

**COVID – 19 AND HITCHES IN CONDUCTING EXAMINATION WITH  
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FACULTY OF ARTS & CULTURE,  
EASTERN UNIVERSITY, SRI LANKA**

**J. KENNEDY<sup>1</sup> & A. SUJENDRAN<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Senior Lecturer in English, Department of Languages,  
Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

<sup>2</sup>Senior Assistant Registrar, Department of Academic Affairs,  
.Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2020.3524>

**ABSTRACT**

The pandemic situation after the spread of COVID – 19 brought many disturbances to almost all the fields. Education is one such field which has been affected by this crisis. Conducting summative examinations during this period becomes another painful matter in the field of education. Almost all the educational institutions face this problem, though they conduct online or face-to-face examinations. Some of the universities have unique problems even before the pandemic situation such as a large number of students and lack of infrastructure facilities. Faculty of Arts and Culture in the Eastern University, Sri Lanka faces the above-mentioned problem before the pandemic outbreak. Now, during this crisis, the problem becomes more prominent due to various health reasons. This paper researches the ongoing problems in conducting summative face-to-face assessments with respect the Faculty of Arts and Culture in the Eastern University, Sri Lanka and some practicable recommendations are given which could be useful to other educational institutions as well.

**Keywords:** COVID – 19, pandemic, assessments, examinations, Faculty of Arts and Culture, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Every curriculum in the education system needs to be checked. One such way of checking is assessing the target group whether the subjects that are being taught, reach the intended outcome. Assessments have two types: formative and summative. Formative assessments are done during the course of teaching progression and summative assessments are done at the end of the course. Tanner and Jones (2006) say that assessments are the hardest part of any teacher and that would nearly become a sensitive one. Whether the assessment is formative or summative, the teacher becomes prey for the course that she/he teaches, since it involves the mastery of the student with respect to the subject taught.

In this light, conducting formative assessments inside the classrooms becomes somehow easier than conducting summative assessments due to many constraints and it has its own

benefits as well. Shute and Kim (2014) state the following benefits: "(a) it allows for comparing learner performances across diverse populations on clearly defined educational objectives and standards; (b) it provides reliable data (e.g., scores) that can be used for accountability purposes at various levels (e.g., classroom, school, district, state, and national) and for various stakeholders (e.g., learners, teachers, and administrators); and (c) it can inform educational policy (e.g., curriculum or funding decisions)."

COVID – 19 becomes a big challenge to almost all the fields, including studies from the school level to higher educations. It encapsulates both the students and the teacher/administrators who run the set of courses. The administrators include the people who conduct examination (especially summative examinations) as well.

Today many students are going for their higher studies, especially for their university or college education in order to obtain a degree. To attain their task, they face several challenges in the learning process which includes assessments as well. For this, attending for formative assessments are somehow easier in comparison with attending summative assessments such as appearing for such examinations.

From the part of students' perspective, appearing for summative examinations are tough, but from the perspective of conducting such examinations are tougher than the students. It is because the process of conducting examinations are more and the person-in-charge for the examination has to cross many hurdles since the summative examinations are more sensitive and they carry the future of the students who follow any course.

## **1.1 Arts-Based Students in the Sri Lankan Universities**

The Sri Lankan system of selecting students for the state universities is different from other countries since Sri Lanka offers free education from Grade – 1 to university undergraduation. Therefore, the government involves in selecting students for university undergraduate education. Even within the stream of education (arts, science, accounts, management-based), the selection process differs. For instance, the science and management based students are selected in district wise quota and the arts-based students are selected island-wide. This makes the student population for the arts-based stream students higher than other streams, even this number exceeds the total non-arts based stream students.

## **1.2 Arts-Based Students at the Eastern University, Sri Lanka (Faculty of Arts & Culture)**

The Faculty of Arts and Culture was established in 1988 and now it has 14 departments of studies and two disciplines offering fourteen (14) degrees [13 special degrees and 01 General degree] programmes. Two thousand and four hundred and eighty-five (2485) number of students are presently following their studies in this faculty from first to fourth years.

Some courses are compulsory to all students in one particular year. For instance, General English, Information and Communication Technology, and Social Harmony are some of the subjects where all first-year students must follow. Likewise, General English and Information and Communication Technology are two subjects where all second and third-

year students must follow. At the end of each programme (end of the semester), a summative assessment has to be conducted and their results have to be released within three months from the date of the examinations. Further, students are subject to select a combination of subjects, that is, in the first year of study, they must select three core subjects along with other compulsory subjects mentioned earlier.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Conducting summative examinations during the normal period in the university system itself is a tiresome and hectic process. This process begins from setting the question paper until releasing the final results (this may further extend when students request for re-evaluation and re-scrutinizing). However, summative examinations become a must for the testing of academic creditability. Further, students would like to show their academic success in order to establish social respect through family pride and other aspects (Gow, Bella, Kember, and Hau, 1996). These may be seen the positive effects of examinations in the cultural context.

At the same time there are many arguments and criticisms that state the negative effects of the summative examinations. Shumway and Harden (2003) argue that the effects of the exams and on exams are changeable. This unpredictable effect may sometimes bring stress on the students. For some students, this stress results in physiological and psychological effects on the "academic" performances during the examination (Timmins and Kaliszer, 2002).

However, examinations become part and parcel to exhibit academic excellence. This process becomes more critical and complicated after the spread of COVID – 19. As Cairns (2020) remarks "the Covid – 19 global pandemic challenges us to adopt a new normal. The fraught changes brought about by nation-wide lockdowns and exam disruptions."

## 3.0 EXAMINATION DIFFICULTIES IN ARTS-BASED STUDENTS AT THE EASTERN UNIVERSITY, SRI LANKA

In view of the Faculty of Arts & Culture at the Eastern University, Sri Lanka, the number of enrolled students is nearly 2500 and each has to appear for formative final semester Examination.

Every semester examination, for each paper about 800 to 1300 students appear at a time. They all have to appear face-to-face examination where all candidates must write the examination at the same time.

Some of the major problems that the Faculty face are: examination hall capacity, handling physically challenged students and students having chronic diseases, preventing malpractices of the students during the examinations, supervising and invigilation by the academic staff members, and transportation of question papers and answer scripts.

### 3.1 Examination Hall Capacity

The first problem arises is the allocation of space for writing the examination. The examination hall capacity in the normal setup is 650 (the biggest hall). In the normal condition, the Faculty does not have any problem. But the COVID – 19 makes the conducting the examinations complicated due to the health advisories from various sectors such as the Presidential Task Force for COVID – 19, the Ministry of Health, the University Grants Commission (UGC) are some whose main advice is to “follow the health instructions” which further instructs to keep social distance which is to maintain one-meter gap among the students.

### **3.2 Handling Physically Challenged Students and Students with Chronic Diseases**

Every child has the rights to learning. So is to apply to the physically challenged children. The Faculty has more physically challenged students than other faculties of the University, and more of them are visually challenged. They need assistance right from home until reaching their homes. The usual practice for conducting examination for them is to allocate an invigilator to readout the questions and they in turn type with the braille typewriters. Here assisting them in maintaining social distance will become a problem, where close assistance is needed for the said physically challenged students.

Other problem would be faced to the students with chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart patients, and other such diseases. Two kinds of problems will be faced: one set of students declare that they have such diseases, the second set do not divulge about their problems with others (officially and unofficially).

While conducting face-to-face examinations, there won't be much of problems with the “declared” set of students. That is, attention and more care can be drawn towards them. But the problem is the “undeclared” students where none of the examiners and their batchmates does know to give more attention toward them. Further, conducting online examinations to the visually challenged students will be impossible at present with the availability of the resources.

### **3.3 Preventing Malpractices of the Students during Examinations**

Whether ethical or not, day by day, students are being caught for malpractices during the examinations such as; bringing unauthorized materials to the examination, using mobile phones (smartphones), copying others, writing points on their body parts (palms, hands, dresses, and thighs) etc. are some of the malpractices occurred very frequently. Apart from the above list, students have the capacity to invent new methods which could be found out at the time only.

Catching them becomes impossible since the supervisors and invigilators are bound with “social distancing” health-protective policy. The supervisors and invigilators will be scared to go near the students and it is natural for everyone to protect themselves. Further, conducting online examinations will never have any guarantee for these malpractices at the present scenario with a huge set of students.

### **3.4 Supervising and Invigilation**

Of course, supervisors and invigilators are humans and they have their own protective measures of maintaining social distance which becomes practically impossible while conducting both face-to-face and online examinations.

Another problem is handling answer scripts. Handling question papers may not have many problems since they could be printed and packed well in advance. But handling the answer scripts immediately after the examinations will become a problem since the supervisors and invigilators have to handle them physically and manually. The supervisors may request the candidates to keep their answer scripts at the table and take them back could be done later after fumigation. However, the answer scripts are usual papers and while fumigating they will get soaked.

### **3.5 Transportation of Question Papers and Answer Scripts**

The same above will occur while transporting the question papers before the examination and bringing back the answer scripts after the examinations. The people are compelled to move closely during these processes and maintain social distance will not be practised.

### **4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The followings are recommended for the smooth conducting of face-to-face examinations:

- a) To handle a huge number of students of the Faculty while conducting face-to-face examinations, divide them into groups based on the infrastructure building capacity and conduct different examinations at different intervals. For instance, if there are 1000 students in one batch and the hall capacity is only 200 (maintaining the social distancing), then divide them into five groups (based on their register number) and conduct examinations in five different times, where five different question papers have to be set for the same paper. However, students may say that is a human rights violation where one paper may be easier than the other one to the same batch.
- b) In the same way, separate examinations must be conducted for the physically challenged students and students having chronic diseases where the number of students will be very much less and more attention and care can be given. Also, for the students who have some chronic diseases who do not reveal themselves, the Faculty can request them to declare their type of disease well in advance. For the physically challenged students and students having chronic diseases, a physician can be allocated while conducting examinations.
- c) To prevent malpractices during examinations is purely depend on the students' behaviour and it may not be practically possible to identify those students. Also, when a student is found out at the time of the malpractice, the supervisor or invigilator cannot go near her/him unless the supervisor or invigilator wear a protective dress.
- d) For handling the answer scripts, the supervisors, invigilators, and the hall attenders must wear hand gloves and this is the only protective measure they can follow.
- e) Also, after the examination, the answer scripts have to be packed with small numbers where they can be handled (carried) by a single person. The total weight for a packet should not exceed three kilograms and the size of the packet must be handled by a single person.

- f) The same way mentioned above will be the solution for the transportation of the question papers and answer scripts, before and after the examinations.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

It is a challenge in all educational sectors throughout the globe while having assessments: both formative and summative. However, conducting formative assessments may be easier since they mainly depend on the teacher, but conducting summative assessments in a formal way becomes a very tough task, especially with the universities. Sri Lankan universities with the arts-based students deal with such a huge number of students. So is the case of the Faculty of Arts & Culture of the Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

This global pandemic situation contributed many challenges to every sector globally and this affects the educational sector as well. It is really a challenged task for conducting examinations since they involve the credits and the standard of each student. Getting out of these challenges also becomes another challenge and they have to be handled individually and case after case.

## REFERENCES

- Cairns, Rebecca (2020). "Exams tested by Covid 19: An opportunity to rethink standardized senior secondary examinations" <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-020-09515-9>
- Gow, L., J. Balla, D. Kember, and K. T. Hau. 1996. The learning approaches of Chinese people: A function of socialization processes and the context of learning? In *The handbook of Chinese psychology*, ed. M. H. Bond, 109–123. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Shumway, J., Harden, R. (2003) AMEE Guide No. 25: The assessment of learning outcomes for the competent and reflective physician. *Medical Teacher* 25(6): 569–584.
- Shute, V. J., and Kim Y. J. (2014). *Formative and Stealth Assessment: Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology*. <http://myweb.fsu.edu/vshute/pdf/fsa.pdf>.
- Tanner, Howard and Jones, Sonia (2006). *Assessment: A Practical Guide for Secondary Teachers*. A&C Black, UK.
- Timmins, F., Kaliszer, M. (2002) Aspects of nurse education programmes that frequently cause stress to nursing students – fact finding sample survey. *Nurse Education Today* 22(4): 203–211.