Background

For many students around the world, the end of the school year is associated with high-stakes examinations. These exams are often used to select, certify or reward students as they move from one level of the education system to the next, or into the workforce. Examinations can also play an important role in public reporting and accountability; they can also open up access to educational opportunities for students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds.

With COVID-19 forcing school closures and bans on group gatherings, countries have had to revisit their approaches to high-stakes decision making, particularly those that were previously informed by high-stakes examinations. However, as many high-stakes exams have been cancelled, postponed or rescheduled, there have been delays or information gaps on student learning, which may lead to an inability to make high-stakes decisions on students’ educational progression and pathways. The students are among the groups of stakeholders that are directly and mostly affected by these decisions. There are three main options that countries can take with regard to high-stakes examinations in this context: cancelling the exams and using other means for making high-stakes decisions of certification of learning and selection of students, proceeding with the exams as planned (typically with in-person administration of the exams), or adjusting the administration of the exams by switching to a new format or medium (for example, to an online format).
Countries have been pursuing different approaches, and different strategies to cope with the situation have been shared in a UNESCO webinar on managing high-stakes examinations during COVID-19 along with practical tips for designing policy interventions with regard to options for examinations during prolonged and massive school closures. As the public health context evolves in every country, approaches to high-stakes examinations and considerations for decision making are also changing. This webinar offers an opportunity for countries to revisit their approaches to conducting high-stakes exams and to prepare for a future of adapting high-stakes decision making for students in the context of elevated health concerns and disruption of usual assessment practices.

Objectives of the webinar

Departing from the joint Framework for reopening of schools, issued by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and WFP, this webinar on high-stakes decision making on students’ progression and pathways in the COVID-19 era is part of the efforts to support national governments and stakeholders for the preparation and implementation of the reopening of schools. The webinar aims to share country experiences with different approaches to high-stakes decision making in the COVID-19 context, including the considerations that guide the choice of approach, challenges and successes to date, and implications for future rounds of high-stakes decision making.

Questions the webinar will address

The webinar will address the following questions:

- What is the current global snapshot of country approaches to high-stakes decision making on students’ progression and pathways in the context of COVID-19?
- What have been the main factors driving the approaches taken by countries?
- What are the emerging lessons for implementing each approach?

Discussion themes

The webinar will be organized around three types of approaches to high-stakes decision making on students’ progression and pathways in the COVID-19 era:

1. Cancelling the exams and using other means for making high-stakes decisions:
   - What information is being used in lieu of exam results?
   - What are the efficiency and equity implications of these changes? What measures have been put in place to ensure that the information used is valid, reliable, and fair for all students?
   - Could this approach become a permanent method for certification and selection of students post-COVID-19?
   - What have been/what are the intended and unintended consequences of cancelling the exams?

2. Proceeding with in-person exams:
   - What adaptations are being made to respect physical distancing recommendations and other health and safety guidelines? What measures are being introduced for students who do not or cannot take the exam in person?
   - What adaptations have been made to the content or the format of the exam given school closures?
What support has been provided to students for exam preparation during COVID-19 school closures? What measures have been introduced to make preparatory materials available to all students?

3. **Switching the exams to online format:**
   - How have students been able to prepare for the online exams? How has the content and format of the exam been adjusted from what students were initially preparing for?
   - What are the measures that are being introduced to prevent examination malpractice?
   - How have the exams been designed and piloted? What stakeholders and partners have had to come together to introduce the online exam format?
   - What measures have been introduced to ensure equitable access to online exams for all students, including those with limited internet connectivity and access to devices?
   - What are the opportunities for this exam format post COVID-19?

**Format**

This 90-minute webinar will include panelists from selected countries around the world and the respective co-leading organizations. Each panelist will make a short presentation addressing the questions raised, and a moderator will facilitate Q&A following the presentations.

**Speakers**

*Moderator:* Marguerite Clarke, Senior Education Specialist, The World Bank  
*Welcome:* Jaime Saavedra, Global Director for Education, The World Bank  
*Presenters:* Gwang-Chol Chang, Chief of Education Policy Section, UNESCO  
              Professor Joshua McGrane, Deputy Director at the Oxford University Center for Educational Assessment  
              Aldo Maino, Vice Minister of Higher Education of Ecuador  
              H.E. Dr. Husam Zaman, President of Education & Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) of Saudi Arabia

**Audience**

The webinar is primarily directed to ministry of education officials, education practitioners, and other interested partners and stakeholders.

**Technical platform**

The webinar will be held in English, conducted through the Zoom webinar platform.