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**COVID-19**

# An overview of national coping strategies on high-stakes examinations and assessments

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The information contained in this document was compiled through a rapid assessment carried out between 24 March and 9 April 2020 by UNESCO staff and based on various sources. These comprise quick surveys conducted or papers prepared by staff from UNESCO Regional Offices (notably UNESCO Bangkok through the NEQMAP network for the Asia-Pacific region, UNESCO Beirut for the Arab region, UNESCO Dakar through the TALENT network, UNESCO Harare and UNESCO Abuja for sub-Saharan Africa and UNESCO Santiago for the Latin America and Caribbean region). Other sources of data include the results of UNESCO Survey on National Education Responses to the Covid-19 Crisis (23 March 2020 – 31 March 2020), other international organisations' reports (e.g. the European Union report on implications of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) on education and training - State-of-play in Member States), information available online (e.g. articles, papers, blogs, websites of Ministries of Education), as well as media reports.

This will be a living document. As the situation evolves and the information becomes available, we will monitor the situation, assess how it is unfolding and update the document accordingly.

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## Introduction

Education systems around the world are working to react to the unexpected outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. As of 9 April 2020, 188 countries have taken measures to implement country-wide closures of education and learning institutions, be they kindergartens, schools, vocational training colleges or universities. An estimated 1.58 billion learners are off schools, which represent 91.3% of total enrolled learners in the world and an unprecedented situation in the history of education<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, about 63 million primary and secondary teachers<sup>2</sup> have also been affected, and where ICT infrastructure and stable internet connection exists, are trying to transfer teaching and learning online. While the statistics that show the scale of the impact on technical and vocational training and higher education institutions are not readily available at the time this paper is written, initial observations indicate similar pattern of going on-line in many countries.

Given the prolonged and massive closure of schools, universities and other learning institutions and a shift to remote learning in many countries in the world, a key question posed to policy- and decision-makers is how to manage timetabled assessments<sup>3</sup> and exams - in particular those related to end-of-key levels, school leaving, university entrance exams and gateways for job, and how to end the school year smoothly. These are high-stakes exams and assessments, where, passing the test would allow the student entry into a higher grade or permission to graduate, and many of which are forth-coming as the current school or academic year ends in May and June in many countries. In most of the cases, these assessments are standardized high-stakes, high-accountability tests, and in some others also linked to teacher performance evaluation and school funding. They represent a sheer challenge for policy makers as the interruption of these examinations is delaying the decisions on student progression, certification, qualification and graduation, thus inducing critical implications on entry into higher education and the labour market, quality and equity of learning outcomes, and fairness in qualifications obtained, leading to lifelong consequences on the students and learners' progression in life as well as a broader socio-economic impact on the economies and societies.

Countries are adopting different strategies - in many cases a mix of them - to cope with the situation, including organizing exams with special arrangements, cancellation, postponement/rescheduling, going on-line (on-line assessment), and introducing alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning. This paper provides a snapshot of decisions taken by countries with regard to high-stakes exams and timetabled assessments in this particular context. Efforts have been made to capture as many countries and territories in the world as possible regardless of whether they are UNESCO Member States<sup>4</sup> or not.

While maximum attempts have been made to validate the information, the measures and decisions taken by countries included in this mapping should by no means be considered exhaustive, nor fully consistent given the quickly evolving situation on a daily basis and the availability of information that can be accessed online. The information presented in the current paper is as of 3 April 2020 and should be considered as a work in progress.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures>

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/news/teacher-task-force-calls-support-63-million-teachers-touched-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>3</sup> Examinations, mostly series-based, that specify the date and time at which all candidates must take the assessment. The tests are timetabled in conjunction with the common school year calendar or academic timetable, i.e. all assessments within a given series will fall within the exam period defined by concerned schools, institutions or education authorities.

<sup>4</sup> There are currently 193 countries, which are UNESCO Member States.

## Summary of coping strategies adopted by countries

Strategy	Countries
<p>Maintaining exams</p> <p><b>Total: 22</b></p>	<p><b>Europe and North America (EUR):</b> Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia</p> <p><b>Sub-Saharan Africa:</b> Eritrea, Sierra Leone</p> <p><b>Arab Region (ARB):</b> Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria</p> <p><b>Asia and Pacific (APA):</b> Kazakhstan, New Zealand, Thailand</p> <p><b>Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC):</b> Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica</p>
<p>Cancellation</p> <p><b>Total: 11</b></p>	<p><b>Europe and North America (EUR):</b> France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States</p> <p><b>Asia and Pacific (APA):</b> Indonesia, Japan</p> <p><b>Sub-Saharan Africa (AFR):</b> Uganda</p>
<p>Postponement/ Rescheduling</p> <p><b>Total: 57 + 16</b> countries of the Caribbean Examination Council</p>	<p><b>Europe and North America (EUR):</b> Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, USA (Derogation)</p> <p><b>Sub-Saharan Africa (AFR):</b> Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroun, Central African Republic, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Seychelles, Tanzania, Togo</p> <p><b>Arab Region (ARB):</b> Algeria, Iraq (including the Kurdistan Region), Lebanon, Oman, Sudan, Tunisia</p> <p><b>Asia and Pacific (APA):</b> Bangladesh, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhuwa), Palau, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tonga, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam</p> <p><b>Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC):</b> Colombia, Costa Rica, Caribbean countries (part of the Caribbean Examination Council), Ecuador</p>
<p>Organizing high-stake exams online</p> <p><b>Total: 11</b></p>	<p><b>Europe and North America (EUR):</b> Belgium (Wallonia and Brussels), Estonia, Italy, United Kingdom, USA (derogation)</p> <p><b>Asia and Pacific (APA):</b> Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhuwa)</p> <p><b>Arab Region (ARB):</b> Egypt</p> <p><b>Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC):</b> Mexico; Venezuela</p>
<p>Introducing alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning</p> <p><b>Total: 23</b></p>	<p><b>Europe and North America (EUR):</b> Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Italy, Malta, United Kingdom</p> <p><b>Sub-Saharan Africa (AFR):</b> Angola</p> <p><b>Asia and Pacific (APA):</b> Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Palau, Thailand, Tonga, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam</p> <p><b>Arab Region (ARB):</b> Egypt, Morocco</p> <p><b>Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC):</b> Ecuador, Mexico, Venezuela</p>
<p>- <i>Of which, reducing number of exams</i></p> <p><b>Total: 4</b></p>	<p><b>Europe and North America (EUR):</b> Italy</p> <p><b>Asia and Pacific (APA):</b> Japan, Viet Nam</p> <p><b>Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC):</b> Ecuador</p>

## Overview of different strategies adopted by countries

### Maintaining exams as scheduled and announced

While the majority of countries in the world decide to cancel or postpone exams, some countries choose to maintain the end-of-year exams, with certain measures to ensure the safety and health of students and teachers in place. As of 3 April, many countries of the Arab region neither cancelled nor waived national exams, especially the school leaving (grade 12) ones. These exams were planned to be held inside schools or centres with hygiene and sterilization enhanced measures. **Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine** and **Syria** are for instance still respecting the announced dates of these exams.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, the World Health Organization stated that Europe became the epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic. While several European countries had decided to close their schools entirely, a number of countries nevertheless decided to continue holding the exams during the dates originally set.

In **Germany**, certain Länder announced that the Abitur (exams at the end of secondary education) would be maintained and required schools to take safety measures to minimise the risk of infection. This is the case, for example, in Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate, where the Abitur exams will continue to be held under strict hygiene conditions.<sup>5</sup> **Finland**, on the other hand, decided to intensify the schedule of the matriculation exam of general upper secondary students in their final year - the only standardized test at the national level. Students also have the opportunity to renew exams for unlimited times. The premises for entrance exams for universities were required to be organised in such a way that there is sufficient physical distance between the applicants, and hygiene and other measures are in place to prevent the spread of infection. **Hungary** does not plan to cancel matriculation exams for the time being, although if needed they will be postponed.

In **Italy**, the Minister of Public Education announced that she would be making a decision regarding exams as soon as possible, but to date, the state examinations are neither cancelled nor postponed. However, there is an intention to organise the evaluation by an internal commission and not by an external evaluation as is usually the case. There are several hypotheses on the table, including holding both written and oral exams, if by the 18 May schools are re-opened as students will have four weeks of face-to-face classes. There will be no failures or postponements in this exceptional situation.<sup>6</sup> In **France**, the national teacher recruitment, which is competitive, is expected to take place between June and July, but subject to changes according to the evolution of the Covid-19 situation.

For **Luxembourg**, secondary school leaving exams (state matura)<sup>7</sup> will be taken on the dates foreseen, but the commissions responsible for developing the examination items and questionnaires have already been instructed by the minister to consider the fact that probably not all courses will be fully completed. The exam questionnaires will need to be adapted. However, the country is also preparing another scenario in case classes can't resume on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April. In **Poland**, so far, the government

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<sup>5</sup> In addition, recognition of the various diplomas is guaranteed this year in all Länder, as confirmed by the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (KMK).

<sup>6</sup> The primary issue is that the Constitution states that students transitioning from one education cycle to the next must pass the State exams. This implies a level of state control over the final exam sessions for the transitions from the 8th to the 9th year of schooling, from the 13<sup>th</sup> year to university level and the final degrees of first cycle (laurea), second cycle (laurea magistrale), and doctorate level. In Italy, qualifications have a legal value, however there are some flexibilities in implementing these rules.

<sup>7</sup> Only the contents that are taught in class until the last day of the school year can be assessed as an examination subject. All other contents that might be taught in class after the school reopening can be assessed as part of the regular class assignments, but will not be included as items for the final exam.

indicated that there is no need to change the school year calendar. However, the so-called special act regarding specific solutions in combat with the novel coronavirus gives the right to the Minister of National Education to reorganize the school year, including exams dates. In **Slovenia**, no decision has been taken yet regarding postponement of final exams or prolonging the school calendar, however, there are three likely scenarios: first, to come back to school on 1 May, second to come back to school on 1 June and third to only issue certificates.

In the African region, **Eritrea** continued with academic activities relative to the National School Leaving Examination 2019/2020 which started on Wednesday 18 March across the country until the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March. **Sierra Leone** is maintaining exams.

A couple of countries in Asia-Pacific have also announced that high-stake exams will continue. In **New Zealand**, which has an academic year aligned with other countries in the southern hemisphere, exams are to be held in November as scheduled with the option to take a digital exam. In **Thailand**, high-stakes exams for grade 12 have been held in March until the 20<sup>th</sup>. Preventive measures were put in place to ensure the safety of the examiners and educational personnel who take charge of the examination centre. In **Kazakhstan**, the Minister of Education and Science officially announced that exams would not be cancelled nor postponed, including the United National Test (high stakes exam after the 11th grade) and no change would be made on the format for now, even though education programmes had been shifted to distance learning.

Several countries in Latin America have the final end-of-school exams towards the end of the calendar year. Nevertheless, prior to the crisis, **Brazil** announced that the National High School Examination (*Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio*, Enem) 2020 would be conducted both in a digital and paper format while the structure of the exam would not be changed. The entrance exam to higher education in **Colombia**, Saber 11 - Calendario A (southern school calendar) was maintained but could be postponed if the situation requires. **Costa Rica** is maintaining the *Pruebas Nacionales*, the national assessment used for certification and promotion from one grade to the next. If postponed, there will be substantial consequences for the education system as there will be no data for the centralized system to manage student grading and to decide promotion of students. At the time of writing this paper, the exams are to be held in June, and without official decision, they might be postponed.

It should be noted that this information is rapidly changing, and governments may adopt a different strategy in the coming days/weeks to respond to the evolving situation of the pandemic.

## **Cancelling exams**

One of most drastic measures taken by States is to cancel high-stake exams. Faced with the pandemic which affects student's ability to maintain continuity of learning in countries where schools are closed, numerous States have raised concerns regarding the inadequate conditions for exams if students are to take.

In the Europe and North America region, **Ireland** made the decision to cancel the oral and practical performance tests of the state examinations which were originally scheduled to take place from Monday 23 March to Friday 3 April 2020. All students who were due to take these tests will be awarded full marks for this portion of the exam. In **France**, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education announced that, given the situation, it would not be possible for high school students to take the baccalaureate exams under normal conditions in June or even in July. The tests will have to be organized in a new way, based on continuous assessment only, using grades of the three first semesters, and grades obtained during the lock-down will not be taken into account.

**Norway** decided to cancel most national exams for the last year of junior high as well as high school. The Ministry of Education has announced that instead, schools will provide more continuous assessment so that the teachers will have the best possible foundation for setting grades. The priority is given to make sure that every student graduates and can continue his or her education (i.e. higher education). As continuous assessment is widely used throughout the year, it is not new to teachers. The regular school year will go on longer than it usually would, until June, as the exams in May have been cancelled (except for some specific groups). Similarly, in the **Netherlands**, at the end of primary school, progression to secondary education normally depends on the advice by their school and a final exam. This year, because of the pandemic, there will not be a final exam at the end of primary school. For now, progression to secondary education will just be based on the school advice that draws on the professional opinion of the primary school. At the end of secondary education, pupil's graduation normally depends on school exams and national exams. There will be no national exams, depending on which decisions on student graduation are made. New guidelines are being introduced, which will take into account the assessments already made. The **Swedish** Scholastic Aptitude Test, SweSAT (högskoleprovet), that was scheduled for 4 April has been cancelled. The cancelled SweSAT will have consequences for the admittance to various HEIs and university programs. The Government is currently looking at possible measures together with the Swedish Council for Higher Education (for example increasing the possibilities to admittance on the basis of grades).

In the **United Kingdom**, school exams including the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and A Levels that usually take place in May and June are cancelled for the current academic year due to the school closure. The government is committed to put in place a proper and robust system and means of redress for the pupils who are due to take these exams this year to ensure that they would get the qualifications they need "in time". In **Slovakia**, regarding the national exams, the written part of the school-leaving examination (State Matura) has been cancelled and will not take place this school year. Examination "Test-9" (written test by the 15-year-olds) has been cancelled for this academic year. The **United States** federal government announced that states will be allowed to cancel federally mandated standardized tests in K-12 schools for the 2019-2020 school year and that it would grant waivers across the board. The SAT college admissions tests have been cancelled through May, though the exam on June 6 has not been cancelled yet. Similarly, the International Baccalaureate examinations are cancelled, but students will be awarded a Diploma or a Course Certificate according to their coursework.<sup>8</sup>

**Indonesia** cancelled the national examination for end-of-school year for junior and senior secondary school. Graduation of the students will be determined by the student's rapport of 5 previous semesters. In **Japan**, university exams (for public universities) usually consists of two phases. The first phase, consisting of the examination by the National Center for University Entrance, was held as scheduled in January 2020. For public universities, the admission results are based on the combination of the scores from this examination and the second round of the examinations organized separately by each university.<sup>9</sup> Following the requests from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), issued on 30 January and 7 February, some universities cancelled their university-specific examinations. In those cases, universities made the acceptance decisions based on the

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<sup>8</sup> Prior to the federal government announcement, more than half-dozen states — including Florida, Georgia, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Washington — have cancelled or postponed the tests before getting federal approval. And more than twice that number have asked the Education Department for a waiver from federal requirements that students in most grades take annual tests for accountability purposes. The number of states that have cancelled state exams have increased greatly since the federal government announcement. As of March 24, leaders of 19 states have either announced the cancellation of annual exams or that they would seek a federal waiver from the exams. This includes states such as Virginia, New York, and New Jersey.

<sup>9</sup> Private universities have their own entrance examinations.

National Center examination scores. However, most of the university entrance examinations were held as scheduled with additional measures taken to protect the exam takers. The overall impact of COVID-19 on the university entrance examinations in the 2019/2020 academic year was therefore limited. Discussion is currently being held on how to ensure equity in the 2020/2021 university examinations while schools are scheduled to reopen in some areas of the country, while they remain closed in the most affected areas.

In **Uganda**, the Ministry has suspended all examinations during the crisis because some students lack the infrastructure to take them. There will be no formal or end of term examinations at the end of term 1. Schools will only have one mock examination which will happen at the end of term 2.

### Rescheduling or postponement of exams

Another solution that is being adopted by many States is to reschedule the exams at a later stage, depending on the evolution of the Covid-19. Obviously, the situation varies greatly from one State to another, depending on the calendar of the examinations, the end date of closure of educational institutions, the academic calendar, and the resources needed to organise the exams. For some States, schools were closed only in mid-March, and therefore decisions on examinations have yet been taken. For others, schools have been closed since mid-February and decisions were already taken if examinations were postponed and how they would be organized.

Several states within the European and North American region have decided to postpone some of their high-stakes exams. For example, in **Austria**, the date of beginning of the matriculation examination and diploma has been postponed to 19 May 2020.<sup>10</sup> In **Bulgaria**, the dates for conducting the national external evaluations and the state matriculation exams are outside the period of the state of emergency and there is no obstacle to their organization. The Ministry of Education and Science is ready to shift these dates, as well as to adapt the content of teaching in all schools.<sup>11</sup>

In **Estonia**, basic and upper secondary final school exams scheduled for April are postponed. The decision on exams scheduled for May and June will be made in due course. New exam times will be set so that students and teachers have enough time to prepare, i.e. exams start not less than two weeks after normal instruction is restored.<sup>12</sup> In **France**, the Ministry of Education announced that written tests for national competitions, initially scheduled for April and May this year, would be postponed and reorganized from the end of May. This concerns both the entrance exams to the “grandes écoles” and those organized within universities to access the second year of medical studies. The competition to enter the school of Magistrate which was initially scheduled for end of May has been postponed to September. In **Germany**, some Länder have maintained the Abitur (German Baccalaureate), others have decided to postpone it until the end of April/May, such as the Länder of Schleswig-Holstein that plans to hold the exams from 21 April. Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Hamburg and North Rhine-Westphalia have also postponed the Abitur. In addition, recognition of the various diplomas is guaranteed this year in all Länder, as confirmed by the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, KMK).

In **Greece**, the period of applications for exams for entrance into higher education may be postponed for later in the summer or for September. In **Ireland**, discussions are underway to postpone for several

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<sup>10</sup> Additional measures are planned to facilitate the school leaving examinations in 2020 such as two weeks of tuition before the start of the examinations; cut the time between individual parts of the examination; cancel part of the examinations; change the organisation of teaching units; move the dates for examinations to Saturdays and bridge days.

<sup>11</sup> Possible solutions are to postpone the exams at a later stage and extend the school year.

<sup>12</sup> If emergency situation continues until the beginning of the summer holidays, the Ministry considers taking assessment and final grading on the basis of current grades.

months the Leaving Certificate, the terminal exam for post-primary education that is used for selection to further education and employment, which was originally planned for June 2020, as well as to postpone the start date of the next academic year of higher education institutions. In **Latvia**, foreign language examinations for 12th grade are postponed from March to mid-May. In **Lithuania**, so far the dates of graduation exams, scheduled for April, have been moved to May and June (up to the end of June 2020) but other alternatives could be explored depending on the evolution of the situation. In **Malta**, A-level exams are postponed to September and students are allowed to start university with probation even if they do not pass. In the **Netherlands**, in some special cases, upper secondary vocational education students who are in their final year of study and who are – due to the pandemic – unable to graduate in time, are allowed to enrol in higher education, and given an extension to fulfil all the requirements and obtain their qualification before 1 January 2021.

In **Spain**, the official examinations to access university are postponed and will be held, tentatively, between June 22nd and July 10th. Also, contents and number of exam items have been modified so that students are not punished for not having worked in class on any block or blocks of contents of any of the subjects. In **Slovakia**, regarding the national exams, while the written part of the school-leaving examination has been cancelled, the internal (oral) part of the examination should take place no later than two weeks after the resumption of teaching, preferably no later than 30 June 2020. Other final examinations, the final post-secondary examinations and the graduation examinations shall take place not earlier than two weeks after the school re-opening. In the **United States**, the American College Test (ACT) has not been cancelled but instead postponed, with the test on April 4 rescheduled to June 13. Hence many U.S. universities are adjusting their admissions criteria to make such tests optional. Finally, **Estonia, Finland and Turkey** have also indicated that their high-stakes exams will be postponed.

In the African region, with most of States having closed their schools around the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, decisions regarding the examination sessions are not the immediate priority, and therefore only a few have already taken, or are in the process of taking, such decisions. More generally, the West African Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) were suspended across **Anglophone West Africa** due to the threat of COVID-19 (**Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Liberia**) and will be revisited once the health situation improves. Furthermore, in **Cameroon**, the Ministry of Secondary Education said that there was uncertainty about the examination calendar and is currently developing a contingency plan if the sanitary situation does not improve. The Ministry of Higher Education said that the examination calendar would be modified. Other States such as **Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Liberia, Seychelles, Tanzania and Togo** have announced postponement of exams.

In the Arab Region, several States have also decided to postpone some of the examination sessions. For example, in **Algeria**, the Ministry of National Education has decided to postpone the physical education and sports examinations for free standing candidates (*candidats libres*) concerned by the exams of the intermediate education certificate (*Brevet d'Enseignement Moyen*, BEM) and the Baccalaureate. Some universities have also decided to postpone the re-sit examinations (*rattrapages*) of the first semester (Laghout, Aflou). In **Sudan**, basic certification exams in all states are postponed until further notice. In **Tunisia**, it has been announced that if the suspension of classes is maintained until May, June will be devoted to courses but only for students in the final year of High School while the national exams (Baccalaureate) will take place in the second week of July.<sup>13</sup> Other States such as **Iraq (including the Kurdistan region)** and **Oman** have announced postponement of exams. In **Lebanon**,

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<sup>13</sup> With regard to the examinations for the diploma for the end of studies of the general and technical basic education, the written tests will take place on June 22, 23 and 24, 2020, while the tests for the entrance exam to the pilot colleges "6th primary year" will take place from 25 to 27 June 2020.

decision was taken to postpone the exams depending on the evolution of the situation. The French baccalaureate and the intermediate education certificate (*brevet*) will be validated this year based on continuous assessment, except for specific cases where the exam is postponed until September.

Similarly, in the Asia and Pacific region, where the first epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic happened more than a month ago, some States decided nation-wide school closure around the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, and some schools start to be reopened. Yet, here also, several States decided to postpone some exams in order to adjust to the sanitary situation. **Cambodia** has postponed the Grade 9 and 12 national exams. In **China**, the GaoKao university entrance examinations, which nearly 10 million students take per year, are postponed by one month to July 7 and 8, 2020. **Hong Kong** (China) has postponed its Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) exam by a month (to April 24, 2020) and will be taking precautionary sanitary measures. In **India**, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)<sup>14</sup> has postponed examinations for board classes Grade 10 and 12 in India and abroad, originally scheduled between 19 and 31 March. The CBSE will conduct board exams only for 29 main subjects that are required for promotion and are crucial for university admission. The Council for Indian School Certificate Examination (ICSE) has postponed class 10 or ICSE board exams and class 12 or the ISC board exams which were scheduled to be held between March 19 and March 31. Additionally, several states postponed all state exams. In **Iran**, end-of-Primary Education National Exams and end-of-Secondary Education Exams are possibly postponed by one month. In the **Republic of Korea**, the government announced a postponement of the College Scholastic Ability Test for 2021 by two weeks.<sup>15</sup> It will take place on Thursday 3 December 2020. As such, the registration for this exam has also been postponed by two weeks to 19 September 2020.

In **Malaysia**, national examinations are postponed (no date specified), as well as for the matriculation examination and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).<sup>16</sup> In the **Philippines**, all entrance exams to high school and university have also been postponed. In **Thailand**, admission exams to enter grade 7 and 10 are postponed until further notice while a solution is being envisaged for having online entrance exams. In **Uzbekistan**, the Field Trial PISA 2020 is so far postponed from a month but might be cancelled depending on the governance board. In **Viet Nam**, several exams are postponed, such as the Field Trial PISA 2020, that is supposed to take place one month later than initially planned (April instead of March). The large scale assessments in grade 5, 9 and 12 are postponed for two months (instead of end of April) and the National High School Examination is also postponed for two months (instead of June). Other States such as **Bangladesh**, **Fiji**, **Indonesia**, **Mongolia**, **Nepal**, **Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)**, **Palau**, **Samoa**, **Singapore**, **Sri Lanka** and **Tonga** have also announced postponement of exams.

Finally, in the Latin American and the Caribbean region, **Colombia** decided that state exams Saber 11 - Calendario B (Northern school calendar) will be postponed and options for rescheduling are being explored. In **Costa Rica**, the *Pruebas Nacionales de Educación Abierta*, the certification exams for students who choose to prepare by their own means, or by attending public projects, private institutes or with a private teacher, has been postponed. All the assessments scheduled for the first quarter of 2020 have been postponed. As for the **Caribbean**, the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC), which covers 16 countries and territories in the West Indies (Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago and Turks and Caicos Islands), has postponed its high school exams from May and June to July 2020. The CXC high school exams in the Caribbean are expected to be implemented in modified online and offline formats, with multiple choice assessments plus school-based assessments to determine final grades. In **Ecuador**, the entrance exam to National Bilingual Intercultural Teachers (*Quiero Ser Maestro Intercultural Bilingüe*) and the

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<sup>14</sup> A national level board of education for public and private schools

<sup>15</sup> This exam will allow for university entrance in the next academic year starting from March 2021.

<sup>16</sup> So far, the matriculation examination is postponed from end of March to end of April and the MUET from mid-March to September.

certification assessment for school officials (*Quiero Ser Directivo*) will be postponed.

## Organizing high-stakes exams online

For some exams, States have decided to organize them online. This option might be challenging as it requires an all new organization of the exams and at least a device for every student and sufficient bandwidth. In the European and North American region, in the **United Kingdom**, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge have decided to move summer exams online.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in the **United States**, High school students will be able to take Advanced Placement Tests at home, with the originally two or three hour's exam turning into a 45-minute online test. In **Belgium**, the Wallonia and Brussels regions also indicated that the high-stakes exams would be conducted online. In **Estonia**, final defence of doctoral theses are carried out online. **Italy** was also considering the option to hold exams online, if the sanitary conditions did not permit students to take the exams on-site. For higher education institutions, each university is deciding the modalities for exams and final degrees for their own students while adopting health and safety measures, including the prohibition of any mutual contact and using the teleconference modality. Several universities have decided to ask students to discuss the final dissertations under the control of a State officer (such as with a teleconference from the municipal building of their residence).

In the Arab region, according to reported information, **Egypt** announced that national exams for grades 11 and 12 will be taken online without postponement, noting that exams will only include what have been already covered before school closure.<sup>18</sup>

In the Latin American and Caribbean region, **Mexico** and **Venezuela** have indicated taking such measures.

Similarly, in the **Asian and Pacific region**, **Myanmar** and **Pakistan** (province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) also indicated that exams will be online.

## Introducing alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning

Finally, some countries, in certain contexts, decided to introduce alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning, e.g. reducing the number of exams, modifying the test format, appraisal of student learning portfolio without exam results. This is the case for instance, for **Angola, India, Indonesia, Malta, Mexico, Micronesia, Mongolia, Morocco, Palau, Thailand, Tonga** and **Venezuela** which have reported adopting alternative strategies.

In **Egypt**, grade 9 exams have been replaced by research projects.<sup>19</sup> In **France**, written tests for post-Baccalaureate competitions allowing access to selective training courses of the first cycle of higher education will be replaced by an examination of the academic files of the candidates, as part of the national pre-registration procedure via the "Parcoursup" platform. **Mexico** introduced a compensatory assessment alternative to tests and quizzes of greater interest (e.g., student learning portfolio assessment, no end-of-year exam for the 2019-2020 school year). However, in some countries, even if solutions have been considered for alternative forms, as the situation evolves rapidly, the plans may

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<sup>17</sup> If students cannot do the online assessments because of illness, caring duties or technical challenges, they can be assessed at a later date. They will not be allowed to defer assessment to the next academic year. It has to be noticed that sixth-year medical school students have just taken their exams online for the first time.

<sup>18</sup> According to another source of information, online assessments are only applied for grades 10 and 11, while grade 12 exams will be conducted without modification.

<sup>19</sup> According to another sources, traditional exams for all grades (except G11 and G12) are to be replaced by research projects.

change to other strategies. In **Czech Republic**, for instance, although preparation for school-leaving examinations has been prepared on TV, the national authorities are now considering to postpone the exams.<sup>20</sup> Other countries decided to reduce the number of exams and learning content (for instance **Ecuador** and **Viet Nam**) and waived some subject matters from the requirements.

In **Ecuador**, it is the case for the national assessment used for bachelor certification (*Examen de grado*) and the entrance exam to higher education (*Examen de ingreso a la Educación Superior*). Some possible options being considered are reducing the length of the test; and reviewing the contents to be evaluated, the construct, scoring methodology and the level of difficulty. Among the different hypotheses that **Italy** is envisaging, is replacing the end-of-year exams with just one oral exam in June if schools are not reopened by the 18<sup>th</sup> of May. Some countries are considering using previous semesters' grades (for instance **Oman**), teachers' assessments, and student self-assessment - which may pose questions of fairness and equality. In **Bhutan**, given the fact that the majority of students are in rural areas with limited access to internet and broadcast media, standard examinations on the adapted curriculum is not recommended. Examinations will be conducted on regular curriculum once classes resume, either on the full curriculum, or on prioritised or adapted curriculum, depending on the length of the school closure and the date of school reopening.

In the **United Kingdom**, the calculated grade process will take into account a range of evidence including non-exam assessment and mock results, and the approach will be standardised between schools and colleges. In **Uzbekistan**, while the decision has not been taken yet, the Ministry of Education is considering alternative modes of examination (take-home exam, online exam or unified exam with university entrance examinations) in the event of prolonged school closures. In **Denmark**, adequate provisions are made to ensure that the pupils benefit the most from education and that their progress is affected the least by adopting alternative methods.<sup>21</sup>

## Beyond high-stakes examinations

In **Argentina**, the national assessment for schools with extended school day (*Evaluación en escuelas de Jornada Extendida*) was cancelled. **Costa Rica** cancelled the fifth grade national mandatory assessment (*Pruebas Nacionales de Fortalecimiento de Aprendizajes para la Renovación de Oportunidades Primaria, FARO*). The national tests of formal education (*Pruebas Nacionales de Educación Formal*), have been delayed in order not to affect test performance. In the **Dominica Republic**, the national assessment for 3rd grade students (*Evaluación Diagnóstica Nacional d Tercer Grado de Primaria*), has also been cancelled. There will be no data available as required by the law, as

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<sup>20</sup> Entrance examinations for lower-secondary pupils and state secondary school-leaving exams for secondary-school students will be adjusted. 1) Entrance examinations will start no later than 14 days after the re-opening of schools and will be organised only in one round with additional alternative terms, 2) State secondary school-leaving exams for secondary-school students will start no later than 21 days after the re-opening of schools, 3) If secondary schools are not open until June 1, the school-leaving exam certificate will be a summary of the results of the last three school reports, 4) Extending the school year to summer holidays is not considered.

<sup>21</sup> Upper secondary VET schools with students who are about to graduate have several options: 1) The length of the VET programme may be extended and the final exam held after the schools reopen; 2) Final VET exams (with very few students) may be held if it is feasible while complying with Covid-19 health regulations; 3) VET schools with students who are going to graduate but whose final exams have to be cancelled may provide students with a degree (administrative diploma), if the school finds that the students in question meet the required level of skills, competences and knowledge and if the trade council agrees. The diploma has the same legal status as the regular one. With regard to VET grades in general VET schools, exam grades may be replaced by continuous assessment marks. Regarding examinations at higher education institutions, the individual institution will work out to offer an alternative form of examination (e.g. an assignment or an online exam) in situations where a planned exam can be conducted. If the institution decides not to replace the exam, they will schedule another exam instead.

the results of this assessment are used as an official indicator of quality of education. Other national assessments linked to this cycle will be rescheduled. In **Ecuador**, alternative methods are being adopted for national assessments including *Ser Estudiante*, *Ser Estudiante en la infancia* and *Bachillerato Técnico*.

Some countries in the African region, such as **Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia** and **Zimbabwe** have their basic education examinations in the October-November-December period and therefore are not yet affected. As regards TVET institutions (polytechnics and colleges), examinations are also taken in the October-November period, thus not affected yet. What could be affected at this stage are the work-based learning / attachments to industry / businesses / organisations. Attachments are part of the training programmes. With regard to university semester examinations, those scheduled for May-June may be affected given the length of the lockdown. In the **Comoros**, all exams except the Baccalaureate and university exams (for which no decision has been taken yet) are cancelled. In the **Gambia**, exams for grades 3, 5 and 8 are cancelled. In **Namibia**, the Ministry of Basic Education will work with teachers to support the analysis of health and sanitary provisions in schools so as to prepare to render distance learning to learners and ensure assessment continues online in tertiary institutions.

In the European and North American region, in higher education institutions of **Estonia**, by current plan, exams are conducted virtually in a planned time scale. In vocational education, it is not possible to defend the final work at school. The school together with the student will find an alternative solution. Exams for qualification are postponed. **Croatia** is updating legislation concerning grading and assessment, in order to take into account the distant learning context.<sup>22</sup>

In **Finland**, the learning objectives in general upper secondary education and vocational education have not been changed. Versatile assessment procedures will be used in grading the learned contents instead of using traditional examinations. In vocational education, the aim is to make sure that students in the final stage of their studies can graduate by prioritizing their competence demonstrations relative to other students in situations where it is not possible to organize all the competence demonstrations in the traditional way. Many HEIs have tried to organize exams online, with MyCourses, Moodle or other digital tools. In **Germany**, the assessment and grading of students' work takes place online, where possible. At the same time, schools are currently developing standards for the assessment of grades based on online work/course work. Schools are currently coordinating such responses to ensure as much consistency as possible.

**Hungary** has been providing higher education through distance education as of 23 March 2020. Teachers are expected to modify the requirements of each subject and the methods of assessment so that no physical contact takes place. Presidents of higher education institutions might consider to reschedule the exam period. As for VET, the Ministry of Innovation and Technology has requested the directors of the National Office for VET and Adult Learning (NOVETAL) to work on a proposal for how to organise the matura examinations in VET but details are not made available. As for public education, the Ministry of Human Capacities provides advices on assessments in digital format for students and teachers in schools via the website of the Educational Authority.

In **Latvia**, diagnostic tests for 11th grade in Physics and Chemistry (planned in April) have been cancelled. VET institutions continue the assessment of student performance during the remote learning (some use more pass/fail grading now). The biggest challenge for VET institutions is the practical training (especially for students who are about to finish the programme).<sup>23</sup> In cases where on-

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<sup>22</sup> At the moment, the authorities are not shifting the dates, but are considering alternative options in case they will have to postpone the exams.

<sup>23</sup> VET institutions and companies have to evaluate the situation on a case by case basis, but students cannot be forced to continue if they still consider it as a risk.

site training is not possible, either company tutors or VET teachers provide tasks for remote learning. Some VET institutions have stopped in-company training altogether, they restructure the training schedules and provide more theoretical content for remote learning. In **Lithuania**, the graduation exams, which are carried out during the educational process (school-level art exam, school-level technology exam and optional school graduation project) will be finalized by remote means (the final part of the exam, i.e. the presentation of the work to the panel, will be done remotely). Also, the speaking part of the Lithuanian language and literature exam will be carried out remotely.

In the **Netherlands**, for higher education, as far as possible, institutions allow examinations to take place in alternative digital forms. Furthermore, at the end of the first year, based on the number of study credits students in higher education have attained, they receive a binding recommendation (Binding study advice, BSA) on whether they may progress to the next year of their course. Due to the measures in place to combat the coronavirus outbreak, first-year students may be unable to obtain the required number of credits. It has been agreed that universities and universities of applied science will take into account the unusual circumstances in which their students are currently studying. Anyone who cannot meet the BSA requirements because their studies have been interrupted or delayed by the coronavirus outbreak will be granted an extension. They can progress to the second year and try to meet the BSA norm in the 2020/2021 academic year.

In **Sweden**, the National Agency for Education announced the cancellation of the semester's remaining national tests in compulsory school and upper-secondary school. In **Spain**, diagnostic tests for primary and secondary students (3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> years in primary and 4<sup>th</sup> in secondary) have been cancelled. As for Vocational Education and Training, the school calendar has been extended and a certain level of flexibility has been granted regarding practices in the workplace, limiting the hours to 220. **Canada, Germany, UK and US** have adopted Progress Record Books to document the skills developed and facilitate the real-time monitoring of apprenticeships.

In the Arab region, **Egypt** made the decision to cancel final exams for primary and preparatory students. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has cancelled March's mid-term exams, by adding the marks to the final exams instead. The Minister of Education meanwhile cancelled the final exams originally slated on March 26 for third preparatory grade students, assigning them to perform a research project instead as their prerequisite to move onto the Thanawya Amma (General Secondary Certificate) or technical secondary stage. Students will obtain the marks for their final year exams once they pass their research projects, with the grade combined with the marks from their first year exams.

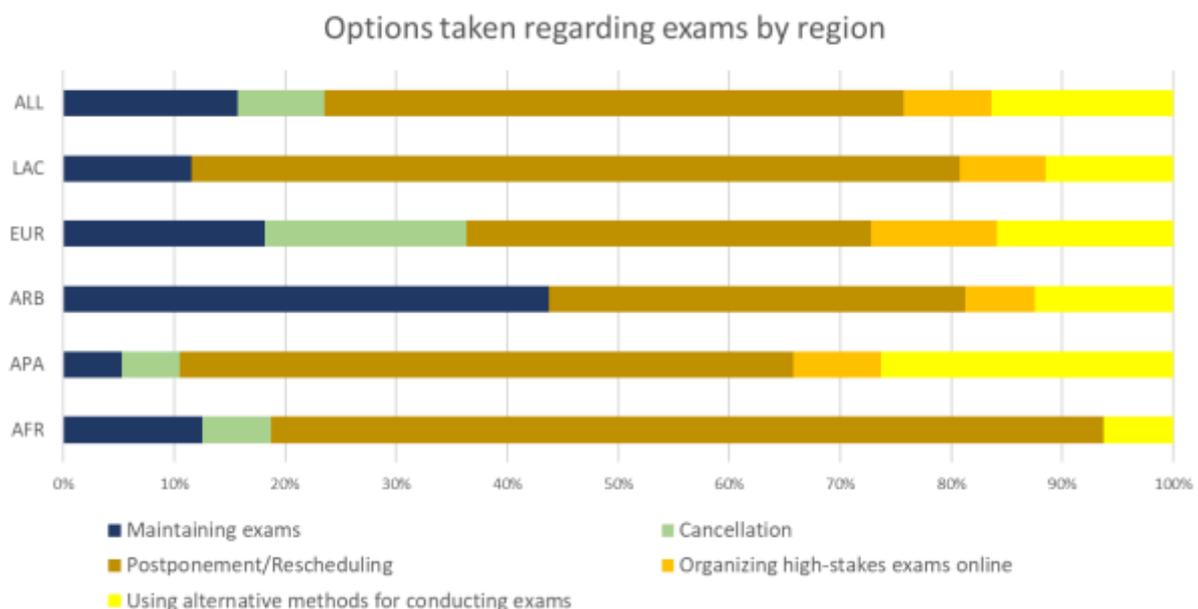
## Conclusions and recommendations

The global analysis of the policy measures being taken to manage high-stakes examinations and assessments during the Covid-19 pandemic highlights five strategies that are being adopted by different education systems:

1. Maintaining scheduled examinations
2. Cancellation
3. Rescheduling/postponement
4. High-stakes examinations online
5. Introducing alternative approaches

While the information, and initial findings, do not allow for an in-depth understanding of the strategies adopted by countries under these circumstances, some commonalities in terms of policy questions for governments to consider to make decisions concerning high-stakes exams and assessments during the prolonged and massive closure of schools, universities and other learning institutions are:

1. If exams are maintained, should they be conducted with the same format and administration or how?
2. If exams are cancelled, how to assess and certify learning?
3. If exams are postponed, by when?
4. If high-stakes examinations are conducted online, how feasible are they in terms of connectivity, security, proctoring, etc.?
5. If alternative approaches are introduced, what can they be? How should they be conducted? When?



Source: Compiled from various sources by UNESCO staff

UNESCO's analysis of data collected for and presented in this mapping covers some 73 countries worldwide that react to high-stakes exams during this time of school, university and other learning institution closures. As we can see in the above graph, the most common strategy adopted by countries is the postponement/rescheduling of examination (73 education systems). There are very few countries, which have opted for maintaining examinations, except in the Arab world (22 education systems). In a few cases, examinations are being cancelled (11 education systems), or governments

have opted for on-line examinations (11 education systems), and some are considering alternative approaches to replace examinations and to validate learning assessment<sup>24</sup>.

Building on this comparative analysis and on what we are learning through policy dialogue with Ministries of Education, UNESCO proposed the following six policy recommendations:

**1. A whole-of-government approach:** Ensure alignment and coordination with other relevant departments regarding decisions to adapt assessment, recognition and validation of learning at secondary level, particularly when they relate to higher education admission, certification and access to regulated professions and labour market.

**2. Broad consultation and public communication:** Involve social partners, students' unions and parents association in the consultation and develop a communication plan in order to ensure buy-in of teachers, their representatives, parents and society.

**3. Assessment options to ensure fairness:** Consider a combination of options to ensure fairness in assessment of learning during school closures. These include: additional support to teachers; consideration of earlier assessments; reduction in the number of subjects tested; automatic recognition and validation of student learning; and conditional admission to university, complemented by remedial courses upon school reopening.

**4. High-stakes examinations:** Any decisions relative to on-site examinations must be based, first and foremost, on guidance provided by national health authorities. Should on-site examinations be maintained (even if postponed), sanitary measures need to be ensured in line with guidance provided by national health authorities. Furthermore, consideration for continuous assessment and appropriate remedial programmes should be considered to ensure equal opportunities.

**5. On-line examinations:** Consider online examinations only when issues regarding equal access to infrastructure and connectivity, security and online proctoring methods, transparency, and students' digital skills and gaps have been thoroughly examined.

**6. Differentiated approaches for TVET:** Consider differentiated approaches for TVET-related examinations to address the particular challenge of TVET students, and constraints related to practical skills and work-based learning assessment. This could include: postponement of exams; use of continuous assessment results; use of online self-assessment resources reflecting learning and eventually achievements of apprentices; locally organized exams, etc.

There are obviously questions relative to Higher Education which are specific and are not yet included here. It does not mean that Higher Education related exams are not important nor requiring urgent attention. At the time of writing this paper, it is considered that the policy priority in the immediate timeframe is the end of lower and upper secondary cycles and the articulation with the further study and training, university admission, etc. The situation might evolve differently in many parts of the world by then, which will require real time updates.

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<sup>24</sup> A more detailed summary of coping strategies adopted by countries is presented on page 4 of this document.