Check for updates

Education in Europe and the COVID-19 Pandemic

EERJ European Educational Research Journal

European Educational Research Journal
1–20
© The Author(s) 2021
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14749041211022130
journals.sagepub.com/home/eer
SAGE

Dancing with Covid: Choreographing examinations in pandemic times

Cristina Alarcón López
Department of Education, University of Vienna, Austria

Mathias Decuypère
Methodology of Educational Sciences, KU Leuven, Belgium

Joyeeta Dey
University of Melbourne, Australia

Radhika Gorur
School of Education, Deakin University, Australia

Mary Hamilton
Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, UK

Christian Lundahl
School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Sweden

Elin Sundström Sjödin
School of Education, Culture and Communication, Mälardalen University, Sweden

Abstract

In this paper, we explore the improvisations made in examination practices in higher education during the pandemic of 2020. Drawing on STS, we start from the theoretical assumption that examinations constitute an obligatory passage point in universities and colleges: a sacred point which students need to pass if they want to gain recognized qualifications. We base our analysis of higher education examinations on cases from six countries around the world: Australia,

Corresponding author:
Elin Sundström Sjödin, School of Education, Culture and Communication, Mälardalen University, Sweden.
Email: elin.sundstrom.sjodin@mdh.se

Belgium, Chile, India, Sweden and the UK. We use the analytical heuristic of choreography to follow the movements, tensions and resistance of the 'emergency examinations' as well as the re-orderings of actors and stages that have inevitably occurred. In our analytical stories we see the interplay between the maintenance of fixed and sacred aspects of examinations and the fluidity of improvisations aimed at meeting threats of spreading Covid-19. These measures have forced the complex network of examinations both to reinforce some conventional actors and to assemble new actors and stages, thus creating radically new choreographies. Although higher education teaching and didactics are being framed as a playground for pedagogical innovation with digital technologies, it is clear from our data that not all educational activities can be so easily replicated.

Keywords
Examination practices, STS, higher education, Covid-19, ontological choreography

Introduction: Covid 19 – emergency examinations in higher education

In his poignant reflection on the disaster that befell the space shuttle *Challenger*, Latour (2004: 233–234) talks of how the shuttle's journeys, which had become routine and unremarkable (an *object*), had suddenly disintegrated, literally, and transformed into a *thing* that became widely discussed around the world:

> What else would you call this sudden transformation of a completely mastered, perfectly understood, quite forgotten by the media, taken-for-granted, matter-of-factual projectile into a sudden shower of debris falling on the United States, which thousands of people tried to salvage in the mud and rain and collect in a huge hall to serve as so many clues in a judicial scientific investigation? Here, suddenly, in a stroke, an object had become a thing, a matter of fact was considered as a matter of great concern.

In much the same way, Covid-19 has prompted, disruptively and almost violently, a re-arrangement of the well-rehearsed practices of school and university examinations. Williamson et al. (2020: 108) argue that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the beginning of 2020 marked the start of a distinctive approach to pedagogy, characterized by the extensive use of distance education, remote teaching and online instruction. 'Pandemic pedagogies', they state, are the specific response to the field of education suddenly becoming an 'emergency matter'. We argue that not only has a specific approach to pedagogy emerged, but equally, all over the world, specific forms of *emergency examinations* have been created. The impossibility (in many cases) of bringing students physically to an examination hall during the (almost worldwide) lockdown meant that the routine and 'black-boxed' practices of examinations, previously taken for granted as a necessity, were called into question. While examination processes always have been subject to glitches, interruptions and workarounds, the scale (i.e. the extent and global spread) at which the lockdown sent the processes into disarray was unprecedented, turning them into a matter of public concern. To use Latour's trope: examinations transformed from *matters of fact* into *matters of concern* (Latour, 2004). Almost all educational institutions found themselves having to innovate on the fly, figuring out new alternatives to the time-tested examination system, with little or no time for thorough deliberation or rehearsal. Examination performances were re-arranged, and in some cases, postponed or even suspended. In this paper, we argue that the virus induced the configuration of new *choreographies of examinations*, where diverse social and material actors, with differing ontologies or logics, were required to re-arrange, reformulate and redistribute themselves, even as the established and familiar spaces

and times of these choreographies were (partly) relocated and redefined (Cussins, 1996; Decuypere and Simons, 2016).

Based on examination cases from six countries (Australia, Belgium, Chile, India, Sweden and the UK), we present analytical stories of new, Covid-19-induced, examination choreographies. Our cases refer mainly to university-level examinations, while one of the cases deals with a college admission examination. The analytical stories illustrate measures taken in the different countries and also how different actors (not least different digital technologies), came to the fore as they confronted the realities of new, hastily constructed practices.[1]

We start this paper by situating examinations as part of formal assessment more generally, and argue that conventional forms of examinations have, throughout history, functioned as a *sacred ritual*. We frame this sacred nature of the examination as an *obligatory point of passage* that students necessarily have to pass through to progress their educational journey (or to exit the educational system by graduating). In order to get a grasp on the changing practices of examinations in the higher education sector, we use the notion of 'choreography' as an analytical heuristic. After outlining our methodological approach, we present our data and choreographic analysis. Our case studies enquire into examples of the adaptations and novel practices that arose in the effort to preserve the sacredness of examinations. We reflect on what changed and what remained of conventional examinations and conclude that the improvisations were focused on maintaining the sacredness of the ritual of examinations at a heavy cost to students, particularly in the Global South, and that universities by and large did not take up the opportunity to rethink examinations.

Examinations: Obligatory points of passage, sacred rituals and choreographies

In many respects, the examination constitutes one of the core parts of education. For decades, and despite national and regional variations, the examination has been the place and time where students and teachers, knowledge and content, pedagogy and didactics, laws and policies, individual dreams and societal visions come together. It can be seen as one of education's most central and sacred 'obligatory passage points' (Callon, 1986) for gaining formal qualifications, for admittance to further education, for entry into a profession, and so on. Obligatory passage points – a term stemming from actor-network theory (ANT) – function as 'central assemblages through which all relations in the network must flow at some time' (Fenwick and Edwards, 2011: 9). Obligatory passage points require that other actors, or assemblages of actors, pass through them in order to form their own networks and in order to pursue their own interests (Fenwick and Edwards, 2011). In that sense, obligatory passage points turn themselves into *indispensable* actor(-network)s in a particular assemblage (Latour, 1987). Moreover, because they are obligatory, such passage points are often easily overlooked, taken for granted or simply not actively noticed as taking up a central, or perhaps better, an *agential*, position: much like the *Challenger*, they become part of a 'black-boxed system' (Latour, 1987). However, because of their indispensability, obligatory passage points play a crucial role in any setting, since they exclude actors that cannot (or will not) pass through them. It is precisely when practices *break down* in an emergency such as a pandemic that the agential capacity of such actors and assemblages is rendered very clearly visible (cf. Alirezabeigi et al., 2020). Using different terms and phrasings, many prominent thinkers such as Durkheim (1938/1977), Marx (1977), Foucault (1977) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have also pointed to such obligatory features and characteristics, describing examinations as *sacred rituals* within educational systems.

In order to understand the sacred nature of examinations, we need to look at the broader functions of educational assessment in which they play a role. Broadly, from the very first examinations

sense of this paper's empirical material, the general term – as well as associated terms such as movements and relationality – also served as a conceptual framework. That is to say, we used the terms in such a way that they conceptually sensitized us for analyzing our data in a relational way, looking for movements and processes of flow, or precisely for moments in which relational movements were interrupted and stabilized.

Cases, methodology and analytic approach

The idea for this paper arose from a series of trans-national conversations between the authors as a way of coping with the pandemic-instigated changes to our lives and our work all through 2020. Observing developments in Australia, Belgium, Chile, India, Sweden and the UK, we exchanged thoughts and notes about how our universities as well as the universities that were our sites of research were coping with the pandemic, how our work and the experiences of students were changing, how news media reported on matters, and so on. The conversations led us to focus specifically on Covid-19-responses to examinations as a pivotal part of education in all these countries, as we witnessed how these responses varied in their vision and were halting in the ways they were realized, with new disruptions and improvisations caused by the virus and by other actors.

Our collective writing in this paper is, in and of itself, to be considered as a method of inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005). Initially, during the spring and summer of 2020 we exchanged stories about the events in our sites of research, and we began to see the possibility of more systematically generating data in our respective sites. We differed in the methods employed, with the methods available largely driven by the research limitations imposed, ironically, by the pandemic itself. It was not possible for us to travel anywhere for fieldwork, nor speak to respondents face to face. Instead, we used data sources available to us safely and remotely. Our data consists of interview transcripts, with students (Sweden), media interviews (India), teachers, IT specialists and student support advisors (Australia, Chile, the UK), directors and administrators (Sweden, Australia); ethnographic fieldnotes and pictures (Belgium); questionnaires to students, teachers and directors (Chile, Sweden); media coverage (India and the UK); and our own quarantined lived realities of being mothersfathersdaughterssonsscholarscolleaguescitizensfriends at different places (realities) in the pandemic.

Initially, as a way to examine, illustrate and share our stories, we each wrote a vignette describing our own 'case' based on our research site, adding our stories into a shared online document. While juxtapositioning our 'vignettes' provided some grounding and a structure for organizing our data, we found it impossible to keep our 'national' stories discreet and intact. Our data kept shifting even as we wrote, with new developments occurring practically every day. Moreover, there were wide disparities, we knew, between universities in the same nation, and, at the same time, many similarities across nations. Eschewing analytical nationalism, we let our shared commitment to such foundational STS (Science and Technology Studies) concepts as relationality, emergence and multiplicity guide our discussions and our writing. As we examined the staging of the examination in different locations, we were struck by the determination displayed everywhere that the 'show must go on'. The metaphor of 'choreography' appeared apt to understand these efforts to coordinate and orchestrate. It functioned as an 'analytical prism' that made particular insights crystallize (Ellingson, 2008). So, although we present analytical stories from six different countries, our aim is not to compare them in order to determine 'best practices', or to seek 'melioration through imitation' (Jasanoff, 2004: 15). Rather, we believe that each case is situated and sensible only within its own unique context (Arnove et al., 2013). Nor is it our intention to systematically generalize our findings on each case to the entire country context. The varied cache of analytical stories located in different continents with different educational, cultural, historical and political conditions pro-

vided us with a rich set of practices from which we could account for multiple versions of Covid-19-driven emergency examinations.

The Australian case is located in the state of Victoria, which declared a state of emergency on 16 March 2020 in response to Covid-19. Although at this time universities were not mandated to go to an off-campus mode, all Victorian universities were preparing to do so in anticipation of campus closures (Murray-Atfield, 2020) and university instruction moved to online mode almost overnight soon after. No one knew how long the lockdown would last, and whether on-campus examinations could be held as usual. But as the weeks went on, it became clear that the knotty problem of examinations needed to be tackled. A variety of solutions were used across different subjects: abandoning examinations altogether and instead grading assignments; holding online examinations using the regular learning management system; using an online 'lockdown environment' software that used electronic trackers to observe students; and a proctored online examination system. Interviews were conducted with six university officials from one Australian university between August and October 2020.

In the context of a wider government-led lockdown, Belgium decided to adopt a wide variety of examination options in higher education, where both online examinations and offline variants were allowed. For the offline/physical variants, proper sanitary measures needed to be put in place and the principle of social distancing needed to be maximally maintained. We focus on how this was done in one university which partly shifted from the usual venues of examinations (i.e. lecture halls) to new ones. These new venues included football stadiums, large student restaurants, and, in this case, a large, off-campus, exhibition hall that is normally used for organizing big fairs, and that permitted maximal regulation of the principle of social distancing. During a participatory observation by one of the authors in June 2020, field notes and pictures were taken and came to serve as the empirical material for the Belgian case.

The Chilean case refers to two public universities, one located in the capital Santiago and the other 50 km south of that city. On 18 March, the government declared a 'state of catastrophe' due to Covid-19. Only a few days earlier, in mid-March, the universities had decided, as a preventive measure, to go into off-campus mode. However, since October 2019, Chilean society and the universities had already become scenes of a massive and unprecedented protest movement that questioned the foundations of the prevailing 'neoliberal' socioeconomic model. The shift to online classes during the pandemic evidenced a sharp digital divide among students, preventing many students from participating regularly in classes or making it difficult for them to do so. Student anxiety was further heightened by long, strict lockdowns and few government initiatives to support families and workers. The data was collected between May and August 2020 and consists of media articles, interviews with a teacher and a university director and questionnaires from 13 students, 14 teachers and two university directors.

In India, during the early stages of the pandemic, the University Grants Commission (the central body controlling higher education) recommended against nation-wide online examinations, on the grounds of the digital divide and the potential for cheating. Nevertheless, Delhi University, a central university located in the capital city, went ahead with its plan of online, open-book examinations for 225,000 students, fuelling massive protests from students and teacher unions, and an appeal to the High Court by students to cancel the examinations. Delhi University draws students of varying socioeconomic profiles from all corners of the country many of whom had returned to their hometowns when the pandemic struck. When the examinations were held, students were expected to participate from states experiencing devastating floods and internet blackouts. Some wrote their examinations from quarantine centres using mobile data. The university pushed through with the examinations, arguing that this protected the future and health of the students. Subsequently, the Delhi High Court gave an order that students who had been unable to complete the online

examination would be given the opportunity to appear for an offline version later. The data in the India case consists of news media reports and media interviews.

Since mid-March 2020, all Swedish universities have for the most part practised distance teaching instead of teaching on campus. This has led to universities increasingly using open-book, online examinations, which in many cases required them to monitor examination-taking practices in students' homes. This was a new and experimental use of surveillance in hitherto private spaces. The student perspective on this is documented here, in interviews with two students in May 2020, for a case that makes visible the changing choreography of exams in the formations and re-arrangements of actors, and in redistribution of agency. At the same time, we can see from a second Swedish case that some educational programmes in Sweden were well prepared, since they had been working with digital examinations and alternative examinations prior to Covid-19 as part of their higher education development programme. The data was collected in interviews with university directors and a questionnaire.

On 20 March 2020 the UK government closed schools in England. It required higher education to adopt social distancing measures in all aspects of teaching and learning but – unlike schools – did not force them to close. Universities were left to make their own arrangements for assessing student achievement during and at the end of courses, in consultation with employers and professional associations. This led to a widespread move away from examinations and toward coursework and tutor assessment which was carried out without media fanfare despite considerable anxiety and upset among both students and staff. The most visible disruption, documented in our case through media accounts (see Adams, 2020), erupted in a different place on the stage: the improvised arrangements for alternative, machine-based assessment of school performance. This assessment was designed to replace the exams used to allocate entrance to higher education but it failed spectacularly. The failure had knock-on effects not only for students and teachers but for admissions systems in the universities (Hubble and Bolton, 2020) and it damaged trust in government policy. While the assessments in this case were pre-entry, they were central to the sorting and ordering processes involved in admitting students to universities and are therefore entirely relevant to this paper.

We have collaged our different empirical stories in order for them to hang together. Our aim is to say something about the parts and, even more, about the combined picture of the multiple realities that have been enacted. When data from the different countries had been composed, we analyzed our material with the help of a matrix that was organized by our two primary research questions: How were the choreographies (roles, stage, movements) of examinations changed and challenged by Covid-19? How did these changes and re-arrangements affect the sacredness of examinations? We present our analysis of the Covid-19-inspired emergency examinations in the next section.

Emergency examinations: Improvising in times of disaster

The new examination choreographies that were created as a result of the pandemic inaugurated a new arrangement of roles of pre-existing actors as well as the emergence of new actors: lecturers, students, exam invigilators, university and unit heads, college administrators, technical managers, IT support teams, internet providers, national and provincial governments as well as objects such as computers (tablets, laptops, etc.), mobile phones, internet connections, hand sanitizer and more.

Scrambled roles

In the normal course of events, the examination process runs almost on autopilot, with fixed roles assigned to those who prepare the examinations, organize the administrative and logistical details, invigilate, sit the examinations and mark them. Over the course of years, these practices become

routine – everyone knows their role. There is little need for meetings and consultation. In our Australian case, faculty members prepare their examination and submit it to one of the administrative support departments, which does a basic check to see that the examination is formatted correctly, the marks add up to the required maximum, and the instructions are clear. Then they organize the venue, furniture, invigilator and so on. But when the pandemic hit, everything changed:

> We had to do a lot of things on the fly while figuring out how to do them, and for students who were [also] coming up with a lot of things on the fly, figuring out what their job's going to be like [the lockdown meant widespread unemployment and students were hit hard] and how do I do the Job Keeper [a programme to support those who were out of work due to Covid-19]. (Interview, Australian case study)

The 'emergency examinations' prompted by Covid-19 changed the assigned functions of many actors. A range of actors – the learning support team members, the cloud environment managers, the student experience officers – hitherto in the background and only supporting the work of academics got involved in questioning whether examinations were required at all, how to make the examination meaningful (for example, not asking simple definitional questions which students could look up easily, since online non-invigilated examinations were necessarily 'open book'), what constituted 'authentic assessment' and how the requirements of online examinations might impact on students' wellbeing. Meetings were set up across many more departments and faculties, and officials high up on the university ladder, such as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor came to be involved. Solicitors were called in to check the legality of requiring students to have computers with certain capabilities, such as a camera, to facilitate invigilated examinations. Each of these new roles tried to maintain what was considered the most critical and sacred aspects of examinations. This story offers a window particularly on the 'backstage' administrative actors who played a key role in re-choreographing the examinations – but not before questions were raised about whether examinations were required at all, and if so, why.

In Chile, the transition to online courses and examinations during a lockdown lasting several months, not only made a new actor visible but transformed it into a new kind of protagonist: the internet provider. Emergency examinations necessarily depended on internet providers to ensure the flow and speed of internet traffic without interruptions (see also Williamson and Hogan, 2020).

Similarly, this moment was ripe for an increase in reliance on private companies in Delhi University, because the academics had little experience of conducting examinations online. One professor called it 'an invitation for commercial enterprises to flourish', arguing:

> There's nothing wrong in online classes but we are not in a stage where we can hold exams. Only commercial enterprises are going to benefit from this, this is not just happening in India but throughout the world, this is an opportunity for them to make money. . .. Many teachers themselves are not trained in holding open book exams. We don't have experience or expertise. And by handing over the responsibility of setting the paper and evaluation to someone else, we lose out on the credibility of the process. (Media interview, Indian case study; Deeksha, 2020)

At one Swedish university, actions were taken to safeguard the examinations immediately after the government recommended remote teaching. On 18 March 2020, a group of people, four university lawyers and three university investigators, published a new regulation for examinations at a distance where they stated that:

> The principle is that normal regulations apply as far as possible. Deviations from the normal regulations regarding examinations must be documented, and all other deviations should be documented. It is important to focus on disadvantaging the students as little as possible, while at the same time maintaining

> legal certainty regarding e.g., transparency, proportionality and equal treatment. (Excerpt from university website, Swedish case study)

Instead of examinations in exam halls, it was now recommended to offer take-home examinations (which require some adaptation of the actual exam questions), or to postpone the examinations. In order to help teachers change their examinations, a link was provided to a website to the Centre for Academic Development [Högskolepedagogiskt Centrum] at the university. Here, one could find suggestions for rephrasing questions written for on-campus examinations to make them more suitable for open-book examinations, such as (a) putting the questions more clearly in a context, (b) making the questions more individual-related or (c) making the questions more complex.

In Chile, online courses and examinations in some contexts were disrupted by weak or slow internet connections, or directly by the digital divide and the complex family/social realities of students. In fact, the Chilean case shows how the digital divide produced a new digital student hierarchy based on access to digital equipment and the infrastructural and emotional conditions necessary for online learning. Such hierarchization and concomitant subjectivation is not only linked to pre-existing class and gender hierarchies (including LGBTQIA+)[2], but even enhances them: the transition from campus to home intensifies previously existing inequalities and tensions. One student stated:

> The home is often a space full of violence (especially towards women and the LGBTQIA+ community). Domestic tasks are not distributed equitably. The care of others often falls to the women of the household. There are many questions such as 'Why am I studying while people are hungry' and many people have said that they prefer to take a leave [from their studies], but do not have money to pay for another year. On top of that, the supposed economic recession has many people doubting whether to continue with their studies. (Questionnaire, Chilean case study)

This domino effect – where the interconnections between different practices bring to view the range of hidden actors (the 'elephants in the room') echo Latour's (2004) examples of how 'the thinging of things' comes to view when matters of fact are shattered to become matters of concern. As more and more actors came to be involved – private companies, student advisors, computers with cameras, regulations, policies and so on – the 'stage' of this exam choreography, formerly contained within large university halls, came to be distributed across many sites.

The scattered stage

One of the most central features of conventional examinations is that of proctoring, as noted not least by Foucault (1977). The strict staging of an examination is a measure taken to spatially hold students apart (and to feel normal about this). The reason for this is to produce knowledge about the *individual* that can be used in comparisons (Meadmore, 1993). Just like a dance stage, the exam halls provide a clear framing for the movements of the actors involved, restricting and enabling them and determining what can be seen and monitored.

However, it turns out that as long as certain key aspects of their 'sacredness' could be guaranteed, examinations could be conducted anywhere. Students did not have to sit together in the same hall, under the same conditions, at similar desks, observed by the same invigilators. Distance or online examinations relocated and distributed the 'stage' of the performance from the classical lecture hall on campus to the homes of the students or to other public spaces like exhibition halls.

In order to maximize social distancing, examinations at a university in Belgium were moved out to big rooms and halls available in the vicinity of the university city (including football stadiums,

banquet halls and museums). In the Belgian case presented here, the examination was staged in a huge building that is normally used for commercial exhibition fairs. In the massive building, there is room for 200 students – even when they are spread out. Although the students are brought together into the same space, the effect of this grand stage is not to connect the students – it is, rather, to separate them. It is to isolate them, not only from each other, but from teachers and most of all from the virus. The stage of the examinations had to radically shift to offer students an examination practice that emulated as closely as possible a 'traditional' examination format.

Elsewhere, digital solutions distributed the examinations to much smaller environments – into the studies, kitchen tables or beds – wherever in their homes students could work without too much disturbance. Students scattered, if possible, their partners, children, pets and other 'disturbances' out of the way for the duration of the examination. In India, students without internet connections in their homes went to community centres where they could access their examinations. They were permitted to submit the completed examinations over WhatsApp on whatever devices they had available. In Chile, as a strong internet connection was far from guaranteed, some students had to climb onto their roof each day in search of a cell signal strong enough to transmit their online classes (Reuters, 2020). In Sweden, students took examinations in their homes as well. One student, Tyra, tells us that she was instructed to turn on her computer camera and place a second camera from an angle behind her, so that the camera could show the entire computer screen and the desk.

> We had to log in to the same Zoom room, first from the computer, and you had to place that so they could see the nearest surroundings. And then, from an angle behind, we had to log in from a mobile or I-Pad or whatever you had and then I used my mobile. I used the camera to log into the same room. (Interview, Swedish case study)

Another student, Rachel, said:

> Well [the instruction] was like, it said that in order to minimize the risk of cheating, it is absolutely not ok to use any kind of material even if you're at home. That's why it is going to be surveilled via zoom, and that's why it's so important for them to see the table and such. So you don't have a note under the computer. (Interview, Swedish case study)

And although they have to orchestrate it themselves, with their own devices, the students seem to consider that the surveillance apparatus was the actor that made the examination 'as realistic as possible'.

These new, scattered stages can carry many students writing their examinations at the same time. Each stage includes a room with certain props: a table or desk, a computer (or a cell phone) and a camera. In some contexts, the whole space has to be 'synoptic' for the supervisor via computer and mobile phone cameras. Digital tools connect the students with the test itself, with the supervisor(s) and the other students dispersed in their homes. Much of the work is already in place – the students are presumed to have the required technology, the same test can be used as before, the technology used (Zoom or similar; examination software) is already in use. The small becomes connected and thus becomes a huge stage.

Not all students welcomed the prying eyes entering their homes, and some students in Australia expressed concern that the camera made visible their living arrangements, which they would have preferred to keep private. The images and the identity information and other data scattered the students and the university across various databases. None of the people we interviewed appeared to know the protocols for where this data was stored, how secure it was, or how long the data could be held by the companies or the universities before it was purged.