

# Students' Preference on Online Examinations: An Evaluation of Satisfaction, Challenges, and Preferred Assessment Modality

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Originality: 98%

Grammar Check: 97%

Plagiarism: 2%

## ABSTRACT

### *Article History:*

Received: 09 Dec 2025

Revised: 16 Jan 2026

Accepted: 13 Apr 2026

Published: 17 Aug 2026

**Keywords:** *Higher education, online examination, student satisfaction, mixed-methods design, criminology education, Butuan City, Philippines*

Online examinations remain widely used in higher education, but their effectiveness depends on student access, technical reliability, clear procedures, and perceptions of fairness. This study evaluated satisfaction, challenges, preferred assessment modality, and written perceptions of an online examination among Bachelor of Science in Criminology students at Merchant Marine Academy of Caraga, Inc., Butuan City, Philippines. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used. All 300 first-year and second-year students who completed the online examination participated. Quantitative data came from a validated questionnaire with an overall Scale-level Content Validity Index/Average of 0.93 and Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 for the challenge scale. Qualitative data came from open-ended student responses analyzed thematically. Frequency, percentage, weighted mean, rank, and thematic analysis were used. Most respondents were satisfied with the examination (88.67%), especially with clear instructions (98.00%), timely administration (97.33%), and successful answer submission (96.00%). Nevertheless, poor internet connection affected 79.00% of respondents, login problems affected 65.33%, and technical-issue anxiety affected 59.67%. Unstable mobile signal (mean = 2.72) and internet connectivity (mean = 2.65) were the only moderate challenges. Students preferred either online or written examination (40.30%) over exclusively online examination (27.00%). The qualitative strand generated eight themes: remote-access convenience, immediate feedback, connectivity, time pressure, system stability, instruction clarity, academic integrity, and constructive feedback. Integration showed that students valued online assessment but wanted flexible options that protected them from technical inequity.

The study concludes that online examinations are acceptable when supported by reliable infrastructure, contingency procedures, and integrity safeguards. It recommends a flexible and resilient assessment protocol.

## INTRODUCTION

Online examinations have become an established component of higher education assessment. Although many institutions adopted online testing rapidly during emergency remote teaching, its continued use should be based on evidence of accessibility, technical reliability, fairness, and student acceptability. Research among distance-learning students found that satisfaction with online examinations is associated with platform quality, institutional support, and the management of remote assessment processes (Aristeidou et al., 2024).

Online examination offers potential advantages for institutions and students. It can reduce travel requirements, paper use, manual checking time, and delays in communicating examination results. It can also allow assessment to be delivered efficiently to students who are geographically dispersed. However, online delivery can also create inequity when students depend on unstable mobile signal, limited data, shared devices, unreliable electricity, or inconsistent access to technical assistance. A well-designed examination may still be experienced as unfair if some students lose time while reconnecting, loading questions, resolving login errors, or submitting answers.

Student satisfaction and assessment preference are related but distinct. A student may evaluate a completed online examination favorably because its instructions were clear and submission succeeded, while still preferring a written examination or flexible choice for future assessments because the technical risk remained stressful. Quantitative data can describe these patterns, but open-ended responses are necessary to explain the experiences behind the ratings. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design therefore supports fuller interpretation by integrating numerical trends with student narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

This study evaluated the online examination experience of all 300 first-year and second-year Bachelor of Science in Criminology students at Merchant Marine Academy of Caraga, Inc., Butuan City, Philippines. It contributes institution-specific evidence by examining positive and negative feedback, ranked challenges, preferred future modality, and students' written suggestions. It particularly addresses the policy question raised by the data: whether general satisfaction with online assessment warrants exclusive online delivery, or whether a flexible online-or-written assessment arrangement more accurately responds to students' actual conditions.

## **OBJECTIVES**

This study explored the feedback, challenges, and preferences of respondents regarding the online examination through the following specific objectives: (1) describe the demographic profile of respondents in terms of age, sex, year level, and enrollment status; (2) determine respondents' positive and negative feedback regarding the online examination; (3) identify and rank the challenges encountered during the online examination; (4) determine respondents' preferred assessment modality for examination; and (5) analyze respondents' open-ended perceptions of the examination and their recommendations for improving future online examinations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently through one survey instrument, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative strand described student feedback, challenges, and preferred assessment modality. The qualitative strand explored students' perceived advantages, difficulties, concerns, and recommendations.

### **Research site**

The study was conducted at the College of Criminal Justice Education, Merchant Marine Academy of Caraga, Inc., Butuan City, Philippines, after the online examination was administered to lower-year Bachelor of Science in Criminology students.

### **Participants**

The study used universal sampling. All 300 first-year and second-year Bachelor of Science in Criminology students who completed the online examination participated: 165 first-year students and 135 second-year students. Because the entire defined examination population was included, findings describe this particular group and examination period rather than a sample-based estimate of a larger population.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher-made questionnaire contained: a) demographic-profile questions; b) 10 dichotomous items on positive feedback; c) 10 dichotomous items on negative feedback; d) 10 four-point Likert-scale items on challenges encountered; e) one item on preferred assessment modality; and f) open-ended questions about positive experiences, suggested improvements, and other comments.

Three experts in criminology education, educational research, and statistics or measurement reviewed the instrument. It obtained a Scale-level Content Validity

Index/Average of 0.93. A pilot test with 30 students who were not included in the final group produced Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 for the 10-item challenge scale, indicating good internal consistency.

### Research ethics protocol

The Institutional Research Committee reviewed and cleared the study before data collection. Respondents reviewed informed-consent information before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could decline without penalty. Responses were treated confidentially and used solely for research purposes. Completed questionnaires were checked, encoded, and securely stored after data cleaning.

### Data collection

Following the online examination, the questionnaire was distributed through the College's online platform. Respondents submitted the survey voluntarily after reviewing the consent information. The researcher checked entries for completeness, encoded responses, validated the dataset, and prepared quantitative and qualitative responses for analysis.

### Data analysis

Frequency and percentage summarized demographic characteristics, positive feedback, negative feedback, and preferred examination modality. Weighted mean and rank described challenges using the following interpretation: 3.26–4.00, major challenge; 2.51–3.25, moderate challenge; 1.76–2.50, minor challenge; and 1.00–1.75, not a challenge. Open-ended responses were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated in the Results and Discussion. All quantitative analyses were descriptive. The study did not perform inferential analysis to establish whether demographic characteristics or technical challenges were significantly associated with satisfaction or preferred modality; all relationships discussed are descriptive patterns only.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Respondent profile

**TABLE 1**

*Respondent profile*

| Profile variable  | Highest-frequency category | <i>f</i> | %     |
|-------------------|----------------------------|----------|-------|
| Age               | 18–19 years                | 195      | 65.00 |
| Sex               | Male                       | 156      | 52.00 |
| Year level        | First year                 | 165      | 55.00 |
| Enrollment status | Regular                    | 281      | 93.67 |

Most respondents were 18–19 years old, male, first-year students, and regularly enrolled. The group therefore represented lower-year criminology students who largely followed the standard curriculum and completed the same online examination. The study did not test whether profile characteristics influenced satisfaction, challenges, or modality preference; no such causal or significant association is claimed.

## Positive feedback

**Table 2**

*Positive Feedback of the Respondents on the Online Examination*

| Statement                                                                    | Yes<br>(f) | Yes<br>(%) | No<br>(f) | No<br>(%) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. The examination was easy to access                                        | 249        | 83.00      | 51        | 17.00     |
| 2. The examination instructions were clear                                   | 294        | 98.00      | 6         | 2.00      |
| 3. The online platform was user-friendly                                     | 260        | 86.67      | 40        | 13.33     |
| 4. The examination started on time                                           | 292        | 97.33      | 8         | 2.67      |
| 5. The time allotted was sufficient                                          | 276        | 92.00      | 24        | 8.00      |
| 6. I was able to submit my answers successfully                              | 288        | 96.00      | 12        | 4.00      |
| 7. Taking the examination online was convenient                              | 238        | 79.33      | 62        | 20.67     |
| 8. The examination questions were properly displayed                         | 263        | 87.67      | 37        | 12.33     |
| 9. The examination reduced paper consumption and helped save the environment | 281        | 93.67      | 19        | 6.33      |
| 10. Overall, I was satisfied with the online examination                     | 266        | 88.67      | 34        | 11.33     |

Positive feedback was high across all indicators. Clear instructions received the strongest endorsement (98.00%), followed by on-time examination administration (97.33%) and successful submission of answers (96.00%). Overall, 88.67% of respondents were satisfied. These results indicate that examination communication, schedule management, question display, and answer-submission procedures operated effectively for most students.

Convenience and ease of access received the lowest positive ratings, at 79.33% and 83.00%, respectively, despite still being endorsed by a majority. This finding foreshadowed the connectivity problem shown in subsequent tables: students generally valued the online format, but its practical accessibility varied. High satisfaction therefore reflects the quality of the examination process for most students, not universal equality of technical conditions.

## Negative feedback

**Table 3**

*Negative Feedback of the Respondents on the Online Examination*

| Statement                                           | Yes<br>(f) | Yes<br>(%) | No<br>(f) | No<br>(%) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Poor internet connection affected my examination | 237        | 79.00      | 63        | 21.00     |
| 2. The online platform became slow or lagged        | 174        | 58.00      | 126       | 42.00     |
| 3. I encountered login or access problems           | 196        | 65.33      | 104       | 34.67     |
| 4. Some examination questions did not load properly | 94         | 31.33      | 206       | 68.67     |

|                                                              |     |       |     |       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|-------|
| 5. I experienced sudden disconnection during the examination | 168 | 56.00 | 132 | 44.00 |
| 6. The allotted time was insufficient                        | 124 | 41.33 | 176 | 58.67 |
| 7. I experienced technical problems with my device           | 175 | 58.33 | 125 | 41.67 |
| 8. I felt anxious because of technical issues                | 179 | 59.67 | 121 | 40.33 |
| 9. I preferred answering on paper rather than online         | 157 | 52.33 | 143 | 47.67 |
| 10. Overall, I was not satisfied with the online examination | 91  | 30.33 | 209 | 69.67 |

Poor internet connection was the most common negative experience, reported by 79.00% of respondents. Login or access problems followed at 65.33%, while 59.67% experienced technical anxiety. More than half experienced lag, sudden disconnection, device problems, or a preference for paper-based examination. These results show that the principal limitations of online assessment were not primarily academic difficulty or unclear directions, but infrastructure, access, and the emotional burden of possible technical failure.

The overall dissatisfaction result should be interpreted with care. Only 30.33% reported being generally dissatisfied, while 88.67% reported satisfaction in Table 5. These figures reveal that many respondents were able to complete and appreciate the examination despite technical disruption. At the same time, 52.33% stated that they preferred answering on paper rather than online. Satisfaction and preference thus represent different aspects of the same experience: students may approve of the administration of a particular online examination while preferring a less technology-dependent option for future high-stakes testing.

## Challenges encountered

**Table 4**

*Challenges Encountered by the Respondents During the Online Examination*

| Questions/Items                                  | Weighted mean | Verbal description     | Rank |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------|------|
| 1. Lack of stable mobile signal                  | 2.72          | Moderate challenge     | 1    |
| 2. Internet connectivity                         | 2.65          | Moderate challenge     | 2    |
| 3. Time pressure                                 | 2.47          | Minor challenge        | 3    |
| 4. Slow loading of examination                   | 2.44          | Minor challenge        | 4    |
| 5. Difficulty logging in                         | 2.43          | Minor challenge        | 5    |
| 6. Device problems (laptop/phone)                | 2.33          | Minor challenge        | 6    |
| 7. Home environment/distractions                 | 2.32          | Minor challenge        | 7    |
| 8. Power interruption                            | 2.28          | Minor challenge        | 8    |
| 9. Limited digital skills                        | 2.20          | Minor challenge        | 9    |
| 10. Difficulty understanding online instructions | 1.95          | Minor challenge        | 10   |
| <b>Overall weighted mean</b>                     | <b>2.38</b>   | <b>Minor challenge</b> |      |

*Scale: 3.26–4.00, major challenge; 2.51–3.25, moderate challenge; 1.76–2.50, minor challenge; 1.00–1.75, not a challenge.*

The overall challenge rating was a minor challenge (mean = 2.38), but this overall mean should not mask the two moderate challenges: unstable mobile signal (mean = 2.72) and internet connectivity (mean = 2.65). The ranking converges with Table 6, in which poor connection was the most frequently reported negative

experience. Thus, connection quality was the primary structural constraint on otherwise effective online examination delivery.

Difficulty understanding instructions ranked last (mean = 1.95), confirming the exceptionally strong instruction-clarity result in Table 5. This pattern shows that student difficulty was not primarily caused by poor examination directions. Institutional interventions should therefore prioritize network reliability, access support, contingency systems, and technical response over merely adding more written instruction.

## Preferred examination modality

**Table 5**

*Students' Preferred Examination Modality*

| Assessment modality                                   | Frequency  | Percentage    | Rank |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------|------|
| 1. Fully online examination                           | 81         | 27.00         | 3    |
| 2. Traditional written (paper-and-pencil) examination | 98         | 32.70         | 2    |
| 3. Either online or written examination               | 121        | 40.30         | 1    |
| <b>Total</b>                                          | <b>300</b> | <b>100.00</b> |      |

The flexible online-or-written option was preferred by the largest group (40.30%), followed by written examination (32.70%). Fully online examination was preferred by only 27.00%. Together, written or flexible options were preferred by 73.00% of respondents. This finding supports the development of a flexible assessment policy rather than an exclusively online policy.

The result does not show that students rejected online examination. Rather, it shows that they preferred choice when weighing online assessment's convenience against connection instability, access difficulty, anxiety, and fairness concerns. A student-responsive system should allow the online format to remain available while providing a written or equivalent alternative for students who cannot reliably access digital examination systems.

## Qualitative findings

### Convenience and comfort of remote access

Students described online examination as convenient because it reduced travel time and transportation expenses and allowed them to take the test from a familiar environment. They also associated online assessment with comfort, reduced pressure associated with travelling to campus, and lower paper consumption. This theme converges with the positive ratings for convenience (79.33%), ease of access (83.00%), and reduced paper consumption (93.67%).

The qualitative accounts clarify why students did not reject online assessment even when they experienced technical problems. For many students, remote access was a meaningful advantage. The policy implication is not to remove online assessment, but to retain it as a viable option while avoiding a one-modality requirement that disadvantages those with limited connectivity.

### **Immediate feedback and transparency**

Students valued prompt release of scores after submission. They described immediate feedback as a way to know their standing, reduce uncertainty, and avoid the waiting time often associated with manual checking. This theme supports the high rate of successful answer submission (96.00%) and the high overall satisfaction rating (88.67%).

Immediate feedback can strengthen perceived examination transparency when students trust that scores were recorded and released correctly. Future online examinations should preserve this strength by providing confirmation of successful submission, clear score-release policies, and a process for students to report suspected technical or scoring errors.

### **Internet and connectivity as the central pain point**

Unstable internet connection, weak mobile signal, and dependence on mobile data were the dominant problems in student narratives. Students described interruptions, lagging, delayed page loading, difficulty opening the examination, and fear that an unfinished test would not be submitted. This theme converges directly with the 79.00% reporting poor internet connection, the 65.33% reporting login or access problems, and the two moderate challenge ratings for unstable mobile signal and internet connectivity.

Connectivity was the clearest point of integration across quantitative and qualitative findings. It was not a marginal inconvenience but the core condition shaping whether students could access the benefits of online assessment. The College should therefore establish technical contingency procedures, campus access options, help-desk support, and flexible modality arrangements for students with documented connection limitations.

### **Time pressure compounded by technical delay**

Students explained that time pressure became more serious when the system lagged, pages loaded slowly, the connection dropped, or they needed to log in again. The issue was not simply that the allocated time was short; it was that technical disruption consumed time meant for answering examination questions. This theme complements the 41.33% who reported insufficient time, the 56.00% who experienced sudden disconnection, and the third-ranked challenge of time pressure (mean = 2.47).

A technically fair online examination must distinguish time spent answering from time lost to system disruption. Faculty should use reasonable, documented contingencies, such as a defined grace period, monitored re-entry, controlled pause-and-resume functions where technically feasible, and a technical-incident reporting process. These measures can reduce anxiety without compromising examination integrity.

### **System stability and usability**

Students recommended reducing platform crashes, loading delays, and login difficulty. Although 86.67% found the platform user-friendly and 87.67% said questions were properly displayed, the qualitative data show that usability is not a binary condition. A platform can be easy to understand when it functions yet still be unreliable under weak connections or high demand.

This theme expands the quantitative findings by showing that system performance includes stability, speed, recovery from error, and ease of re-entry. The College should perform pre-examination load testing, streamline the login process, ensure browser and device compatibility, and offer a short practice examination so students can identify access problems before a high-stakes test.

### **Clarity of instructions**

Quantitatively, instruction clarity was the strongest positive feature, endorsed by 98.00% of respondents. Qualitatively, some students still requested more detailed instructions, particularly about navigation, examination rules, submission steps, and what to do when connection or login problems occur. This is partial convergence rather than a contradiction: instructions were clear for most respondents, while a smaller group needed additional technical and contingency guidance.

The finding suggests that clear content instructions are not enough. Future guidance should include a pre-examination orientation, a visual step-by-step guide, technical requirements, a practice link, a statement of permitted and prohibited actions, and emergency procedures for disconnection or accidental submission.

### **Academic integrity concerns**

A smaller but meaningful group raised concerns about cheating and perceived unfairness in unrestricted online examination settings. Students worried that honest examinees could be disadvantaged if others accessed unauthorized materials or assistance. This theme was not directly measured in the quantitative strand, making it a unique qualitative contribution.

Academic integrity concerns require assessment design rather than surveillance alone. Faculty can reduce opportunities for simple answer sharing through randomized item order, multiple question versions, question banks, time-controlled availability, open-book application questions where appropriate, and clear integrity expectations. If remote proctoring is considered, the College should also assess privacy, cost, bandwidth, accessibility, and due-process implications before adoption.

### **Gratitude and constructive feedback**

Many students expressed appreciation for faculty efforts, the convenience of the examination, and the opportunity to provide feedback. Their comments combined satisfaction with practical suggestions for stronger internet support, better platform stability, more preparation, longer or more flexible time arrangements, and fairer monitoring.

This theme reinforces the overall positive orientation found quantitatively. Students' critiques were not simple rejection of online assessment; they were constructive requests for an assessment system that retains convenience while becoming more stable, equitable, and transparent. Institutional feedback mechanisms should therefore be maintained after each major assessment period.

### **Integrated discussion**

The quantitative and qualitative strands converge on a balanced conclusion. Students valued online examination for convenience, reduced paper use, prompt feedback, clear instructions, timely administration, and successful submission. At the same time, the same students repeatedly identified weak connectivity and mobile signal as the most significant impediments to a fair online experience. The quantitative ranking of connectivity as the leading challenge was explained by qualitative descriptions of technical delay, lost examination time, fear of failed submission, and anxiety.

The most important integrated finding is the distinction between satisfaction and future modality preference. While 88.67% were satisfied with the completed online examination, 73.00% preferred either a written examination or a choice between online and written format for the examination. This is not inconsistent. Satisfaction reflects evaluation of the completed activity, whereas future preference reflects a forward-looking assessment of risk, comfort, access, and fairness. The results indicate that online examination can be retained as a valuable modality, but exclusive online delivery does not best reflect the needs of the full respondent population.

The study does not establish that connectivity caused lower satisfaction or preference for written examination because inferential association testing was not conducted. The evidence does, however, justify a practical policy response: institutions should not treat high overall satisfaction as evidence that all students have equal technological access. Reliable infrastructure, clear contingency procedures, flexible alternatives, and integrity-centered assessment design are necessary conditions for equitable online examination.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Online examinations were generally satisfactory for the 300 lower-year Bachelor of Science in Criminology students at Merchant Marine Academy of Caraga, Inc. Clear instructions, on-time administration, successful submission, adequate examination time, and reduced paper use were the strongest reported features. The study's central contribution is the identification of a meaningful distinction between satisfaction with the completed online examination and preference for future examination modality. Although 88.67% of respondents were satisfied, only 27.00% preferred fully online examination; 73.00% preferred either a written examination or a flexible online-or-written option. Quantitative and qualitative findings converge in identifying unstable mobile signal and internet

connectivity as the principal barriers, with associated login difficulty, lag, sudden disconnection, technical anxiety, and time pressure. Online examination is therefore an effective and acceptable assessment option, but not a universally equitable stand-alone option in a setting where technological access remains uneven. The findings support a flexible, resilient, and integrity-centered assessment policy that preserves online examination's efficiency while ensuring students have workable alternatives when technical barriers threaten fair participation.

## TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The study's translational output is the Flexible and Resilient Online Assessment Protocol for the College of Criminal Justice Education. The protocol will preserve online examination's strengths—clear instructions, timely delivery, rapid feedback, and reduced paper use—while addressing technical inequity and integrity concerns. Before each online examination, faculty will provide a technical orientation that includes a platform-login guide, browser and device requirements, a short practice access period, examination rules, support contacts, and a step-by-step procedure for login failure, disconnection, power interruption, accidental submission, and re-entry.

The College will establish a flexible assessment policy under which students with documented signal, device, power, or access limitations may complete an approved written examination or equivalent alternative arrangement. For online delivery, faculty will use reasonable, documented contingencies, including defined grace periods, monitored re-entry, incident logs, and pause-and-resume features where the platform supports them. The College will coordinate with the institutional information technology unit to conduct platform load testing, improve connection reliability, operate an examination-day technical help desk, and identify campus-based access points for students whose home internet is inadequate.

To protect fairness, online examination design will use randomized item order, question banks, multiple examination versions, time-controlled access, clear academic-integrity rules, and application-focused questions. The protocol will be reviewed after every major assessment period through student feedback, faculty feedback, technical-incident records, completion data, and integrity reports. Future comparative research will include upper-year students who take paper-and-pencil examinations and will test whether connection quality, device access, year level, digital skills, satisfaction, and modality preference are significantly associated.

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