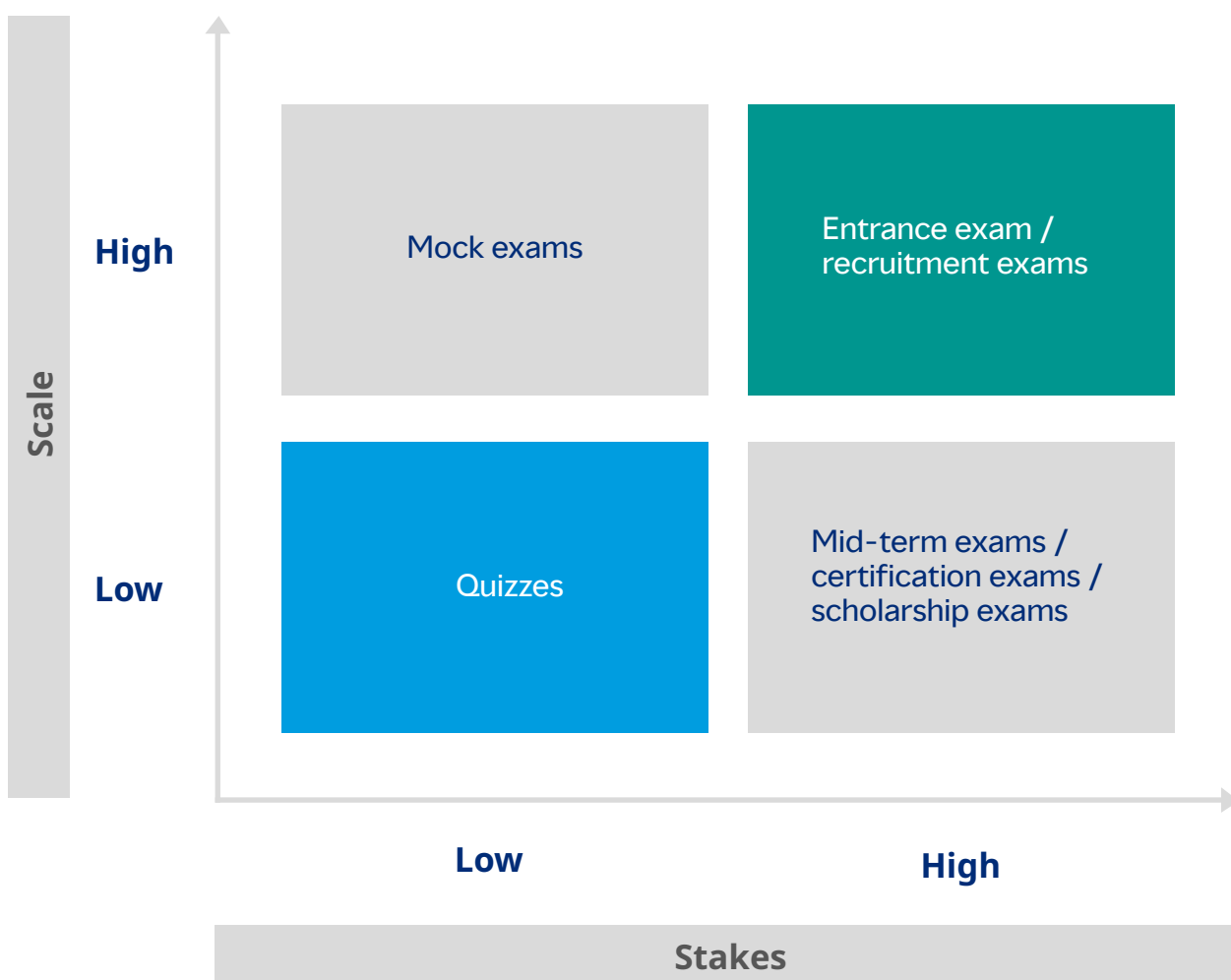
You can begin by determining the exams' stakes - high or low. This distinction defines the purpose of the examinations under consideration. Following this, you decide on the scale you want to manage. Here's what I would suggest.

## 1. Low stakes=low scale

It is considered low-stakes if you choose a type of examination that is deemed a grading assessment but negligibly impacts students' grades. For example, quizzes help evaluate a course's or a subject's learning. You should begin by monitoring quizzes online with a minimal number of students to get a gist of how the entire online model works. You are not only getting some practice, but you also gain the feedback needed to learn better. Understand, engage and explore, without worrying about consequences.

## 2. Low stakes=high scale

If you've gotten the hang of administering low-stakes exams on a low scale, try moving the scale up a bit by administering low-stakes exams on a large scale. You can try this for mock tests. Teachers often offer mock tests for a large number of students to help them evaluate their preparation for an upcoming and crucial exam. Of course, the outcome of these tests is vital. However, since they aren't the actual exam, you can safely term them as low-stakes assessments. Thus, the educators can easily get accustomed to all aspects of an exam without worrying much about the consequences. They can set up different exam patterns comprising subjective and objective questions, create their grading patterns, which can be done offline and online, train themselves in the nuances of proctoring and the art of invigilation. Such a type of low-stakes exam at a large scale has no limit to the number of times one can attempt the mock tests and practice their online test-taking strategies.

## 3. High stakes=low scale

I'm sure if you've enjoyed experimenting with administering online exams up till now, undertaking a high-stakes exam on a low scale will be a breeze for you. High-stakes exams, such as internal assessments, certification exams or mid-term exams, have major consequences and need a high level of reliability. Hence, one needs to tread carefully. So, begin with a small batch of students, a sizeable number that is easy to manage. Sharpen your online exam-taking skills and hone your perspective, considering the high level of relevance and validity these exams require. While the stakes will provide a detailed understanding of the candidates' potential, the scale will ensure fewer stress areas and a reduced workload.

## 4. High stakes=high scale

Time to prep up and face the dragon, i.e., undertake high-stakes exams on a large scale. Exams such as national exams, university entrance exams and recruitment exams carry substantial weightage as they are critical to the future of the test-takers. You've already understood the nuances by practicing across a wide variety of exams. Therefore, administering such exams while ensuring that the principles of high-quality assessments, such as security, integrity, impartiality and accuracy, are incorporated seamlessly and without glitches.

I believe that the hybrid approach, a mix of online and offline, can help you experiment with online exams. It is an interesting approach that helps educators get accustomed to the nuts and bolts of giving online exams. With ample pedagogical flexibility and the utilization of the right resources, educators can shape their perception about the usefulness of this mixed approach, meaning certain aspects of an exam can be undertaken online – whereas the others can be administered offline. Such flexibility lends incredible effectiveness to the hybrid system, allowing you to administer tests seamlessly.

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# Conclusion

I think I have repeatedly iterated that disruptions are inevitable. We live in the age of the unexpected that may manifest in different ways. And the next event or development may occur without warning – COVID-19 is an apt example of such uncertainty. I believe every crisis presents an opportunity for innovation. When we recognize it, we can end up stronger every time. The current set of challenges emanating from the contagion has presented us with an opportunity to embrace a different approach that negates existing threats and those emerging from such unforeseen disruptions. How is that? It is by starting small with digital adoption and continuing the momentum to digitize education and examinations. Once every education sector stakeholder recognizes the many opportunities it accords, they'll shape a system that continues unabated, safeguarding students, teachers and others alike from such unwanted developments.

**Trust me. We can sail any wave. We can get through any disruption; we always do. All it takes is a small step in the right direction.**

*Mercer | Mettl's State of Online Examinations Report 2021 gives you unparalleled insights into the journey, experience and challenges that universities and colleges faced in taking the digital route. Over 650 participants across more than 18 countries participated in the survey. Respondents include deans, HODs, professors and other influential decision-makers.

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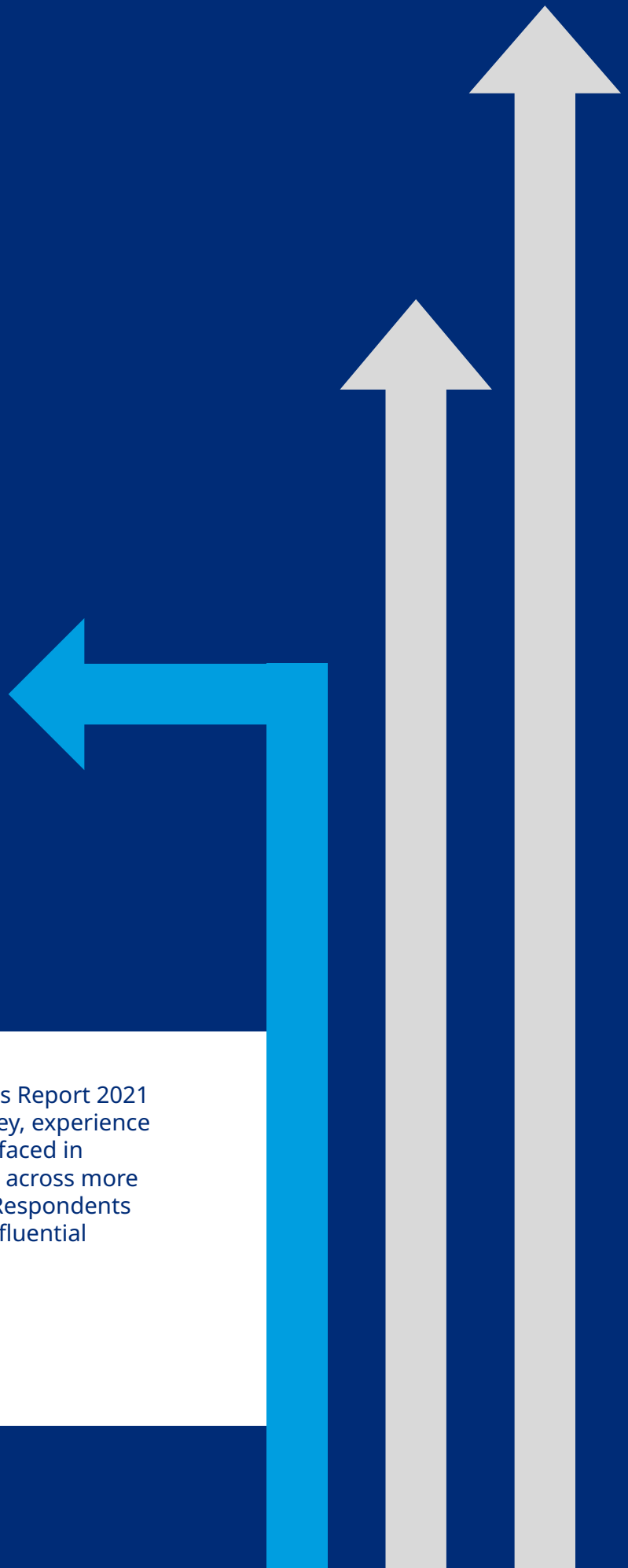
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At Mercer | Mettl, our mission is to enable organizations to make better people decisions across two key areas: acquisition and development. Since our inception in 2010, we have partnered with more than 4,000 corporates, 31 sector skills councils/government departments and 15+ educational institutions across more than 90 countries.

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