



Managing high-stakes assessments and exams during crisis

Introduction

Education systems globally are working to react to the COVID-19 pandemic. To contain the virus, schools, universities, and education and training institutions have closed around the world on a massive scale. This is an unprecedented situation in the history of mass education. School closure has affected teaching, learning and assessment processes, requiring shifts in thinking and more flexible approaches to continue education during the crisis.

Many countries have shifted to online and distance learning modalities, and now policymakers are determining how to manage assessments, particularly high-stakes exams. Summative assessments, such as end-of-cycle exams and university entrance tests, are a concern in many countries given the substantial weight they have in grading policy, for example, in countries where national exams count for 75% of the grade in addition to continuous assessment, which make up 25% or less. These exams are critical to the future of many students around the world, especially those from disadvantaged groups (World Bank 2020).

This Issue Note looks at the coping strategies of countries to manage high-stakes exams during the crisis. Countries are adopting different strategies - in many cases a mix of them - to cope with the situation, including organizing exams with special arrangements or exceptions to the rules (e.g. school-based examinations with physical distancing, remote assessment with parental supervision), cancellation, postponement/rescheduling, on-line assessment, and introducing alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning (e.g. review of student's past assessments/learning portfolio, validation of learning without exams). However, some students may be more able to participate in one particular arrangement for exams than another, opening up a discussion about inclusion and fairness. Also, alternative approaches could lower exam standards, as could modified exams with less test items or project work.

Defining the topic and related key issues

A key question posed to policy- and decision-makers is how to manage timetabled assessments¹ and exams - in particular those related to end-of-key levels, school leaving, university entrance exams and gateways for job, and how to end the school year smoothly. In many cases, these are high-stakes, high-accountability exams offering a way to standardize and justify learning outcomes and for the system to evaluate learning gaps in terms of quality and equity in student learning, which may link to teacher performance evaluation or school funding. They represent sheer challenges for policymakers as the interruption of these examinations is delaying the decisions on student progression, certification, qualification and graduation. This may involve critical implications on entry into higher education and the labour market, quality and equity of learning outcomes, and fairness in qualifications obtained, leading to potential lifelong consequences on the students and learners' progression in life as well as a broader socio-economic impact on the economies and societies.

Different countries have adopted different strategies for high-stakes exams by trying to answer the following policy questions:

1. If exams are maintained, how should they be conducted? Should the same format and administration be kept?
2. If exams are cancelled, how to assess and certify learning?
3. If exams are postponed, until when?
4. If high-stakes examinations are conducted online, how feasible are they in terms of connectivity, security, proctoring, etc.?
5. If alternative approaches are introduced, what can they be? How should they be conducted? When?

The situations across countries and territories vary significantly in terms of systems, context, resources, and capacity. Despite the diversity, a common issue is the context of uncertainty with regard to the evolution of the pandemic, the duration of school closure, the procedures and date of school reopening, etc., which requires **broad consultation and public communication** for effective policy decision making. Another common issue is the critical importance of **ensuring equity and fairness** in exams and assessments. Where alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning assessment² are used, there are issues of **validity and reliability**, as these approaches could lower the standard of high-stakes exams, as could modified exams that cover less test items. The question is whether current students will have the same level of competencies as assessed in previous years, which may also exacerbate the issue of fairness.

¹ Examinations, mostly series-based, that specify the date and time at which all candidates must take the assessment. The tests are timetabled in conjunction with the common school year calendar or academic timetable, i.e. all assessments within a given series will fall within the exam period defined by concerned schools, institutions or education authorities.

² For example by reviewing student's past assessments/learning portfolio without exams.

Lessons from past practices and current crisis

There are universal standards and practices in emergency education to continue teaching, learning and assessment during a crisis (INEE 2010). Financial cost, culture, ICT infrastructure, availability of devices, availability of digital and non-digital teaching and learning resources, capacity and complementarity of different strategies are among important factors for countries to consider options for exams under crisis situations. The experiences so far, including those of relevance in the past, point to the following lessons:

Postponement and rescheduling are common choices for exams under crisis situations and should correspond with the speed and scale of the outbreak

The policy measures being taken by countries to manage high-stakes examinations and assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic³ indicate that the most common strategy they have been choosing among the following five strategies is to postpone or reschedule examinations:

1. Maintaining scheduled examinations
2. Cancellation
3. Rescheduling/postponement
4. Online examinations
5. Introducing alternative approaches

Regardless of interruption in teaching and learning, monitoring of student learning still needs to be conducted

Interrupted teaching and learning inevitably make student learning assessment difficult. This challenge can still be tackled by combining formative and summative assessments⁴ and/or allowing exceptions to the rules - for example offering “50 per cent concession” exams,⁵ allowing both current and former out-of-school children to prepare for exams,⁶ awarding full marks for students for practical exams⁷. The common response is to determine students’ grades based on the evidence of their standard of work (IB 2020), which may include teacher assessed coursework, practice/mock tests, previous academic attainment, and other factors. However, there is concern that this approach may not be entirely fair, since previous attainment may not represent the student’s current performance, teacher bias could be an issue, and alternative grading could lower the competencies normally assessed in exams.

Formative, continuous assessment can be used as a solution to cancelled high-stakes exams

A sample of the literature points to formative assessment as a solution during crisis, specifically continuous assessment for “gauging ongoing progress by identifying learner strengths and weaknesses” (INEE 2010). This approach is more inclusive (GEMR 2020) and leads to greater achievement if teachers and students actively engage with each other and what is shared (INEE 2010). The most efficient way to continuously assess is online - there are many online guides, courses, and tools for creating digital

³ UNESCO’s rapid assessment of national coping strategies on high-stakes examinations and assessments carried out between 24 March and 9 April 2020. See details in *UNESCO (2020); COVID-19 – An overview of national coping strategies on high-stakes examinations and assessments*. Working Document, Paris, April 2020

⁴ Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2003-4) combined formative assessments with the final assessment (summative assessment) for decision on student transition to next levels or access to university.

⁵ Jammu and Kashmir Board of School Education, India, 2016

⁶ UNICEF support to Syria’s Ministry of Education, 2015

⁷ Governments of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Tamil Nadu, India, 2006

lesson plans and e-tivities, including quizzes, polls and surveys. However, not all students and teachers may have access to devices and the Internet, and may not have the capacity to quickly shift to online learning.

If necessary, continuous assessment can be conducted by other means, such as speaking through telephone or mobile cell, or texting or sending audio or video recordings, or distributing packets of learning materials and textbooks to students without online access to follow up on the student learning over time. OECD research shows that the success of students overcoming the crisis without a learning gap, especially disadvantaged groups, relies on maintaining close interactions with teachers (2020), including through continuous assessment. However, authentication of the student's work could be an issue, and therefore measures must be put in place to ensure the authentication of the learner's work is verifiable to limit cheating.

Ensuring assessments and exams are conducted in a fair and reliable way

The coping strategies adopted by different countries indicate the different levels of impact of the crisis in countries, and point to mitigation readiness based on system infrastructure, resources, and the capacity to respond quickly and effectively to challenges. Despite the diversity, one common aspect is the context of uncertainty, which makes decision making difficult. Adopting a combination of strategies including introducing alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning appears to be an effective strategy when exams have to be cancelled, postponed or rescheduled. However, they work only if they are conducted in a fair and reliable manner, and controlled for teacher bias - a risk of formative assessments⁸, through strategies such as anonymous submission of coursework, peer assessment,⁹ evidence-based grading,¹⁰ and flexibility in accepting grades for admissions to universities.¹¹ They should also be conducted when students are available, with fair alternative arrangements for those who are sick, have caring and home duties, or who must work, as well as be feasible for teachers and appropriate for the subject being assessed.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

Overall guiding principle - Ensuring equity, inclusion and fairness

- ✓ Any decision regarding assessment, recognition and validation of learning during the period of school closures must be guided by concern for equity, fairness and inclusion.

Options for exams during prolonged and massive school closures

- ✓ Postponement and rescheduling are common choices for exams under crisis situations and should correspond with the speed and scale of the outbreak.
- ✓ If exams are to be maintained on schedule, due considerations must be given to options that can ensure the safety and hygienic conditions of exam takers and those involved in the

⁸ Teacher bias is why, for example, the UK moved away from formative assessment, to high-stakes exams (GEMR 2020).

⁹ For example, Coursera - an online higher education course provider in the US - relies heavily on students assessing each other. They sign an honor code promising not to abuse the process. See more details at <https://learner.coursera.help/hc/en-us/articles/209818863-Coursera-Honor-Code>

¹⁰ Including both teacher assessment and the option for learners retaking the exam at a later date when institutions reopen if they are unhappy with the calculated grade.

¹¹ For example, SATs results have become optional admissions criteria for many universities in the US.

administration and grading of exams, for example on site examinations with physical distancing or online examinations.

- ✓ If exams are to be cancelled, alternative ways for administration, grading and certification should be made available while addressing issues of fairness, robustness and teacher bias.
- ✓ Consider rebalancing the emphasis on high-stakes exams with formative assessment to promote learning and educational progress during crisis, while controlling for teacher bias with grading focused on evidence of student achievement over time rather than just their performance during the test.
- ✓ Higher education and TVET institutions should be flexible about the grading policy used for credit transfer and admissions.

Policy recommendations

1. **Alignment:** Ensure alignment through coordination with other relevant departments regarding decisions to adapt assessment, recognition and validation of learning at secondary level, particularly when they relate to higher education admission, certification and access to regulated professions and labour market.
2. **Public Communication:** Consult social partners, students' unions and parents' association and develop a communication plan in order to ensure buy-in of teachers, their representatives, parents and society. Communication at national and international level should include information on changes in final qualification awarded, if any, to ensure mobility and recognition.
3. **Combining multiple assessment modalities:** Consider a combination of options to ensure fairness in assessment of learning during school closures. These include: additional support to teachers; consideration of earlier assessments; reduction in the number of subjects tested; automatic recognition and validation of student learning; and conditional admission to university; complemented by remedial courses upon school reopening.
4. **On-site examinations:** Any decisions relative to on site examinations must be based, first and foremost, on guidance provided by national health authorities. Should on site examinations be maintained (even if postponed), sanitary measures need to be ensured in line with guidance provided by national health authorities.
5. **On-line examinations:** Consider online examinations only when issues regarding equal access to infrastructure as well as connectivity, protection of personal data, security, integrity and online proctoring methods, transparency, and students' digital skills and gaps have been thoroughly examined.
6. **Differentiated approaches for TVET:** Consider differentiated approaches for TVET-related examinations to address the particular challenge of TVET students, and constraints related to practical skills and work-based learning assessment. This could include: postponement of exams; use of continuous assessment results; use of online self-assessment resources reflecting learning and eventually achievements of apprentices; locally organized exams; etc.

Key references

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About UNESCO Education Sector's Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector's issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development.

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was prepared by the Section of Education Policy, based on the findings of the surveys and desk research supported by UNESCO staff around the world, as well as outcomes of the webinar 4.

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