

Learning, teaching and assessment during the pandemic at the University of Malta. Findings of the SALT Surveys

SALT Survey Team:

Dr Sarah Cuschieri, Ms Jo-Anne Attard, Prof. Paul A. Bartolo,
Mr Lionel Attard, Mr James Cilia, Prof. Joseph Cacciottolo

Background

The University of Malta (UM) celebrated its 250th Anniversary during the 2019-2020 academic year. During this same year, the University was impacted by one of the most significant upheavals in its history. A global public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic lead to unexpected and sudden changes in the daily life of all students, academics, administrators and technical staff. In line with the World Health Organisation, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Health, Malta instituted a number of preventive measures to safeguard the Nation's health. One of the containment measures was the closure of schools, institutes of further education and universities on 13 March 2020. This public health measure was followed by a swift and necessary shift from face-to-face teaching and assessment to a new remote modality. The UM reacted rapidly to successive and fast-moving events by implementing a number of complex changes to enable teaching and assessment to be sustained at a high quality, albeit via different modes and vehicles. A principal aim was to offer the University's student body as much continuity of learning, stability and peace of mind as was possible in rapidly changing circumstances.

Scope of surveys

Over five months, from March to July 2020, the vast majority of students and staff at the UM underwent novel experiences and acquired new skills and competences. The experiences in reaction to both the international and local public health situation needed to be documented and analysed in order to have an evidence-based platform from which to move forward, into what at the time of writing is still an indistinct landscape. A multidisciplinary team of UM staff developed and implemented three “Surveys of Assessment, Learning and Teaching (SALT)” that were aimed respectively at: (a) students, (b) academics and (c) administrators and technical staff. The overarching aim of the surveys was to obtain information and opinions about experiences in teaching and assessments across the University’s entities. All enrolled students, academic, administrative and technical staff were invited to voluntarily take part in the respective surveys. The three online surveys were distributed through the official UM electronic mail between the 6 of July to the 20 July 2020.

Outcomes

SALT-Students

The SALT-S survey was distributed among all enrolled university students following a taught programme during the academic year 2019-2020. Electronic mail was used to contact a total of 11,261 students of whom 1,958 replied (17.4% response). The responses included also over a thousand distinct comments in reply to open questions. From the feedback submitted by students, it appears that they understood “the necessary” shift to remote teaching due to unprecedented times caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the majority (66%) reported that they were generally dissatisfied with this shift. Their comments showed that this was related to several factors, including lack of, confusing, or delayed information on the new procedures, and higher workload and expectations from them, while feeling less supported:

“I was mostly dissatisfied by the delay in communication and final decision taking by our faculty.”

“What the faculty failed to understand that being inside for so long, had an impact on our mental health. Instead of aiding the student by offering alternative methods of assessment, they decided to go through with exams ... We were under extreme anxiety and stress and having this workload did not help at all.”

On the other hand, it is worth noting that those who were satisfied included experiencing remote learning as an improvement:

“Overall this method was better in my opinion mainly cause I found it easier and more relaxing to attend lectures which helped me reduce stress as I didn’t have to worry about buses or running to school in the morning. Most lecturers also handled it very well.”

With regards to learning, 60% felt that they did not achieve their intended learning goals. Students across faculties felt the need to point out that while they had to tick one option on each item’s Likert scale, they had actually experienced different situations with different lecturers, departments and faculties:

“On the whole, online teaching is worse than in-person. Sometimes this is just because it is harder to transition to it, other times it is because the lecturer's method of teaching does not translate properly into online lectures.”

“The shift to online lectures has been perfectly fine by some lecturers. However, others did not even attempt to do any online tutorials or lectures and just placed the slides online with question fora if we have any difficulties.”

Some also pointed out that the students’ ways of learning required different approaches:

“I’m a student who usually doesn’t grasp much from lectures... rather, I read the recommended textbooks and then ask questions during lectures. With these online courses, there was an increase in tutorials, which helped students like me who do not necessarily need spoon feeding, but rather discuss particular problems. We need to strive a balance for both types of students.”

With regards to communication with administrative bodies, 42% of the respondents reported that they were dissatisfied. A similar perception (40% of respondents) was observed with regards to official communication and advice related to assessments and examinations held in June 2020. Students across faculties commented about communication with both administration and academic staff:

“Every time I had a query, lecturers were always reachable through emails or zoom meetings.”

“While I understand that the situation caused a great deal of uncertainty for everybody, the lack of communication about what the options that were being considered caused a great deal of stress on us students.”

Most student respondents were dissatisfied with the ease of using the new modes of teaching and assessment/examination tools (76% and 66% respectively). Reference was widely made to difficulties with the technology:

“The lectures online were hard to follow and focus on as the communication due to technical issues was not always successful,”

Changed assessment requirements also raised anxiety:

“Some exams were so much harder than previous years which definitely increased our stress tenfold.”

The majority of students reported to have undergone ‘Assignments’ or ‘VLE take home exams’ during June’s assessment period, although other examination formats were also followed (Figure 1). Students expressed general satisfaction (64%) towards the new remote assessment/examination modalities that they experienced, with a preference towards assignments and dissertations through the use of VLE (Figure 2). Furthermore, the majority of respondents (47%) considered the new remote assessment/examination modality as superior to the traditional paper-based examinations and welcomed these modalities (62%) for future implementation even when the public health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic are removed. There were concerns about the loss of anonymity in examinations, but some commented on open-book examinations as a better option regarding lifelong learning:

“The online exam mechanism was very good, and I believe gives better results as answers would be more argued rather than learnt by heart and forgotten as soon as the exam finishes.”

A majority (54%) expressed concern about potential internet connectivity failures and power outages during their remote assessments/examinations.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it an abrupt change in students’ life, learning and assessments; 66% of the respondents reported that they experienced symptoms of anxiety generally related to their studies. Across faculties, students further commented that their distress was not understood:

“For our course in particular the overwhelming amount of assignments was horrible and very detrimental to the well-being of the student and the lack of sympathy from lecturers and admin is tragic.”

Students expressed a marked concern about the physical health, safety and wellbeing of their loved ones (47%) and their own mental and emotional wellbeing (32%).

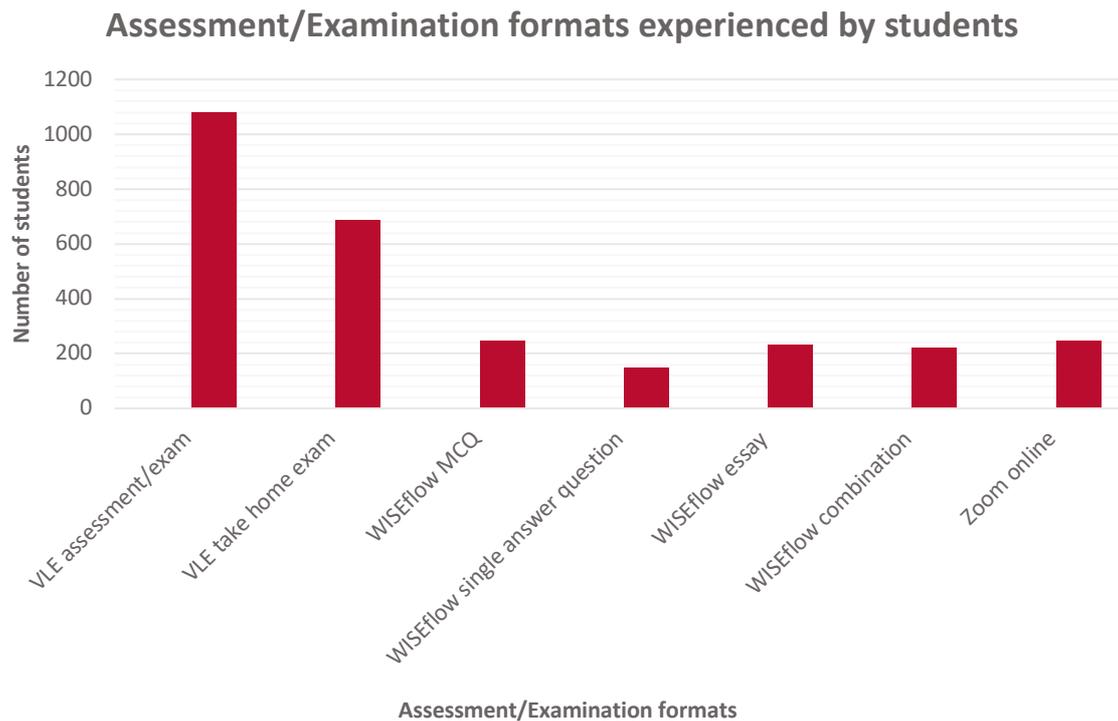


Figure 1. The different assessments and examination formats as indicated by students (students experienced more than one format during June 2020 examination sitting)

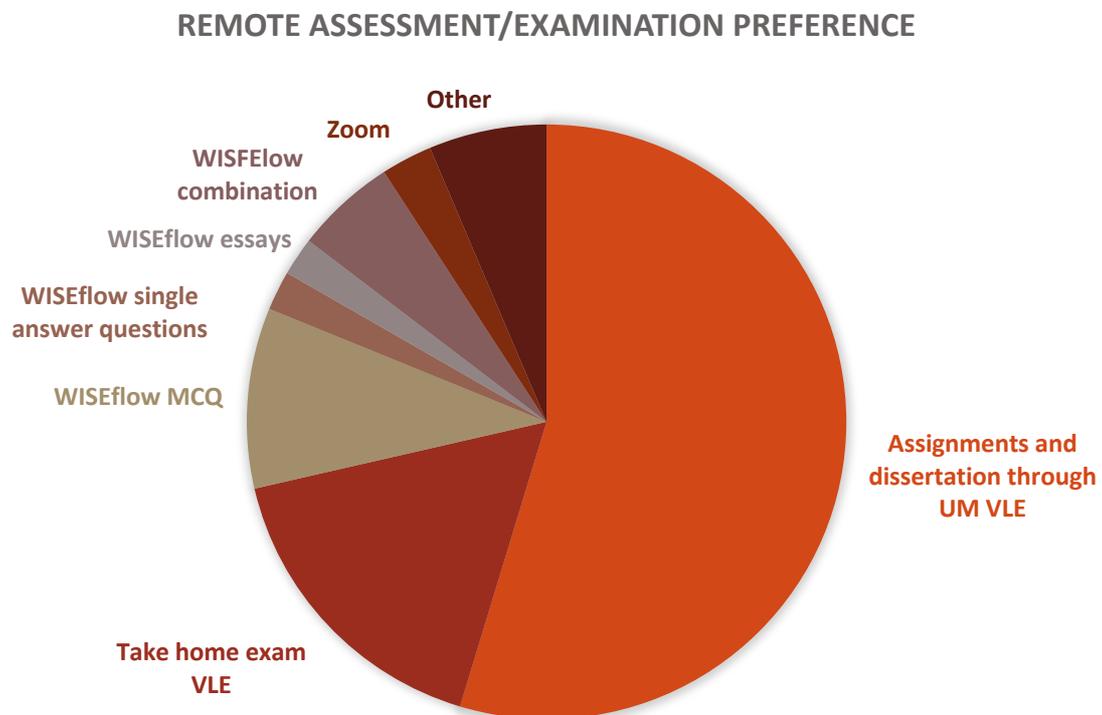


Figure 2. Preference of remote assessments/examinations by students

SALT- Academic staff

All academic staff employed by UM on full-time, part-time and casual basis were invited to participate in this voluntary online survey. Out of a total 2,255 academic invitees, a response rate of 25.3% ($n= 571$) was achieved, again with over a thousand additional distinct comments. Academics were in their great majority satisfied with the transition to remote teaching, the support and training provided (87%) and with the assignments/exams modalities used (78%). The majority (74%) of respondents had an adequate space and time to deliver lectures remotely. The active participation of students during remote teaching proved to be a potential challenge, with 31% of academics being dissatisfied with students' participation and engagement. This was also a concern in comments across faculties.

While a few reported that:

“Student participation actually increased”, many missed the face-to-face interaction:

“Remote teaching is fine, but nothing beats live interaction in class.”

“I find the opportunity for dialogue and human contact with my students in face-to-face interaction irreplaceable.”

“Students also ask far less questions during online sessions.”

Many commented about feeling disconnected with the students, and irritated by the students turning off their camera:

“Just seeing a name on the screen and getting no kind of response is NOT teaching.”

Preparing remote assessments/examinations was well accepted, with 67% reporting to be satisfied with the ease of using the remote assessment tools, while 55% claimed that the remote assessments were relatively better than the traditional paper-based assessments. However, the shift to remote work led to a higher workload and dissatisfaction (Figure 3)

SATISFIED WITH YOUR WORKLOAD WHILE WORKING REMOTELY

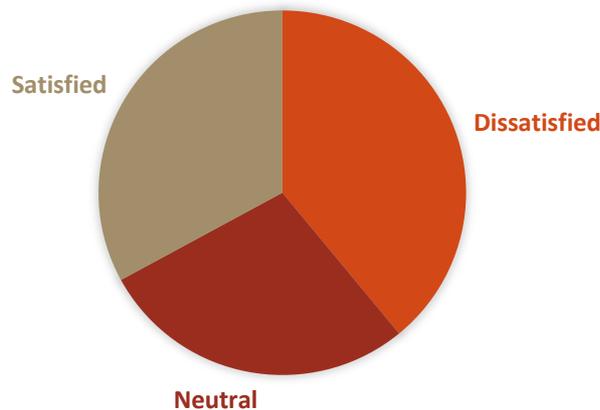


Figure 3. Academics satisfaction with workload during remote working

Comments on increased workload came from across faculties:

“The amount of work, including administrative, increased significantly during this period.”

“The work needed to prepare the material for online use, give feedback on student posts etc increased the workload manifold.”

“Remote written assessments were successful in our faculty but the amount of work they brought about in terms of planning and preparation to ensure a fair and rigorous examination process left everyone burnt out!”

The combination of VLE and online ‘Zoom/Google Meet’ sessions was well accepted and widely utilised by academic staff to deliver their teaching remotely. In fact, 72% of the respondents would welcome and maintain this type of teaching henceforth.

There was widespread acknowledgement of the valuable support received from the UM IT Services and the Office of the Registrar along with the regular calls for training to sustain remote teaching. However, their suggestion was for some form of a mix of face-to-face and remote teaching which they termed “*blended*”, “*hybrid*” or “*mixture*”, or remote as “*a supplement*”:

“Remote & online teaching should be promoted even in normal conditions because in a blended teaching environment it trains students to learn in different ways and using technological tools.”

Several academics suggested that blended learning is a new form of more effective pedagogy:

“The focus needs to be on (students') learning and for each learning episode what works for students to achieve intended learning. So essentially I appeal for a change in mindset seeing the physical and the virtual spaces not in separation but seamless for contextualising active engagement with human others and material resources for learning.”

“Some educators tend to stick to the ‘sage stance’ in that they know best and more. In reality this is impractical in the era of knowledge economy and so students should be more helped to sift through the information found everywhere, thus enhancing students’ self-directed learning.”

The assessments/examinations formats used during the June 2020 examination period varied across academic staff, (Figure 4) with the majority (71%) reporting a change in their usual assessment/examination format. Nonetheless, 39% of the respondents welcomed the remote assessment/examination formats and would be comfortable with adopting them in future. Concerns about the loss of anonymity in examinations varied with only 13% sharing concern. In fact, several saw the loss of anonymity in the new forms of examinations as justified by the new higher form of assessment:

“I noticed that Final year students when sitting for 3-hour exams tended to 'regress' to 1st year material. With this new take-home exam their replies were more sophisticated, more balanced, more composed and more subtle. So, this was a learning experience for us academics too.”

ASSESSMENT/EXAMINATION FORMATS

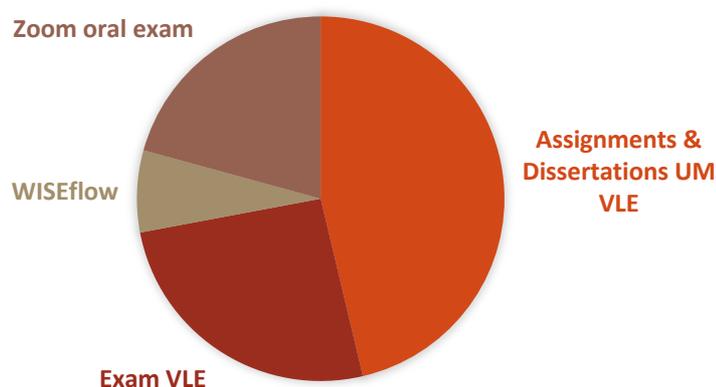


Figure 4. Different assessment/examination formats used by academic staff for the June 2020 examinations

The upheavals due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused general concern among academic staff about the physical health and wellbeing of their loved ones (77%), their students' wellbeing (62%) and their work-life balance (56%).

SALT- Administrative & technical staff

The administrative and technical staff employed by UM were also invited to participate in the voluntary survey. Out of 1,137 staff invited, a response of 33.2% ($n=377$) was achieved, again including substantial open comments. There was general consensus of satisfaction with regard to the shift to remote working (94%) and the adequacy of support provided when challenges and problems arose (87%):

“It was stressful at first, but I was working a mixture of onsite & remote working and found it was actually beneficial to my well-being.”

“Both IT services and the support provided by the Head of Dept and Colleagues was the key to a smooth transition.”

No communication issues were encountered when remotely contacting other administrative staff, academics and students:

“Meetings through zoom prove to be as effective since sharing of media is made easier. Reduced travelling time and contributing to minimising traffic.”

The majority (81%) reported that they were satisfied with the transition to remote assessment/examination formats when compared with the traditional paper-based exams, with a preference to having this kind of assessment/examination modality in future (Figure 5). A high level of satisfaction was also reported with regard to their overall workload during remote working (74%). As was the case in the other two SALT surveys, comments also described a variety of positive and negative experiences.

WELCOME REMOTE ASSESSMENTS/EXAMS FOR THE FUTURE

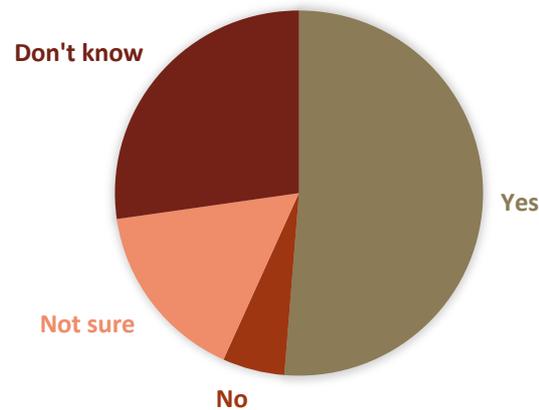


Figure 5. Perspective of administrative and technical staff on utilizing remote assessments/examination for future sessions

Understandably the COVID-19 pandemic caused a general concern for the physical health and wellbeing of their loved ones (90%), their own mental and emotional wellbeing (54%) and the general impact of COVID-19 on the Maltese community as a whole (59%).

Conclusion

A majority of students reported a general dissatisfaction with the necessary shift to remote teaching during the second semester of academic year 2019/2020, though others found the change helpful in different ways. This appeared to be related to several factors including uncertainty due to lack of or delayed information on the new procedures and more difficulty following online teaching, missing the opportunity for better explanations and support of face-to-face interaction. A converse observation was noted with regards to remote assessments/examinations, where the students expressed satisfaction in using remote modalities. Students welcomed the idea of undertaking future assessments/examinations sessions using these remote modalities. Academic staff were generally satisfied with the shift to remote teaching and assessments/examinations, but also expressed dissatisfaction with regards to the increase in their workload and the level of connectedness with students. They thus welcomed remote teaching and assessments/examinations in future as part of a blended learning approach. The administrative and technical staff were generally satisfied with the shift to remote working, communication and assessment/examination sessions.

This first report following the SALT Surveys has allowed the authors to provide a rapid overview and the sharing of useful information before the forthcoming examination session and the commencement of the 2020-2021 academic year.