

Addressing 21st century assessment challenges in the Middle East

The role of technology for professional high-stakes test owners

By Pearson VUE



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KANTAR IMRB

Introduction

Professional assessment is a vital and expanding element of Middle East economies, and exam owners across the region are competing not just within their own sectors but also globally to achieve the best outcomes for both exam candidates and employers. However, our research has found that the changes required to achieve this also bring fresh challenges.

This study, commissioned by Pearson VUE with fieldwork carried out by Kantar IMRB and based on a survey of 50 professional high-stakes test owners across the Middle East, sheds light on these challenges. Test owners are considering alternatives to traditional exam formats and many have either transitioned from pen-and-paper to computer-based testing already or intend to do so.

There are concerns about maintaining the relevance of exams, as well as test centre security and convenience for candidates – and investment in technology is clearly viewed as a key solution.

High-stakes assessment challenges

High-stakes professional exams have a profound effect on the lives and careers of those who sit them – whether that is acquiring a driving licence, qualifying as an accountant or earning the credentials to become a surgeon. They are equally important for the organisations which own them, increasing standards across a wide range of industries and helping save lives in healthcare and public safety-related sectors.

The Middle East has a proud history of striving for increasingly sophisticated assessment solutions across multiple sectors, applying global best practices to improve the quality and value of their exams.

This study has found that, as part of this process of raising standards, test owners face challenges in developing content which is relevant to the workplaces candidates will be entering, along with difficult decisions about how and where the exams are delivered.

Almost all (**94%**) test providers predict that the number of exams they provide will increase in the next three years. So understanding the 21st century assessment challenges facing professional test owners – and how these are being addressed – is especially important as organisations in the Middle East increasingly look to technology as part of the solution. This study identifies these key challenges and concerns, along with potential solutions.

About the research

The statistical data in this report is based on a face-to-face research of 50 senior executives from professional test-owning organisations in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan and Oman. The survey was conducted by Pearson VUE's research partner Kantar IMRB between December 2015 and March 2016.

About the test owners

The respondents are from multiple sectors – education, financial services, medical, regulatory (such as road safety and manufacturing) and technology – delivering 2,000 exams each per year on average. They were each responsible for 45 professional accreditations on average.

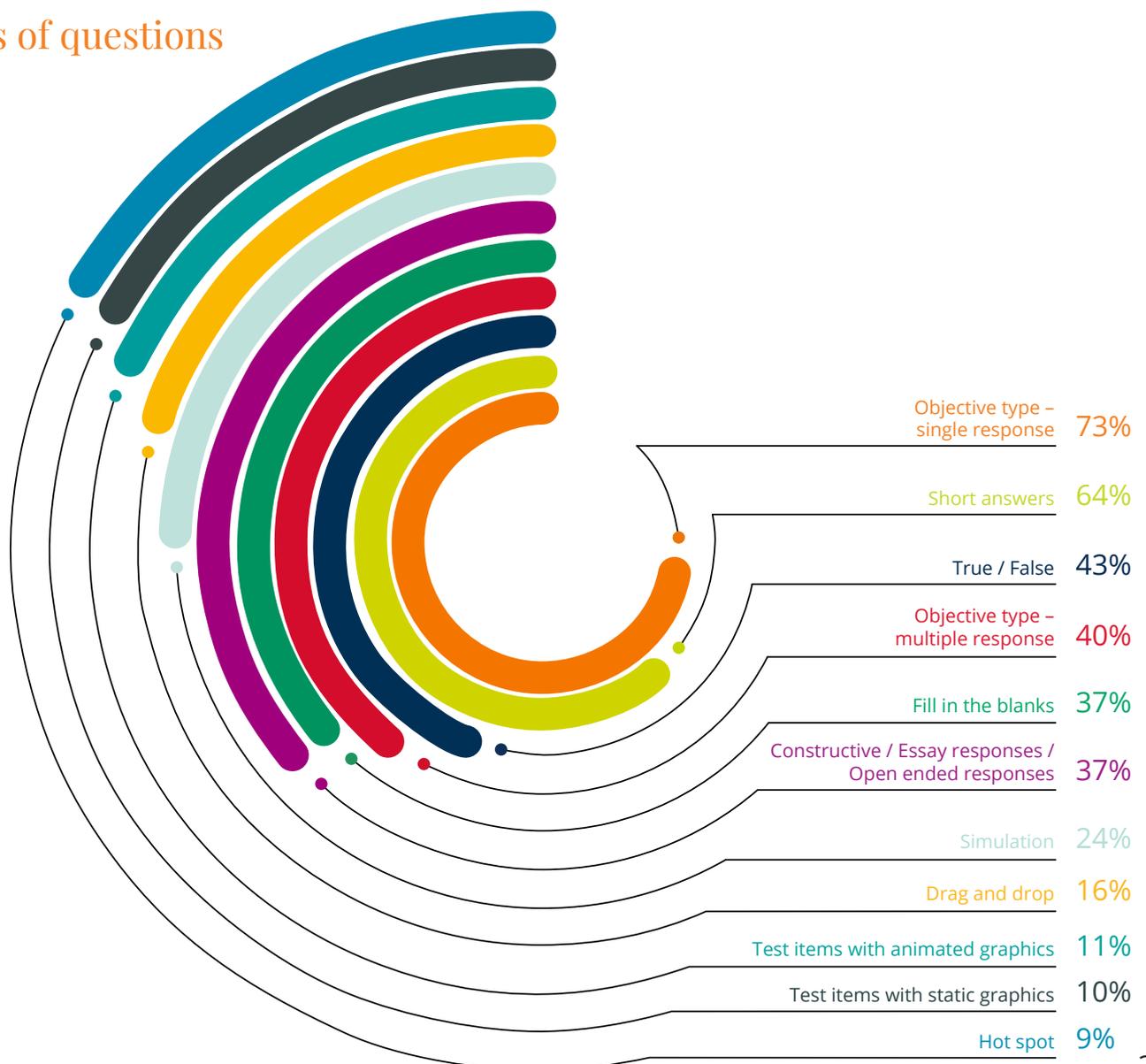
Competition in the Middle East professional assessment industry is not an issue for governments and professional bodies, but for other sectors - such as education, financial services, medical and technology - it is a concern.

Nearly a third of the respondents (31%) stated that they faced a lot of global competition and more than four in ten (42%) said they faced a high level of local competition. A high level of competition is of course healthy, and perhaps linked with a major focus among test owners on the quality and relevance of their exam content.

Popular question formats

Most test owners surveyed (73%) use single response questions. Other popular formats include short answer (64%), true-or-false (43%) and multiple-choice questions (40%).

Types of questions



Challenges facing Middle East test owners

Maintaining the relevance of exam content

This study reveals a key concern among test owners: maintaining the relevance of exam content to constantly evolving modern workplaces. Technology, innovation and ever-increasing competition in the Middle East drives the key skills required by employers, and this drives the need to adapt exam content constantly in order to maintain its relevance and value.

Unfortunately, test owners do not always achieve high levels of content relevance, resulting in more than a fifth (22%) of respondents reporting that candidates are unprepared for employment upon completing their certification exam. Over half (54%) also express concern about whether their test content reflects key skills and knowledge.

These concerns are clearly shared by employers too. Over a third (36%) in the EMEA region (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) stated that they had difficulty filling jobs due to skills gaps, according to the ManpowerGroup 2016/2017 Talent Shortage Survey.

This could explain why seven in ten (68%) test owners surveyed said that developing new content or maintaining the relevance of assessments was a challenge for their organisation – with a third (30%) saying this was the main concern. Addressing these issues could potentially have a positive effect on Middle East economies, making a larger pool of candidates with the right skills available to employers.



Developing new assessment content / maintaining relevance of assessment	68%
Less flexibility in registration & scheduling system	42%
Increased operational overhead	38%
Improving candidate experience during test	38%
Processing applications forms & administration	34%
Security issues like questions being 'leaked' before exams	32%
Accurately measures the subject as outlined in specification	32%
Cost	30%
Less candidate flexibility	30%
Offering a continued professional development programme	30%

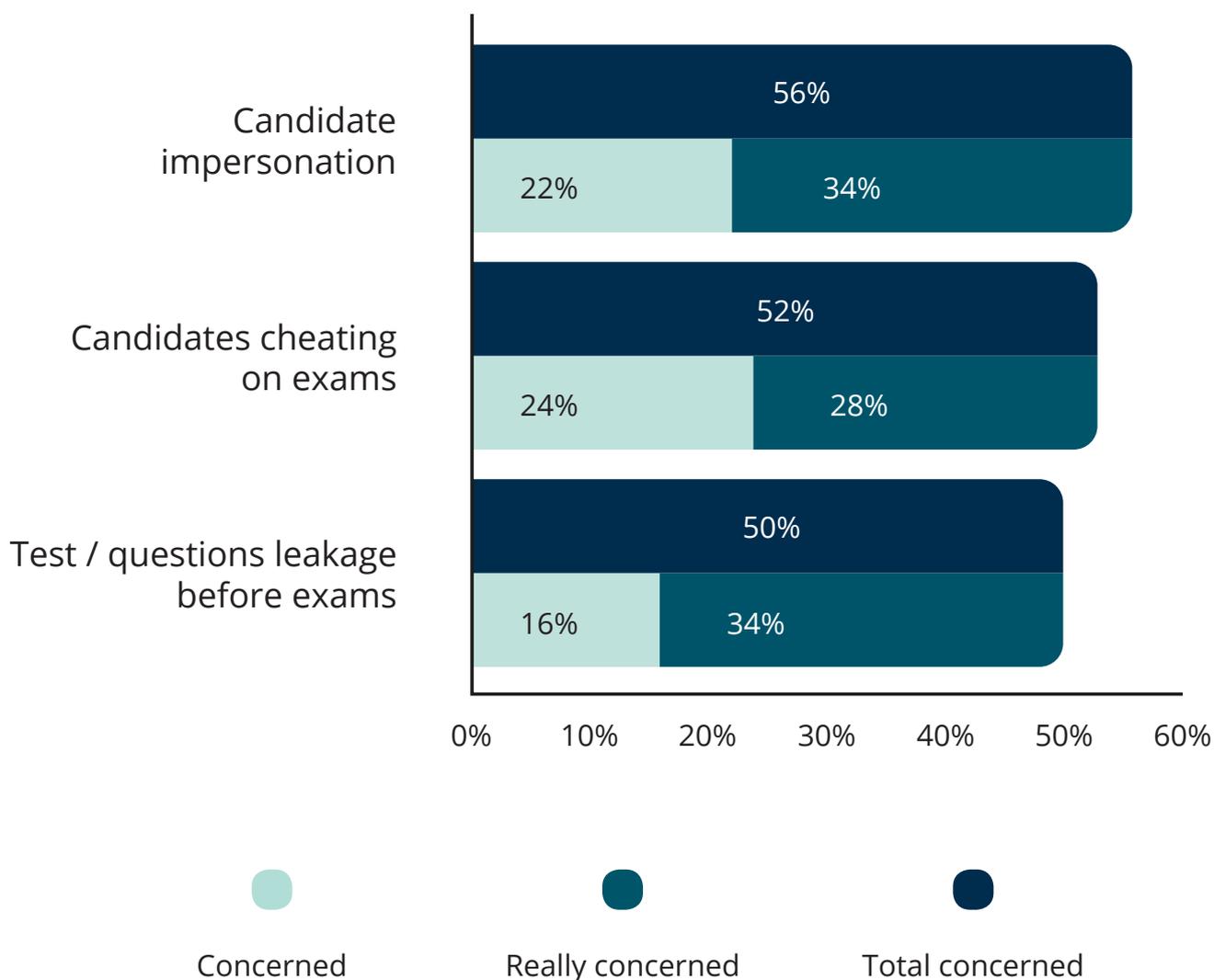
Exam fraud: an intellectual and technological arms race

Exam owners find themselves embroiled in an arms race with ever-more sophisticated cheats. Cases of candidates attempting to use sophisticated electronic devices – even spy glasses featuring a camera in one case – have already been uncovered around the world, meaning that test owners must review and enhance security procedures regularly.

This is in effect a technological arms race. As potential fraudsters attempt to utilise the latest gadgets, test delivery organisations have to employ the latest methods of detection and prevention.

It is encouraging that many test owners across the Middle East are taking fraud seriously, with more than half (**56%**) expressing concern about candidate impersonation – where a student fraudulently sits an exam on behalf of someone else – and half concerned about test papers or questions being leaked before exams. There is also widespread general concern on the topic, with more than half (**52%**) concerned about candidates cheating when sitting exams.

Security concerns



Improving the candidate experience: convenience concerns

Professionals working in Middle East countries are increasingly tech-savvy, as they are exposed to sophisticated electronic devices throughout a variety of customer experiences – including learning and assessment technologies. This, combined with the ability of candidates to express their gratitude or displeasure regarding their assessment experiences on social media platforms, means that improving and maintaining the candidate experience has never been more important.

Nearly four in 10 (**38%**) stated that candidate convenience – including registration and scheduling, candidate experience and flexibility in terms of test centre location – had improved within their organisation over the past five years. However, six in ten respondents (**62%**) noted that candidate convenience has not improved at all over the same period of time.

Improvements are still required in another crucial area of the candidate journey – booking the exam itself – as four in ten (**42%**) test owners said registration and scheduling systems were a current challenge to the tests managed by their organisation.



Potential technological solutions

This study found that Middle East test owners have indicated a desire to address 21st century assessment challenges with technological innovation to help build more relevant content and deliver it in a more secure and convenient manner. Operational delivery was improved by the use of CBT for **87%** of respondents.

Content and delivery:

Three-quarters of the test owners surveyed (**74%**) believed that technology will help improve content. This includes developing new content, maintaining relevancy, and accurately measuring the required skills.

CBT has become known for creating opportunities for new and innovative ways of assessing candidates' knowledge and skills that are difficult to assess using paper-based testing, for example using drag-and-drop, radio buttons, check-boxes and drop-down question types.

Security:

The CBT delivery method is recognised as a way of making exam content – perhaps the most precious commodity of an exam – more secure than the pen-and-paper equivalent. It greatly reduces the risk of theft, leaks or accidental loss associated with the transportation of printed copies of the exam, and electronic question-banking allows the encryption of test content.

More than half (**56%**) of test providers were optimistic that the advancement of such technology can help minimise cheating, and a third (**33%**) of those who delivered pen-and-paper based tests stated that they were likely to move their exam to computer-based form in the near future.

Convenience:

The majority (**92%**) of test owners believed that computer-based testing solutions could allow them to expand their test centre coverage – meaning greater convenience for candidates – and nearly nine out of 10 (**86%**) believed CBT can improve the delivery of exam results to candidates.

CBT has allowed for greater flexibility than the traditional pen-and-paper delivery method which means candidates attending an exam hall on one particular day. Instead, exams can be delivered in windows – specific time periods during the year – or on-demand throughout the year, allowing candidates to book a convenient date at a local test centre.

Generally, half of respondents stated that the adoption of technology could help overcome these convenience challenges.

Conclusion

Professional high-stakes test owners in the Middle East believe in embracing technological solutions in order to improve content as they adhere to global best practices, and considering that the majority are planning to increase the number of exams they offer, now is the time to start adapting content and streamline psychometric content processes to gain the competitive edge.

The adoption of innovative assessment solutions has emerged as a key trend that could propel the Middle East ahead of its global competitors.

Methodology

A primary study with a personal interview approach (face-to-face and telephone) was implemented. Each interview took 20 minutes on average and was conducted in English or Arabic.

50 senior executives employed by test-owning organisations were interviewed.

Data collection was conducted from December 2015 to March 2016.

Research data collection and analysis: Kantar IMRB.

Sample

Countries: UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia

Industries: Academic, financial, technology, medical, regulatory, (such as road safety, manufacturing).

Only included organisations which delivered more than 1000 tests per annum.

Approach used: Purposive sampling

Full report available on request. Please email mary.fitzpatrick2@pearson.com



About Pearson VUE

Pearson VUE (www.pearsonvue.com) is the global leader in computer-based testing for high-stakes certification and licensure exams in the healthcare, finance, information technology, academic and admissions markets. We offer a full suite of services to develop, manage, deliver and grow test programmes for over 450 clients via the world's most comprehensive network of highly secure test centres in 180 countries, and through online solutions. Pearson VUE owns Certiport, the global leader in foundational IT certification solutions, and is a business of the world's leading learning company Pearson (NYSE: PSO; LSE: PSON).

Contact us

Americas

Chicago, IL
+01 888 627 7357
pvamericassales@pearson.com

Global Headquarters
Minneapolis, MN
+01 888 627 7357
pvamericassales@pearson.com

Philadelphia, PA
+01 610 617 9300
pvamericassales@pearson.com

Europe, Middle East & Africa

Africa
+44 0 207 010 2587
vuemarketing@pearson.com

Dubai, United Arab Emirates
+971 44 535300
vuemarketing@pearson.com

London, United Kingdom
+44 0 207 010 2587
vuemarketing@pearson.com

Asia Pacific

Beijing, China
+86 10 5989 2600
pvchinasales@pearson.com

Delhi, India
+91 120 4001600
pvindiabusiness@pearson.com

Melbourne, Australia
+61 3 9811 2400
pvseasiasales@pearson.com

Tokyo, Japan
+81 3 6891 0500
pvjpsales@pearson.com

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