

## Current Issues on Assessment in Education during Pandemic

### *Isu Semasa Pentaksiran dalam Pendidikan ketika Pandemik*

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#### Article progress

Accepted: 04 Jun 2021

Reviewed: 29 July 2021

Published: 31 May 2022

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**Abstract:** School-Based Assessment (SBA) is a concept integrated into the Malaysian education system to harmonise the assessment of an educator into the process of teaching and learning, with an idea to optimise students' understanding of a subject they are learning. Enforcing discipline and engaging students in learning are difficult, especially when both parties are separated miles away. Thus, this paper will cast an overview of the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Malaysian education system, issues related to online assessment in the Malaysian education system during pandemic and assessment practices, challenges and solutions during a pandemic by other countries. The methodology used in this paper is qualitative, through a review of documents specifically on past studies from 2019 to 2021. The findings showed that a pandemic such as e-Learning is widely used, and SBA replaces formal examinations. Then, the need for technology tools and internet connections become a never-ending issue for students. However, few countries have come out with online assessments to replace formal assessments practice in the classroom. In conclusion, the rapid changes in the education system need prompt action from every party involved, including teachers, students and parents. No one child left behind policy should always be the highlight of the education system during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Pandemic; Assessment; Formative Assessment; School-Based Assessment;

**Abstrak:** Pentaksiran Berasaskan Sekolah (PBS) adalah konsep penilaian yang digunakan oleh guru-guru dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran bagi mengoptimalkan pemahaman pelajar terhadap sesuatu subjek yang mereka pelajari. Disiplin yang melibatkan pelajar dalam pembelajaran bukanlah tugas yang mudah, apatah lagi ketika kedua-dua pihak dipisahkan dengan jarak. Oleh itu, artikel ini akan menjelaskan kesan Pandemik COVID-19 terhadap sistem pendidikan Malaysia, isu-isu yang berkaitan dengan penilaian dalam talian dalam sistem pendidikan Malaysia semasa pandemik dan amalan penilaian, cabaran dan penyelesaian semasa pandemik yang dilaksanakan oleh negara lain. Metodologi yang digunakan dalam artikel ini adalah kualitatif, melalui tinjauan dokumen secara khusus mengenai kajian masa terdahulu dari tahun 2019 hingga 2021. Kajian terdahulu menunjukkan bahawa semasa pandemik e-Pembelajaran banyak dipraktikkan, dan PBS menggantikan peperiksaan formal. Selain itu, keperluan untuk alat teknologi dan sambungan internet menjadi isu yang tidak pernah berakhir dalam kalangan pelajar. Walau bagaimanapun, beberapa negara telah mempraktikkan penilaian dalam talian untuk menggantikan amalan penilaian formal di dalam kelas. Kesimpulannya, sebarang perubahan dalam sistem pendidikan, memerlukan tindakan segera dari setiap pihak yang terlibat, termasuk guru, pelajar dan ibu bapa. Tidak ada seorang pun kanak-kanak yang ketinggalan atau 'No child left behind'

adalah dasar yang harus menjadi asas keutamaan sistem pendidikan semasa wabak ini.

**Kata kunci:** Pendamik; Pentaksiran; Pentaksiran Formatif; Pentaksiran Berasaskan Sekolah;

## Introduction

In 1918 the world was shocked by the rise of the H1N1 Influenza A virus, commonly known as the Spanish Flu. A virus whose sole purpose is to infect and mutate and multiply is born to kill civilization. It lasted for two years before it was disappeared into thin air, leaving behind a broken society and devastated economies. Today we face a new Spanish Flu with a different name, COVID-19. Like a century ago, it poses to threaten all aspects of our life, including our education system. Since December 12, 2019, a persistent outbreak of an unknown acute respiratory tract illness has been reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, coming from the Hunan South China Seafood Market that later spread all over the world. On January 25, 2020, the first instances in Malaysia were confirmed among Chinese travelers arriving in Johor via Singapore (Sipalan & Holmes, 2020). Educators in Malaysia have to do their part to curb the spread of the disease, like our counterparts in any other sector. The fact that we suffered a pandemic almost 100 years ago is a humorless joke. Humanity with all its glory was not prepared. With depleted the arsenal at our disposal, we reduced to the only thing we could do, "social distancing", the bare minimum to slow down the spread of the disease.

As a result, the purpose of this article is to look into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Malaysian education system in a short period of time since it began in January 2020. The other goals are to investigate issues connected to online assessment in the Malaysian education systems during a pandemic and assessment practices challenges and look at possible solutions during a pandemic that other countries are considering.

## Review of literature

This paper focuses on the impact of the pandemic on education systems that bring up assessment issues that require immediate solutions. The research method of this paper is qualitative, and it is to establish a literature review on the current pandemic issues globally via past studies in 2019 to 2021 where pandemic as COVID-19 assaults the world.

## Effects of the pandemic towards the Malaysian education system

Effects of the spread of COVID-19 to the education system around the world is undeniable; Malaysia was not exempted. When the COVID-19 virus ravages the world, the education sector was not spared. Schools were quick to be shut down in fear of the disease. It was not long before the education system adopted the unconventional learning method to outlast the pandemic. Even with good intentions, rushing comes with a myriad of issues and the concern of the effectiveness of SBA in this new environment is not excused. With student-focused education principles rooted in the education system, being virtually available in a virtual classroom is a challenge to both the teachers and students.

With the ratio of students and teachers in this county at 12 to 1, it is not hard to see that schools and universities are prime real-estate for the virus to breed. The unexpected rise of the R-Nought of COVID-19 has caused the government to close the public education system earlier than planned. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) turned towards the saving grace of the internet, introducing online learning to replace face-to-face learning in the classroom in an absurdly short amount of time. E-learning which has on no occasion been taken seriously in this country, suddenly became mainstream overnight. Sudden migration into e-learning is felt like a shockwave. Like the famous Turkish proverb reminded us, "He bites his tongue who speaks in haste".

With no end in sight, tech giants rushed to beef up their platforms for the new norms, teachers and students were introduced to the new breed of learning platforms in the likes of Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx and Skype to provide a conducive setting for students to engage and have a feeling of belonging in one way or another. Even students are now required to learn 'independently' in a new environment at home compared to their daily school routine, where technology becomes the primary medium that has completely transformed teaching and learning operations (Rish, 2020).

Furthermore, MOE came out with the new revision of curriculum alignment to suit the current pandemic

situation in July (MOE, 2020). This new revision of curriculum alignment is to support teachers in teaching and to learn for non-examination classes, which involves Standard Curriculum Primary School (KSSR), Standard Curriculum Remedial Class (KSKP) and Standard Curriculum Secondary School (KSSM). This new curriculum alignment consists of rearranging content, pedagogy, and assessment based on the expected learning to fulfil subjects' specific needs. It is essential to clarify the Malaysian education system's assessment and show that assessment should be integrated while teaching and learning occur.

### **Assessment in the Malaysian education system**

Several drastic changes need to be made to remedy decades-old practice in the Malaysian education system. One of them is recognized to be "assessment". A significant first step is to have the students learn instead of memorizing. It determines learners' ability to improve by shaping their understanding of a particular subject (Abduh, 2021). In other words, assessment lies at the heart of the teaching process (Joseph & Adamu, 2020).

The current changes are reshaping what is taught, how it is learned, and validated in advanced ways that benefit individual learning. Individual progress in learning becomes the focus of the learning process when the learning moves from instruction by teachers to students. Students can develop their analytical and problem-solving skills and skills in deep learning, lifelong learning, self-directed learning, reflective learning, and motivation through student-centered learning (Indrianti, 2012). A student-centered classroom is one in which teachers consider the needs of all students, both as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process actively. At first, teachers should identify students' strengths and weaknesses before student-centered learning can take place. Students need to be responsible not only for their learning but also for their peers. Teachers may encourage group activities that need students to still work in the group even the distance, and online platform may limit their interaction. However, with good monitoring, group work still can be done.

Furthermore, teachers may provide a breakup room for each group to discuss with the Zoom application meeting. Teachers will be the facilitators to be in every breakup room for monitoring. During this phase, assessment can also be done with self-assessment and peer assessments. Thus, the Malaysia Education System changes begin with introducing School-Based Assessment (SBA) in 2011. SBA officially began to be implemented in 2011 for Grade One primary school pupils and Form One secondary school pupils in 2012 (Malaysian Examinations Syndicate, 2014c). However,

SBA is not a new aspect of the national assessment system of Malaysia. Summative assessments such as final examinations have been conducted in schools before implementing the new SBA system (Malaysian Examinations Syndicate, 2014b).

The first public examination changes in Malaysia can be seen when Malaysia Examination Syndicate (MES) introduced Form Three Assessment (PT3) to replace PMR in 2014 after the introduction of PMR in 1993. The PT3 is one of the four assessments under the overall SBA system. The decision was to make less focus on examination-oriented learning for students. The formats are made in a way that students' learning can be examined throughout the years. Therefore, if students are incompetent to achieve the learning goal, teachers are responsible for assisting and guiding students throughout the year.

The transformation in Malaysian Education assessment is undeniably affected by the poor performance in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). TIMSS and PISA provide a more detailed framework for assessing student success globally (Abdullah et al., 2016). Students' poor performance in these exams showed the drawback of the existing education system in generating internationally competitive personnel. It eventually becomes a starting point for MOE to critical strategy the reformation of education policy in Malaysia called the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013- 2025 to improve the education system in all aspects.

### **Issues related to online assessment in the Malaysian education system during the pandemic**

With all classes and activities taken online in a hurry, MOE does not precisely have a deck of total cards to choose a viable platform. Like most people, naturally, MOE turns towards big tech companies to rely on. That means companies like Google, Microsoft, Facebook and others. These platforms are generally built to be generic, with every function that they have pretty much similar. They are made to be used by billions of people, which should come as no surprise. From the eyes of an assessor, several obvious issues present themselves in these early days of e-Learning migration.

First and foremost, the concern is technology availability. Most middle-income families have a standard PC or laptop at home; to fit 30 people in one 14-inch screen is not exactly ideal for teachers. Some more impoverished families might even rely on a 7-inch smartphone, not to mention only 5 million users have access to a broadband network for a smooth video conference call. The next concern is discipline. Children

will be children, and Malaysian children are not strictly comparable in Germany, Finland or Japan. In 2017 survey shows that up to 63% of parents support corporal punishment (Perimbanayagam, 2017). That is not an anomaly since many Malaysians have been watermarked and blueprinted with corporal punishment for generations.

The third concern is privacy. Data breaches and privacy scandals haunted big tech companies a few years back. The government-sanctioned the online mass exodus of underaged children and young adults to provide virgin hunting grounds for hackers and stalkers. One does not take long to find prankster gate-crashing online classes on YouTube. It will just be a matter of time before the government drags into a scandal of its own.

To top it off, the more economical health of the students severely affected by the pandemic, The Internet, usually associated with freedom, isn't exactly free. During this pandemic, the Malaysian unemployment rate has risen to 4.9% nationwide (Jaafar, 2021). With Internet service, laptops, PC, modems etc., costs money, some students will suffer considerably more than others. These few general factors unquestionably will hinder an assessor's ability to make and assess at a personal level, which will defeat the purpose of SBA.

Therefore, even e-learning is one of the best solutions that the education system can employ, the effect of using it is still unavoidable. The demand for technology and the internet may raise up the education cost for certain families, and parents need to monitor their children as the surfing of the internet nowadays is borderless. The most important thing is the level of reliability and validity of assessments should be one of the great concerns in the education system.

## **Assessment practices, challenges and solutions during the pandemic by other countries**

### *China*

According to Su (2020), it is impossible to promote online assessment for many reasons effectively. First, many of the students with different places and different abilities to sit for online assessment. Second, online assessment is not scientific and fair enough. Third, test developers must define the answering method explicitly as needed, but several high-scoring questions could not be answered online.

Besides, many online assessment techniques need to be studied first before they can be considered durable and accurate. Finally, China agrees to look at the formative assessment. The formative assessment also helps China MOE assesses students' performance (Su,

2020, Zuo 2021). Their education experts and policymakers have considered how students of top universities in the world are being selected. They have also begun to realize that the formative assessment can avoid large-scale mass problems and evaluate a student in a more detailed manner, allowing future academic success to be anticipated more accurately (Zhang, 2016; Komolafe, 2021).

This changes from face-to-face assessment to online assessment supported by Zhang et al. (2021) as the EFL teachers made the assessment decisions and selected assessment methods based on policy, the local context, and their own teaching experience and reflections. Teachers managed to plan and improvised the classroom assessment based on the needs of the online assessment. The percentage of formative assessment is raised. Meanwhile, the percentage of summative assessment is reduced.

### *United Arab Emirates (UAE.)*

Al Falah University, United Arab Emirates, has developed another alternative in conducting the assessment as they have shifted to teaching and administering examinations online. Students are tracked using proctored software when taking the home-based exam. A recorder can capture live footage of students taking the exam and the surrounding area (Halaweh, 2020). However, this software needs students to prepare the related tools such as laptops, webcams, and high-speed internet connections. This proctored software can detect students trying to cheat based on their body movement, face, or head away from the camera. However, there are other reasons why people move their bodies in a particular situation. Proctoring methods do not guarantee students will not cheat (Halaweh, 2020; Hussein, 2020).

Meanwhile, according to Hussain et al. (2020), Several software tools were employed at Al Ain University, where the current study was conducted, to ensure that the testing procedure was as efficient as feasible. Respondus Lockdown Browser, for example, is used for audiovisual monitoring during examinations, Turnitin is used for plagiarism detection, Moodle is used for testing, and MS Teams is used for oral exams. In addition, students and faculty members were given orientation seminars to familiarize them with the new manner of learning and teaching and assessment.

Besides, tools such as Blackboard Learn and Lockdown Browser are also used to allow students to perform examinations at home. These tools allow for more fair and valid tests as they perform certain actions to prevent students from using third-party software during assessments to cheat (Ali & Al Dmour, 2021). Meanwhile, Pu & Zu (2021) reported that teachers assess

their students' written assignments via WeChat applications because it assists students in getting the assignment on the spot without the need to spend time online all the time.

### *The United States (US.)*

At first, US MOE highlights students' welfare, commitment, and environments for learning that must be given more attention before they can face the new norm of learning. Therefore, schools are responsible for gathering this information to advise how students should confront the trials elevated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It will not be easy, but it is vital to address the long-standing disparities that vulnerable students must contend with. According to Jimenez (2020), teachers must take on three critical assessments, which should never be overlooked. First, diagnostic tests are performed at the start of the year to determine students' preparatory points and provide teachers, schools, and parents with recommendations on how to help children access grade-level information.

Second, formative and intermediate tests serve as scrutiny throughout the year, indicating how teachers should modify their instruction to increase student learning. Third, year-end summative assessments provide data that may be compared across subsets to determine how well all students met the state's academic standards. Meanwhile, according to Kasilingam (2014) and Farrel (2015), the use of open-book tests has been recommended. Thus, this open-book test online is practiced during the pandemic and is one of the methods to assess the students' learning (Rahim, 2020).

Therefore, the findings show online assessments are the alternatives for teachers and educators considered during the pandemic. Besides, some tools for assessment purposes are also developed to ensure that the assessment conducted is reliable and valid for the students. However, not to forget that formative assessment is not new in the education system. It can be applied in teaching and learning without special requirements such as a big hall and examination papers.

### **Conclusion**

COVID-19 undoubtedly has stunted the education system around the world, albeit not halted. Conventional systems proved to be a risky endeavor to be continued at the time, and the internet has proven to be a saving grace. E-learning will continue to be a challenge for the foreseeable future. However, the online assessment during the pandemic should never be questioned. During this challenging time, formative assessment is the best way to assist students' learning and track students'

progress in learning in every subject they learn. Policy and standard of procedures must take precedent regardless of their tools to make SBA relevant during this pandemic. With limited resources and too little time, the basics must take centre stage at the end of the day. The parent must understand the difficulties, and students have to take responsibility for their education, and teachers have to be creative to engage. Although many would think outlasting the current pandemic is the goal, one must never forget a possible pandemic in the future.

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