

COVID-19 related changes to upper secondary assessments in six countries: Adaptations and reactions

Conference Abstract

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Abstract

In 2020 the world shut down as COVID-19 took hold. Most countries imposed some form of lockdown, people were required to work from home and schools shut. In many countries, these closures affected upper secondary school leaving examinations and assessments as most were scheduled to take place after the start of the school closures. Each country and/or assessment organisation had to develop a strategy for managing the assessments in these circumstances. The strategies varied from cancellations and postponements, to altered assessment structures and moves to online assessment (UNESCO, 2020).

Our research investigated these changes to assessments in six contrasting countries: the Gaokao in China; A levels in England; Standard 12 examinations in India; the Second Cycle State exam (*la maturità*) in Italy; the *Evaluación de Acceso a la Universidad* in Spain; and the ACT, the Advanced Placement (AP) and the SAT in the USA. For each assessment we were interested in how the approaches in 2020 compared to the way that they were assessed pre-covid, what changes (if any) were made in the subsequent academic years, and whether there were any changes to the standards of the examinations.

We also compared the sentiments surrounding the changes and considered whether any problems were identified. The changes to examinations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic could be expected to generate comments from both education bodies such as teaching unions, and the public. As the research was carried out relatively soon after the changes were announced, there was limited academic literature available in this area. Therefore, the searches focused upon media coverage. Newspapers and other media sources often report the perspectives of important stakeholders (Shih, Brossard & Wijaya, 2011) and are able to publish such information with immediacy that is unavailable to other sources (Nasir et al, 2022).

We used Factavia to analyse newspapers from the affected countries to identify issues or problems that arose from the changes, and the reactions to them. We used the name of the assessments as our search term and we limited the results to articles tagged as education. This step was necessary as Factavia suggested many articles that had no relevance to our search, particularly when using "A level" as the search term for the English newspapers. Finally, we excluded articles that did not contain opinions on the changes.

We found that the changes to examinations varied by country and by year. There were changes to all the assessments in the 2019-20 academic year, but by the 2021-22 academic year only A levels England and the Standard 12 exams in India still had pandemic-related changes. The changes in 2020 ranged from complete cancellation (A levels), to cancellation of some exam sessions (e.g. ACT) or papers (e.g. *La maturità*), to merely postponing the assessments (e.g. Gaokao). Most examinations that were run had some changes to the examinations. The AP and some of the Gaokao arts papers moved online whilst the AP and *la maturità* changed their papers. These strategies continued to be used in 2021, although the changes to individual examinations were not always consistent between years. There was evidence of changes to standards in England and India.

The analysis of the sentiments reported in the media showed that issues were reported for all the assessments. The postponement of the Gaokao in China appeared to be the best received of all the changes. The only negative press coverage reported concerns about how well students were prepared for the exam and whether they would be more anxious. In

contrast, the move to calculated grades in England received far greater coverage, with concerns about the results, the grading process, fairness, grade inflation, and, once the grades had been published, anger about the grades themselves. Students in every country except China launched petitions about the changes, although the subject of the petitions varied. Students in India objected to the use of school assessments to calculate results, whereas students in Italy and Spain objected to exams being held, and students in England were objected to the calculated results. In both England and the USA, students threatened or started lawsuits about the results. The most widely reported issues concerned anxiety and access to university. However, the most negative coverage concerned the technological issues with the AP and the calculated results generated by the algorithm in England.

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