### **Online Large-Scale and High-Stakes Assessment: The Israeli Experience**

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### Abstract

Fourteen years ago, the Examination Division at the Israeli Ministry of Education started using ICT for standardized large-scale and high-stakes exams at the end of high-school. Today, thousands of high-school students are tested online every year in a variety of disciplines and in several languages: Hebrew, Arabic and English.

These exams are administered by an online environment developed by the Center for Educational Technology (CET). This environment provides unique flexible question templates which enable testing research skills through the use of computerized simulations and layered maps, data analysis skills through the use of electronic spreadsheets, etc.

This environment is adapted to students with learning disabilities. It can enlarge font size and provide audio-recorded texts (for students with visual difficulties), and it enables audio-recorded answers (for students with writing difficulties).

The online environment enables a rapid large-scale distribution of the exam, testing simultaneously an unlimited number of students, gathering student answers after testing, grading automatically close-ended questions and sending the data to the Ministry of Education. All of these activities are done while maintaining the stringent security standards.

Key words: assessment; online; technology

#### **Online Matriculation Exams in Israel – General Background**

Students in the State of Israel are examined, at the end of high school, through standardized, external examinations, known as the *Bagrut* or matriculation examinations. In 1999, the Ministry of Education decided to allow online matriculation examinations in certain subjects, and since then the number of subjects in which an online examination is offered has grown, the number of schools seeking to have their students examined in this way has grown, and the number of students responding to the challenge of online assessment has also grown.

Two years ago, the Ministry of Education launched a national program to integrate advanced technologies in teaching, learning and evaluation. As a result, ICT infrastructures in the schools have been upgraded, particularly in schools located in Israel's social and geographic periphery. More and more teachers are including ICT-based content and tools in their teaching, along with learning management systems (LMS), and interest in online testing is growing. In the summer of 2013, thousands of high school students took online matriculation examinations in text-rich subjects such as English, History, and Bible, as well as in subjects that make extensive use of multimedia, such as Chemistry, Biology, Biotechnology, and Geography.

The Center for Educational Technology (CET) developed, for the Ministry of Education's Examinations Division, an online environment for matriculation examinations (iTest). CET also constructs the online matriculation examinations, with content specialists from two organizations (CET and the Henrietta Szold Institute) determining the content of the test items included in these examinations. CET is also responsible for teacher training and preparation of the students for online testing, as well as registration of the schools and students for the various online examinations. Finally, CET is also responsible for conduct of the online matriculation examinations, including distribution of the test questionnaires to the schools via the internet on the date of the examination, real-time monitoring of progress of the examinations, collection of the students' answer files, and their transmission, encrypted, to the National Assessment Center.

In order to run online matriculation examinations in the schools, we run pedagogic activities (such as training teaching and technical staff in the school, and conducting a preliminary practice with the students on the iTest examination environment) and technical activities (such as upgrading the iTest environment in line with developing needs, mapping the ICT infrastructure in the schools, and checking whether it meets the requirements of the testing environment). These activities are carried out under the auspices of the Ministry of Education's Examinations Division.

#### Pedagogic and Psychometric Advantages of the Online Matriculation Exams

Online assessment is generally "coming into line" with contemporary teaching and learning methods, which in recent years have involved more and more use of computers and the internet. In this sense, the transition to online testing represents a bottom-up change, unlike change in the opposite direction, top-down (which is less common), in which online assessment serves as a catalyst for expanding and deploying online teaching and learning methods appropriate to the  $21^{st}$  century.

The transition to online testing as a result of bottom-up processes has been addressed extensively in the literature, for example:

"As schools integrate technology into the curriculum, the method of assessment should reflect the tools employed in teaching and learning." (CEO Forum on Education and Technology,

2001, p. 3). Or, "As students come to do the majority of their learning with technology, asking them to express that learning in a medium different from the one in which they routinely work will become increasingly untenable, to the point that much of the paper testing we do today will be an anachronism" (Bennett, 2001, p. 8).

Much has been written about the pedagogic advantages of online tests, which have been successful at better simulating the realities in which the student operates while learning, particularly in those subjects in which the use of media is structured into the syllabus (for example, in the sciences). Furthermore, online tests allow optimal use of the computer's capabilities for the purpose of checking knowledge, understanding and higher cognitive skills in subjects in which it is hard, or perhaps impossible, to test them by means of paper and pencil tests (Bennett, Jenkins, Persky, & Weiss, 2003). This is through a variety of questioning modes, beyond the familiar ones (open and closed questions), which call for a variety of response modes on the part of the students. In addition to all these, with online testing, possibilities to record information are available as well (Thompson & Weiss, 2009).

The Israeli online matriculation examinations are also implementing these advantages more extensively, as can be learned from these examples of questioning modes used in online tests in recent years:

Analysis and data processing: Our experience has shown that online testing allows the inclusion of questions requiring the student to carry out a complete process of analysis and data processing, similar to the process that he experiences in the course of his learning. For example, the Biotechnology Laboratory section in the matriculation examination is comprised of two parts: in the first ("wet") part, each student is assigned, by lot, one of four possible experiments; he receives the materials and instructions required to perform the experiment, and carries it in a "live" laboratory. Upon completion, the student has the raw data that he has collected in the course of the experiment. In the second part, the student moves to work at the computer, entering the raw data collected into an Excel worksheet, calculating concentrations, drawing graphs and trend lines, and preparing a summary report describing the experiment carried out and its outcomes, in response to a series of related questions. In the same examination, in the section of Bioinformatics, the student is required to make use of the various search engines (the same ones that he used during his studies) to find entries describing sequences of proteins or of genes. The student is required to analyze these records, and to use bioinformatics tools to compare the sequences or to obtain information on the relevant genes or proteins. Students have stated that questions of this type challenge them, in that they ask them to deal with real life issues, and require them to apply the knowledge and tools that they acquired in the course of their studies.

**Analysis of dynamic phenomena:** When we develop online matriculation examinations, we aspire to utilize the dynamic display possibilities offered by the computer. For example, in a question that recently appeared in the matriculation examination in Geography, the student was asked to view an animation and a video clip demonstrating the tsunami that hit the coast of Thailand in 2004, to identify the phenomenon that caused this natural disaster, and to describe the stages of its development.



In another question in that same examination, the student was asked to view a video clip that captured screens from the Google Earth site showing segments of the course of the Mekong River in Thailand. With the aid of the video clip and maps available in the testing environment, the student was asked to identify the direction of the river's flow, the types of landscape through which it passes, its uses, and the flow volume based on the seasons of the year.



Questions touching on issues that truly concern the students (such as preparedness for natural disasters) give the test a value described as assimilation, internalization or meaning.

**Carrying out a research process:** Our experience shows that online testing allows the inclusion of research questions, in which the student is required to perform an experiment. However, instead of doing it in a "live" laboratory, which is very complex in the case of large-scale examination, he runs the experiment as a laboratory simulation. He is then required to answer questions whose solution requires modification of the values of the independent variables observed in the simulation. The PISA 2015 tests, for example, will challenge students in developed countries with inquiry tasks of this type, as the research process itself is defined as an important skill for people in modern society.

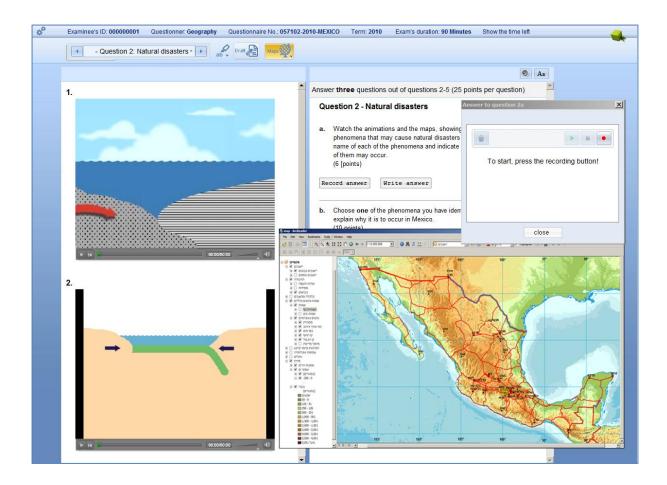
The skateboarder is riding the half pipe. Drag and release the skateboarder. Notice the change in the skateboarder's velocity. The bar chart on the left presents the skateboarder's kinetic energy (brange), potential energy (blue), and total energy. Apply friction. The skateboarder gradually decelerates (slows down) due to friction with the air, and his kinetic energy is converted	Energy plots Pie chart Bar chart			
into heat energy.	Restart	Slow motion	Friction	Pause
Answer the questions: 1. The following 4 graphs describe t	he relative amounts of the different energy stateboarder to each of the graphs.		0,	

The research literature shows that online testing allows adherence to the high psychometric standards necessary to ensure fairness in grading, so important for students in high-stakes examinations, such as the matriculation examinations:

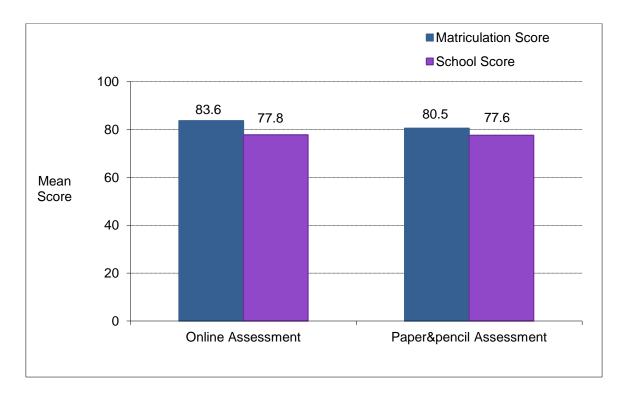
**Neutralizing the influence of handwriting**: Illegible handwriting can affect the score awarded to the student by the evaluator. Klein & Taube (2005) found that legible essays led to an increase of 1%-7% in the score (in comparison with that given by an expert), while illegible essays led to a drop of 9%-23% in the score. A test carried out through a computerized environment neutralizes the influence of this bias factor, by providing an interface through which the student types or records their answers. The iTest environment allows this (description below).

**Neutralizing the effect of spelling errors**: In tests that do not check linguistic capabilities, spelling errors may also influence the score given to the student by the evaluator (Resaei & Lovorn, 2010). The ability to include a spelling checker in the computerized environment may provide a simple solution to the effect of this bias factor, and provide equal opportunity to both immigrant students and those with learning disabilities. This capability is also included as an option in the iTest environment.

**Neutralizing the halo effect**: The computer allows the checking of the students' responses, while neutralizing their identifying characteristics and the effect of their performance on other questions (Ridge, 2001). The iTest environment applies this idea through an interface for horizontal checking of responses to open questions (along with automatic checking of responses to closed questions, which in itself also eliminates potential human error).



When development of the online matriculation examinations began to accelerate, the Examination Division at the Ministry of Education asked CET to accompany the process with an evaluation research (2006). The principal aim of the research was to examine whether the very fact of being tested online discriminated – in favor or against – students tested in this way, in comparison to their peers being tested in the traditional manner, using paper and pencil. The research focused on the examination in Geography, which was one of the first online matriculation examinations. The achievements of a group of online examinees were compared with those of a sample group of students tested using paper and pencil, within the same schools, characterized by a similar distribution of school-assigned scores in Geography. In other words, both groups had similar characteristics, but differed only in the format of the examination. The research findings are shown in Graph 1, which shows that in both groups, the average score for the matriculation examination was slightly higher than the average school score. It was also found that the average score in the matriculation examination among the online examinees was slightly higher than that for the paper and pencil examinees, but the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant.



# Graph 1: Achievements in matriculation examination in Geography – Online examinees compared with paper and pencil examinees (2006)

These findings provide an initial confirmation of the argument that the transition to an online matriculation examination does not affect the chances of success in the examination, and encouraged the Ministry of Education to expand the scope of the online testing.

#### Logistic Advantages of the Online Matriculation Exams

The literature points to logistic advantages of online tests, some of which we have found to be the case in the online matriculation examinations. In order to understand these advantages, we will first describe the preparatory actions that take place in the lead up to the matriculation examinations.

Preparation for the online matriculation examinations is carried out by means of a dedicated website available to the schools. Most of the pages on the site are blocked from the general public, but are available to those schools in which online matriculation examinations are being held. This is done by means of appropriate permission settings. The website serves to disseminate essential information to the schools, such as: the subjects in which online matriculation examinations are being held, a user guide for the online examinations, etc. Distribution of the testing environment is carried out through this website. The website also allows the input of essential data from the schools, prior to the examination, such as: the examinations that the school wishes to administer online, details of the students expected to take each of these examinations, and their entitlements to testing accommodations (if any), as well as a mapping of the school's ICT infrastructure. The website also holds a collection of practice tests, which may be downloaded as part of the preparation for the matriculation examination.

**Distribution of the matriculation examinations and collection of the test outputs in a convenient, efficient and rapid manner**: The online matriculation examinations are

distributed close to the scheduled time for the examination, through a secure channel on the above mentioned website. Authorized representatives of the school log into the website and download the encrypted examination. A few minutes before the commencement of the examination, a password is disseminated via the internet, which allows the encrypted examination to be opened. At the end of the examination, the examinee clicks on the "Submit" button, his responses are packaged into an encrypted file, and are transmitted to the national examinations server at CET which receives it, opens it and transmits it, along with the files of the rest of the examinees, to the National Assessment Center. This process replaces a long, complex process of printing examinations, mailing them from a central location to the schools, collection of the answer booklets, transferring them to collection points scattered around the country, and from there to the National Assessment Center. and from there to the evaluators – in physical form or as scanned files via the internet.

**Shortening the assessment process**: While with paper and pencil tests, the physical answer booklets arriving at the National Assessment Center are passed to evaluators or are scanned first and then provided in digital form, the responses of the examinees in the online examinations are simply and conveniently transferred to the evaluators, without having to bring them to the National Assessment Center. Bennett (2003) also relates to shortening the assessment process. According to him, "There are several reasons, but chief among them is that scoring and reporting can be done more rapidly" (p. 1).

**Reduction in costs**: Since the online examinations allow a shortening of the preparation process prior to the examination, and subsequently the assessment processes, they also reduce costs significantly. This is also addressed by Bennett, Jenkins, Persky, & Weiss (2003) and Thompson & Weiss (2009). In decreasing costs, they refer to the lack of need for printing, storage space and distribution of test sheets and notebooks, in addition to saving time and effort in collection, scanning of answer booklets and evaluating answers.

## iTest Online Environment for Matriculation Exams – Technological Characteristics to Support Risk Management

CET's iTest environment for online testing is a program installed on the students' testing workstations, and its operation is based on internet browsers. In developing the software, we had to meet certain fundamental requirements, arising from its object of serving as an online environment for high-stakes and large-scale exams. One of the most significant constraints that the software developers had to cope with was the need for the program to operate correctly and efficiently on a wide variety of ICT infrastructures within schools. Therefore, we have limited, as far as possible, the infrastructure requirements that the school is required to provide, and have developed an environment which, apart from being adapted to a large range of infrastructures, can be operated in a number of modes: on a standalone workstation, whether connected to the internet or not; at workstations connected to a server on a local network within the school; or through a direct connection to the internet.

A further need that iTest was required to address is the maximal survivability of the students' answer files. For this, we carry out a dual save operation, in real time, for each of the student's answers – on the local workstation and on the local area network server. Similarly, workstations connected directly to the internet record the answers in real time on the national examinations server at CET.

The iTest environment also supports data confidentiality, both of the content of the examination and of the response files. The examination files, packed in Zip format and secured by a strong password, are stored in a secure location by CET until their distribution to the schools a short time before the scheduled time for the examination. The files can only be opened and run through the iTest environment, by means of the password, which is issued a few minutes before the scheduled examination starting time. The response files uploaded to the national examinations server at CET, at the end of the examination, are also packed into Zip files and secured by a strong password, and they only can be opened with an application developed for this purpose and run only at CET.

iTest offers tools for monitoring the conduct of the examination, both locally, within the school, and on the national level, via the internet. These tools allow close monitoring over the progress of the examination at each of the student workstations, for the purpose of support, data security and to ensure proper conduct of the examination. The data collected using these tools are documented in logs allowing data mining to investigate faults, both during and after the examination, and to carry out theoretical research on the students' patterns of response.

#### **Online Matriculation Exams – Responding to Students with Special Needs**

The online matriculation examinations in Israel received added impetus, inter alia, because of a growing awareness of the problems faced by students with learning disabilities, and the right of these students to equal opportunity in learning and in assessment methods.

The Ministry of Education policy in Israel is to provide a suitable solution to the special needs of students with learning disabilities, a solution that will allow them to realize their innate potential during the examination, without lowering the level of its demands. This policy is reflected in a series of examination accommodations, given to students with learning disabilities, in paper and pencil matriculation examinations, with each student's entitlements set in line with his disability. For example: a longer examination time, large-print examination questionnaires, dictation of the examination questions by a neutral examiner, transcription of the student's responses to a neutral examiner who writes them down, or an examination conducted in the form of an oral discussion between a professional, human examiner and the student (Ministry of Education, 2003). A similar policy exists in the United States and in other countries, led by the purpose to allow as many students with learning disabilities as possible to take standardized tests (Reich & Petter, 2009).

Accommodations may refer to an array of alterations to test administration as well as test content, and are designed to eliminate factors that penalize students as a result of their disability or special needs that provide scores that do not represent their content knowledge. The purpose of accommodations is to ensure that the test measures content knowledge (target skill) and not the ability to take the test (access skill). Accommodations in the relevant literature refer only to changes in test administration that do not change the target skill of the assessment (Cawthon, 2006).

Given the technological developments over recent decades, the possibility has been considered in recent years of integrating advanced technologies into the testing environment, whose purpose is to increase access to the tests for students with learning disabilities (Dolan, Hall, Banerjee, Chun & Strangman, 2005).

Research accompanying the deployment of online examinations accessible to students with learning disabilities demonstrates their contribution to reducing frustration among these

examinees, who, unlike in the past, can be tested like the other members of their class, without having to leave the room to be tested by a human examiner, this being by means of appropriate technological alternatives (Salend, 2008; Bennett & Gitomer, 2008).

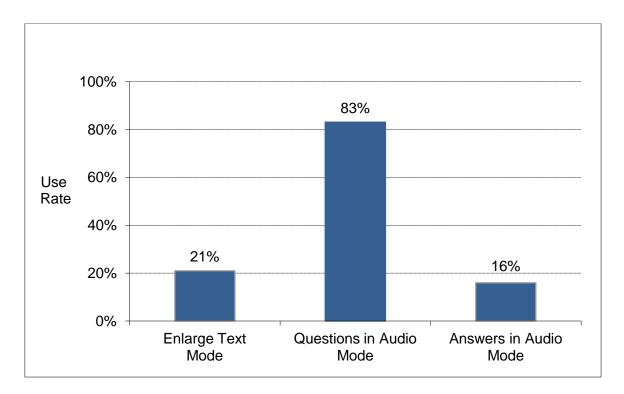
"I know I need testing accommodations to pass and graduate. I think they help me show others what I have learned. But some of them are embarrassing and unnecessary. I hate it when they make me leave the classroom to take a test with the special education teacher. It makes me feel different and the other kids always ask me why I have to leave." [A student with a disability] (Salend, 2008, p. 14).

Some of the research monitors the effectiveness of particular technological components, such as one that allows students with visual disabilities to listen to the examination questions, which was found to be of particularly assistance (Dolan, Hall, Banerjee, Chun & Strangman, 2005).

The Israeli Ministry of Education also offers online matriculation examinations made accessible to students with learning disabilities, and at the Examination Division's request, a series of capabilities was added to the iTest environment, the most important of which for students with learning disabilities being: the ability to enlarge the size of the text on the screen; the ability to have a recording of the questions played (instead of requiring that they be read by a neutral examiner, or reading them from the computer screen); and the ability to record the answers (as an alternative to dictating them to a neutral examiner or typing them).

These capabilities were trialed for the first time in 2010, as part of a dedicated pilot in the matriculation Bible examination, which is a text-rich examination including texts in their original form – the Biblical text. Participating in this pilot were students with learning disabilities who were entitled to a variety of examination accommodations, and they were allowed to make use of all three of the above accommodations, as they chose.

The pilot was also accompanied by an evaluation research, carried out by CET at the request of the Examination Division at the Ministry of Education (2010). This research examined the extent to which an online examination including the above capabilities meets the needs of students with learning disabilities. Graph 2 shows the extent of the use made by the students of the various accommodations.



Graph 2: Use of accommodations in the online matriculation examination in Bible studies (2010)

The research findings show that 21% of the students used the **enlarge text mode**. The use of this capability was especially noted among those entitled to this accommodation, but also among those entitled to an oral examination -40% and 33%, respectively.

The **questions in audio mode** was used by 83% of all those taking the examination. 100% of those entitled to an oral examination made use of this feature, as did those entitled to have the examination questions read to them by a neutral examiner (88%) or to a large-print examination questionnaire (87%).

The **answers in audio mode** was used by 16% of all the students. Almost all those students who recorded answers to some of the questions chose to type their answers to other questions. The use of recording answers feature was significant among students entitled to an oral examination – 25% of those entitled to this accommodation recorded their answers. By contrast, students entitled to dictate their responses to a neutral examiner did not use the recording answers feature more than others. The data shows that, of those students taking the examination, who were expected to make extensive use of the recording answers feature (those entitled to an oral examination or to dictating their responses), over 80% typed their responses rather than making use of the recording answers feature. In in-depth interviews conducted following the examination, the students explained that, in fact, the ability to type their responses (rather than writing them by hand, as is the norm in traditional examinations) made recording unnecessary at times, and so they did not make extensive use of it.

In the interviews conducted following the examination, the majority of students (over 75%) expressed a high level of satisfaction with most of the capabilities, and about half of them noted that, during the examination, they felt more at ease than when they were taking paper and pencil examinations. They also felt more focused, and much less stressed. The vast majority of the students (over 90%) stated that the online examination met their needs better than paper and pencil examinations, that they would want to be tested with this type of

examination in other subjects, and that they would recommend to other students with learning disabilities similar to their own to also take the online matriculation examination. The teaching staffs in the schools participating in the pilot also expressed enthusiasm with the opportunity offered by the online examination, and stated that it was an empowering experience for their students.

This evidence validates the findings in the research literature, according to which, for students with learning disabilities, the fact that they have to leave the regular classroom to take an adapted examination constitutes a frustrating, demeaning experience (Salend, 2008).

#### **Summary and Future Challenges**

Online matriculation examinations, which were first developed in Israel 14 years ago, are now encountering the developing needs of learning and teaching that place emphasis on skills relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this spirit, such examinations are being extended to more and more subjects, and are in demand from increasing numbers of schools and students.

In this paper we have presented our experience in developing and running online matriculation examinations, and the advantages, in pedagogic, psychometric and logistic terms that we have identified from this experience. We also related to the solution they provide to students with learning disabilities.

Our next technological and psychometric challenge is to develop means for documenting and scoring the processes of inquiry and problem solving alongside with their results.

It appears that, in all these aspects, the practical field is moving ahead of the research, and so we believe that dissemination of the knowledge acquired in the field will assist in advancing future solutions and developments.

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