

Preparing Faculty Resources for Adopting Open Book Exams at a Liberal Art University in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This paper provides insights into the journey of a liberal arts university in Pakistan towards adopting online or remote Open-Book Examination (OBE) as an attempt to shift from conventional examination to foster deeper learning, critical thinking, and knowledge application skills among undergraduate students. This journey encompassed the creation of a twelve-member Community of Practice (CoP) involving diverse stakeholders representing the full spectrum of university community including faculty, students, leadership, and administrative departments. After a series of regulated meetings, the CoP collaboratively developed assistive resources for the faculty to be able to plan for, prepare, and implement OBE. This initiative was housed at the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT), a hub of pedagogic innovation and excellence. The OBE resources were disseminated to all faculty through the webpage. These resources are available for viewership beyond the institutional community and serve as a guide for faculty in Higher Education willing to adopt the OBE approach. The paper also unpacks some key attributes of OBE and sets a way forward for capacity building in low-resourced institutes.*

Key Words: Open-book Exam, OBE, Community of Practice, CoP, Pakistan

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a black swan moment for Pakistan's Higher Education. A country challenged with the second highest population of out-of-school children, deeply entrenched digital inequalities, and acute skill gap; the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Pakistan plunged into digitized solutions to overcome disrupted instruction (Khalid, 2023). It was easier to develop a remote teaching ecosystem as many international digital platforms revised their pricing models to support remote teaching in developing countries and many HEIs from developed countries shared free resources to help faculty in low-resourced countries integrate Open Educational Resources (OERs) in their instruction (Laufer, Leiser, Deacon, & Fecher, 2021). Applications such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom offer free or heavily discounted plans for educators, enabling seamless communication and lesson delivery (Laufer, Leiser, Deacon, & Fecher, 2021). Similarly, Edmodo and Moodle extended their features to support resource sharing, while platforms like Coursera and Khan Academy provided free access to courses and learning materials. As the world was responding to the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19, many international universities in Canada, US, and European Union stepped forward to help educators from other regions combat the issues pertaining to limited preparedness, lack of digital resources and infrastructure, absence of institutional policies, and digital skill-gap to shift to remote or synchronous online learning instruction by offering thousands of open educational resources (OER) and practices (OEP) in the form of repositories showcased at their Ministry of Education and institutional webpages (Raza, 2022).

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In Pakistan, educators at all levels heavily relied on these free tools to support remote instruction thereby bridging the digital divide (Raza, 2022). However, the assessment of learning by ensuring alignment with academic integrity standards remained a great challenge for educators. The lack of access to online proctoring resources and alternative assessment protocols challenged educators to conduct valid and reliable assessments of learning. Studies from developing countries emphasize that limited digital accessibility exacerbates these challenges (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Particularly in the context of Pakistan, the HEIs were not systematically prepared for a massive transition to remote and synchronous teaching and did not have the financial capacity to procure advanced proctoring software to ensure the reliability and validity of the assessment of learning (Raza, 2022). Furthermore, HEIs did not have guidelines or protocols to conduct alternative assessments which intimidated the teachers leaving them unprepared in an unprecedented situation. Global research highlights several challenges faced by educators in different parts of the world, for instance in Indonesia, a study on remote learning during the pandemic reported that instructors of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) were challenged by conducting speaking assessments due to a lack of systems in place to ensure credibility and transparency of remote speaking assessment thus often not conducting the oral assessments at all. The consequence was a prominent skill gap when face-to-face instruction resumed (Dawson, Nicola-Richmond, & Partridge, 2024). Similarly, in Pakistan, due to the nonavailability of AI-driven proctoring systems Cambridge International Examination was postponed and eventually carried out moderated grading with the assistance of school instructors. The grades did not correctly represent students' skills and potential thus resulting in massive reactions from parents and students (Raza, 2022). Another problem reported from Nepal highlighted the lack of expertise in university instructors to develop assessments for the online modality of teaching. This issue is further extended by unreliable internet connections which prohibits students from taking time-sensitive synchronous assessments (Permzadian & Cho, 2023). The study also concluded that reimagining assessment was inevitable in an online setting. There are other studies from South America, North Africa, and Middle-east emphasizing the need for envisioning the assessment and course content differently in remote settings to ensure equitable assessments with higher validity, reliability, impact, and practicality (VRIP) (Arnold & McDermott, 2013).

In remote or online instruction, given these challenges, it is difficult for instructors to ensure that conventional examination or assessment comply with academic integrity standards thus mandating the HEIs to think about alternative assessment methods. One such alternative is open-book examination (OBE), these are different from conventional exams because students can consult books, notes, lectures, or other reference material while they take the exam (Dawson, Nicola-Richmond, & Partridge, 2024). These examinations don't focus on recall and comprehension levels of cognitive engagement, rather they focus on higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, application, and creation. OBE can offer a range of possibilities to the instructor, from a full OBE in which students can bring any sort of learning material to the open-file category in which students' own notes are permitted during the assessment (Permzadian & Cho, 2023). In situations of fully online learning that lacks proctoring, OBE usually effectively falls in the category of Full OBE.

The management of OBE in remote or online instructional settings is easier however, at the heart of this strategy lies the necessary competence of instructors to be able to design OBE that caters to higher taxonomies of cognitive engagement through posing reflective questions to students. This paper describes the process of faculty resources developed by the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) at a liberal arts university in Pakistan to discuss significant attributes of OBE and prepare faculty to develop effective OBE at undergraduate-level degree programs. The CLT plays a vital role in pedagogic innovation at the university under discussion. This Center steers faculty development initiatives to keep abreast with modern trends in teaching within a diverse range of disciplines. CLT established a Community of Practice (CoP). The concept of a CoP was first proposed by Wenger (1998) as a framework for building successful focus groups in an academic setting. Members of these groups come together with a shared objective of pursuit and commitment to sharing knowledge with each other. The implementation of CoPs in the context of Pakistan's HEIs is still an emerging phenomenon, especially to find collaborated solutions with an interdisciplinary mindset. CoPs are well established in the international world where it is perceived as a successful method for inter-departmental or inter-institutional collaboration (Wenger, 1998). Despite the international recognition of the success of this methodology, only a few HEIs in Pakistan engage in CoPs



as a framework for creating new solutions and sharing and sustaining knowledge. The liberal arts university under discussion is an avid supporter of CoPs and several active CoPs are managed by the CLT team. Several faculty and institutional development resources have been developed through the framework of CoPs. This paper describes the outcome of a multidisciplinary CoP to share and sustain best practices in OBEs.

Methodology: The Operational Aspect of CoP

Any sustainable change and practice should be rooted in clearly articulated procedures. For this CoP, it was essential to engage participants who shared common interests and expertise in the realm of assessment planning, innovative use of technology, and questions to promote higher-order thinking skills. The CoP presented diversity by taking onboard representatives from different levels of stakeholders including faculty, students, leadership, and admin staff. The faculty represented six disciplines and together the group offered diverse expertise in assessment planning for different subject areas, feedback, Ed-Tech integration, and operational knowledge of Moodle, the Learning Management System used at the university. There were twenty participants of the CoP, faculty nominated by the Department Chairpersons considering their past experiences and achievements in the relevant aspects of assessment, admin staff represented the Information Technology Service (ITS), Controller Examination, and Academic Affairs Office. The member students presented different academic levels in the university spanning from freshmen to final-year research scholars.

The CLT team served as a core leadership team and developed a strategic vision for the CoP by defining its objectives, deliverables, and order of priorities. These were collectively reviewed by participating members and revisions were made in the order of priorities. The CLT team also structured early engagement strategies, which included a preparatory workshop for participants to get familiar with their roles and responsibilities. Defining the objectives and defining deliverable priorities gave CoP a definite direction and each monthly meeting was tracked on the pre-defined trajectory thus adding to the purpose and value of the CoP meetings. The CLT hosted eight semi-structured meetings over a period of six months, each meeting lasted for an average time of two hours and adopted a flipped model of engagement. Selected reading materials by the CLT team were provided to the participants with a list of focus questions for in-depth exploration of topics. These materials served as the basis for discussion during the next scheduled meetings, where participants collaboratively analyzed the content to collectively reach a consensus on key issues to generate the contextualized deliverable for the university.

The deliverables of eight meetings included: Faculty Guidelines for OBE, Best Practices for OBE in Liberal Arts, Course Design Guidelines for OBE, Guidelines on OBE-specific marking criteria, and OBE Guidelines for Students. These documents establish an institutional foundation for the university and CLT takes immense pride in the fact that all faculty at the university have the essential competence to plan for, develop, and conduct OBE.

Unpacking OBE Strategy

It is generally accepted that traditional exams build a certain anxiety in students, they instill more sense of fear and threat compared to OBE while the provision to consult self-developed notes, books and other resources during the exam significantly reduces students' stress and anxiety (Perzmadian & Cho, 2023). There are traces of debate among researchers that indicates a mixed opinion about the effectiveness of traditional and OBE. Research argues that the OBE promotes life skills of self-regulation, motivation, self-assessment, and intellectual stimulation through higher cognitive skills by encouraging students to critically reflect on the questions, and apply textbook knowledge in a unique way and this process encourages students to practice skills more than just cramming and short-term memorization, which might be the situation in traditional examination. OBE promotes Critical Thinking, although the notion of critical thinking may vary contextually there is a general consensus that critical thinking refers to a conscious process of systematically thinking about one's one thinking while engaging mindfully in reasoning, analysis, and application of the known knowledge in a new or different context (Dawson, Nicola-Richmond, & Partridge, 2024).

The phrasing of questions or cases in the OBE determines the extent to which students engage in critical thinking. Designing effective questions requires an essential redesigning of the curriculum planning, implementation, and class assessments. If merely the course assessment is changed into OBE, it doesn't do justice to building students' necessary skills in attempting and taking ownership of OBE (Arnold & McDermott, 2013). The principal reason for this mandatory requirement is that students need to practice the skills of critical thinking, knowledge application and creation in new contexts, and self-regulation of learning. The course design is not reviewed to build different skills but also to develop cognitively engaging and intriguing questions. OBE requires more creative questions that present a case, context, or situation to the students for their critical analysis in a way that students have to apply knowledge in a different scenario to find solutions. As part of the course redesign, rubrics are also an essential component to encourage students to track their progress, identify areas for development, and self-regulate their own learning through self-assessment. It is crucial to have tailored rubrics to the module's intended outcomes that capture which skills students must master to be able to take the OBE. The Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) developed several faculty learning and professional development materials on writing and using rubrics in Higher Education. These PLD materials complement the OBE guidelines for the faculty.

Another essential addition to the course design is formative assessment which is low-stake and provides significant opportunities for students to practice essential skills they must have for taking OBE (Dawson, Nicola-Richmond, & Partridge, 2024). The ongoing formative assessments not only prepare students to master skills that are required to attempt the final summative assessment but also provide the instructors with an essential understanding of students' abilities to take OBE. This information is crucial in informing decisions to improve or alter teaching strategies (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). The summative exam in the OB setting should be complemented by the formative assessment in the OBE style. If these two are not well aligned with each other, the feedback provided to the students during the year may not be beneficial to harness skills in students that prepare them for summative high-stakes assessments. The Best Practices Guide on OBE offers a range of assessment strategies to direct the faculty at the university to align formative and summative assessment strategies that wholesomely build skills of reflection, critical thinking, analysis, and application of knowledge.

Lastly, despite practice and change in course design to prepare the students for OBE, it is imperative to share some standard guidelines specific to OBE, students' roles and responsibilities. Students should be informed about the benefits of OBE on their life skills, they should know how will the assessment unfold in an OBE setting, the reference material should be equitable and all other infrastructure required for the OBE should offer reliance to students from off-campus locations as well. Students also must know the implications of OBE on their final grades, standard operational procedures for submitting the OBE, adherence to course-based policies and time allocations, and expectations to avoid overconfidence. OBE is an alternate assessment strategy opted due to environmental factors and students should be ready to prepare and collect their own reference material rather than relying on search engines because one of the key attributes of OBE is its direct relevance with the class lectures and in most cases, references made of search engines result in poor output of students in OBE.

OBE in higher education is also beneficial because they provide students' the opportunity to report their learning in their own style. Students also perceive it positively as it offers more flexibility and interaction with learning material that fosters their deeper learning.

A notable advantage of OBE is its versatility, these exams support remote settings or on-campus administration. While the traditional exams can only be administered on campus under a formal setting, OBE fully addresses the administrative issues by removing the threat of cheating making it easier for the faculty as well as students to use examination as an opportunity to foster self-regulation, ownership, and deeper learning. It can be effectively administered both on-campus and online, making it a transferable model across different learning environments.

Lastly, OBE are based on constructivist learning theory which encourages students to engage with problem-based questions, reflect on their learning experiences, collaborate with peers or learning resources.



Conclusion

Alternative assessment strategies are the only way out for HEIs in Pakistan and other low-resourced countries where online proctoring software is either too expensive or not available. One of the many lessons learned during the global pandemic of COVID-19 was the skill gap among faculty to adopt new methods of assessment, feedback, and pedagogy to address unprecedented situations. This effort made by the CLT team is an attempt to develop sustainable systems for thriving in difficult situations. It is also a new pedagogy for the faculty to develop deeper learning among students giving them the chance to take ownership of their own learning, engage in self-reflection, and learn to apply their knowledge and skills. By introducing this new assessment strategy, CLT also ensures that faculty realizes the significance of formative assessment, and course redesign for preparing students for OBE by uplifting the skill set offered through university experiences. Faculty development is also of significance for harnessing essential competence in rubric development, crafting situational questions, and expanding the horizon of faculty to think about the available reference material that they should incorporate in their ongoing lectures.

The transition from conventional to OBEs projects institutional commitment to fostering a more practice-oriented approach to lifelong learning. By taking the right direction, institutes in Pakistan can build the capacity to overcome challenges and ensure the successful adoption of OBEs.

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