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eBook

3 Pandemic-Related Challenges Facing Admissions Testing Around the World

& How Digital Assessment Can Help

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Key Takeaways

1. Digital, Remote Testing Promotes Equity of Access

2. Flexible Exam Software Keeps Tests in Session

3. Secure Assessments Support Benchmarking

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed education. As schools and universities pivoted to remote education in 2020, faculty explored new teaching formats for the virtual classroom, while students strived to maintain academic performance in an unfamiliar learning environment.

One impact of this unprecedented moment in education is the decision among a growing number of colleges and universities to eliminate admissions testing. Several factors are contributing to test-optional policies, including limited availability of in-person testing centers and concerns about equity in testing and admissions.

When done well, admissions testing can provide an objective measure to evaluate prospective students, helping colleges and universities achieve institutional goals, including improved student outcomes and retention rates. However, there are also some challenges associated with standardized tests and concerns about ensuring an equitable testing experience for students. Developing a digital strategy can help testing organizations support equity of access for every test-taker, increase scalability to support large-scale, remote testing, and safeguard valuable exam material — all to simplify decision-making in admissions.

Let's take a look at the leading challenges admissions exam providers are facing.

Challenge:

1. Equity of Access

Due to the pandemic, many testing centers have closed their doors to entrance exam sessions. Any testing centers that remain open can only accommodate a limited number of candidates to maintain social distancing, and in certain parts of the world, test cancellations and postponements have made it difficult for students to find an open testing center within a reasonable driving distance [1]. Many colleges and universities have switched to test-optional admissions policies simply because it is too difficult to determine if applicants have equitable access to testing sessions [2].

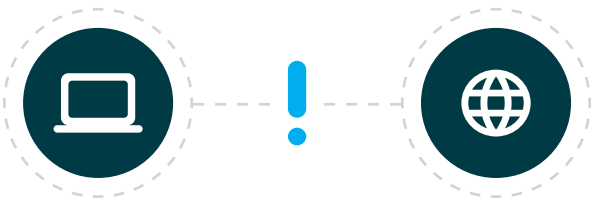
Following a decision to cancel all written examinations for May 2020, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Organization established new criteria to replace the exams — including forecasted final grades submitted by schools — which the IB would then adjust using predictive analysis of historical assessment data [3]. Once it became clear that these adjusted grades were significantly lower than students' actual grades, the IB switched to a "dual route" for the May 2021 examinations, allowing schools the choice between written examinations in countries where it is safe to do so or a combination of assessment coursework and predicted grades [4].

39%

of IB Students

Could Not Sit for May 2021 Exams

Prior to implementing its two-track plan for the May 2021 exam, the IB surveyed 3,000 schools in 152 countries and found that 71% of schools — representing 61% of IB exam-takers — could safely administer the written exams in person [5]. Those 39% of students unable to sit for the IB's written exam didn't have access to the same materials for admissions to represent their performance in IB programs, which could place them at a disadvantage to their more favorably located peers.



A recent report from the Institute of Higher Education cites a study that linked test-optional policies and higher test scores in 100+ liberal arts colleges in the United States, suggesting that students with lower scores were less likely to include them in their application, and thus less likely to gain admission [6]. In the absence of a test-blind policy, there is no guarantee that a high test score — or a written test score in place of some alternate indicator of performance — won't sway decision-making during admissions review, thereby privileging students with access to testing sessions.

Since most problems with equity of testing access result from the in-person nature of traditional admissions testing, a remote alternative can help resolve the issue. However, many digital assessment solutions require a stable internet connection. While a digital solution can serve test-takers anywhere, web-reliant exam technologies can disadvantage students without access to reliable WiFi, causing interruptions that may hinder performance or prevent completion of timed exams.

Solution:

Improve Equity of Access with Offline Assessment

Computer-based software that supports remote, offline assessment can create a more equitable testing experience. Offline assessment allows test-takers to access exams from their personal devices, without the need for WiFi during the testing session — an internet connection is only necessary to download the exam and upload it upon completion. Offline assessment can promote an equitable experience for every test-taker, including those who live in rural areas with limited internet access.

Offline assessment means administrators can administer both synchronous and asynchronous testing; test providers can schedule multiple testing sessions to better fit students' busy schedules, save exam-takers the hassle of traveling to a single testing center, and eliminate cancellations or postponements that prevent students from completing admissions tests.

Challenge 2:

2. Limitations of In-Person Testing

The challenge of administering written exams safely in the COVID-19 era has forced some testing organizations to establish alternatives that may inhibit an equitable admissions process, as noted above in the IB's decision to offer a dual route for its May 2021 exam, following an unsuccessful attempt to create a standardized system for predictive grading in May 2020.

The Parliament of United Kingdom has responded similarly to the IB in its decision to cancel all General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), Advanced Subsidiary (AS), and Advanced (A-Level) examinations for Summer 2021 and substitute exam scores with "teacher and lecturer assessment" [7]. While the UK government will provide exam board support materials to help guide educators in their assessments, there are no specific instructions directing the use of these materials [8], which could lead to the same inconsistencies associated with predictive grading.

Before announcing cancellations for summer 2021 exams, the UK Department for Education had explored the possibility of online assessment, but exam boards indicated there was not enough time to complete the steps necessary for the switch to computer-based testing [9]. Without a timely solution for digital assessment, the UK decided that canceling the exam sessions was the best way forward.

In the past year, countries including India and Saudi Arabia have had success with digital solutions for remote testing. Six thousand students successfully completed the LSAT — India examinations in July 2020 using an online testing solution with A.I.-enabled remote invigilation [10]. Saudi Arabia's Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) used an exam platform powered by A.I. for administering its Standard Achievement Admission Test (SAAT) in June 2020. ETEC's remote SAAT allowed the organization to accommodate exam-takers from multiple countries, while also allowing exam-takers to take the SAAT at computerized testing centers where available [11].

In June 2021, Ukraine announced plans to conduct a trial session for its Education Independent Testing (EIT) in a remote environment [12]. The main objective for EIT is to administer secure, remote exams to over 500,000 high school students in 2022. The first Trial EIT Online is scheduled for September 2021.

Remote EIT Projected to Serve

500,000+

High School Students

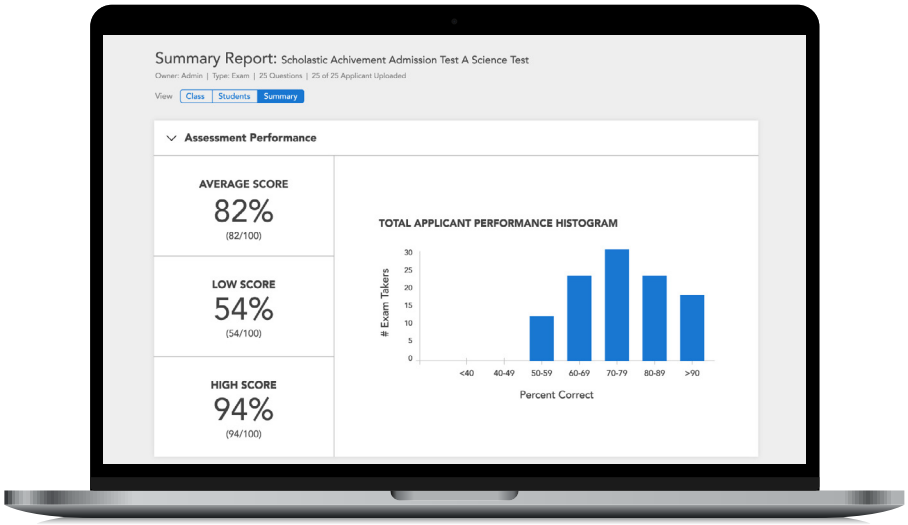
Solution:

Achieve Flexibility in Assessment with Digital Testing

A digital assessment platform can help organizations overcome the limitations of in-person testing by allowing the flexibility to deliver secure assessments on-site or remotely. Digital testing solutions allow students to access exams directly from their devices — administrators do not need to distribute and organize testing materials. Digital testing also cuts the costs associated with paper-and-pencil exams, and it can expedite the review process with automated scoring, delivering results to students faster.

A scalable, digital platform serves a large group of test-takers simultaneously and without interruption. Testing solutions that rely on the internet can overwhelm a testing facility's infrastructure and create connectivity issues during in-person testing sessions. However, a solution that blocks access to WiFi for the duration of the exam ensures a reliable on-site testing experience while preventing academic dishonesty.

Digital testing solutions with remote assessment features, such as invigilation and exam-taker identify verification, also alleviate the problem of limited space in a testing center and eliminate concerns that have led some organizations to cancel exam sessions. Remote exam technologies that provide the same level of security as an in-person testing center ensure the integrity of the exam for all exam-takers – even those abroad.



Challenge:

3. Benchmarking Student Performance

In May 2020, the University of California (UC) school system announced its suspension of SAT and ACT requirements until 2024, citing the need for a new test to assess applicants according to UC-specific values and to support its campus-wide goal of enrolling more students from underrepresented racial groups [13]. Though the UC system made admissions testing optional for their applicants, a report released just one year prior by a panel of UC academics concluded that standardized test scores are an even stronger predictor of college performance than high school grades [14].

U.S. High School GPAs Increased

30%

Between 2005 and 2016

In recent years, grade inflation has made it even more difficult for selection committees to identify candidates for acceptance according to GPA alone. Admissions committees have seen increasing numbers of high-GPA applicants — a 2017 study of grade inflation by Fordham revealed that high-school GPAs in the United States rose 30% between 2005 and 2016 [15]. Since grading criteria are not standard across high schools, universities have been unable to determine whether high grades correspond to exceptional performance in rigorous courses [16]. This variability only became more pronounced during the pandemic, prompting many schools to switch to a pass/fail grading model. While a modified grading system can offset the impact of remote learning on student performance, it also has the potential to obscure students' strengths and weaknesses.

In the absence of standardized test scores, selection committees do not have an objective measure to predict academic performance. Following test cancellations by organizations like the IB and testing regulations including those in the UK, predictive grading is on the rise as a measure to replace test scores in university admissions. But without standardized exams to evaluate students by the same criteria, admissions offices cannot be sure of consistency across the forecasted grades submitted on students' behalf. The IB's past attempts to establish an algorithm to "standardize" predicted grades were unsuccessful, projecting much lower marks for students than those submitted by their instructors and potentially risking students' chances at admission [3].

Some higher ed institutions that choose to go test-optional focus instead on candidates' soft skills, such as personal statements or essays. However, a study from Stanford University's Center for Education Policy Analysis revealed that the quality of an admissions essay is less a predictor of academic performance and more a predictor of household income [17], so replacing test scores with essays in admissions may negatively impact students from low-income families. What's more, a high test score can help students from disadvantaged backgrounds stand out in admissions pools, even without the help of a professional essay writer or the extracurricular activities that pad the university applications of their more privileged peers [18].

Solution:

Preserve Academic Integrity with Exam Security

A computer-based testing platform can provide the security measures necessary to maintain the value of admissions testing as a reliable indicator of student performance. With the help of digital tools that preserve academic integrity, admissions test providers can offer higher ed institutions a universal standard to aid in the selection of qualified candidates.

Exam security features like complete device control prevent academic dishonesty by disabling access to any external programs, screensavers, and web browsers — everything but the test itself — for the duration of the testing session. In addition to security software that restricts computer access, auto-identity verification tools and remote invigilation solutions digitally verify the identity of each test-taker and screen individual testing sessions for any unusual activity.

Security technologies like these eliminate the cost of live invigilators at in-person testing facilities. These technologies protect valuable exam content in a remote environment, and they facilitate a consistent exam experience for every test-taker.

Enhanced Admissions Testing with ExamSoft

With a complete digital solution for entrance exams and admissions testing, your organization can administer secure, offline assessments to serve more test-takers and promote equity in testing. The ExamSoft platform supports test providers in every aspect of assessment — from exam creation and delivery to data analysis — to help organizations improve the university admissions process.

Contact us today to learn how you can benefit from digital assessment with ExamSoft.

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