

## Online Vs. Face-To-Face Examinations In Postgraduate Education: Student Perceptions in Poland\*

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in students enrolling in postgraduate programs in Management Accounting and Controlling at the University of Lodz (Poland). Online exams have become a common method for evaluating students' knowledge, both in fully remote courses and hybrid models. This article aims to analyze postgraduate students' perspectives on two types of exams: online and face-to-face. The study focuses on assessing remote exams, identifying factors that influence students' preferences for a particular format, and exploring their decisions regarding postgraduate program choices. A survey-based study was conducted to collect data on students' perceptions of different examination formats. A large majority of respondents (74.1%) preferred the hybrid model. The most frequently mentioned advantages included the elimination of the need to commute to campus (88.9%), increased comfort from using personal equipment (81.5%), and a better ability to balance exams with professional responsibilities (70.4%). Most respondents (57.7%) considered online and in-person exams equally reliable. The main challenges of online exams involved organizational and logistical issues related to exam administration, while organizational and psychological factors appeared less significant. The findings provide a foundation for discussions on how to organize examinations in higher education programs. This analysis can also serve as a guideline for universities developing assessment systems that meet the needs of today's students.

**Keywords:** Online examinations, Face-to-face examinations, Postgraduate education, Student perceptions, Hybrid learning environments

### Introduction

In recent years, the rapid growth of digital technologies has greatly impacted how teaching is carried out at all levels of education, including higher education (Tharapos, 2022; Winters *et al.*, 2023; Dutta *et al.*, 2025; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). These changes directly influence how students' learning outcomes are evaluated (Tashiro, Hung and Martin, 2011). An increasing number of universities are offering both remote participation in classes and online exams afterward. While the remote format boosts flexibility and accessibility in education, it also raises concerns about the reliability, fairness, and effectiveness of exams compared to traditional face-to-face exams (Tashiro, Hung and Martin, 2011; Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Tharapos *et al.*, 2023; Winters *et al.*, 2023; Dutta *et al.*, 2025; Hancock *et al.*, 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the digitalization of the education process (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020), with higher education institutions being effectively compelled to quickly adopt remote teaching and, later, remote assessment (Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020). Once the pandemic ended, some universities kept online courses in their offerings due to ongoing demand from the education market, where this model had, to some extent, become standard. Consequently, online exams have

become a common tool for assessing students' knowledge, both in fully remote courses and hybrid models. The rise of remote assessments has sparked a broad debate over academic integrity, the potential for cheating during online exams, and the comparability of results with those from traditional methods (Spaulding, 2009; Newton and Essex, 2024; Essahraui *et al.*, 2025).

From students' perspective, the choice of exam format is mainly influenced by: flexibility and logistical barriers, technological skills and digital literacy, the emotions experienced (stress), and the perceived dependability of the exam (Adler *et al.*, 2021). Online exams can increase convenience and flexibility, while also reducing logistical barriers such as traveling to the university, finding parking, scheduling conflicts, or work commitments (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Tharapos *et al.*, 2023; Winters *et al.*, 2023; Dutta *et al.*, 2025; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). This is particularly significant for postgraduate students who balance further education with their current professional work. On the other hand, however, traditional face-to-face exams are often perceived as more reliable and fair, providing equal conditions for everyone candidates. (Tharapos *et al.*, 2023; Dutta *et al.*, 2025; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). They do not require students to have digital skills or specific technological abilities, thereby avoiding additional stress in this area. Students' personal attitudes and personality traits also impact their choice of examination format.

Understanding how students perceive different examination formats is crucial for developing effective educational strategies and for evaluating their outcomes later. This article aims to analyze postgraduate students' views on two types of exams: online and face-to-face. The study focuses on assessing remote exams, identifying factors that influence students' preferences for a specific format, and exploring their decisions about postgraduate program choices.

## Literature Review

The progressive digitalization of higher education, coupled with the experiences gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly influenced and boosted the adoption and integration of online teaching and assessment tools (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). Concurrently, these modifications have prompted scholarly debate concerning the reliability of remote examinations, the preservation of academic integrity, and students' preferences regarding various assessment methods (Spaulding, 2009; Tashiro, Hung and Martin, 2011; Newton and Essex, 2024; Essahraui *et al.*, 2025). As a result, an increasing number of studies are analyzing students' attitudes toward online exams and traditional in-person examinations (Adler *et al.*, 2021; Tharapos *et al.*, 2023; Winters *et al.*, 2023; Dutta *et al.*, 2025; Hancock *et al.*, 2025).

Empirical evidence indicates that students prefer online exams, particularly in an "open-book" format (Attia, 2014). Key logistical determinants influencing students' preference for remote examinations include the elimination of the need to commute to campus and the associated reduction in travel-related stress (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Winters *et al.*, 2023) as well as significant savings in both time and money (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Newton and Essex, 2024; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). Students frequently regard online examinations as offering greater flexibility and convenience, helping them balance academic work with personal and professional responsibilities (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Hancock *et al.*, 2025) and also support specific medical or health-related needs (Winters *et al.*, 2023). Logistical constraints, including geographical distance from the university, professional responsibilities, and family commitments, are especially significant in graduate education. At this level of study while working full-time, making remote access to courses and exams a key factor in their decisions about continuing their studies.

Completing an examination within the familiar and secure context of one's home has been shown to significantly reduce stress and anxiety levels (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Winters *et al.*, 2023; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, such a setting can enhance sustained attention and decrease environmental distractions typically generated by other test-takers (e.g., coughing, chair movement, or footsteps) (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Winters *et al.*, 2023). Conversely, some participants reported that the home environment was predominantly associated with rest and sleep, which impeded their ability to switch into an "examination mindset" and, as a result, to perform at their best (Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020; Hancock *et al.*, 2025).

The main drawbacks of the home environment included the presence of other family members (especially children), flatmates, or neighbors, who made it significantly harder to focus (Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020; Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). Many people pointed out the challenge of finding a quiet space to study and work (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020). Students also reported feeling added

stress due to potential internet disconnections, power outages, or equipment issues (Khan and Khan, 2018; Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020; Hancock *et al.*, 2025). They also see exam questions as more difficult, which, in their view, aims to stop possible cheating (Khan and Khan, 2018; Hancock *et al.*, 2025).

Empirical evidence indicates that online exams may be associated with a significant rise in cases of academic dishonesty (Newton and Essex, 2024; Essahraoui *et al.*, 2025). Students perceive online exams as a format that facilitates cheating (Winters *et al.*, 2023; Newton and Essex, 2024). The most common methods include using unauthorized notes or textbooks, or searching the internet during the exam (Newton and Essex, 2024). However, some studies suggest that the level of academic dishonesty may be similar across both types of exams and that differences are mainly due to the perception that remote exams are easier to cheat on by students and staff (Spaulding, 2009).

The question of how reliable face-to-face and online exams are is complicated and depends on how reliability is defined. It can be seen in terms of fair conditions, as well as in accurately measuring knowledge. In-person exams offer equal conditions for all students (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023) and have long been seen as a dependable way to measure academic success (Essahraoui *et al.*, 2025). In one study, only 2.1% of students identified them as the most accessible way to cheat academically, while in the context of ‘open-book’ online exams, up to 65.1% of respondents described them as such manner (Winters *et al.*, 2023). However, some students believe that remote exams are a more accurate way to measure the skills needed in ‘real life’ because they allow the use of professional tools (e.g., Excel) and other available sources. This more closely mirrors actual professional work compared to just memorizing information (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Winters *et al.*, 2023; Hancock *et al.*, 2025).

Although significant research has examined online examinations in higher education settings (including both undergraduate and postgraduate students), relatively few empirical studies have specifically focused on postgraduate students' preferences or those enrolled in blended learning programs. In particular, there remains a need for research that concurrently examines students' perceptions of exam fairness and the logistical and organizational factors influencing their mode preferences. Accordingly, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: Which examination format is preferred by postgraduate students within hybrid learning environments?

RQ2: What factors influence or determine postgraduate students' preferences regarding examination formats?

RQ3: Do different examination formats influence students' decisions to enroll in postgraduate degree programs?

## Methodology

A survey-based study was conducted to collect data on students' perceptions of examination formats. The investigation aimed to characterize students' attitudes toward assessments administered in three modalities: online, in-person, and hybrid. The survey targeted students enrolled in a postgraduate program in Management Accounting and Controlling at the University of Lodz (Poland), yielding a total sample of 27 participants. Classes in this program are delivered in a hybrid format, allowing students to participate in classes and examinations either in person (in a classroom with the instructor) or online (synchronously). Data were collected during a scheduled class session in March 2026, approximately midway through the two-semester program (October–June). Students accessed the questionnaire via a Quick Response (QR) code. Participation was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously.

The survey instrument predominantly comprised closed-ended items, including single-response, multiple-response, and 5-point Likert scale questions. In addition, it contained a single open-ended item designed to elicit qualitative feedback regarding the structure and organization of the examinations. The questions encompassed, among other topics: (a) an evaluation of the current examination model, (b) an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of remote examinations, including an assessment of the reliability of both in-person and remote formats, and (c) an exploration of student preferences. Additionally, the survey included an item assessing the anticipated impact of compulsory in-person examinations on participants' decisions to pursue postgraduate studies. The resulting data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods; given the limited sample size, more advanced inferential or multivariate analyses were not conducted.

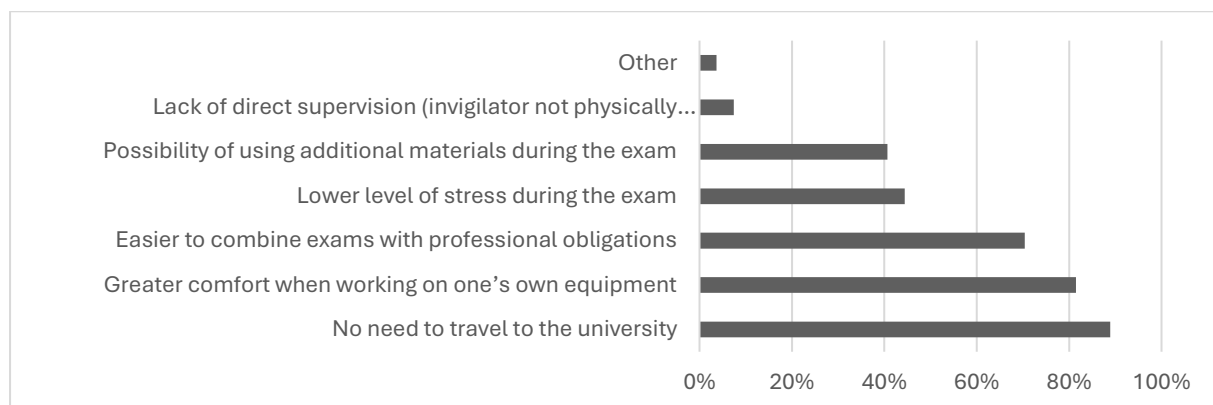
## Research Results

All respondents were employed on a full-time basis; however, their positions differed in terms of career stage, with specialists constituting the majority (74.1%) and managers representing a smaller proportion (18.5%). This configuration is consistent with the typical profile of postgraduate students, who frequently combine ongoing professional development with employment and personal obligations. The distribution of participants according to place of residence relative to the university was heterogeneous; however, the majority resided in the same city as the university (51.9%). The vast majority of students (65.4%) attended classes online or through a blended approach, depending on the circumstances at the time (19.2%). The detailed composition of the group is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents**

| Variable                             | Category                   | N  | %     |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|----|-------|
| <b>Distance from University</b>      | local students             | 14 | 51.9% |
|                                      | up to 50 km                | 3  | 11.1% |
|                                      | 50–150 km                  | 6  | 22.2% |
|                                      | over 150 km                | 3  | 11.1% |
| <b>Employment Status</b>             | employed (full-time)       | 27 | 100%  |
| <b>Career Stage</b>                  | specialist                 | 20 | 74.1% |
|                                      | managerial position        | 5  | 18.5% |
| <b>Primary mode of participation</b> | other                      | 1  | 3.7%  |
|                                      | mainly online              | 17 | 65.4% |
|                                      | mainly on-site             | 4  | 15.4% |
|                                      | equally on-site and online | 5  | 19.2% |

The current examination administration system received a very high evaluation, with a mean rating of 4.93 on a 5-point Likert scale. This positive assessment is consistent with students' stated preferences regarding examination formats. A large majority of respondents (74.1%) identified the hybrid model—where examinees may choose between an online and an in-person examination format—as their preferred option. An exclusively online examination format was preferred by 18.5% of respondents, whereas only 3.7% preferred an exclusively in-person format. These findings indicate that students do not conceptualize the selection of an examination format as a dichotomous choice. Rather, the primary consideration for them is the capacity to adjust the exam format to align with their individual circumstances and their current personal or professional situation. Respondents identified multiple determinants shaping their favorable evaluation of online examinations. These factors are summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. The advantages of remote exams**

The most frequently reported advantages included the elimination of the need to commute to the university (88.9% of responses), increased comfort from working on one's own equipment (81.5%), and an enhanced ability to

balance exams with professional responsibilities (70.4%). In their open-ended comments, respondents additionally noted that:

*“In my opinion, online exams and classes are a huge help. I live an hour away from Łódź and have young children; I don’t always have someone to look after them, so for me, classes in a format like this are a great solution.”*

*“The hybrid model is great because it allows you to balance your professional and family life with your studies. You can connect from anywhere in Poland or around the world as long as you have internet access.”*

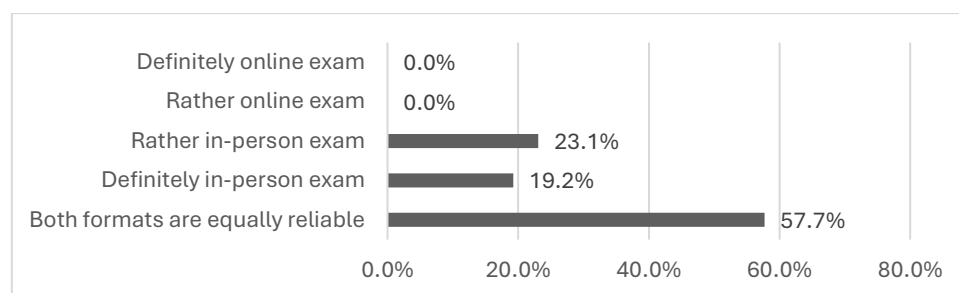
*“I believe that giving students a choice is the best approach because not everyone can make it to an in-person exam due to all sorts of unforeseen circumstances.”*

These findings suggest that, for postgraduate students, organizational and logistical conditions associated with examination administration constitute the primary determinants of their assessment of this format. Psychological variables—such as reduced stress levels (44.4%) and the opportunity to consult supplementary materials (40.7%)—appear to play a comparatively lesser role. Moreover, only a small proportion of respondents identified the absence of an invigilator as a major advantage (7.4%), indicating that concerns related to proctoring are not a salient factor in the overall evaluation of this assessment modality.

Respondents also identified factors they perceived as disadvantages of online examinations. The most frequently reported issue concerned technical difficulties related to equipment or internet access (55.6%). In comparison, factors related to the home environment—such as distractions (25.9%), stress from exam monitoring (14.8%), and a lack of suitable conditions for taking the exam at home (7.4%)—were reported much less often. These findings suggest that the main barriers to online exams are mostly technical, while organizational and psychological factors seem to be less significant. Additionally, some respondents said that, in their opinion, remote exams have no drawbacks (14.8%).

More than half of the respondents (55.5%) reported that a mandatory in-person examination format (as the only option) would be a barrier for them (combined proportion of “somewhat yes” and “definitely yes” responses). The most frequently reported obstacles were long commuting distances to the university (37.0%), work commitments (33.3%), and family responsibilities (29.6%). Economic and logistical issues—such as travel or accommodation costs (25.9%) and transportation challenges (25.9%)—were mentioned less often. These results suggest that the main barriers to participating in in-person exams are organizational, mainly related to balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. However, it is noteworthy that more than half of the respondents (55.5%) reported they would still enroll in the program even if exams were held only in person (18.5% indicated they probably would not, and 25.9% were undecided).

The analysis additionally encompassed an evaluation of the examination’s reliability as a function of its mode of administration. The corresponding results are displayed in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Assessment of the reliability of examinations**

The majority of respondents (57.7%) perceived online and in-person examinations as equally reliable. Meanwhile, 42.3% of participants indicated that in-person exams are a more dependable way to assess knowledge (including both “rather yes” and “definitely yes” responses), whereas none of the respondents rated online examinations as a more reliable form of assessment. These findings suggest that although a subset of students attributes higher reliability to in-person exams more, for most, reliability isn’t the main factor that distinguishes the two types of assessments. This is also supported by a comment from one respondent: *“Those who need to learn and want to know how to do something will learn regardless of the exam.”*

## Discussion

The findings partly corroborate research (Attia, 2014) indicating that students prefer a remote model; moreover, flexibility and choice are key for students - the majority prefer a hybrid format, both for attending classes and sitting exams, as this allows them to adapt to the current situation. This result is influenced by the characteristics of the study group – postgraduate students – all of whom were in full-time employment and had to balance their studies with their professional work.

An analysis of the factors influencing the choice of remote exams confirms the conclusions from the relevant literature. Respondents identified the most significant benefits of remote exams as: not having to travel to the university (Aristeidou et al., 2023; Winters et al., 2023; Newton & Essex, 2024) increased comfort from using their own equipment (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023) and the ease of managing exams alongside professional responsibilities (Aristeidou et al., 2023; Hancock et al., 2025).

Factors identified in previous studies as key drawbacks of this type of examination include the presence of other family members (especially children), flatmates, or neighbors (Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020; Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Hancock *et al.*, 2025) as well as difficulties in finding a quiet place to study and work (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Sangster, Stoner and Flood, 2020). These issues were mentioned less frequently, likely because the study groups consisted of postgraduate students whose financial situations are probably better than those of undergraduate and master's students. Among the disadvantages, they mainly cited technical difficulties related to equipment or internet access (similar issues were reported by students in the studies by Hancock et al., 2025; Khan & Khan, 2018; Sangster et al., 2020). These findings suggest that respondents view technical issues as the primary obstacles to taking online exams, while organizational and psychological factors seem to be of lesser importance and do not influence their decisions. Therefore, it can be said that the study group primarily assessed online exams based on their feasibility, considering professional and personal commitments.

An assessment of exam reliability clearly shows the direction of change; the traditional view, which regards face-to-face exams as more reliable, was held by about 40% of respondents (as confirmed by research by (Aristeidou *et al.*, 2023; Essahraoui *et al.*, 2025). However, it is worth noting that these respondents preferred hybrid exams – which provide an option. The majority believed there was no difference in reliability between face-to-face and remote exams.

## Conclusion

The findings offer a foundation for discussing how to organize examinations in postgraduate programs. The experience from the COVID-19 pandemic shows that conducting classes and exams is possible and much easier than initially thought; furthermore, a blended teaching and learning environment is likely the future of education. The analysis can also serve as a guide for universities creating assessment systems that meet the needs of today's students. In postgraduate studies, it is crucial to consider students' diverse needs, especially those related to balancing studies with work and personal commitments. Therefore, flexible options that let students choose how they participate in classes and assessments could give a university a competitive edge. It's also important to note that, although the format of exams doesn't determine enrollment, some respondents view it as a key factor: some would not have enrolled if exams were only in person.

However, the study has significant limitations – it involved only one group at a single university, so the sample size was small; as a result, the findings may offer some insight but cannot be generalized to all students or postgraduate students. It is also important to remember that the study was conducted among a specific group – students in the field of management accounting. This context (subject area, digital skills) influences the students' perceptions and the opinions expressed in the questionnaire; in other words, the responses reflect the actual experiences of the respondents.

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