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The Consequences of Exams Cancellation

During COVID-19:

The Case of Kuwait

Nasser N. Hasan

University College of London – United Kingdom

College of Education – Kuwait University

State of Kuwait

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic impacted many aspects of our lives, and the educational aspect is not exempted. Regular testing and assessment procedures were no longer available. Therefore, many countries decided to cancel the final tests. Kuwait is one of them. This decision resulted in a dramatic increase in the high school passing rates compared to pre-pandemic years in Kuwait's three school divisions. Even more, the distributions of the cumulative percentage were significantly shifted toward high levels. This impact, in return, induced post-high school admission concerns regarding future academic failure. This study provides an analysis of final exams status pre- and post Covid-19, as well as future perspectives.

Keywords: Formative & Summative testing, Classroom assessment, Undergraduate admission, School lock-down.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the unpredicted and sudden spread of COVID-19 pandemic impacted our lives in many aspects. The educational aspect is not an exception. Different approaches have been applied to overcome such impact on different educational fields across the nations. In the same trend, Academic Journals called for special COVID-19 issues, in which researchers help to come up with practical solutions to deal with such negative impacts. The Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice Journal called for studies considering the long term impact of COVID-19 on the Educational Measurement section in their Fall 2020 issue. In her editorial introduction to the section letter, the journal chief editor, Dr. Deborah Harris, pointed out that this impact has reached but is not limited to the educational testing and assessment. The effect of this pandemic and its related consequences can be seen in the lack of summative data from assessments since the pandemic started. This introduction has been written in some countries. Also, many issues related to testing have been raised initially and left for the policy makers' personal efforts.

Countries were dealing with these testing issues differently. As pointed by Dennis Opposs (2020), the Standards Chair at the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation in the United Kingdom, many countries cancelled the high-school exams and dealt with this cancellation differently. England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland used a statistical model to standardize GCSE, AS, and A- level grades. In France, the students will receive an average score in each subject based on their marks throughout the year. In other countries such as the Netherlands and Norway, the final exam marks were dropped, and the final grades are based on the earlier schoolwork and exams. In Kuwait, different approaches for different school levels have been implemented. Consequently, the Kuwaiti high school students' results during the pandemic indicated a dramatic shift and increased dramatically. The purpose of this article is to show how the Ministry of Education in Kuwait responded to the issues related to the classroom assessment and testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these results are related to such response.

Assessment during COVID-19 in Kuwait

As well as other countries, the educational system in Kuwait during the pandemic has been paralyzed. However, in contrast to other countries, schooling was practically stopped for approximately six months since February until mid-August. As shown in Alhouti's (2020) study, the first decision in March was to establish a new online learning platform, followed by the Government extension of school lock down until further notice. Moving toward July, no decisions have been made related to the classroom assessment procedures or the final tests (for more details; see Alhouti, 2020). Finally, on the 29th of July 2020, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Kuwait issued a decree about the final grades for year 12 students (including all three divisions across the Kuwaiti high school system; the Scientific, Literary, and Religious divisions in high school) on their social media accounts. The decree states that all the marks assigned to the final exams are to be based on the classroom teacher assessment instead. The assessment of core-subjects will be through participation, attendance, homework, and reports on their online learning platforms without any clear criteria for how such assessment will be measured, quantified, or assigned. The pre-pandemic school assessment included quizzes and final exams for each core subject within each division. Test scores were used for classifying students (pass/fail). In contrast, students will receive full marks in other non-core subjects such as Computer, Physical Education, and other elective subjects. No changes have been made to the cumulative percentages weight for the last term, weighing thirty percent of the final cumulative percentage. This percentage is equivalent to the percentages from the entire year ten and year eleven, weighing 10% and 20%. These measures seem to be an easier way and a less creative one to overcome the COVID-19 impact than how testing companies in the United States were dealing with the same situation with a far greater number of test-takers; (Camara, 2020).

The previously mentioned plan was applied to year twelve students. On the other hand, students in primary or middle schools' levels were promoted to the next academic year without any assessment. Moreover, for the other two high-school levels, tenth and eleventh grades students who had marks - either from exams or classroom assessments - in the first term should be promoted to the next academic year. Whereas those, who do not have any marks in the first

term, have the right to take the exams based on the first term curricula to be promoted. Otherwise, they will remain in the same grade without promotion (i.e., failing to pass the year).

Grading Without Clear Purpose and Scoring Rubrics

The first standard dealing with the assessment purpose reported by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation states: “*Classroom assessment practices should have a clear purpose that supports teaching and learning.*” (Klinger et al., 2015). In contrast, teachers in Kuwait were not given any clear instructions on assessing student learning outcomes and how the previously mentioned assessment methods should be used for which learning goal. This ambiguity resulted in using different assessment types for different learning goals with each teacher. There is a clear threat to the grading fairness in this situation due to the obscure information on how the students will be assessed (Tierney, 2013).

On the other hand, assuming that the assessment types were appropriately assigned to measure different learning goal outcomes, teachers faced another issue related to the scoring outcome due to the lack of scoring rubrics. All of Kuwait’s assessment methods during the pandemic are either based on quality judgments and/or performance-based assessments. Both assessment forms require scoring rubrics to evaluate students (Moskal, 2000; Mertler, 2001; & Moskal, 2003), yet no rubrics were given to teachers. As a result, the subjectivity involved in the evaluation process is dominant; (Moskal, 2000). Even if the teacher designed a rubric for his classroom and students, objectivity could not be assured due to the inter-teachers (i.e., inter-raters) differences.

Study Questions

The purpose of this study is to provide a deeper insight regarding the consequences of cancelling the exams in Kuwait due to COVID-19. Specifically, two questions are raised in this study:

- 1 - To what extent do Cumulative Percentages differ between the Pandemic Year and the Pre-Pandemic Years?
- 2 - How students are distributed through different Cumulative Percentages Intervals?

Methodology

To explore the consequences of exam cancellation in Kuwait during COVID-19, four pre-pandemic and one post-pandemic high school results were taken from official newspapers' websites in Kuwait, for data analyses. Fifteen datasets were extracted (i.e., three divisions for each academic year from 2016 to 2020). Results included 102312 students for Scientific division, 77171 students for Literary division, and 6031 students for Religious division.

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to discuss the first research question along with the graphical approaches by presenting the density curves for all divisions in the Kuwaiti high school system. To make pairwise comparison, the one-way ANOVA test showed a statistically significant difference. Tukey post hoc test was run for narrower confidence interval between pre and post pandemic years. On the other hand, the proportions of students within different cumulative percentages intervals were tabulated in order to answer the second research question. The ethical consent was not required as the datasets are freely available in the public domain (newspapers' website in Kuwait).

Results

Research Question 1

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether the cumulative percentages averages are significantly different between the years across all three divisions. For the Scientific division, differences between the average cumulative percentages are statistically significant between the years, $F(4, 83146) = 334.95, p < .05$. Tukey post hoc analysis revealed that the differences between the 2020 (i.e., the pandemic) year ($M = 86.15, SD = 8.41$) and the previous years, 2019 ($M = 83.15, SD = 9.92$), 2018 ($M = 83.56, SD = 9.31$), 2017 ($M = 84.12, SD = 8.79$), and 2016 ($M = 83.68, SD = 8.90$) were significant.

Moving to the Literary division, the differences between the average cumulative percentages are statistically significant between the years, $F(4, 59216) = 670.70, p < .05$. Tukey post hoc analysis revealed that the differences

between the 2020 year ($M = 82.24$, $SD = 7.23$) and the previous years, 2019 ($M = 78.20$, $SD = 8.53$), 2018 ($M = 77.89$, $SD = 8.08$), 2017 ($M = 78.94$, $SD = 7.59$), and 2016 ($M = 79.42$, $SD = 7.40$) were significant.

Finally, in the Religious division, differences between the average cumulative percentages were statistically significant between the years, $F(4, 4679) = 108.02$, $p < .05$. Tukey post hoc analysis revealed that differences between the 2020 year ($M = 88.29$, $SD = 8.64$) and the previous years, 2019 ($M = 82.34$, $SD = 9.09$), 2018 ($M = 81.50$, $SD = 8.72$), 2017 ($M = 82.27$, $SD = 8.28$), and 2016 ($M = 84.23$, $SD = 8.66$) were significant.

Apart from the statistical tests, the density curves of the cumulative percentages of the last five years for the Scientific, Literary, and Religious divisions are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3; respectively.

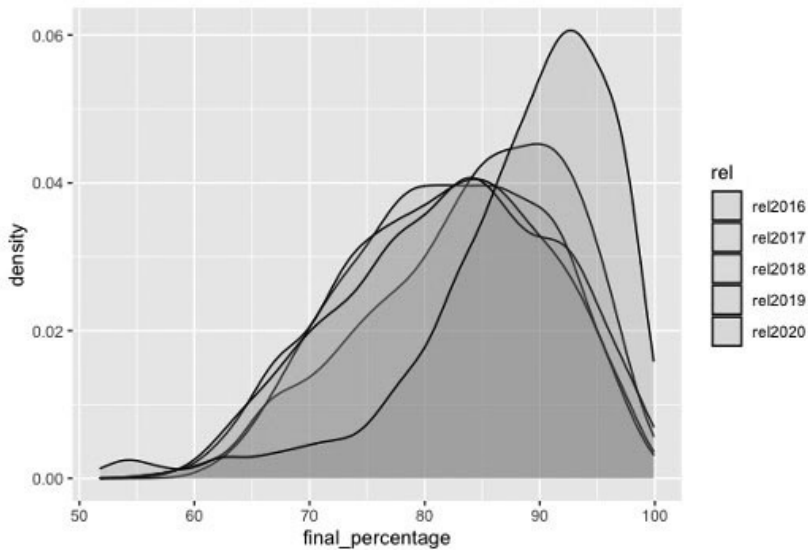


Figure 1.

The density curves of the cumulative percentages of the last five years for the Scientific division

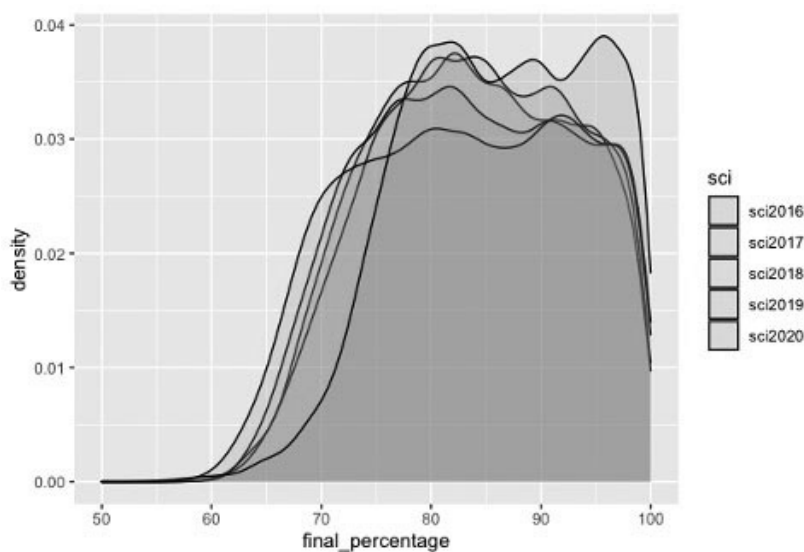


Figure 2.

The density curves of the cumulative percentages of the last five years for the Literary division

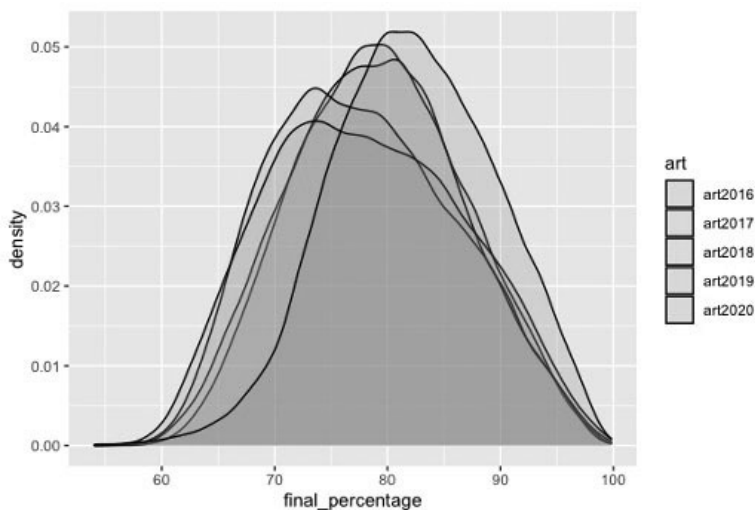


Figure 3.

The density curves of the cumulative percentages of the last five years for the Religious division

Research Question 2

Students' proportions among different cumulative percentages intervals are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3, for the Scientific, Literary , and Religious divisions, respectively.

Table 1.

Students' cumulative percentages proportions in the Scientific division

Year	Students	95.00% - 100%	90.00% - 94.99%	85.00% - 89.99%	80.00% - 84.99%	75.00% - 79.99%	70.00% - 74.99%	65.00% - 69.99%	60.00% - 64.99%	<60%
2016	18224	11.46%	13.97%	14.66%	15.79%	14.20%	10.06%	4.22%	0.64%	15.00%
2017	19280	10.84%	13.21%	13.85%	14.93%	13.42%	9.51%	3.99%	0.61%	19.64%
2018	21687	9.93%	10.81%	10.76%	11.79%	11.56%	9.58%	4.74%	0.65%	30.18%
2019	21273	10.29%	11.11%	10.37%	10.71%	10.33%	9.59%	6.43%	1.47%	29.70%
2020	21848	18.82%	17.92%	17.68%	18.56%	16.40%	7.08%	1.91%	0.51%	1.12%

Table 2.

Students' cumulative percentages proportions in the Literary division

Year	Students	95.00% - 100%	90.00% - 94.99%	85.00% - 89.99%	80.00% - 84.99%	75.00% - 79.99%	70.00% - 74.99%	65.00% - 69.99%	60.00% - 64.99%	<60%
2016	14794	1.19%	6.06%	12.07%	18.75%	19.99%	15.33%	7.29%	1.41%	17.91%
2017	16701	1.10%	5.19%	10.63%	17.02%	17.81%	14.19%	7.81%	1.98%	24.27%
2018	15303	1.08%	4.19%	8.31%	11.26%	13.42%	13.87%	9.33%	2.36%	36.18%
2019	14808	1.26%	5.14%	8.65%	11.38%	12.14%	12.83%	8.74%	3.15%	36.71%
2020	15565	3.43%	12.01%	19.85%	24.65%	22.09%	11.61%	3.24%	0.82%	2.30%

Table 3.***Students' cumulative percentages proportions in the Religious division***

Year	Students	95.00% - 100%	90.00% - 94.99%	85.00% - 89.99%	80.00% - 84.99%	75.00% - 79.99%	70.00% - 74.99%	65.00% - 69.99%	60.00% - 64.99%	<60%
2016	1064	7.24%	16.45%	17.76%	14.66%	9.96%	6.77%	4.89%	0.94%	21.33%
2017	1236	4.37%	11.65%	14.81%	14.56%	14.16%	9.95%	5.18%	0.97%	24.35%
2018	1267	3.55%	9.47%	13.26%	13.42%	11.68%	9.71%	5.76%	1.66%	31.49%
2019	1233	5.27%	11.19%	12.08%	13.54%	11.76%	7.62%	5.11%	2.35%	31.08%
2020	1231	20.55%	29.24%	21.20%	12.59%	5.85%	2.44%	1.71%	1.30%	5.12%

Discussion

In the previous sections, results showed the impact of exams cancellation and the ambiguity of everything related to the assessment on the number of students passing the year in the pandemic year compared to the last four years pre-pandemic. Also, findings showed how the average of the cumulative percentages jumped into higher and unusual averages compared to how they were pre-pandemic. Alhammadi (2020) published the surprising students' passing rate for the three divisions after the MOE's former Minister, Dr. Saud Alharbi Press Conference. The passing rates were 99.7%, 97.9%, and 96.0% for the scientific, Literary, and Religious divisions, compared to the previous year's passing rates of 70.4%, 63.5%, and 69.0% (Alturki, 2019). Such high increases in the passing rates draw the whole country's attention, especially academics to go deeper into these results. Not surprisingly, the cumulative percentage mean for the Scientific division students who passed the high school jumped to 86.15% in this pandemic year compared to the average in the last four years when it was 83.15%, 83.56%, 84.12%, and 83.68% in 2019, 2018, 2017, and 2016, respectively. Relatively, the same jump occurred in the Literary division, where the average jump to 82.24% compared to 78.20%, 77.89%, 78.94%, and 79.42%, from 2019 to 2016, respectively. Whereas in the Religious division, there was a dramatic jump in the average to 88.29% compared to 82.34%, 81.50%, 82.27%, and 84.23% in the previous years.

Along with the statistical significance of these jumps, figures and tables presented show a practical significance due to the exam's cancellation decision, where the cumulative percentage distributions are shifted toward higher percentages in all divisions. Consequently, this shift will push Kuwaiti higher education institutions to admit more students, and obviously, more than their capacity. In return, this will cause an admission fix when it comes to admitting high school students to colleges and universities, as pointed out earlier (Jiao & Lissitz, 2020; Su, 2020; and Evans & Knezevich, 2020). Therefore, students' over-admission task will be challenging for admission staff in Kuwait. Higher education institutions were aware of these issues (Bin Turf, 2020). However, many people, including parliament members, academics, and parents, provided impractical solutions to overcome any dramatic increase in the proportion of high school graduates who meet the minimum requirement for higher institution admissions. For instance, one of the solutions was to admit more students than the Kuwait University capacity. Apparently, this solution sounds acceptable to the students and their families. Yet, it may lead to further problems in the future, such as when the number of offered classes is less than what is supposed to be offered to take in the number of admitted students. This problem, in return, will cause severe graduation delay for these students who could not enrol in some courses. Clearly, problems started when the exams cancellation decision was made, leaving the higher institutions in Kuwait with unclear solutions. Therefore, it seems that problems are circulating through an open ended path.

As COVID-19 carries many negative impacts on our education, on the other hand, it shows the discriminatory power of tests and clear, well-instructed classroom assessments in evaluating students' academic performance by taking individual differences into account. Future research should focus on following the post-high school academic achievement for students admitted to Kuwait University or other higher institutions in Kuwait. Also, higher institutions should track and study the number of students withdrawals in the upcoming years compared to the pre-pandemic years. Such studies raise the possibility of academic failures due to overestimating students' academic abilities awareness within the Kuwaiti community to overcome future issues related to students in higher education institutions.

Finally, important changes need to be made to tackle these concerns regarding post high school admissions and future academic failure. First, the MOE should not cancel the final exams which contribute to most of the final grade in the normal settings this year if administering them in-person is risky. Instead, tests should be delivered and administered remotely, following the College Board suggestions (Camara, 2020:13). Second, clear instructions should be given to high school teachers on how to use and grade non-testing virtual classroom assessments. Third, tracking and studying the characteristics of the academically unsuccessful and withdrawn students allow officials and researchers to understand the nature of the educational loss caused by this pandemic and its consequences, in order to deal with them before admitting students with similar characteristics.

عواقب إلغاء الاختبارات خلال جائحة كورونا: مثال من دولة الكويت

ناصر نجف حسن

جامعة كلية لندن – المملكة المتحدة

كلية التربية – جامعة الكويت

دولة الكويت

الملخص

أثرت جائحة كورونا على جوانب حياتنا بشكل كبير، ومما لا شك فيه أن هذا التأثير لم يستثني الجانب التربوي، حيث إن أساليب القياس والتقويم التقليدية – وإجراءات القيام بها – لم تعد قابلة للتطبيق، مما دفع عددا من الدول لإلغاء الاختبارات كما فعلت دولة الكويت. ولكن هذا القرار تسبب بزيادة كبيرة في المعدلات التراكمية على مستوى الثانوية العامة، حيث تغير منحنى توزيع المعدلات التراكمية في هذا العام مقارنة بالأعوام السابقة نحو الدرجات المرتفعة؛ مما يندرج بأزمة قبول في التعليم ما بعد الثانوية في دولة الكويت، وربما استتبعه فشل أكاديمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاختبارات، التقييم الصفي، القبول الجامعي

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