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## **EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE ASSESSMENT: A STUDY OF PERSPECTIVES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF PAKISTAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Online assessment is not a novice concept, yet, gained popularity only after the noxious COVID-19 invaded the world. Much of the literature is focused on the effectiveness of online assessments and the challenges faced by the teachers while setting online examinations. The challenges, students faced while attempting online examination is the least studied area as of now (Özden, 2005). Therefore, the current study intends to explore the university students' perceptions of the challenges they have faced during online examinations owing to COVID-19 by adopting phenomenology as the basic research method. The criterion sampling technique was used for the selection of 15 university students from across Pakistan. The data was collected in vis-à-vis interviews sessions preferably, however, the researcher used zoom where intercity logistics were involved. Findings revealed that students were particularly challenged on technical and financial grounds, and social structures of combined family setups further added to their problems. The implications are equally valuable for academia and policymakers.*

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**KEYWORDS**

*Online education, online assessment, e-assessments*

**INTRODUCTION**

The benchmark for a successful teaching-learning process conducive to the intellectual development of the students have always been assessments procedures. Formative assessment is focused on providing students ongoing feedback on their performance, whereby tends to be more informal and ungraded in majority of the cases. Summative assessment on the other hand is rather cumulative in its nature and is always graded (Kearns, 2012). Assessments further serve as the checklist for teachers while measuring their own performance. Therefore, the whole process from deciding the type of assessment suitable for a particular course to the implementation while facilitating the students during the whole process by mitigating the challenges, they may face, is a critical determinant for an eminent teaching-learning process (Tosuncuoglu, 2018).

Strictures that governments across the globe had to take in order to curb the virulent strain of noxious COVID-19 jeopardized the whole education system (Mumtaz, Saqulain, & Mumtaz, 2021). The termination of face-to-face activities left educational institutions with no other option but to accept the challenge imposed. Educational institutions and universities henceforth turned to online education as the only alternative available. Online education though is not a novice concept yet challenging for a majority of traditional students and teachers. While having households transformed into classrooms with absolute zero physical contact with teachers, participating in routine teaching-learning activities became pretty challenging for a majority of the students let alone taking assessments (Gathuri, Luvanda, Matende, & Kamundi, 2014; Mumtaz et al., 2021). Since online assessment is not conducted in a closed environment, maintaining its sanity and validity is highly questionable and is not usually trusted by a majority of a traditional teachers. The rapid shift in the entire educational paradigm demanded expeditious measures, stringent guidelines and comprehensive policy on conducting valid, reliable and secure assessments compatible with the online format (Jawad et al., 2020). However, autonomous academic bodies responded differently to the situation in Pakistan (Khan, Khan, & Shah, 2022). For example, Ministry of Education Pakistan cancelled annual board examination across the country and promoted students of classes 10 and 12<sup>th</sup> on the basis of their 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> results respectively (Abbasi, 2020). Nevertheless, Higher Education Commission (2021) issued a comprehensive policy abstaining universities from promoting students on the basis of their previous results. Additionally, universities were given a liberty to choose between online assessments or on-campus exams while observing COVID-19 related SOPs (Ali, 2021). Since students and teachers experienced a great deal of challenges during the entire procedure of online assessment, it is about time to bring advancements in the educational sector. The current study therefore, attempts to

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contribute towards the goal of a sustainable and tech-savvy educational infrastructure by exploring the challenges, our students faced during online education most importantly during their assessment.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Examination and assessments are helpful in judging learning capabilities of the students and hence are significantly essential part of education systems across the globe. Traditionally examinations are conducted in a closed environment; classrooms to be more specific while being physically proctored by faculty. Nonetheless, the onset of COVID-19 strengthens the concept of distance education. Not just the routine classes were conducted online but universities in Pakistan had to conduct their examination online in adherence to the policy guidelines of Higher Education Commission Pakistan (HEC) followed by lockdown across the country.

Assessment- though a straight path apparently, requires teachers to put in diligent and thoughtful efforts to design a purposeful and reliable mechanism to achieve pre-defined core educational goals (Barnes, Clarke, & Stephens, 2000). Aligning teaching and learning activities with assessments tasks are the inherent pre-requisites, whereby feedbacks and interaction between designers, delivers and assessors helps in promoting deep learning rather than superficial approaches among the students (Gathuri et al., 2014). Though many of the universities of developed countries have adopted online education during the last decade, examination were yet to be conducted in a physical setting (Sabbah, 2010) owing to the expensive security implications. Nevertheless, conducting e-assessments was inevitable for the universities amidst global pandemic. The unpreparedness for conducting online examination whereby posed several challenges, validity and trustworthiness remained the key challenges throughout. Yet, there has been a massive debate, if all the assessments and its types are valid in online set-up, what ensures their trustworthiness?

Validity by and large identifies which assessment approach suits best while assessing certain learning objectives of the course whereas reliability, feasibility and transparency usually serve as the fundamental constituents of validity. Trustworthiness primarily deals with the prevention of cheating and use of unfair means in examination, accessibility, inclusiveness, and privacy whereupon should remain intact.

Formative assessments are known as assessment for learning among educators. It tends not just to improve students' achievement, metacognition and motivation but aid low-achieving students by setting equitable learning outcomes for them. While summative assessments remain an integral component of teaching-learning process, faculty struggled to adopt the formative assessments in online learning systems (Doucet, Netolicky, Timmers, & Tuscano, 2020). Most of the strategies conducted in physical

classrooms generally lose their relativity in online setup thus require a shift in assessment approaches, tools and mindsets. Given the immaturity of sophisticated technologies, formative e-assessments were burdensome for the both students and the faculty, when overwhelming workloads are considered equally deleterious for both (Doucet et al., 2020; Xiong & Suen, 2018). Moreover, to evaluate students' learning over time, teachers are required to track and triangulate student observation, conversation and assignments which require a colossal amount of work which is less likely to be efficiently undertaken by the teachers. Thus the overall validity of assessments is jeopardized (Xiong & Suen, 2018).

Development of summative assessment require teachers to demonstrate certain professional and scientific evaluation skills, yet a majority of teachers lack these skills even for physical classroom assessments let alone online assessments (Elmehdi & Ibrahim, 2019; Xiong & Suen, 2018). Since much of the online assessments are not proctored, and are only intended at endorsing the completion of a course. Awarding a degree requires some kind of proctoring. Proctoring software are rather expensive and therefore, are usually avoided by university administrators (Xiong & Suen, 2018).

Teachers faced a hard time designing a course in parity as of face-to-face courses owing to a number of reasons. Almost all the universities have their own guidelines for students' evaluations. Regardless of the detailed guideline provided by HEC on what and how to conduct examination, direction setting internal policies both for students and teachers were missing in a majority of cases (Joshi, Vinay, & Bhaskar, 2020). Additionally, most of the teachers were bound to use open source examination platforms known for their limited customizability thus leaving teachers with fewer options to assess the students (Joshi et al., 2020). Classroom discussions and presentation though are ungraded often, have been a critical determinant for students learning in a face-to-face setting. However, on contrary to physical classrooms, keeping up with voluminous postings on discussion boards and blogs have been an overwhelming activity for the students. Also, teachers tend to avoid been engaging in any such activity owing to the amount of reading involved (Kearns, 2012).

Barricading cheating in an online setup is another serious concern (Abduh, 2021). To mitigate cheating, a majority of teachers have turned to setting multiple exam papers for a single class resulted in intensified workload. Yet, uprooting cheating from an online setup is easier said than done. It is highly unlikely for the students to remain honest in the absence of a proctor. Results of a study conducted on validity of online assessments revealed that impersonating in an online classroom is easier for the students. There are paid services available who would impersonate students during an exam. In case of universities that require non-shareable attributes such as biometric to attempt the paper does not fully address the perils of impersonations. Students can let

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anyone attempt their papers on their behalf in their presence (Gathuri et al., 2014).

Time management has emerged as another serious concern at students' end (Abduh, 2021). An online format does not provide students the liberty of reading the whole paper at first and attempt to answer those on priority they feel confident with. Students as a result remain juggling with the questions and failed to answer the questions they are prepared for (Joshi et al., 2020). Findings of a study concluded that students have spent their allocated time more on solving technical glitches and contacting technical person than on attempting the exam paper (Abduh, 2021). Good internet connection is therefore, critically significant for a smooth conduction of examination. LMS and other assessment platforms usually don't support offline working. Hence, the lost in connectivity during the examination not only cost students their time by forcing them to repeatedly answer the same questions but also bring anxiety and distraction.

Moreover, the online education system impede the physical connection of teachers and students, adversely affecting the incidental communication opportunities that have not only been detrimental for their motivation but hindered a continuous feedback considered significant for improving their overall performance grades (Mumtaz et al., 2021; Yasmin & Sohail, 2017). Since distress is an essential concomitant of lack of motivation among students, accessibility of computers and internet added to the emotional burden of the students. Lack of required computer skills and familiarity with online assessment processes further aggravated the situation for students particularly (Alruwais, Wills, & Wald, 2018; Mumtaz et al., 2021).

Maintaining academic integrity and assessment security are indispensable. Though there are a variety of assessment tools available online to conduct assessment, not all suffice the purpose fully. Existing resources are particularly inadequate for conducting high stake assessments such as thesis and viva (Gamage, Silva, & Gunawardhana, 2020). To curb the academic dishonesty it is critical for universities to explore available options, provide intensive high-end technical faculty trainings, set attainable benchmark aligned with learning outcomes and adapt to multi-level security strategies promoting academic honesty while ensuring trustworthiness and validity (Teo & Pueh, 2020).

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

1. What are the perceptions of the students about the different methods of assessments used in universities?
2. What are the challenges students faced during online assessments?

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs qualitative inquiry and phenomenological research design.

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Phenomenological approach identifies the phenomena as in they are identified by the actors in the situation and studies the experiences from the perspectives of the individuals (Aguas, 2022) aiming at gathering deep information through inductive methods (Polkinghorne, 1989). The current study was also focused on exploring the in-depth information and analysis of lived experiences of university students since the close focus of the study was to develop an understanding of the challenges university students faced while attempting the online assessment.

### Population and Sampling

15 students enrolled in different universities across Pakistan were purposefully selected as the participants of the study (Lavrakas, Shuttles, Steeh, & Fienberg, 2007). The sample comprised of 7 male and 8 female participants and not bound to any specific discipline, university, or city. While selecting the participants from a university, it was ensured that students have attempted at least one online examination of their degree programs. Prior consent of the participants was taken through phone calls. Participants were open and were willing to share their experiences.

The following criteria were used to decide the inclusion of the participants in this study. All the participants were enrolled in any degree program, have attended online classes, and attempted online assessments during COVID-19.

**Table1: Demographic Information of the participants**

Information	Gender	Department
Participant 1	Female	Bs Hon IT, B. Ed completed. AIOU,
Participant 2	Female	MSc IT UCP Gujranwala, B. Ed completed, AIOU
Participant 3	Male	B.com, MBE, M.Phil. ELM 4 <sup>th</sup> semester, UMT Lahore
Participant 4	Female	B.Ed. Hon, Doctorate on homeopathy, MPhil ELM 4 <sup>th</sup> semester, UMT Lahore
Participant 5	Male	MBBS 2 <sup>nd</sup> year Sialkot medical college
Participant 6	Male	BBA 4 <sup>th</sup> semester, UCP Lahore
Participant 7	Female	BS Hon educational planning and management, B. ED. MPhil ELM 4 <sup>th</sup> semester, UMT Lahore
Participant 8	Male	MBBS 2 <sup>nd</sup> year, Apwa Medical College, Faisalabad
Participant 9	Female	MBBS 2 <sup>nd</sup> year, Sialkot medical college
Participant 10	Female	MBA final year 4 <sup>th</sup> semester, NUST University Islamabad

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Participant 11	Male	MPhil Pharmacy, FCC, PU Lahore
Participant 12	Female	MPhil, UMT
Participant 13	Male	Bs Hon BBA 8 <sup>th</sup> semester COMSAT, Islamabad
Participant 14	Male	Doctor of Physiology, Zia-ud-Din University, 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester, Karachi
Participant 15	Female	The Karachi university BS hon Psychology 1 <sup>st</sup> semester

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### Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants enrolled in ten different universities of Pakistan. The researcher asked open-ended questions in order to develop a deeper insight into the challenge students had been facing while attempting online assessments.

### Interview Guide

A self-developed, semi-structured, interview guide, was used to gather data. The interview guide was comprised of 16 major questions leading to several following questions wherever deemed necessary. The first area intended to gather the demographics of the participants and the rest of the areas intended on exploring the students' perception. Initial draft of the guide was shared with all the researchers and few changes were made after discussion. The finalized guide resulted in questions focused on gauging the more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Some questions were amended to avoid jargons.

Piloting it with a critical friend sufficing the inclusion criteria, further improved the guide. The piloting highlighted the gap of the context in which the questions were asked and the perspective in which the answers were given. Henceforth, the guide was revised and used for gathering information.

### Data Collection

Data were collected using semi structured interviews from the participants. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. 15 students enrolled in different chartered universities, who have attempted at least one online assessment were selected. Interviews were recorded using two android devices in case of one-on-one interviews. Zoom recording feature was used where interviews were conducted online. Also, all the participants were informed and their consent was sought prior to the whole process. Majority of the interviews lasted for 40 minutes. However, few, stretched to a one and a half hour. It took the researcher almost two months, to collect the data. Participant's consent was taken to use their recordings for the purpose of research with

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a surety that secrecy will be intact by all means.

All interviews' recordings transcribed verbatim and translated in English language, typed and saved both in hard and soft forms for later use. The body gestures and other non-formal cues of communication were closely observed and recorded and proved to be important while understanding the big picture of students' responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Reflective thematic analysis was applied to analyze the transcript. Reflective Analysis can be applied to both inductive and deductive and henceforth best suited the current study. Reflective analysis as suggested by Braun and Clark should be conducted in six-phases. The six phases facilitate within back-and-forth movement for rigorous data engagement.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

Thematic analysis generated multiple codes that were categorized in a theme based on similarities. The major patterns highlighted the factors such as being novice to the system, socio-economic factors, and time management.

#### **Novice to the system**

The sudden shift to online education caught both the students and teachers off guard. The dynamics of physical classrooms are entirely opposite to the online classrooms. Much of the teaching-learning process is carried through technologies and requires the participants to be tech-savvy which not the case is with the students enrolled in graduate studies. The students are usually familiar with MS software. Being familiar with software such as Zoom, teams, and other conferencing software needed proper training in order to get the most out of it. However, since teachers themselves were not apt at using any online software supporting distant learning, help was no-where to be found.

It was a whole new paradigm and hence require proper trainings. None of us was comfortable using these technologies just for taking lectures let alone taking exams (participant 6). Online assessment was yet another dilemma for such students. Majority of the students found it difficult to attempt papers without having a liberty of the support of their teachers during examination. Majority of the students attempted paper multiple times but failed to submit it to their institution owing to the lack of understanding of the procedures.

We only had two months of studies during lockdown and were forced to attempt the papers that too online. Teachers themselves were not comfortable while using this latest technology and spent most of the lecture time figuring out the features of this

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online-system. Also, there were several questions that requires illustrations and could not be described in-text solely. To add to the miseries, I could not submit my first online paper owing to sudden power failure.

**Lack of understanding**

Practical fields such as engineering and medical are subjected to the field work and could only be best understood if provided with any such opportunities. Online classes deprived them of their field work. Teachers were bound to explain the content through lectures that lead to confusion and created boredom among students. Also, environmental factors and their financial conditions hindered their learnings which ultimately adversely affected their results.

It was overall a daunting experience. Lectures were not tailored for online mode and so were the assessments. Questions were detailed and lengthy and generally involved a lot of typing and if you are not a pro-typist, you would certainly have missed the game. Presenting the questions was yet another challenge. Above all answering the questions that were not well-understood from the content that was not well-delivered was the root cause of the whole problem (Participant 12).

**Financial Constraints and Socio-economic factors**

Pakistan is a developing country. Families' mithered under crippling financial conditions. Meeting the new academic needs and providing more than one technological gadget was an additional burden. Students from humble backgrounds were not able to attempt the papers at owing to the unavailability of required gadgets, suggested bandwidth. I could not attempt the paper as my sibling and I had a paper during the same timeslot. We belong to a humble background and could not afford to buy another laptop during pandemic (Participant 5).

Unavailability of a designated space also added to the challenges of the students. Not many students were given any exemption from their households not even during their regular university time. Most of the students could not ask questions as they had a lot of noise around them. I didn't feel motivated at all because I was forced to attempt a paper for which I was not prepared. Not because I didn't want to study but because I could not afford to have a quiet place, I live in a combined family system. I had no liberty to use laptop for as long as needed; I share my laptop with my siblings and two of my cousins. To listen to the recorded lectures on repeat or to even download it; bandwidth in my area is not ideal.

I failed the paper that otherwise, I would have passed with distinction (Participant 10). Furthermore, universities offer a number of facilities to the

students including digital facilities, libraries and online learning resources. During pandemic students were only left with the latter that too become inaccessible at times. On the other hand, teachers and management totally ignored the cumbersome situation and bombarded students with multiple quizzes and assignments.

I wish that my voice could reach out to as many teachers as possible. The whole system of online education was new to us as well. Teachers have always been bragging about the stress teaching us online has brought to them while dealing with their domestic engagements. I wonder, what made them inconsiderate of the fact that many of us were professionals. We had to work online causing us a lot of screen stress leading to eye infections and vertigo in extreme cases. Unlike them, we were working, dealing with the household and studying at the same time. Yet we were given impractical deadlines to meet. They sure did save their day but lost the respect we had for them (Participant 8). Furthermore, teachers were least bothered with the short deadlines. Not all of them, the majority; however, posted tasks late at night with a submission due early morning the next day to get themselves safe from administrative pressures. We had a teacher who usually very quietly post assignments late at night with submissions due in the morning, left us working like mules, and yet have had the quality compromised (participant 11).

### **Responsible body for Issues**

Since this online education was a new term not for just the teachers and students but for the managements of otherwise physical organizations. Though all three of them figuring out what works best in those tedious times. However, the onus of designing and implementing a smooth, hassle-free system was on the management and administrators which unfortunately as per the opinion of the students, they have badly failed.

The situation demanded for revised attendance policy considering the limitations of students and ensuring their maximum participation at the same time. Training sessions for using online teaching-learning tools should have been arranged. Additionally, a policy that could intact the overall decorum of the organization should have designed and implemented to curb the challenges. The situation however, was quite opposite. Teachers were not well prepared and hence comforted students by giving them undue favours in their assessments and assignments or vice a versa. Students on the other hand took the most advantage particularly in the case of technophobic teachers. They skipped their classes and used the issue of low bandwidth as mere excuse. Furthermore, they used all the possible means to cheat in exams and while doing their assignments. Teachers on the other hand were no less ignorant. They did nothing to address such issues on their own behalf, comforted students to cover their deficiencies. Hence

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started a rat race, failed by the students who have been honest to themselves during this whole situation.

Everything comes with a price tag, so does the honesty. I had been honest while attending classes, submitting assignments and attempting paper but scored equal to the students who had been using unjustified means to get through the routine procedures. Now the question comes what the management was doing to regulate the whole thing? The content we were taught was not designed for online education, online assessment is yet a far-fetched idea to be executed in Pakistan and yet we have been assessed while the challenges, teachers and their own competencies, management and lack of policies have totally been neglected? Is there any regulatory authority to assess Universities for all such unjustified practices? (Participant 4)

## **DISCUSSION**

A significant part of the literature and previous studies is based on the challenges based by the students due to online education rather than online assessment. The study's research question was regarding the main challenges faced by university students in online assessment. This whole process of online education was cumbersome and has its toll not just on faculty but on students as well. The technical trainings provided by the universities were rather otiose leaving both the students and the faculty to sort their issues during the teaching time which brought forward the serious issues of time management especially during assessments.

Besides, Pakistan is a developing country, and a vast majority of the students suffered due to the lack of proper resources. Parents could not provide separate technical gadgets to all of their children resulted obstructing their class participation. Besides, a majority of Pakistani households are based on combine family system and hence has fewer chances for students' having a dedicated learning time, let alone a dedicated place costed students their time and concentration and eventually their grades.

While the entire teaching-learning system is meant to ensure the learning of the students, faculty and management could not be spared for being novice to the online education. Online education and assessment regardless of its novelty in underdeveloped countries such as Pakistan, is a very known and frequently used medium in the rest of the world. A plenty of literature identifying the challenges, proposing solutions and discussing best practices from across the globe was available for consultation. Teachers might have been benefitted, if they have chosen otherwise. Teacher's training should be mandatory in such scenarios, especially when the technology is involved. Additionally, the socio-economic factors should be considered as the majority of the students belong to the humble backgrounds and in most cases

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are the bread winners for their families. Hence the affordability is highly subjective.

The lack of regulatory authorities functional to the level of students' satisfaction has been detrimental for students' motivation. Students were neither motivated to learn during their semesters nor they were prepared for the examination. Also, the back and forth switching between on-campus and online studies frustrated the students to the level that they reverted to protests. The takeaway from the whole situation is the need of a comprehensive policy for online studies and assessments while taking into consideration the challenges faced by teachers and students.

### RECOMMENDATION

Considering the unpredictability of the magnitude of the situations such as COVID-19, it is inevitable for the universities to have a workable alternate plan to initially respond the emergencies.

Necessarily, should the universities choose to adapt/adopt any alternative plans for traditional teaching-learning process, bound to provide trainings on pedagogies, instructional design, time management and effective classroom engagement apart from technical trainings.

Moreover, financial constraints of both the students and faculty be taken in consideration while establishing a response to the emergency situations.

Strict observation protocols by the regulatory authorities should be observed while implementing any alternate plan and necessary amendments should be encouraged based on the observation results.

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