Assessment challenges in higher education during the pandemic: course directors' perceptions and reflections

Orlanda Tavares[iD], **Maria João Antunes**[iD]

Research Centre on Child Studies (CIEC), Universityof Minho, Portugal.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education, requiring rapid adaptations in students' assessment. This study examines course directors' perspectives on the subject using semi-structured interviews with course directors from different Portuguese higher education institutions. Findings reveal critical issues, such as maintaining academic integrity, logistical constraints, and inequities in access to resources. Course directors reflected on the increased workloads for educators and students and the fairness of assessment formats, which disproportionately affected students with limited technological access. Despite these challenges, the crisis prompted a critical reflection on the importance of strengthening digital infrastructure, professional development, and institutional policies to enhance resilience and equity in future disruptions.

Keywords: Higher education; assessment; academic integrity; Portugal.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, as widely recognised, has posed immense challenges for higher education, as it has had a disruptive effect on teaching and assessment practices in a predominantly online environment. The abrupt transition has required teachers and course directors to adapt, especially concerning assessment, which has been largely affected by the absence of face-to-face interaction and the need to maintain standards of quality and fairness. Course directors were at the centre of this process, as they were responsible for coordinating various strategies that met institutional needs, on the one hand, and the realities of teachers and students on the other. In this article, we set out to answer the following research question: what were the main challenges emerging from student assessment in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what lessons have been learnt from this experience, according to the perspective of course directors?

The literature on assessment in higher education suggests that assessment practices are deeply linked to pedagogical objectives and the teaching context (Biggs, Tang, & Kennedy, 2022). According to the concept of constructive alignment, a central concept in this field, effective assessment should directly reflect the expected learning outcomes, ensuring the measurement and deepening of knowledge. Nonetheless, the pandemic has challenged the practical application of this principle due to the obligation to move abruptly to remote teaching environments. During this period, course directors have played a central role in guiding teachers in redefining assessments, although not always with time for structured planning or access to advanced technologies.

Some of the main concerns included issues related to academic integrity. Indeed, the literature has shown that the transition to online assessments has intensified concerns about academic dishonesty, as face-to-face supervision is no longer possible (Gupta et al., 2023). The use of tools such as randomised question banks, time-limited exams and authentication platforms have been widely used as a way of trying to prevent cheating. However, even with these strategies, many course directors and teachers realised that ensuring the authenticity of answers remained a challenge. Ober and Cheng (2023) showed that the perception of unfairness increased among students, especially those who faced technological difficulties or inappropriate home contexts. Maintaining rigour and ensuring fairness is, in this sense, a kind of dilemma that has left course directors in a complex position, forcing them to make quick decisions on the basis of limited resources and poorly consolidated evidence.

Another relevant aspect identified in the literature is the shift in the type of assessment used. Cooper et al. (2022) suggest that the pandemic has led many educators to reconsider traditional assessment formats, such as face-to-face exams and written assignments, in favour of more flexible approaches, such as open-ended assessments, practical projects and oral tests. However, these changes are not easy to implement in operational terms, especially in subjects with large classes, because they require individualised assessments that were, at the time, unfeasible. Course directors have had to balance these logistical issues with the need to support teachers in implementing innovative practices. Giri and Stewart (2023), in their analysis of the health professions, suggest that methods such as virtual simulations and scenario-based assessments have emerged as effective alternatives, although they require considerable initial investment in technology and training.

The issue of fairness has also been widely discussed. Pereira, Cadime and Flores (2022) show that many students in Portugal felt that online assessment conditions were less fair than face-to-face ones, particularly when they involved technological restrictions. On the other hand, teachers, burdened with additional workloads, also assumed difficulties in ensuring that assessments accurately reflected student performance. Chavez and Lamorinas (2023) suggest that the stress caused by the pandemic directly affected perceptions of the effectiveness and

fairness of assessment practices for both teachers and students, an aspect that became central to the role of course directors, who were required to mediate these tensions.

In addition to practical concerns, the pandemic has brought about a broader reflection on the purposes of assessment. Biggs, Tang and Kennedy (2022) argue that assessment should move beyond merely measuring performance to focus on developing competencies and promoting meaningful learning. This principle seems to have been reinforced during the pandemic, when many course directors ended up encouraging the adoption of more formative approaches. For example, Cooper et al. (2022) reported that, although limited by the lack of physical interaction between students, practical projects and online collaborative activities gained ground as alternatives that allowed skills to be assessed in a more authentic way.

The ethical implications of assessments during the pandemic have also been a source of concern. Stifel et al. (2020) draw attention to the psychological impact of the abrupt changes, which affected teachers and students. In this context, course directors have had to deal with the consequences of stress and anxiety that have arisen as a result of reduced deadlines, work overload and uncertainties surrounding the timing of the return to face-to-face teaching. At the same time, course directors had to ensure that the adaptations didn't jeopardise institutional credibility, which could mean adopting measures that weren't always popular with everyone involved.

Besides difficulties, the literature has shown that the pandemic may have acted as a catalyst for changes in perceptions about assessment in higher education. Reedy et al. (2021) argue that the crisis has exposed the weaknesses of existing systems, while at the same time showing the potential for innovative and more inclusive practices. Analysing the perspective of course directors allows us to better understand how these challenges have been met and what lessons can be learnt for the future of higher education, especially in contexts of uncertainty or disruption.

2. Methodology

As part of a broader study aimed at understanding the impact on equity of changes in higher education access policies during COVID-19, semi-structured interviews were conducted with course directors from a diverse range of educational institutions, including universities and polytechnics, in the public and private sectors, to gather their perceptions of the reasons for student dropout. In these semi-structured interviews, the issue of assessment was repeatedly mentioned. Therefore, this article focuses precisely on course directors' reflections on the challenges of assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the lessons learnt and the strategies adopted in response to the abrupt transition to online and remote teaching. A variety of educational levels were under study, including bachelor's, master's, and higher technical and professional courses (CTeSP). Eighteen course directors from various fields and

educational levels were contacted via email, leading to virtual interviews via Zoom. An overview of the respondents' professional and demographic characteristics is given in Table 1, which includes information on their disciplinary area, gender, academic level of the programmes they coordinate, and the kind of institution they work for.

High ethical standards were upheld in the study by obtaining participant agreement for interviews that were recorded and transcribed, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality. The adaptable format of the interviews encouraged free discussion of the challenges faced in assessing students. An inductive thematic analysis was employed through MAXQDA software.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees

Interview	Gender	Type of qualification	Disciplinary area	Type of institution
1	Male	CTeSP	Arts	Public Polytechnic
2	Male	CTeSP	Arts	Public Polytechnic
3	Male	CTeSP	Law	Private Polytechnic
4	Male	CTeSP	Engineering	Public Polytechnic
5	Male	Bachelor	Engineering	Public University
6	Male	Bachelor	Engineering	Public Polytechnic
7	Male	Bachelor	Engineering	Public Polytechnic
8	Male	Master	Engineering	Private University
9	Female	Master	Engineering	Public University
10	Female	Bachelor	Management	Public University
11	Female	Bachelor	Management	Public University
12	Male	Bachelor	Management	Public Polytechnic
13	Female	Bachelor	Management	Public Polytechnic
14	Female	Master	Management	Public Polytechnic
15	Female	Master	Education	Public Polytechnic
16	Female	Master	Education	Public Polytechnic
17	Female	Master	Education	Public Polytechnic
18	Female	Master	Education	Private Polytechnic

3. Findings

The analysis of course directors' reflections on the challenges of assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed key difficulties, particularly the struggles and adaptations required to address these unprecedented circumstances. These insights shed light on broader structural and pedagogical issues that higher education institutions faced globally.

Table 2. Perceptions of course directors

Assessment challenges in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic		
Ensuring integrity	Strategies adopted: randomised questions; shorter test times; oral examinations; project-based assessments	Increased workload both for educators and students and blurred boundaries between work and personal life
Unequal access to technology and other social inequities	Perceptions of both lower student performance and grades inflation	
Inputs for changes		
Opportunity for rethinking assessment purposes		
Making assessment more flexible and reflective approaches adopted		

A recurring theme that emerged from the content analysis performed was the difficulty in preventing fraud during online evaluations. Course directors expressed concerns about students circumventing the integrity of assessments, particularly in the absence of physical supervision. For instance:

> Because there's one who does the oral [exam], then goes out and can communicate to the others the questions that were asked. So, we had to change the questions for all of them. (Int. 3, Private Polytechnic)

Such challenges were intensified by technological limitations and the lack of reliable proctoring tools. Attempts to mitigate these issues, such as randomised questions or shorter test times, were only partially effective:

> We opted for shorter test times, but that didn't prevent the issue of fraud. (Int. 13, Public Polytechnic)

The logistical challenges of adapting assessment practices were particularly evident in the context of oral examinations and project-based evaluations. While oral assessments were seen as a way to ensure individual accountability, they posed significant constraints in terms of time and scalability:

> For oral exams, it takes much more time than doing them simultaneously. I was lucky to have a small class, but for those with 300 students, it was unmanageable. (Int. 5, Public University)

Similarly, project-based assessments, while effective in some cases, increased the workload for educators, particularly when verifying individual contributions. One participant described the extensive process they adopted:

> What I tried was to rely on practical assignments, but it was an excessive workload for me. Each student had to defend their work individually. (Int. 7, Public Polytechnic)

Indeed, this finding poses the need to discuss the resource-intensive nature of alternative assessment methods and the need for scalable solutions in higher education, as argued by Reedy et al. (2021).

The concern to maintain educational activity seems to have resulted in an increased workload for teachers and students, not only in relation to assessment. In some situations, the concern for rigour led many teachers to duplicate the work they asked their students to do. In addition, many teachers reported that they no longer had boundaries between personal and work time:

> With the students, it was about creating that connection, creating that network, so that the learning didn't break down beyond the synchronous moments, right? And that happened. Now, everyone's exhaustion was also very noticeable, because then we were always working and so were the students. I don't think it was just us, the students were also exhausted. In order to continue to invest in education with rigour and quality, we all overdid it. (Int. 7, Public Polytechnic)

The shift to remote assessment formats significantly impacted both learning outcomes and perceptions of fairness. Some educators reported that students performed poorly during the pandemic, attributing this to the inadequacy of online assessment methods:

> I had the worst results ever. That made me reflect on what we really want to evaluate and how. (Int. 18, Private Polytechnic)

Similarly, other participants observed grade inflation and expressed concerns about students exploiting the system:

> In some cases, there was more success in passing the course, likely due to some kind of scheme that allowed students to succeed. (Int. 12, Public Polytechnic)

These mixed outcomes reflect the dual pressures of maintaining rigour while adapting to new formats. The experiences described also highlight equity concerns, as students' varied access to technology and conducive study environments disproportionately affected their performance. For example, an educator reflected on the perceived injustice of certain adaptations:

> Looking back, I think it was unfair. Anyone doing a paper exam can review their answers, but in this case (maximum response time tests), they couldn't. (Int. 18, Private Polytechnic)

These findings echo Hodges et al. (2020), who argue that emergency remote teaching exacerbates inequities and poses significant challenges to fair assessment practices.

Despite these challenges, the pandemic prompted educators to reflect on their evaluation practices and reconsider the purpose of assessment. Some course directors described adopting more flexible and reflective approaches, moving beyond traditional methods:

> It made us reflect on what we really want to evaluate and what we want them to learn. (Int. 18, Private Polytechnic)

This aligns with Biggs and Tang's (2011) advocacy for constructive alignment in assessment, prioritising critical thinking and authentic learning over rote memorisation.

4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed deep vulnerabilities in higher education assessment practices, paving the way for a significant and necessary transformation. The challenges faced during this period have highlighted the urgency of rethinking assessment objectives and methods in order to prioritise critical thinking and adaptability over simple memorisation of content. This redefinition is urgent in order to ensure that assessment not only measures results, but also supports meaningful and sustainable learning.

In addition, the importance of strengthening institutions' digital infrastructure has become clear. Investments in more sophisticated and secure tools for online assessments are fundamental, but they must be accompanied by a commitment to equity, ensuring that all students have access to the conditions necessary for fair assessment. In this sense, the ongoing training of educators is a priority. Offering training in hybrid and online teaching methodologies could be a way of enabling greater resilience and effectiveness in future responses to disruption scenarios.

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the need for adjustments in institutional and educational policies. Clearer and more comprehensive guidelines that ensure the integrity and fairness of evaluation practices, even in crisis contexts, should be incorporated into institutions' strategic plans. Such measures are important to respond to the gaps highlighted by the pandemic and, above all, to pave the way for more innovative, flexible and inclusive solutions in the future of assessment in higher education. The present study is not without its limitations. In order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges of assessment, it is essential to incorporate the perspectives of other key educational stakeholders, particularly students. Additionally, a comparative analysis could be conducted between course coordinators' perceptions regarding grade inflation or declining academic standards and statistical data on student performance during this period. Despite these limitations, the study makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on assessment in times of disruption.

References

Biggs, J., Tang, C., & Kennedy, G. (2022). Teaching for quality learning at university 5e. McGraw-hill education (UK).

Chavez, J., & Lamorinas, D. D. (2023). Reconfiguring assessment practices and strategies in online education during the pandemic. *International Journal of Assessment Tools in*

Education, *10*(1), 160-174.Mellar, H., Peytcheva-Forsyth, R., Kocdar, S., Karadeniz, A., & Yovkova, B. (2018). Addressing cheating in e-assessment using student authentication and authorship checking systems: teachers' perspectives. International Journal for Educational Integrity, 14(1), 1-21.

Cooper, A., DeLuca, C., Holden, M., & MacGregor, S. (2022). Emergency assessment: Rethinking classroom practices and priorities amid remote teaching. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *29*(5), 534-554.

Giri, J., & Stewart, C. (2023). Innovations in assessment in health professions education during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review. *The Clinical Teacher*, *20*(5), e13634.

Gupta, T., Shree, A., Chanda, P., & Banerjee, A. (2023). Online assessment techniques adopted by the university teachers amidst COVID-19 pandemic: A case study. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *8*(1), 100579.

Ober, T. M., & Cheng, Y. (2023). Adapting to online and remote learning: Examining the educational assessment experiences of US college students Amidst COVID-19. *IEEE Internet Computing*.

Pereira, D., Santos, P., Aguiar, C., & Flores, M. A. (2022). Biology Undergraduate Students' Views of Assessment:: Methods, Purposes and Effects. *Journal of Assessment in Higher Education*, *3*(1), 79-99.

Pereira, D., Cadime, I., & Flores, M. A. (2022). Investigating assessment in higher education: students' perceptions. *Research in post-compulsory education*, *27*(2), 328-350.

Reedy, A., Pfitzner, D., Rook, L., & Ellis, L. (2021). Responding to the COVID-19 emergency: student and academic staff perceptions of academic integrity in the transition to online exams at three Australian universities. International Journal for Educational Integrity, 17(1), 9.

Stifel, S. W., Feinberg, D. K., Zhang, Y., Chan, M. K., & Wagle, R. (2020). Assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic: Ethical, legal, and safety considerations moving forward. *School Psychology Review*, *49*(4), 438-452.