

Should Universities Replace Traditional Exams With Continuous Assessment?

Universities love exams for one simple reason: they're clean. One date, one room, one score. But learning is rarely that neat, and research keeps poking holes in the idea that a single high-stakes moment captures what students know. Evidence across learning science, assessment research, and student performance studies suggests that continuous assessment should carry most of the grade because it supports durable learning and reduces performance distortion linked to anxiety. At the same time, sources also warn that continuous assessment can backfire when it turns into constant pressure. The most defensible position is a redesign: continuous assessment as the default, exams as limited verification, and a course structure that keeps feedback meaningful rather than nonstop.

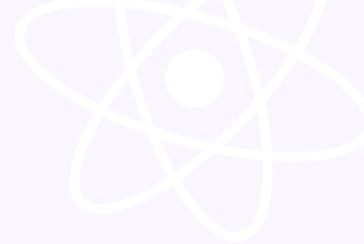
A major reason to shift weight away from end-of-term exams is that learning strengthens through repeated retrieval, not repeated exposure. Roediger and Karpicke's classic experiment on "test-enhanced learning" shows that practicing retrieval (testing) can improve long-term retention compared with restudying, even when restudying boosts short-term performance. Their work reframes testing as a learning event, not just a measurement tool. Continuous assessment can use that principle naturally: frequent low-stakes quizzes, short checks, and cumulative tasks create repeated retrieval across weeks. That design fits what Dunlosky and colleagues call "practice testing," a technique with strong evidence for improving student learning when applied appropriately. In other words, the best argument for continuous assessment is not "exams are bad." The stronger argument is that learning improves when assessment is spaced and repeated.

Still, the conversation changes when anxiety enters the room. If assessment pressure distorts performance, then grades stop meaning what universities claim they mean. Tang and He's meta-analysis (focused on the COVID-19 period) reports a negative correlation between university students' anxiety and academic performance ($r = -0.211$). That number doesn't prove anxiety is the only cause of lower grades, and it sits in a specific context (pandemic stress). But it supports a practical point: when anxiety rises, performance drops in a measurable way. If a course relies heavily on one high-pressure exam, the score can reflect stress response as much as mastery. Continuous assessment spreads evaluation across multiple moments, which reduces the chance that one spike in anxiety becomes the whole story of a student's semester.

Now the counterpunch: continuous assessment can also create stress. When students feel "always assessed," the course becomes a treadmill with no off switch. A report discussed by Universities should not worship the cleanliness of exams. They should design assessment the way learning actually works: gradual, repeated, feedback-driven, and human.

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Continuous assessment, done well, gets closer to that reality. High-stakes exams, used sparingly, can still check the fundamentals. The outcome is a system that measures what students know more accurately - and teaches them more effectively along the way.

Works Cited

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