



# The Way Forward: 100% Continuous Assessment

BY CHARLOTTE GERONIMI  
SENIOR LECTURER IN FOOD & BEVERAGE OPERATIONS  
AND EVENTS MANAGEMENT AT ITS

## ASSESSMENT PATTERNS

Locally, Malta's colonial past meant that the British model was followed very closely in both educational and examination systems (Sultana et al., 1997; Zammit Ciantar, 1996). However, the political change in 1964, initiated several revolutionary reforms that have been going through ever since. The past decade has been extremely significant mainly due to the introduction of measures and reforms, including those affecting assessment (Cutajar, 2007). Whilst these practices were traditionally based on examinations, 21st century needs have shifted the emphasis from memory to application, and to soft skills such as teamwork and communication. Since these skills are seen as a prerequisite

for employment, a necessitated change has been noted not only in the way the curriculum is taught but also how it is assessed (Said Pace, 2021). Compulsory education has moved from 100 per cent summative assessment to a combination of continuous and summative assessments (Cilia, 2019). Similarly, this proposal is also being considered for post-secondary learners (Bonnici, 2019).

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The common and exhaustive definitions of summative and formative assessment methods respectively either measure students' achievement at end of module or enhance student learning through continuous feedback (Byram and Hu,

2013; Trotter, 2006). However, Hernández (2012) and Nitko (1995) argue that the difference between methods can be vague when assessment is carried out without considering the intended impact or when used merely as a steppingstone to the next academic goal (Cross and O'Loughlin, 2013). Additionally, Popkova (2018) states that, unlike in the primary and secondary sector where schools are required to follow the national curriculum, post-secondary institutions set their own requirements to which students' knowledge, competencies, and skills should be developed. Consequently, this makes the distribution of standardised tests highly problematic (Strauss, 2014) and assessment through one-off final exams ineffective (Weimer,

2016). Therefore, post-secondary assessment methods should be comprehensive enough to cater for different educational needs whilst also providing assessment reliability. In fact, various researchers have agreed that this is best guaranteed through continuous assessment (Beagley and Capaldi, 2016; González, Jareño, and López, 2015; Khanna, Brack and Finken, 2013).

#### **PURPOSE**

To support the needs of the changing working life, curricula are being renewed worldwide with the European Union even setting recommendations of standards to higher education institutions, including the need of continuous assessment when assessing technical and practical skills (EFCE, 2012; Moltzahn and Wittstock, 2002). Similarly, Pietikäinen and Karinen (2016) suggest that applying continuous assessment in the form of tasks carried out throughout the whole module rather than an end of module exam helps guide students towards deeper learning. Additionally, Entwistle and Peterson (2004) state that assessment choice plays an important role in quality learning and so, lecturers need to support their students' learning through assessment methods that encourage reflection, critical thinking, and conceptual understanding.

Continuous assessment can also be used as a tool to communicate the intended learning outcomes to students, which can increase their deep-learning motivation (Biggs and Tang, 2007) whilst enhancing high-level engagement in diverting students from memorising and describing towards explaining, relating, and applying (Weinstein, 2019). Continuous assessment makes this possible because learning is divided into smaller parts that occur evenly throughout the module rather than during a concentrated assessment period. This assessment method also provides lecturers with feedback from their students'

learning throughout the course and therefore, any difficulties can be reviewed immediately. In fact, Walde (2016) looks at this as an evaluation on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies in relation to the curriculum because it assesses the curriculum as implemented in the classroom, thus allowing lecturers to make any changes as dictated by their students' needs.

#### **CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT METHODS**

Lecturers are faced with numerous methods of assessment that can be used to obtain information about student achievement and learning progress. This can often cause confusion; in fact, Alausa (2004) identifies

Whereas research concerned with continuous assessment implementation in post-secondary institutions offering theoretical curricula have not escaped researchers' attention, studies on this application in post-secondary institutions offering hands-on practical modules are scarce, with only a few studies investigating such approaches for the assessment of practical modules. This is unfortunate because assessment is important for all students mainly because it informs students about what they should be learning and how they should be learning it. Therefore, assessment tasks need to be constructed with that in mind and in doing so, the

assessment will fulfil two essential requirements: measuring competence and improving the learning process.

According to the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards (2014), lecturers can use written (online or paper-based) assessment tasks to assess theoretical or technical knowledge, observations (directly or virtually) to assess performance, practical assessment through the production of a project or work portfolio and an oral assessment to assess theoretical or technical knowledge whilst also understanding professional discussion.

Similarly, the International Labour Organisation (2017)

notes that through continuous assessment, the learning progress of students can be monitored continuously because it allows assessors to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individuals whilst providing them with required support to improve their learning and helps to identify students that are falling behind, thus introducing appropriate support measures.

Regardless of the assessment method chosen, one thing is certain - although they matter, grades certainly do not have the biggest impact on student learning since

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the chosen assessment methods as the major issue associated with assessing learners. Similarly, Harden and Cairncross (2006) note that the assessment of practical skills is often neglected with unsatisfactory assessment instruments generally being the contributing factor. However, Plessiss and Prouty (2007), argue that using continuous assessment methods such as portfolios, observational exercises, discussions, role plays, and presentations can aid lecturers in periodically finding out what their students know, understand, and can do.



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they only provide students with very little information as to how they can improve or demonstrate their learning (Hattie, 2016). In fact, written and in-person feedback that is specific to the task at hand has the greatest impact on improving learning outcomes (Soden, 2011) and when done well, it has a powerful influence on student learning (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2001). Further research also suggests that spending more time on constructive feedback increases student learning (Marzano, Pickering and Pollock, 2001).

#### **CHALLENGES**

Involving lecturers in curriculum design and development is more likely to make the curriculum challenging, thus creating positive curriculum interactions. However, seeing that assessment clearly influences students' work,

the question whether to do 'assessment of learning' or 'assessment for learning' has frequently been raised. The increased implementation of continuous assessment as the preferred method of assessment has resulted in much discussion about its demerits. In fact, Doherty and Dockrell (2011) note that such assessments can have a debilitating effect on the students' learning process.

Torrance (2012) adds that the emerging problem is that such assessment patterns are being reduced to regular classroom tests that are used for monitoring students' progress or as feedback techniques to improve grade and test results, with many other researchers (Bennett, 2011; Klenowski, 2009; Hargreaves, 2013; OECD, 2020; Swaffield, 2011) sharing this criticism.

Similarly, Marshall and Drummond (2006) also explored the way in which lecturers enact continuous assessment and concluded that although some practices embody the 'spirit' of such assessment; others merely conform to the 'letter'. Indeed, they suggest that whilst the former can help prepare for future learning, the latter is merely a tool for judging student performance.

Reibel (2021) also notes that without attention, lecturers may create continuous assessment that reflect their own personal values and experiences or provide biased feedback to students. This form of lecturer bias in continuous assessment can inform practice and policy development, stifle student growth, enforce discriminatory policies, and socially isolate students. Whilst it is an educator's professional duty to judge student performance fairly and accurately, inaccurate judgments do occur and they have the potential of not only altering student grades, but to distort a student's self-concept, or reduce opportunities to learn (Cohen and Steele, 2002). Similarly, Wood and Graham (2010) note that lecturer gender, race, socioeconomic class, and ethnicity bias could also lead to a misrepresentation of student performance which can activate stereotypes that lead lecturers towards the use of discriminatory performance evaluations.

Although CA assessment can be of concern for many lecturers, it is believed that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, and a cautious approach to design and development of assessment methods, as well as the sharing of responsibility amongst module lecturers, will benefit both the student and the lecturer. Nonetheless, there will always be concerns connected with any assessment approach, and no approach will become a one-fits-all solution.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Not only does continuous assessment give students a better chance of achieving their full potential, but it offers students a better-rounded education because they are continuously showing learning achievement. In fact, lecturers can capture their students' full performance during which they are able to comprehensively assess students' progress. This approach also gives lecturers

enough time to provide constructive feedback, thus correcting any issues as they arise. Here lecturers are at the centre of the assessment where they are properly involved in the education of their students and not simply giving lectures and marking exams at the end of a module. This popularity with continuous assessment has led to an increased spread of negative comments towards summative assessment because students and lecturers often question the need to assess the work of an entire semester with a single assessment. Indeed, the generally positive comments regarding CA suggest that it would be worthwhile to implement, and one from which students and lecturers can benefit. In fact, to ensure students are actively learning rather than cramming everything towards the end of the semester, this assessment method could be further implemented with students on other courses.

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