

REFLECTIONS ON NEW TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION ASSESSMENT

Anca-Teodora ȘERBAN-OPRESCU¹
Irina DAVID²

Abstract

In the past few years all aspects of social and economic life were significantly impacted by the global pandemic, forcing everyone to reconsider familiar ways of doing things and carrying on with their personal and professional plans. Higher education was not an exception, and all the stakeholders involved in the educational system had to cope with numerous challenges and adapt quickly to many changes in all areas of their activity: teaching and learning, evaluating and grading, interaction between teachers and students and among peers, or administrative issues. This article aims to discuss the first two elements from this list and to show how the shift to exclusively online academic interaction triggered reconfigurations of the evaluation systems used in universities. While, as the title of the paper indicates, we would like to concentrate our attention on changes in assessment, we also consider that teaching and learning methods have a strong impact on how acquisition and development of skills is evaluated and that neither of the two aspects can be discussed without making some reference to the other.

Keywords: higher education; (online/ remote) assessment; online/ remote education.

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1. Introduction

In the spring of 2020, when in many countries universities were forced to close their doors and send students home to study online, there was immediate concern regarding ways of implementing quickly the necessary changes and of acquiring new sets of technological and methodological skills to design and conduct effective classes in an exclusively virtual environment. Probably few people, including the authors of this article, imagined this would be more than a transitory one-month period, after which things would get back to normal. However, as weeks of pandemic measures extended to months and the end of the semester and the academic year was getting closer and closer, it became obvious that after the difficult period of teaching online a new challenge was ahead: that of finding the best methods to complete the evaluation, provide feed-back and establish grades that would fit the new circumstances and reflect students' efforts to comply with academic requirements, as well as their level of new skill acquisition.

¹Anca-Teodora Șerban-Oprescu, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, teodora.oprescu@rei.ase.ro.

²Irina David, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, irina.david@rei.ase.ro.

As shown in this article, university teachers from different countries struggled in their attempt to provide accurate assessment and to avoid the pitfalls involved in testing students without being in the same room with them to be able to provide immediate clarification if needed and to avoid cheating. The authors of this article will also provide information about their own experience at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

2. Recent trends in Higher Education assessment

Online or hybrid education has been part of the activity of many higher education institutions for years. Therefore, at a first glance one might think that they were fully prepared for the switch from face-to-face interaction to completely remote teaching/learning and evaluation after the outbreak of the pandemic. However, researchers and practitioners in the field have emphasized that there are relevant differences between e-learning as a general strategy and the changes that occurred starting from March 2020. Terms as “emergency distance education” (Boström et al., 2021: 1), “emergency remote teaching” (Farnell et al., 2021: 22) or “emergency remote assessment” (Cernicova-Buca, 2021: 1) were used to refer to the new paradigm, characterized by remote communication being imposed on the stakeholders instead of accepted by them gradually, lack of time to prepare and adapt to the new situation both technologically and psychologically, necessity to make drastic changes quickly, impossibility to refuse or postpone adopting and implementing remote education or evaluation strategies and tools.

Cernicova-Buca mentions the tensions between academics that optimistically saw the opportunity to adapt assessment to new trends and modernize our perceptions and expectations in terms of how it should be performed and those that considered the risks involved especially due to the way in which assessment facilitated by technological tools would encourage unethical behavior among some students (2021: 4)³. In her study, she highlights the significant impact that the pandemic had on the stakeholders of the education process, and the fact that human commitment and emotional state had to be taken into account in the analysis of the situation and identification of best solutions. According to her,

Evidence (...) points to the fact that teachers felt overwhelmed by the added responsibilities to the workload assumed before the outbreak of the pandemic, while students felt anxiety, anger, detachment, and a loss of purpose in their educational

³ It is interesting to notice that concerns regarding the integrity of assessment given the reduced control and supervision opportunities during online evaluation compared to face-to-face interaction were expressed by many higher education institutions from different countries from the very beginning of the pandemic, long before semesters ended and the need for effective assessment became an emergency (see Farell et al., 2021).

path. Universities succeeded at uneven rates to provide normative and instructional support mechanisms to ease the shift from in-campus education to emergency remote teaching and learning. The whole higher education ecosystem was challenged, and the psychological factors had to be considered alongside pedagogical solutions, technical affordances and the commitment of teachers and students to keep educational processes functional. (Cernicova-Buca, 2021: 4)

A major disadvantage of remote assessment, from the teachers' perspective, was the loss of control and ability to supervise the participants that were evaluated. A possible solution was to enable students to participate more actively in the process, by negotiating assessment methods and relying on peer or self-observation to a larger extent than in the past (Cernicova-Buca, 2021: 4-5, Gradišek and Polak, 2021: 287). However, adaptation came with challenges both for students, some of whom felt the need for human interaction, guidance and feedback during assessment and for teachers, who may have not already had the proper training to make the switch from traditional to online evaluation (Cernicova-Buca, 2021: 7).

In addition, despite the younger generations being perceived as more tech savvy than many, if not most of their trainers, both students and teachers struggled with the high level of technological input necessary for participating effectively in their academic activities. The lack of suitable devices or access to Internet, the need for private spaces at home fit for home-working, different levels of technical competences and the perceived distancing and lack of direct interaction, as well as the higher potential to engage in unethical practices from the students' part are just some of the issues that had a significant impact on teaching and evaluation, as well as on relationship-building and communication between teachers and students and between peers (Boström et al., 2021: 11; Cernicova-Buca and Dragomir, 2021: 2; Gradišek and Polak, 2021: 287-288; Montenegro-Rueda et al. 2021: 11).

In order to mitigate the risks mentioned above and to maximize the effectiveness of the evaluation process, trainers are encouraged to reconsider traditional methods and adapt feedback and grading to the strategies and content of remote teaching and learning. A possible solution would be to reduce or eliminate the emphasis on final exams designed to check accumulation of knowledge and replace them with ongoing evaluation throughout the semester, as well as redesign tasks, "selecting tests with a more qualitative approach that invite students' reasoning and reflection". (Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2021: 11)

García-Peñalvo, Corell, Abella-García and Grande (2020) also recommend teachers to step away from the assessment system they used before the pandemic. At the same time, they are aware of the challenges involved, given that redesigning evaluation procedures to make them fit for online interaction requires efforts and a set of skills that extends to areas beyond teaching and testing methodology. Technological competences and the proper use of technology as a facilitator, not as the main tool

of assessment are also mentioned (García-Peñalvo et al. 2020, qtd. in Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2021: 3).

The same idea is supported by Capperucci and Salvadori (2021), who show that the majority of lecturers that participated in a survey they conducted admitted that faced with the uncertainty of how to carry out final evaluation they had resorted to using the same assessment strategies they had used before the pandemic, which were aimed mainly to check knowledge of specific information rather than development of competences. Although trainers do recognize the value of authentic tasks meant to encourage student reflection and autonomy, actually designing such tasks and evaluating student responses requires a lot of resources in terms of time spent, as well as skills and resources required for designing and assessing, supervising student activity and avoiding cheating, as well as providing useful feed-back (Capperucci and Salvadori, 2021: 9-11). Despite all these challenges, the two authors insist that assessment that facilitates reflection and the expression of self-autonomy should be integrated in higher education curriculum as a useful instrument even after the pandemic fades away and in-campus activity is no longer disrupted (11-12).

3. The authors' experience

Assessment is and has always been a highly debated and questioned way of action rather than a concept. Although it is quite easy to define it and the majority of people agree that it is a necessary part of any education system, there will probably always be heated discussion around how it can reflect to the maximum the actual qualities of the subject or product under evaluation. It goes without saying that things become hyper sensitive when it comes to evaluating individuals, especially in a period of turmoil such as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, when being empathetic and understanding students' health and psychological difficulties had a strong effect on the evaluation process, testing its objectivity.

In this section of our article we will present our own reflections on assessment in English for Economics and Business Communication at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE Bucharest). In a previous paper on academic communication during COVID-19 (David and Șerban-Oprescu, 2022), we looked at changes undergone in terms of how we kept in touch and exchanged information during the recent health crisis and at new ways of building rapport with fellow colleagues and students. We highlighted in the paper, just as many colleagues from Romania and abroad have already done, that we were caught by surprise to a certain extent, but at the same time we also expected the many and varied ways in which communication took new forms and shapes to fit novel circumstances. But it is, nevertheless, communication, fluid in its very nature, highly sensitive to change, highly adaptable, highly complex in its very straightforwardness as a concept.

Ruminating over our educational tactics and strategies used to adapt to the new realities, we stopped to think of something that is perceived as more static, rigid, to be complied with, to be applied, kind of more 'reliable' during change: assessment. No matter what one does in terms of teaching, no matter what students do as learners and partners in the teaching process, one thing is for sure: for most people in an academic environment validation ultimately relies on assessment. From this point on, one question has become of paramount importance, at least from our perspective: how can we make assessment reflective, to the highest degree, of the new teaching methods, of the new ways of online teaching, of the new ways in which students have to acquire knowledge and develop skills?

Naturally, in the pre-pandemic period, we had our tried and tested ways of evaluating our students, which were comfortable and familiar at least from the teachers' perspective. The vast majority of our classes, at least for Business and Specialized Communication – which is what we teach at BA level, are seminars that focus a lot on on-going evaluation. For the greater part these curricula are conceived to develop and strengthen the ability of the students to acquire and practice business vocabulary in foreign languages, grammar and correct spelling and phrasing and enhance their communication skills for future professional contexts; i.e. presentation skills, public speaking, team and leadership communication, debate and negotiation routines. As stipulated in the syllabus, the evaluation of the student was made up of class activity aspects: attendance, assignments done and presented to the class instructor, project work done individually or in groups, presentations in front of colleagues and teacher to be followed by feedback. Another percentage of the overall grade consisted in a written test required at the end of the semester based on the topics discussed during the seminars. The two parts composing the final grade were proportionate and as a rule involved a standard 50-50 percentage to have a balanced input for the final grade.

The advantages of this type of class work and evaluation are numerous. First of all, a strong connection is created between teachers and students. The teachers get to know their students very well, faces become familiar, names are attached to individuals rather quickly, and a quick bond is developed with the entire group of students, as well as between the students themselves. Due to this, students tend to be active during classes both during individual and team tasks: even with the habitual by now distraction represented by at-hand mobiles, it is easy to seek and demand attention, to 'bring back' focus, to solicit answers and to keep the young minds plugged to what is going on in class. At the same time, in-class group work always has a good impact on motivation, making teaching more fun, and encouraging the creation of bonds among students, thus stimulating the appearance of a general spirit of learning in a relaxed, fun environment. Secondly, feed-back can be provided quicker. Assignments can be instantly checked in class, questions are answered impromptu, the teacher may add new information, develop on certain themes that need further clarification, new information can be added that is of direct value to the

issue discussed. Also, the trainer has the possibility, especially in foreign language teaching, to write new words or grammar structures on the board. Pronunciation is corrected, the exchange of information between student and teacher happens 'on the go', in a swift, yet effective manner. The dialogue runs parallel to the monologue and it creates a sense of fluidity and efficiency in communication. Finally, in terms of overall class management, it is easy to spot and stop disrespectful behavior. Also, if there are certain students that act up, the group gathered in class is certainly more effective in appeasing that behavior and, together with the teacher, conflictual situations are ended in rapid manner.

For the specific purposes of the evaluation, on the one hand we have the component of class attendance and interaction, which go into the seminar activity. Also, we have students who are very active – some in each and every class, some from time to time and some that need to be required to answer and participate. Presentations done in front of the group are engaging and students can check their ability to draw the audience in. For the specifics of the written test, at the end of the semester, the drill is traditional and standard in education. The test checks in writing information that students are supposed to have gathered along the semester. It is easy to check and make sure there is no cheating, as in a seminar formation there are fewer students (up to 25-30 maximum).

One of the key disadvantages of the traditional or classic type of students' activity and evaluation is represented by commute time, which influences both the educational process and the evaluation as, many times, students who are late always tend to blame the traffic, the perfect excuse especially in a busy urban area. This applies both to attending regular classes, and to being late for the written test at the end of the semester. Another potential drawback is represented by some participants' tendency to take control of the conversation. One always gets the highly motivated, constantly active students who tend to dominate the class discussions, express their opinions and always complete their out-of-class assignments. Naturally, when homework is checked, these are the ones who want to give the answers and it becomes quite easy for the ones who did not go through homework to continue relaxing, as they are being offered the answers. One way to avoid this is to have students take turns, and get them all involved in the process of checking responses, but it takes a lot of time and there are a lot of other activities to be done during the same seminar. Also, this method of taking turns in answering reminds all of us of the tedious school and high-school drills and we want to make it clear that we are willing to approach the student in a more adult manner. Another often mentioned practice is to have students send in homework via email and have the teacher look through and correct where necessary. But this is hugely time consuming and not really efficient as students rarely take the time to check on teacher corrections every time they send in an assignment. Regarding the final assessment, for the written test the evaluation is standard, but one needs to pay attention to how grading is done, allotted points for each task and correct add-up to compose the final grade. Also,

depending on number of students, grading takes several days of active and dedicated submersion into correcting student hand-ins.

COVID-19 ushered in a total and systemic disruption in every aspect of our lives and, naturally, in education as well. For the purpose of this paper, we will only refer to the changes and their associated pros and cons with regard to the process of evaluating university level students.

Some of these advantages were instantly perceived, while others took some time and became obvious after several trial and error attempts. To start with, timewise, the whole educational process became more time-efficient. No commute hours spent in traffic or moving from one building of the campus to another. It did take longer to prepare the materials and get used to online teaching and the university Moodle platform, but once the steps were learned, it all fell into place. The Zoom platform also came in handy for interaction with the students. Communication became easy in time, just as in class. Furthermore, having the internet at our fingertips it was possible to access quite quickly useful websites and links to be used in the teaching process. It was also easy for students to do their assignments and instantly upload them on the online platform under a specifically designed rubric. As teachers, we would indicate what needed to be done as homework, create the section and leave it open for students to access and upload whenever they wanted to do it – which gave them a sense of autonomy, accessibility and comfort. It was surprising to see and especially hear students via Zoom that were seldom responsive in class. When asked why, some said that from their familiar environment, in front of the screen, they felt less compelled to interact in a certain way and felt comfortable enough to speak with the teacher and fellow colleagues.

For submitted assignments, which automatically went into seminar activity for evaluation, it became easier for teachers to keep track of the students who uploaded their responses, who were late in submitting, or who never completed specific tasks. The platform had every action registered and in sight. For the written test, different approaches have been adopted. Some teachers opted for a submitted online test, or a presentation via Zoom on a given or individually chosen topic among the ones studied that semester. Surprising, or not, taking into account the visible openness of students displayed in the online environment, we also observed that having students present something to us and their colleagues via Zoom was an instant success. They were more comfortable, more at ease, and more open to feedback, with a positive attitude.

The disadvantages of online learning have been already talked about a lot and we will briefly mention some of them. With students having technology and their devices so close to them, there were cases when diversions led to quick loss of attention. Another aspect that needs to be considered is the disruption(s) caused by family members entering the room during online meetings or requiring the student's

attention for specific aspects. While there were students that participated in online classes more than they used to in face-to-face encounters, one cannot deny that there were also those who were irresponsible. This situation was extremely difficult to handle during presentation sessions, when at the end of a speech colleagues were invited to make comments or to ask questions. In some sessions, the same few students participated in the discussion all the time, with the rest of them remaining quiet, while in others the teacher had to keep insisting for someone – anyone – to engage in a dialogue with the presenters. Another major issue is represented by students not turning their camera on, thus not providing the necessary clues for the teacher to know whether they are still following the class. Finally, in online education evaluation has become definitely more difficult to achieve in an objective way.

The same aspects that influenced teaching and learning patterns had a strong impact on assessment methods. In the first year, after the initial shock had apparently been diminished and both teachers and students had become somewhat comfortable with the idea of online interaction, the end of the semester produced a new turmoil, since it was the first time when completely online evaluation was to be performed. For many teachers, it was easier to try and reproduce in the online environment the same final assessment method that they were familiar with: the written test. There were obviously many issues involved. While the university already had a functional online platform that could be used for creating tests, the lack of visual contact with the students made it impossible for teachers to know whether the class participants themselves completed the answers. They had to log in with their own user name and password, but no one could check if it was them completing the tasks. At the same time, it was impossible to know if they were doing the required work on their own or if they were communicating with colleagues, as well as if they were relying on external online sources for inspiration. Teachers testing skills related to business communication in English tried to preempt cheating attempts by creating tasks that would stimulate students' creativity, asking them to express their opinion about specific aspects and to produce brief essays on given topics of discussion. Teachers testing knowledge acquisition created quizzes that organized questions and options in random different orders for different students, giving them a short time to complete the test in the hope that they will not have time to resort to other sources of information than their own memory. Some teachers have decided to have the testing via Zoom, asking the students to keep their cameras turned on so that the teacher can keep an eye on them, but even this proved to be difficult with large groups.

Another major issue with written exams online was related to time management. While most students completed their tasks on time, there were always some who would fail to do so. Obviously, the culprit always seemed to be a weak or broken Internet connection or a failure of the system. In these situations, the teacher had to decide whether to consider the respective students had failed the exam, or whether

to trust them and allow them to submit their work later than their colleagues. Needless to say, this led to differences in grading, since different teachers had opposing views regarding this situation.

Another assessment option in the first semester spent during the pandemic was represented by online oral examination, which eliminated some of the drawbacks mentioned above, but which involved a long number of hours that the teacher had to allocate for each exam.

In the later stages, assessment became better adapted to online teaching and learning. It has become in some cases less formal than it used to be, more focused on the evaluation of skills and communication competences rather than of knowledge. Regarding general business communication in English classes, final assessment, which usually took the form of a written test, was replaced by ongoing evaluation. Instead of taking tests, students were encouraged to do some research on their own or in small teams and deliver oral presentations. The benefits were obvious: autonomous self- and group-study, the development of critical thinking skills needed to select and organize information and public speaking were encouraged. At the same time, students could actually see, maybe better than in the case of a written test, how they could benefit from what they have learned during the semester. However, some of the drawbacks of online classes were also present. Given that the teacher and their colleagues were not in the same room and could only see their faces, some presenters resorted to extensive reading, refusing to accept that a presentation involves more than just a listing of data. Not needing to pay attention to their body language and not feeling the need to create a bond with their audience – who in most cases had their cameras turned off – they would just deliver facts. Furthermore, when stopped by the teacher and asked to improvise rather than read the information, many of them would deny that this was the case, relying on the lack of visuals that the teacher could use as a proof. Additionally, the teacher had very little control over the audience. With their cameras turned off during their colleagues' presentations, it was difficult to know who was actually paying attention. During the Q&A sessions, there were only a few students – usually the same – who were getting involved in the discussion. Obviously, similar situations would occur in face-to-face evaluation, with some students being always active and taking every opportunity available to hone their skills, and others just trying to check some boxes, get their grade and move on to the next subject.

With decreased control over their students and little to no proof to support claims of inappropriate behavior during assessment, even when their experience-based intuition helped them know something was wrong, many teachers had no choice but to give grades based on existing evidence. At the same time, they had to be more empathetic than before, having to acknowledge that students were struggling to keep up with all the changes going on around them. As a result, excuses were easily accepted for delayed submissions, postponed deadlines, rescheduled presentations

or final work that would not fully comply with expected levels of performance. This led to general grade inflation, a phenomenon which according to official figures affected all levels of education in Romania, not just higher education.

To sum up, the main issue that has already been identified as a major drawback in remote assessment is the ability of the students to cheat or to try and take advantage of external elements to justify their failure to comply with specific requirements. Students having windows open onscreen with information, having materials close at hand to look for answers, talking to colleagues via chat on phones or computers to obtain answers, or submitting their answers after the indicated dead-line and blaming technological issues were all challenges that trainers had to cope with. And it is true; these things take place and it is quite impossible to control every 'door open' to such possibilities. Yet, what if evaluation is done in such a way so as to hinder greatly, or eliminate completely the need to cheat? And we have seen this happening: students submitting homework and then doing very well thought out presentations or group projects, answering questions in real-time in an oral examination and so on.

After the pandemic, when most of us returned to face-to-face activities, what we have to decide is whether we go back to how things were before 2020 or whether we manage to integrate some of the methods and tools that we were forced to use during the pandemic in everyday teaching and assessment practice. We would definitely opt for the second choice, since we think that the virtual environment has proven its benefits.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, it is true that traditional face-to-face teaching and learning creates an experience of more impact for learners. It also creates the context for socialization, group dynamics and personality development for the future. Additionally, we have to realize that, in higher education, we deal with mature individuals. These are young men and women who have the ability to control their attention span, who know how to multi-task, pick and choose what is of real use to them. The evaluation is just part of the learning continuum and if one really wants to acquire and keep information they will do so and the assessment part will only validate already mastered knowledge. We think that the future of learning and assessment in the academic environment lies in hybrid, adaptable, learning on-the-go forms of teaching. The equivalent of machine learning mechanisms – systems that learn as they work, through practices and experience, stalk up information and act using best tools for given circumstance.

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The authors

Teodora Șerban-Oprescu is Associate Professor with the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, Bucharest University of Economic Studies. She teaches Business Communication, Intercultural Communication and Research Methodology. With a PhD in Cultural Studies and postdoctoral studies in Economics, Dr. Șerban-Oprescu

is actively looking for ways to integrate Social Sciences and Humanities in original pieces of research.

Irina David is an Associate Professor with the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Her areas of research include aspects related to innovative methods for teaching business communication in English, cultural issues and the development of multilingual competences, enhancing critical thinking skills, or facilitating the integration of students in a wide range of professional and cultural contexts. She is the (co-)author of textbooks on business communication in English and on cultural studies, as well as of various articles which focus on cultural and methodological topics. She has participated in multinational projects aimed to promote multilingualism and intercultural competences, the development of useful tools for the (self-)assessment of these skills, or to facilitate the enhancement of communication and other transferable abilities that would increase the likelihood of integration in any socio-cultural environment.