

## **Evaluating differently in the digital age: The case of Master's theses.**

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### **Abstract:**

The Master's dissertation is an important part of a student's academic journey. It represents the culmination of their extensive education and reflects their ability to define and execute a project in accordance with standards of writing and presentation. Like other forms of education, it serves as a means of training. Its purpose is to enable students to acquire the appropriate methodology for synthesis and to demonstrate their mastery of activities and resources related to their research topic. The support and guidance of students during this period is essential, through regular exchanges between the student and their research supervisor to address any concerns and provide direction.

The evaluation of a dissertation focuses on its various components, including the defence. As such, this assessment, whether written or oral, is a complex task. However, the health situation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic has forced universities to resort to remote assessment of Master's theses.

This paper focuses on the online evaluation of Master's theses, which was an unprecedented experience for most teachers during the Covid-19 period.

**Keywords:** evaluation, dissertation, online, face-to-face, strategies.

### **Introduction**

The coronavirus pandemic has had far-reaching effects and implications on various sectors, including higher education. It has forced the authorities to rethink the educational landscape in Algerian universities by introducing online teaching methods. This includes the delivery of courses and tutorials in the form of videos, Word or PDF files, as well as online exams and continuous assessment.

The preparation of a final dissertation is an important milestone in the life of a student and their supervisor. The evaluation of a dissertation is as important for a supervisor as the writing process is for a student. The evaluation of a dissertation focuses on several parts and elements. The first part provides information about the research itself, while the second part is dedicated to the concrete realisation of the dissertation. In addition, the student's oral defence is a third element to be evaluated. Therefore, the evaluation of a dissertation, whether based on the written or the oral component, is a complex task.

### **1- Research problem:**

In today's context, we are discussing online evaluation, which has led us to reflect on its effectiveness. The health situation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic has forced universities to resort to remote evaluation of master's theses. As evaluation requires rigour and reliability, several questions arise: What strategies should be adopted to support students and enable them to successfully complete their research? How should the preparation for the online defence be approached?

These are the questions we would like to address, drawing on our own experience as university lecturers and that of our colleagues who have experience in evaluating dissertations in person and moving to online evaluation in the 2019/2020 academic year.

### **2- What is a thesis ?**

A dissertation, also known as a thesis, is a personal piece of work undertaken by a student (or group of students) at the end of their studies. It serves as a means of training, similar to other forms of education. It is a written exposition of the results of research activities undertaken within a programme. The purpose of a thesis is to enable the student, through sustained engagement with research practice, to acquire the appropriate methodology for synthesis and to demonstrate mastery of the activities and resources related to their research topic.

Each student must be supervised by a teacher, as supervision involves guiding the student by providing direction and addressing their concerns in order to successfully complete their research. This is achieved through frequent interaction between the student and the supervisor. The supervisor assists the

student from the initial stage of choosing a research topic based on the student's interests.

Supervision is provided through programme courses, support seminars, methodological workshops and bibliographic research, all aimed at progressively developing the student's research skills.

The role of the research supervisor is to oversee each stage of the dissertation process, provide corrective feedback where necessary, monitor the student's progress during the development of the dissertation, conduct interim evaluations, ensure the scientific rigour of the dissertation and, finally, proofread the final version and check for plagiarism.

The library can also contribute to this support by guiding the student to relevant sections related to their research topic and facilitating access to documentation. Unfortunately, this aspect is not well used in many universities.

### **3- The transition to a new mode of assessment: online evaluation:**

Indeed, the global health crisis, including its impact on Algeria, has led to the adoption of online teaching and assessment methods. We have observed that the use of digital technology has become a driving force for innovation in education.

Traditionally, the evaluation of final theses was done in person, with students presenting their work orally and discussing it with the jury members. However, during the first three years of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote evaluation was introduced, completely eliminating the oral component.

This shift to remote evaluation has presented new challenges and raised questions about the effectiveness and fairness of the evaluation process. It is important to review the strategies used to support students in their research and to adapt the assessment methods to ensure that rigour and academic standards are maintained.

We must emphasise that the teacher's role in evaluation is not simply to sanction the student. Evaluation is a process of recognising, identifying, determining and defining the student's areas for improvement in order to address them. It is also about identifying the student's abilities in order to

enhance and develop them. According to Reuter and *al*<sup>1</sup>. (2011: 105), *"Evaluation in education can be defined as the collection of information undertaken by any actor involved in a work situation about the identifiable performances or behaviours performed by individuals in that situation."*

Evaluation should not focus on a positive or negative judgement of the work; rather it should identify the student's strengths and address any difficulties so that appropriate action can be taken after the presentation

#### **4- Criteria for evaluating a Master's dissertation in class**

Scientific research is *"primarily a process, a rational approach that allows the examination of phenomena, problem solving and obtaining precise answers through investigations."* (N'Da, 2015, p.17). The evaluation criteria are linked to the objectives of the final thesis. They represent the qualities sought in the thesis. A thesis is evaluated according to the following criteria:

##### **4-1 Evaluation of the form:**

- Respect of the title page and presentation of a clear and unambiguous table of contents.
- Respect for the structure, cohesion and coherence of the text and the quality of the writing.
- Conformity of the bibliography with the chosen topic.
- Conformity of the abstract and balance between the sections of the thesis.

##### **4-2 Evaluation of the content:**

- Originality of the work.
- Presentation of the research question.
- Clear formulation of objectives or hypotheses and justification of methodology and theories used.
- Presentation and analytical skills.
- Synthesis skills.
- Quality of writing (spelling and vocabulary, paragraph structure, clarity and appropriateness of headings and subheadings to the content).
- Quality of conclusions.
- Adherence to writing standards: citation of sources and correct referencing.

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations in this article are originally in French, but those are translated into English.

### **4-3 Evaluation of the Oral presentation**

The oral presentation is the verbal presentation of a thesis. It does not repeat the written document, but summarises it by highlighting the main points. It has three objectives: to ensure that the student is the author of the work, to confirm that he/she is able to orally present the different stages of his/her research and to establish that his/her work fits into a research framework that opens the discussion to further studies that can complement or deepen it.

The presentation panel is composed of the supervisor, a chairperson and an examiner, who evaluate both the written work and the oral presentation, as well as the knowledge acquired during the student's training.

During the presentation day (face-to-face assessment) there is direct interaction between the student and the panel members, allowing for clarification of ambiguities, multiple explanations and guidance in the right direction. This face-to-face meeting addresses the student's concerns and allows them to take notes and gather necessary explanations for later corrections.

During the presentation, the supervisor plays a crucial role. They provide their assessment of the student's work, evaluate their diligence and integrity, and advocate for the research problem and results presented by the student. Finally, the jury members discuss and decide on an appropriate mark that reflects the quality of the student's work, taking into account both the written and oral components.

In general, the jury members evaluate the following aspects

- Introduction and presentation of the topic: the clarity of the introduction, the contextualisation of the topic and the formulation of the research problem.
- Structure of the presentation: logical organisation of the discourse, coherence of the different sections and smooth transitions between them.
- Mastery of the subject: the student's ability to answer the jury's questions in a relevant way, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the subject.
- PowerPoint presentation: effective use of visual aids to enhance understanding and clarity of presentation.
- Verbal Expression and Quality of Communication: the student's ability to present his work clearly, fluently and accurately, while providing convincing answers to the questions asked.

According to Le Bras (1994: 25) when addressing students, the conditions for a successful presentation include: *"the quality of your reflection, the depth of your literature research, the exercise of your critical thinking, the rigour of your analytical and synthesis skills, your ability to develop a logical plan and to express ideas clearly."*

### **5- Criteria for evaluating a Master's thesis in a remote (distance) learning context:**

There are two methods of remote evaluation. The first method is similar to face-to-face assessment, namely the online defence. However, completing a dissertation in itself can be a challenging task for some students, and the addition of an online presentation makes it even more delicate and puts students in a difficult situation.

The second type of assessment is the assessment of the written work in the absence of the student, in order to comply with the health protocols implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic. The assessment is carried out without a defence, with each member of the jury giving the student a mark and a report with comments and feedback. The supervisor then communicates the comments of the two examiners to the student, who is expected to make corrections and submit the final work. The final mark is calculated as the average of the three marks.

It is clear that there is a difference between assessing a thesis in person and assessing it remotely. Assessing the work of someone who is absent and unable to defend their writing is a challenge. While the written criteria remain the same, the absence of the oral component makes the grade less reliable.

### **6- Remote assessment of final theses: navigating between success and failure:**

We spoke to a number of lecturers and students about their first experience of online dissertation assessment. We also consulted various departmental Facebook pages to gather comments on the subject. The results are summarised below:

- Difficulty in absorbing guidance and advice remotely: Some students' supervisors find it difficult to understand the instructions and guidance given by jury members. This barrier hinders their progress.

- According to the Heads of Department, online evaluation is a beneficial solution. It eliminates the need for several teachers and students to be physically present, ensuring compliance with health protocols and preventing the spread of the virus.
- According to teachers, most students do not respect the strict deadline for submitting their work. The credibility of the assessment is compromised and some students have been observed to plagiarise or simply copy and paste without any effort.
- For the majority of the teachers we spoke to, the main reason for the failure of this type of assessment is the absence of the oral component, especially in language departments (such as French, English, Arabic, Spanish, etc.).
- While some students are satisfied with the absence of the oral defence, others prefer the interaction that takes place during the defence, where they have the opportunity to ask questions, demonstrate their oral skills and seek explanations in a face-to-face setting.

## **7- Summary:**

Writing a dissertation provides students with the opportunity to successfully complete a personal project and refine skills that are crucial for their future as graduates and professionals. However, the realisation of this project poses a number of challenges for the student.

As evaluation is an integral part of the learning process and plays a role in the development and improvement of teaching and learning, it is important to identify the shortcomings and difficulties faced by students on the day of the defence and also through their written work. This is done with the aim of addressing and strengthening these areas for the benefit of future cohorts.

An illustrated guide should be made available online to help students format and structure their dissertations. It should also emphasise the importance of checking for plagiarism.

The quality of assessment, whether face-to-face or remote, always involves a degree of subjectivity. However, it is important to ensure that this subjectivity does not lead to arbitrariness. This can be achieved by implementing a rigorous and well-designed assessment process that ensures compliance and reliability.

## Conclusion

Finally, it is evident that the method of remote evaluation has been rejected by some who prefer the traditional format of evaluation, while others have accepted it. We suggest a critical and reflective evaluation of the teachers' experience and the students' adaptation to this new method of evaluation.

The purpose of evaluation is to assess whether students have assimilated the knowledge provided by teachers throughout their academic journey. With the new reforms, the focus has shifted from the assessment of knowledge to the assessment of skills, making the oral component an essential aspect to be considered.

Therefore, it is necessary to develop a standardised framework for remote assessment of dissertations, taking into account all relevant parameters. In addition, the evaluation criteria for online assessments should be reviewed, taking into account the increasing digitalisation of our world.

To successfully implement this new approach to assessment, collaboration between educational staff, teachers, students and administration is crucial. We believe that the organisation of online defences through videoconferencing applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet would be beneficial. It is important to note that " *these new ways of accessing and processing knowledge should be accompanied by improvements in our teaching practices, both at the pedagogical and didactic level.* " (Y. BELAHSEN and M. TOUIAQ, 2017: 26).

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