Context

The world is currently experiencing an unprecedented scale of school, university and other learning institution closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the period of school closure is extended in most countries, considerations for handling exams and timetabled assessments are now among the top priorities of all policymakers’ agenda. This is especially the case for high-stake exams and assessments, where, for example, passing the test would allow the student entry into a higher grade or permission to graduate, and many of which are quickly approaching as the current school year ends in May and June in many countries.

A variety of strategies have been adopted in this regard including cancellation, postponement, derogation, on-line assessment/onscreen test, exams with special arrangements (e.g. paper-based examinations with physical distancing, remote assessment with parents supervision), using alternative approaches for validation and certification (e.g. review of past assessments/validation of learning). They represent a sheer challenge for policy makers as the
interruption of these examinations is delaying the decisions on student progression and graduation, and in the case of technical and vocational training and higher education, on credit transfer, certification and qualification affecting their access to graduate programmes and/or the labor market. This may lead to an increased use of online assessment and onscreen test, a potentially larger learning gap within and among countries and a potential lack of qualified individuals for the following year in most of the professions, leading to lifelong consequences on the students and learners as well as a broader socio-economic impact on the economies and societies.

**Objectives**

The webinar was designed to:

- Share information and facilitate peer learning about how governments are coping with the issues of assessments, especially high-stakes exams in the context of prolonged and massive school and university closure and a shift to online and distance learning;
- Explore and examine evidence of promising practices of national education policies on testing, assessment and evaluation in response to Covid-19;
- Explore the potentials and limitations of on-line assessment and implications regarding equity and inclusion.

**Options for Exams and Assessments: A Global Overview**

According to the recent rapid global mapping conducted by UNESCO, countries are opting for different strategies to cope with the challenge. 73 countries had postponed or rescheduled exams, 23 introduced alternative approaches such as replacing exams with research projects, home-based exams, portfolio assessment, and replacing written tests with one single oral exam, 22 maintained exams while in 11 countries, they were cancelled altogether (see Annex 1). Logistic burden, financial cost, culture and complementarity of different strategies are among the likely factors for considering options for exams. Some countries are moving towards or considering online testing, while noting that not all subjects and competencies can be assessed online or through the phone. Issues of fairness and feasibility in alternative assessments (e.g., teacher workload, use of scores from formative assessments) also need attention. It is also important to look beyond school closure, as once schools reopen, student learning needs to be assessed to detect the learning gaps, and remedial and accelerated classes need to be offered to offset the loss of learning.

**Countries’ Coping Strategies for High-Stake Exams and Assessments**

In response to the educational disruption caused by school closures, many countries have deployed distance and remote learning strategies to ensure continuity of learning, whilst
maintaining a focus on equity and inclusion. There are some commonalities in the challenges encountered and the approaches adopted in different countries and territories.

**Hong Kong SAR, China**

Exams and assessments are critical in determining the students’ futures and how they are administered can literally change their lives. In response to the pandemic, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority of China decided to postpone the HKDSE (Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination), the highest-stake exam that determines access to higher education, by one month following the outbreak. It was a very difficult decision for them to make, torn between safety of the exam takers and the administrators and the critical needs of having the HKDSE scores in time for higher education admission. Many experts were consulted, especially medical experts, to ensure the safest environment for the exam. Online testing was also considered as an option. However, the decision was made against it as it was not possible to ensure equity, validity, and transparency of the online testing.

**Lebanon**

Lebanon took a 3-channel approach to ensure continuity of learning: printed assignments, TV programs, and online through various online platforms and learning management systems. National exams for grades 9 and 12 are normally conducted in June. These exams have been postponed until further notice. Different scenarios are being prepared as the situation evolves. The main considerations for moving forward with the exams and assessments include: equity and equal opportunity for all; curriculum coverage as many students have not competed the significant percentage of the intended curriculum; critical cutting point in the school calendar year for students (i.e., will they have to repeat the year?); data security if using online testing.

**Uganda**

There are many high-stake exams in Uganda and they are considered as an “ultimate outcome” of the education system. As the situation continues to evolve, many things remain uncertain and both students and parents are worried. The Government is moving towards using formative assessments. Curriculum are being reviewed to reflect this shift.

**Argentina**

The situation surrounding the high-stake exams and assessments is different in Argentina and some countries in Latin America. A new academic year just started in Argentina and there is not yet a pressure on graduation/promotion assessments. In addition, in Argentina and to some extent in the Latin America in general, there is a lot of focus on and a long tradition of classroom-based assessments instead of standardized high-stake exams. Ensuring fairness and
quality of such assessments is already a challenge, as it is important to ensure the same level of exigence across the country. This may pose specific concerns when classroom-based assessments cannot take place due to school closure. Argentina has been exploring some strategies for online assessment, yet access to computer and the internet cannot be ensured for everyone. In addition, online assessment would require training the students in a mock-up exam situation to ensure familiarity with the timing, the style of questions. Furthermore, it is very costly and not into Argentinian pedagogic tradition. Hence, in order to ensure equity, Argentina is focusing on delivering courses and receiving course work from students and conducting assessments based on them.

Exams and assessments in higher education and vocational education and training (VET)

Exams, assessments, and certificates are critically important for students in higher education and VET as their access to labour market often depends on these degrees and qualifications. These sectors face very different challenges as shown in the cases presented during the webinar.

United Kingdom\(^1\) (higher education)

In the UK, universities are autonomous institutions and they set their own policies on assessments while commonalities are clear and universities are communicating with one another. All face-to-face teaching and traditional examinations have been suspended in universities across the country and most of teaching has moved to on-line provision. The number of assessments and exams has been drastically reduced with automatic promotion introduced in many programs. Many are offering online assessments, but Exam Boards will not use marks from these assessments if these would reduce the students “overall” grade. Many final year students are being offered a 24 or 48 hour time period to download, complete and upload an assessment. Guidance is being given that the assessment should be completed within the normal exam time (e.g., 2 hours), that examiners will make allowances for the extraordinary context, and that IT support is available at all times, and that measures are in place to eradicate malpractices and cheating. Measures being used to prevent cheating include having all students sign a declaration that the work they are submitting is all their own with a reminder that the degree is in jeopardy if cheating is uncovered, use of oral examinations to check on performance, use of plagiarism detection software, etc.

France (technical and vocational education and training)

\(^1\) The speaker was not present at the webinar due to technical problem.
In vocational education and training (VET) where the focus is on practical skills using specific equipment, the impact of school closure on assessments and exams is critical. In France, VET sector faces an additional challenge of keeping the students, with higher rate of them from disadvantaged backgrounds having greater issues of access to equipment and connectivity, engaged during the closure. In addition, the quality of practical skills development is likely to be hampered by the current situation. This is likely to generate inequality and increased dropout rates. The French Ministry of Education decided to cancel all final exams with the exception of individual candidates, whose final exam is postponed to early September 2020. For the other VET students, the cancelled exam is replaced by an assessment led by the VET provider on the basis of the record of the last training year and taking into consideration the school marks, the training liaison booklet and other elements. An examination board will determine the final marks in light of the marks obtained for general and vocational education, results to in-service monitoring situations, and evaluations of training periods in the workplace. Since it is a challenge to assess the practical skills online and without access to materials and equipment, it is important to prepare for the reopening, by setting up additional support and guidelines for those students, through a personalized monitoring including practical skills in VET provider premises.

Exams and assessments in time of the COVID-19 Pandemic – Equity is the key

The situations across countries and territories vary significantly in terms of systemic, social, and cultural contexts and their specific challenges. Despite the diversity, one common aspect is the context of uncertainly with regard to the evolution of the pandemic, the duration of school closure, the procedure and date of school reopening, etc., which makes decision making difficult. Broad consultation and public communication is critical to effective policy decision making. Another common aspect is the critical importance of ensuring equity and fairness in exams and assessments. A combination of options can be considered to ensure fairness in assessment of learning during school closures including: 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. For high-stakes exams, continuous assessments and appropriate remedial programmes should be considered to ensure equal opportunities.

There is no one-size-fit-for-all solution. For instance, some countries may be prepared for online testing, and many are not. Moving forward, a mix of different strategies could be a good way to go, with innovative ways to conduct assessments. UNESCO encourages and facilitates mutual learning based on which each country would make their policy decisions.
### Annex 1: Strategies adopted by countries based on UNESCO’s rapid global mapping (April 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
<th>Number of countries by region</th>
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| **Maintaining exams**                         | Maintaining end-of-year exams during the dates originally set, e.g. class-based/school-based exams with certain safety and strict hygiene conditions in place such as physical distancing, mask wearing, or under special arrangements. | Europe and North America: 8  
Africa: 2  
Arab Region: 6  
Asia and Pacific: 3  
Latin America: 3                                                                                           |
| **Total: 22**                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                    |
| **Cancellation**                              | All or some key exams are cancelled.                                                                                                                                                                               | Europe and North America: 8  
Asia and Pacific: 2  
Africa: 1                                                                                                                                                                         |
| **Total: 11**                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                    |
| **Postponement/Rescheduling**                 | Rescheduling the timetable for exams, mostly by postponing them to a later date in accordance with the sanitary situation. The situation varies greatly from one country to another, depending on the school or academic calendar, the duration of closure of the educational institutions, and the resources needed to organise the exams. The new dates of the exams are not always announced. In some cases, it is announced that the contents of the rescheduled exams will be adapted or made optional. | Europe and North America: 16  
Africa: 12  
Arab Region: 6  
Asia and Pacific: 20  
Latin America: 3+16 countries of the Caribbean Examination Council                                                                 |
| **Total: 73**                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                    |
| **Organizing high-stake exams online**        | This option requires a new organization of the exams and at least one device per student and sufficient bandwidth connection. Most online exams reported have a reduced time for the exams, e.g. from a two or three hour exams to a 45-minute online test. Teleconference is reported as a modality for students at higher education level to present their final dissertations. | Europe and North America: 5  
Asia and Pacific: 3  
Arab Region: 1  
Latin America: 2                                                                                                                                                           |
| **Total: 11**                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                    |
| **Introducing alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning** | Alternative approaches to exams include replacing exams with research projects, switching to home-based exams, portfolio assessment, and replacing written tests with one single oral exam. Other approaches include reducing the duration or number of exams, waiving some subject matters, adapting the content to be evaluated according to the prioritised or adapted curriculum, and unifying the school leaving exam with university entrance examinations. In some countries, adjustments are made to the grading system by taking into account a range of evidences that show student achievement, e.g. through continuous assessments and mock test results. | Europe and North America: 6  
Africa: 1  
Asia and Pacific: 11  
Arab Region: 2  
Latin America: 3                                                                                                                                                           |
| **Total: 23**                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                    |
| **- Of which: Reducing number of exams**      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Europe and North America: 1  
Asia and Pacific: 2  
Latin America: 1                                                                                                                                                           |
| **Total: 4**                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                    |
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