

# Opinion on the European Baccalaureate in light of the Coronavirus crisis

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## Introduction

On the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, the Board of Governors will reconvene through video conference to decide, among other things, on measures to take for the 2019-2020 European Baccalaureate session to ensure its fairness and integrity, after suspending classes *in situ* in March of 2020 until the Coronavirus crisis abates.

The following document has been drafted by the CoSup representatives for the European Schools in close consultation with students via surveys, forms and debriefing through social media platforms. It describes the opinion of the students and thus that of the CoSup representatives on how to deal with this matter.

Generally, the issue is that the European Schools system is based on a fragile compromise between the European institutions and the 27 delegations of the member states, meaning that the European Baccalaureate is very bureaucratically rigid. Given the current conditions however, all political systems must comprehend the extraordinary situation, calling upon extraordinary measures. Hence, we are hereby pleading the European Baccalaureate's usual rigidity to be foregone in favour of possible solutions ensuring its longstanding commitment to its principles.

The proposed solutions are to be split into two categories. Either for the European Baccalaureate (hereinafter referred to as the BAC) for the 2019-2020 session to be cancelled and grades given through some other non-conventional formula or for structural adjustments to be made.

These structural adjustments are meant to be understood in the following way: adjustments to the BAC, essentially making it easier. Certain structural adjustments have already been voiced by some Parents' Associations, including that of the EEB1 APEEE. These effectively suggest that a) questions, that have not been covered due to Coronavirus, are taken out now from both the written and oral exams, b) a possibility of adapting the marking criteria and instructions in light of the crisis is considered, c) final results are to be closely monitored, and if an anomaly is found, scores ought to be adjusted and d) communication to tertiary institutions by the European Schools leadership is to be ensured, to inform them of the potential disadvantages, the students may have had faced in their evaluation<sup>1</sup>.

In the opinion of students of the 13 European Schools, the option to cancel is favoured over the option to make the European Baccalaureate easier. It is our opinion that by cancelling the BAC, the best outcome is achieved in terms of curbing disadvantage to students, integrity of the exam and all-around fairness, given the difficult situation that the European Schools face. The following three chapters set out and justify the reasons for cancelling the BAC: An analysis of the fundamental effectiveness of remote learning vis-à-vis face-to-face learning, the textual and numerical feedback from ES students supported by all schools' data, and deductions based on the CoSup remote learning survey that was conducted across all 13 European Schools and received more than 2900 replies.

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<sup>1</sup> Other solutions include postponing the BAC, non-harmonized BAC, no written and only orals, a Project-based BAC, only one exam (France), multiple choice BAC, and choosing out of a number of questions for the BAC.

## Effectiveness of Remote Learning vis-à-vis Physical Learning

*“With the growing popularity in e-learning, it occurred to me that the e should mean more than electronic. If we are going to call it e-learning, shouldn't it be effective, efficient, and engaging?”* says M. David Merrill, instructional effectiveness consultant and professor emeritus at Utah State University.

This viewpoint is echoed by many educators and experts in education around the world. Schooling, by its definition, is a web of knowledge, tools and attitudes that are about much more than learning a topic or the syllabus itself. Socialization, creativity, the fostering of a democratic self-image or in the case of the European Schools, nurturing of a European identity all make up the educational systems.

In its core, remote learning diverges significantly from the convention classroom. In terms of acquiring knowledge, it is not only about definitions, pop quizzes or understanding of a specific matter, but also development of key competencies in a physical classroom such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, debating skills and mutual cooperation, in addition to the practical acquisition of supra-subject real-life skills, such as those that can be used in the workplace, or the competencies of lifelong learning, and the tools that allow one to use knowledge rather than to just have it, all which of course also help students at the European Baccalaureate examination. While it is theoretically possible to foster a digital culture, that promotes the parallel improvement of the aforementioned elements of both the standard syllabus and the ‘hidden curriculum’, it has come to our attention that this new system is yet to be further amended to fulfil them and subsequently reach the required standards of the BAC.

Mainly due to the short notice to educators and students to implement the new form of education, the vast majority of the student body of the European Schools have voiced a concern that the change in approach has demanded more time to accustom, and thus less time was available for to the acquisition of the learning material. It is under these conditions that the European Baccalaureate’s future must be decided.

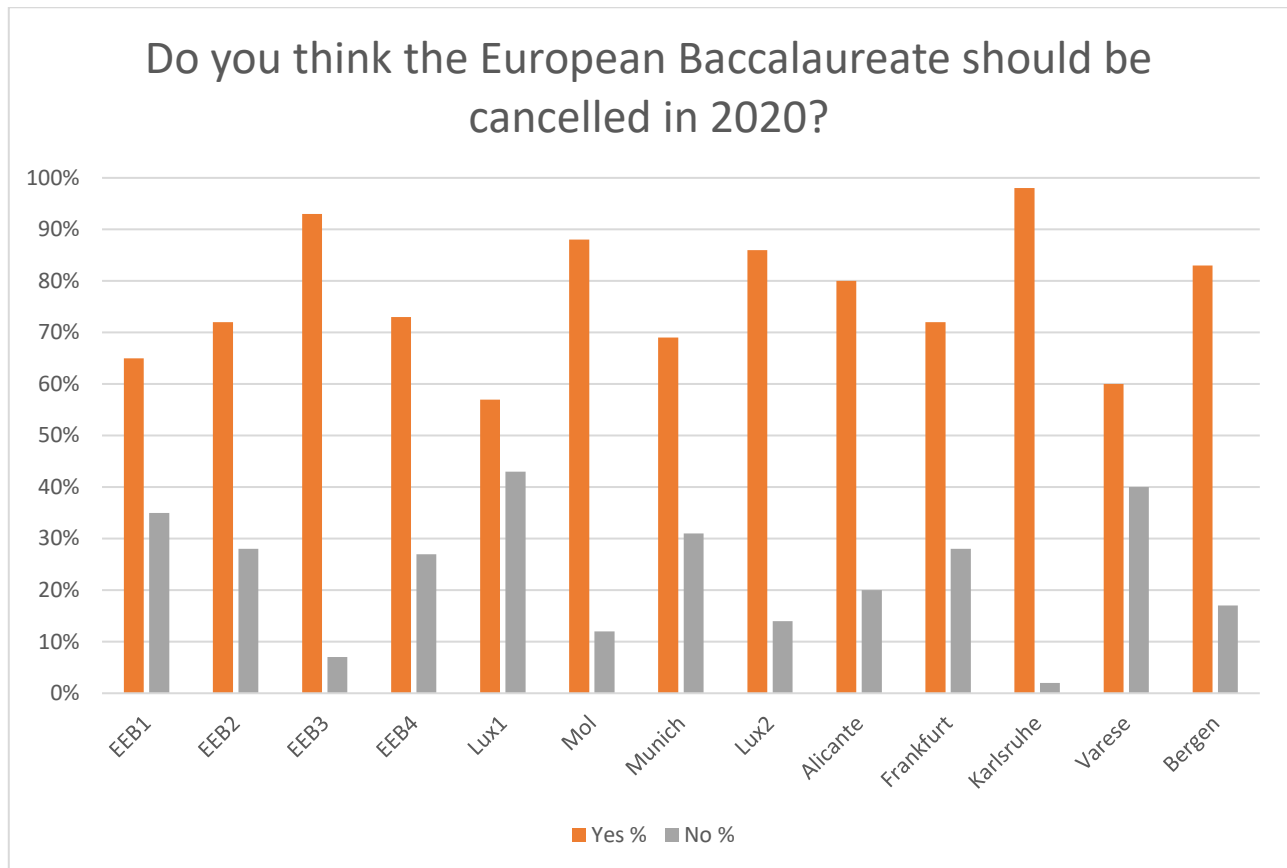
## Feedback from Students

Through a poll conducted by the CdE of EEB1, an overwhelming majority of S7 students wish for their BAC to be cancelled, because they do not feel they remote learning prepared them enough or do not feel mentally ready for it. A survey with a sample size of 165 students found that 65% want their BACs cancelled, while 35% favour structural adjustments. As regards to the grades, a survey with a sample size of 215 has found that 42% favour the PreBac grade to weight more, and 58% favour the A grade in the same aspect. Other schools show similar patterns of voting, with all in a majority favour for cancelling the BAC, for example EEB4 where from 182 S7 students 73% want to cancel the BAC, EEB2 with a sample size of 133 where 72% percent opted for cancelling, and EEB3 where 93% of 129 S7 students voted to annul the BAC.

Do you think the European Baccalaureate should be cancelled in 2020?

School	Sample	Yes %	No %	Yes N	No N
EEB1	165	65%	35%	107	58
EEB2	133	72%	28%	96	37
EEB3	129	93%	7%	120	9
EEB4	182	73%	27%	133	49
Lux1	150	57%	43%	85	65
Mol	25	88%	12%	22	3
Munich	123	69%	31%	80	36
Lux2	21	86%	14%	18	3
Alicante	82	80%	20%	66	16
Frankfurt	90	72%	28%	65	25
Karlsruhe	55	98%	2%	54	1

Varese	110	60%	40%	66	44
Bergen	36	83%	17%	30	6



After the CoSup consulted with the CoSeea, it was found that an overwhelming majority in the Accredited (Type 2 and Type 3) European Schools also wish for their BACs to be cancelled.

Current suggestions for the grade distribution include A) 40% of C mark from PreBac and 60% from A grade, 50-50 or 60-40 for the same distribution respectively B) 30% S6 grades with 30% PreBac and 40% A mark (or 20-40-40), using assignments done at home as evaluations for the A mark and C) the possibility to repeat the 2019-2020 year or take the BAC exam in September 2020.

These votes were accompanied by personal feedback, which will now be described, and the opinion of the CoSup after its extraordinary meeting that took place on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. It is with regards to the following that European School students (and thus the CoSup representatives) are of the opinion that the European Baccalaureate should be cancelled, and the grade system to be 40% of C mark from PreBac and 60% from A grade, and that S7 students should be given the opportunity to repeat the year without any penalties or take the exam in September 2020.

- With regards to uncertainty over the Coronavirus crisis, it is uncertain whether holding physical examinations would be possible, or safe in terms of the risk of infection,
- With regards to the current ineffectiveness of online learning and short time span to correctly implement it with best practices and as fully adapted substitute, students have lost almost the entire second half of their S7 year, thus putting them at a disadvantage,

- With regards to unequal teaching practices across classes during the crisis, meaning that some students have too heavy of a workload and cannot cope, while others have no work and are not learning enough, some are doing videoconferences while others are not (e.g. some do not have microphones, web cameras, or even laptops), etc., it would be an unequal BAC session,
- With regards to the lack of harmonization in the curriculum, i.e. that different classes do different topics at different times, it would be difficult to make the necessary structural adjustment for the BAC to be fair,
- With regards to the fact that the PreBac and A grades already offer a viable way of evaluating students,
- With regards to the cancelling of A levels, French Baccalauréat, GCSEs and IB exams (all done with careful consideration after weighing the facts, and all having developed a fair grading system) and this making it unfair on European School students if the BAC were held, as they would be at a disadvantage because they will have to take exams that they are unprepared for, leading to potentially lower grades and making it harder to achieve University offers vis-à-vis other students,
- With regards to talk of continued lockdown until May in Belgium and other countries, and to the Central Office's latest decision to suspend the classes *in situ* up until the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2020, meaning that students will have spent too little or no time physically learning from March up until their BACs and thus leaving them unprepared,
- With regards to the trauma, stress and complications put on all students due to the Coronavirus and above that severe trauma to a minority of students (e.g. death of a loved one), meaning that students would be inherently disadvantaged when taking the BAC,
- With regards to the wellbeing of the students that has seen a rapid deterioration since the onset of the lockdown due to the crisis, insofar as,
  - Students are moving less, staying more at home. This means their physical health slowly deteriorates. Students are attempting to act on this by going in parcs to run and cycle, but it is no match for prior conditions.
  - Students are staying longer in front of screens due to the extended and only use of remote learning. Some complain of frequent headaches and tiredness. They also complain of tiredness of the eye and fear a loss of quality of their eyesight.
  - The lack of interaction with friends between hours and in brakes is also affecting students. They only see their family and their screens.
  - While students are able to sleep more, which naturally results in improved mental health, they report not having a structured day with structured hours, and thus are more prone to reduced skill acquisition capabilities.
- With regards to the inherent ineffectiveness of remote learning as described in the second part of this opinion document, and more specifically due to the short time span to implement it, meaning that online learning is currently less effective, less interactive (e.g. some are missing the support of the board), has less communication with teachers and makes it harder to get help from them, meaning students do not understand every topic and thus are at a disadvantage,
- With regards to the very real possibility that hard-hit countries like Spain and Italy might not be recovered enough to take exams yet, in compliance with Annex X, Paragraph 6 of the 2015-05-D-12-en-18 Document,

- With regards to the fact that online BACs would not be possible, since not all students have good internet connections, their own computers and good environments, therefore it is not possible ensure fairness, and also cannot prevent cheating,
- With regards to the inherent difficulty in making structural adjustments to the BAC, insofar as making sure the exam is actually easier, and that opening up Pandora's box in terms of legal appeals, possible inequalities, discrimination and disadvantage and loss of integrity of the BAC,
- With regards to socioeconomic inequality within the European Schools (the European Institutions offer different contracts, different salaries now, and then there is the Cat.1 / Cat.2 / Cat.3 divide, and the 2004 EU expansion, all which made the European Schools transition from a socioeconomically homogenous schooling system to a heterogeneous one), meaning that not all students have access to good internet connections, good computers and good environments, means that a minority of students would be put at a disadvantage. At EEB1, for example, the APEEE has had to start a solidarity project offering discounted laptops on a 12-month loan,
- With regards to the CoSup remote learning survey that has gathered over 2900 responses from the 13 European Schools, and has proven that online learning has not yet been able to reach its full potential and effectively provide an alternative to physical learning, especially for the S7 in preparation for their BACs,

Thus, it is with regards to the above that ES students and the CoSup are of the opinion that the European Baccalaureate should be cancelled, and the grade system to be 40% of C mark from PreBac and 60% from A grade. It is further proposed that students who want to retake the S7 year or take the exams in September 2020 without any penalties should be allowed to do so (e.g. those who would otherwise have a failing grade or planned on the BAC to increase their averages), in order that the fairness is ensured to all students.

## CoSup Remote Learning Survey Analysis

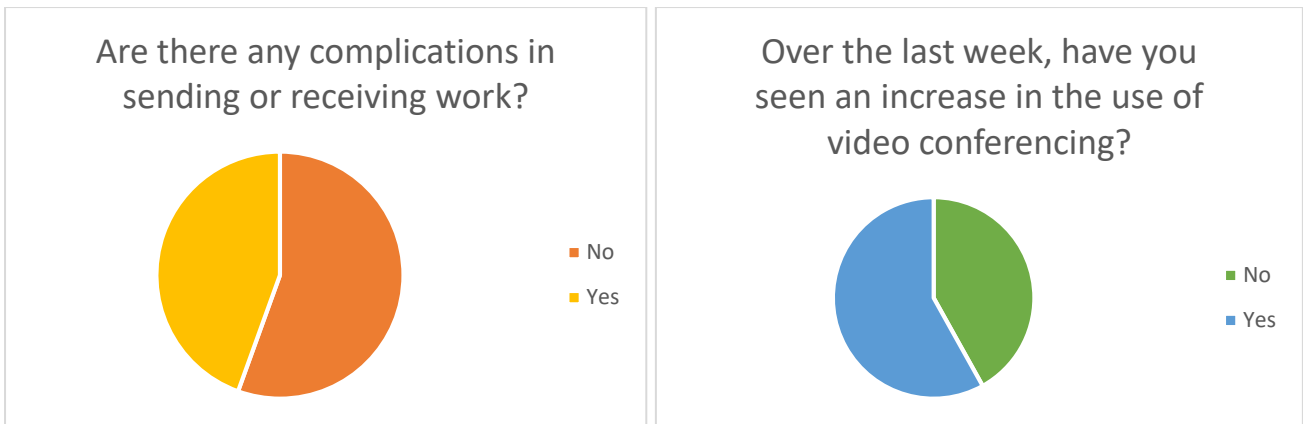
Statistics collected over a period of roughly two weeks (22<sup>nd</sup> of March until the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2020) from over 2900 students across the 13 European Schools support the personal feedback of students. EEB1 had 544 participants, and all schools managed to gather a representative sample of students from all years and most sections, and there seem to be no statistical outliers in most categories from school to school<sup>2</sup>.

While after some initial hurdles, the remote learning system employed by the European Schools through Office365 has managed to adapt as feedback took its effect, the data suggests that the system is currently less effective than conventional teaching practices, that it affects the wellbeing and learning quality of students negatively, and that it is still not being fully put to use. Considering it is so close to the start of the 2019-2020 BAC session, these worries need to be taken very seriously.

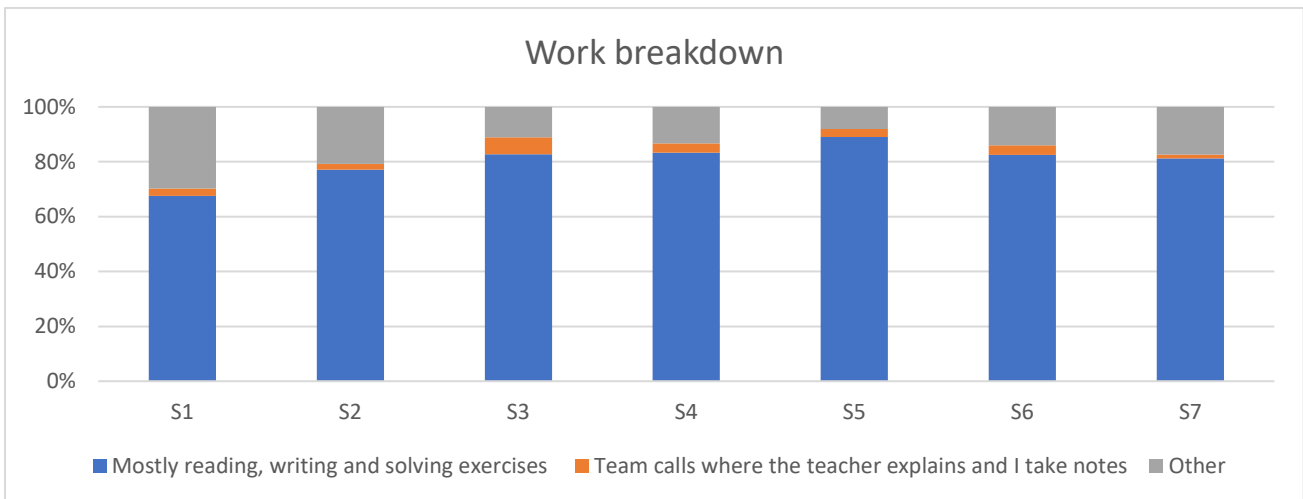
The analysis provided shows that videoconferencing increased in the second week of remote learning, with 58% of all European School students reporting so, and that there are complications in receiving-sending work in 44% of cases, and thus proves that the digital tools provided to the stakeholders of the European Schools community more-or-less work. The problem seems to be, however, that there was no time to effectively get accustomed to this system, even further worsened by the worrying report of 70% of S7 students reporting 'too heavy workloads' from their teachers.

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<sup>2</sup> The graphs show the data of all schools.

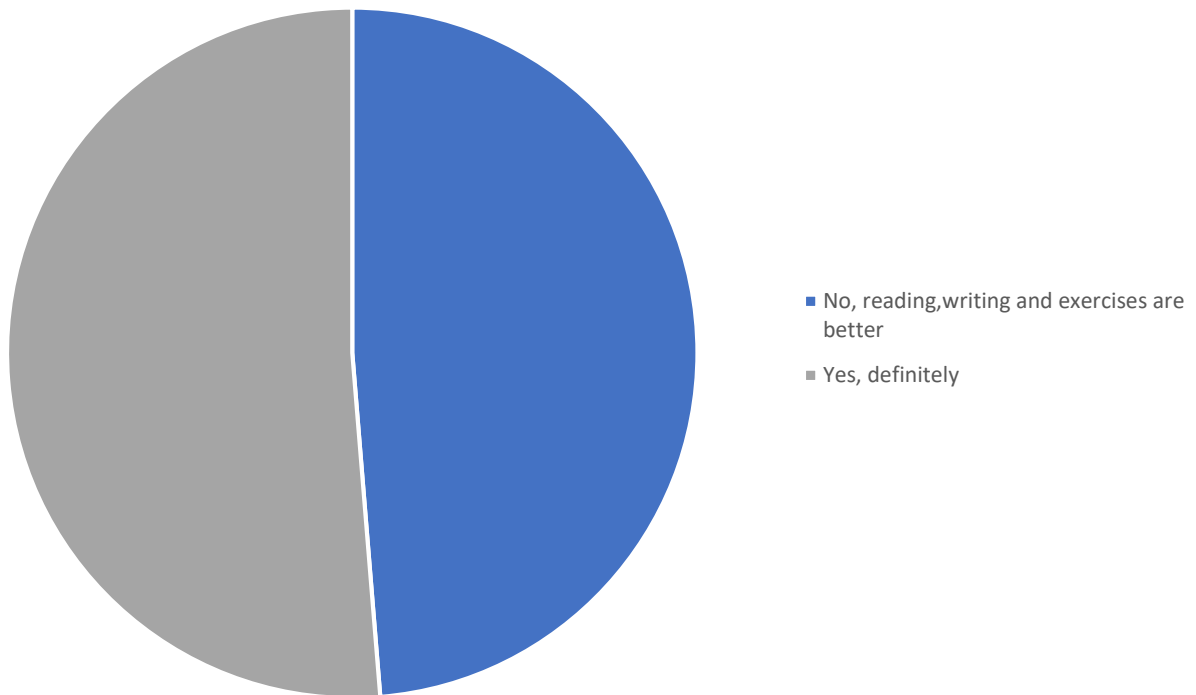


Firstly, the work breakdown analysis suggests that most work is non-interactive. This means that indeed, students are left on their own to figure out what is expected of them and lack the guidance that physical learning in a classroom with a teacher would give.



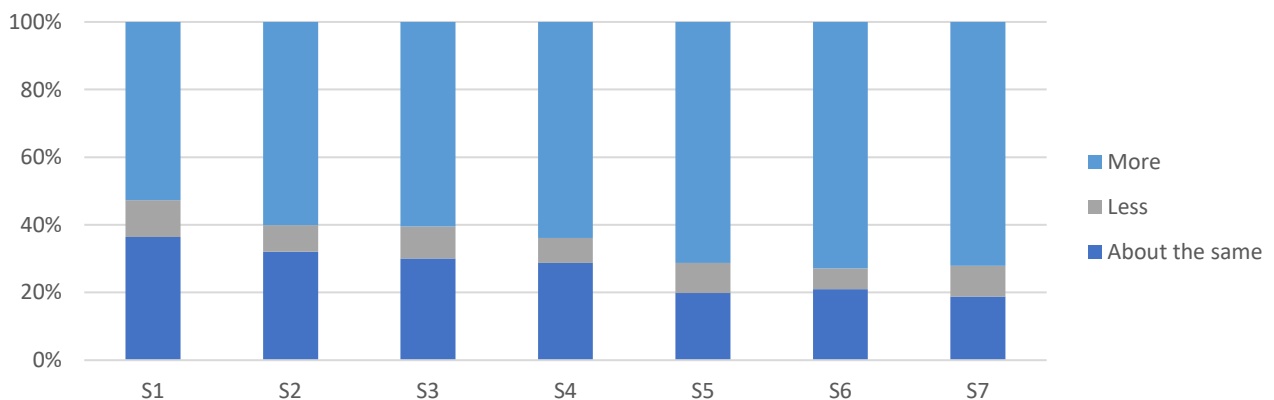
Students have reported this issue, and as it is shown in the increase of videoconferencing, it had its effect, yet when asked in the second week, students still felt that online learning was more of a “robotized” rather than engaged learning. Note that S7 have the lowest share of videocalls. Thus, the conclusion is that the classes still are not interactive enough for most: 51% wish for more videoconferencing in general, and 55% of S7s specifically.

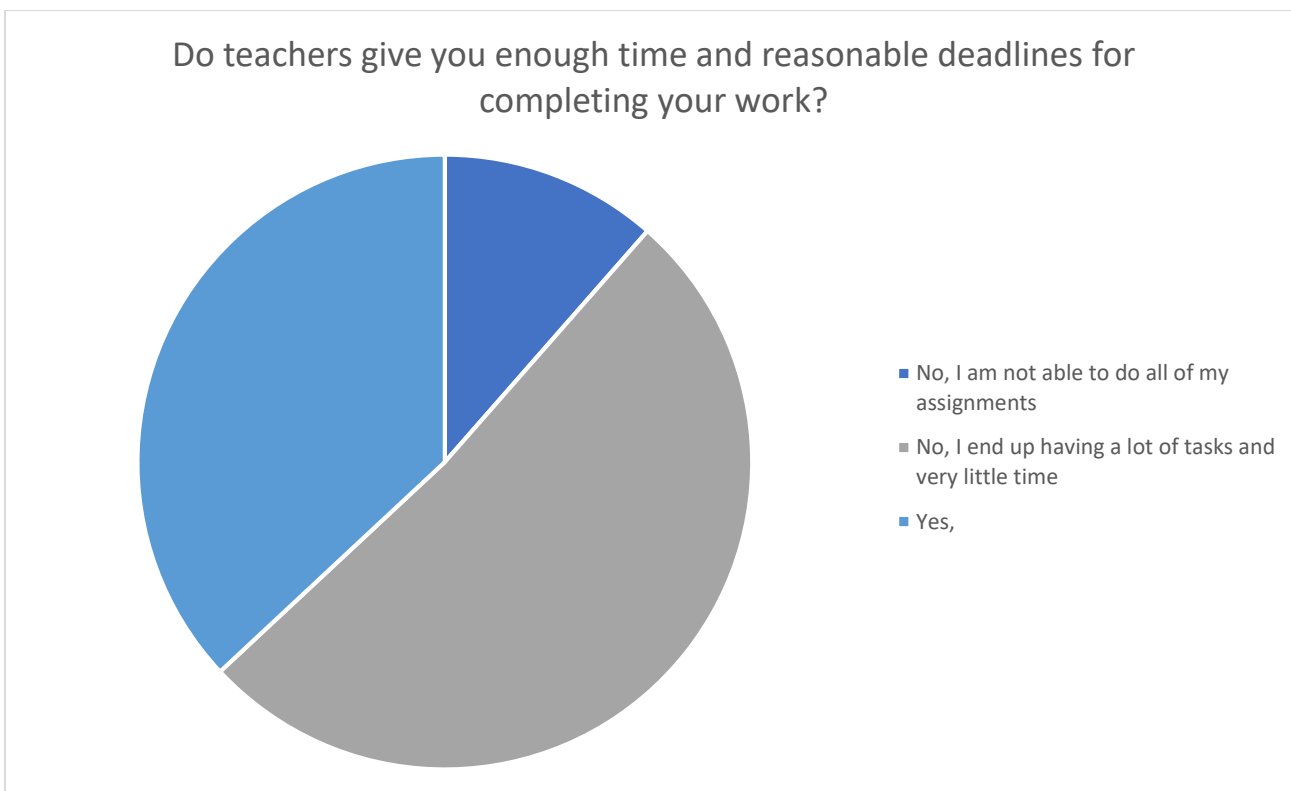
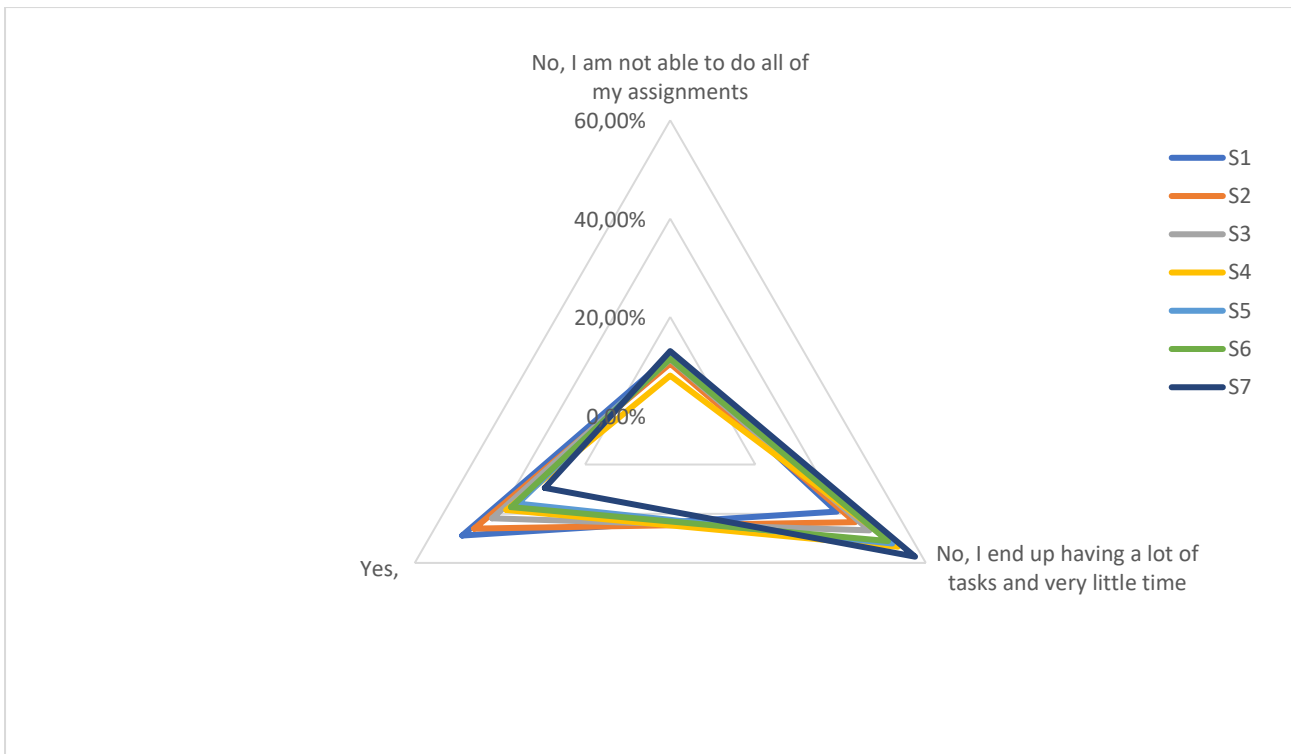
### Would you like to have more interactive Classes (eg. more videocalls)?



Another issue is that teaching staff are trying to compensate for the loss of physical contact in the classroom, especially in S7 in preparation for the BAC, and thus are giving too heavy workloads. However, they seem to bear no effect on the quality of learning, only the amount. This is especially an issue in S7, where an overwhelming majority end up having lots of tasks and very little time.

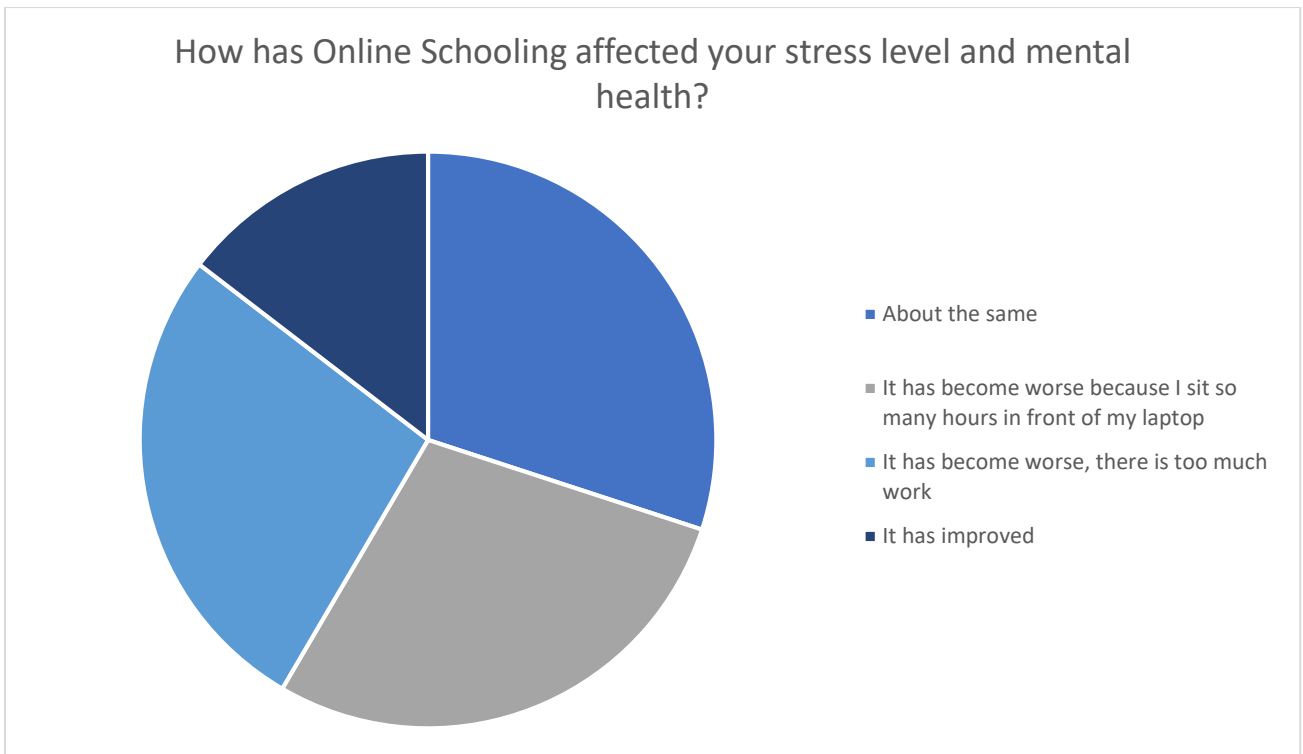
### How much school work are you doing compared to a normal school day?



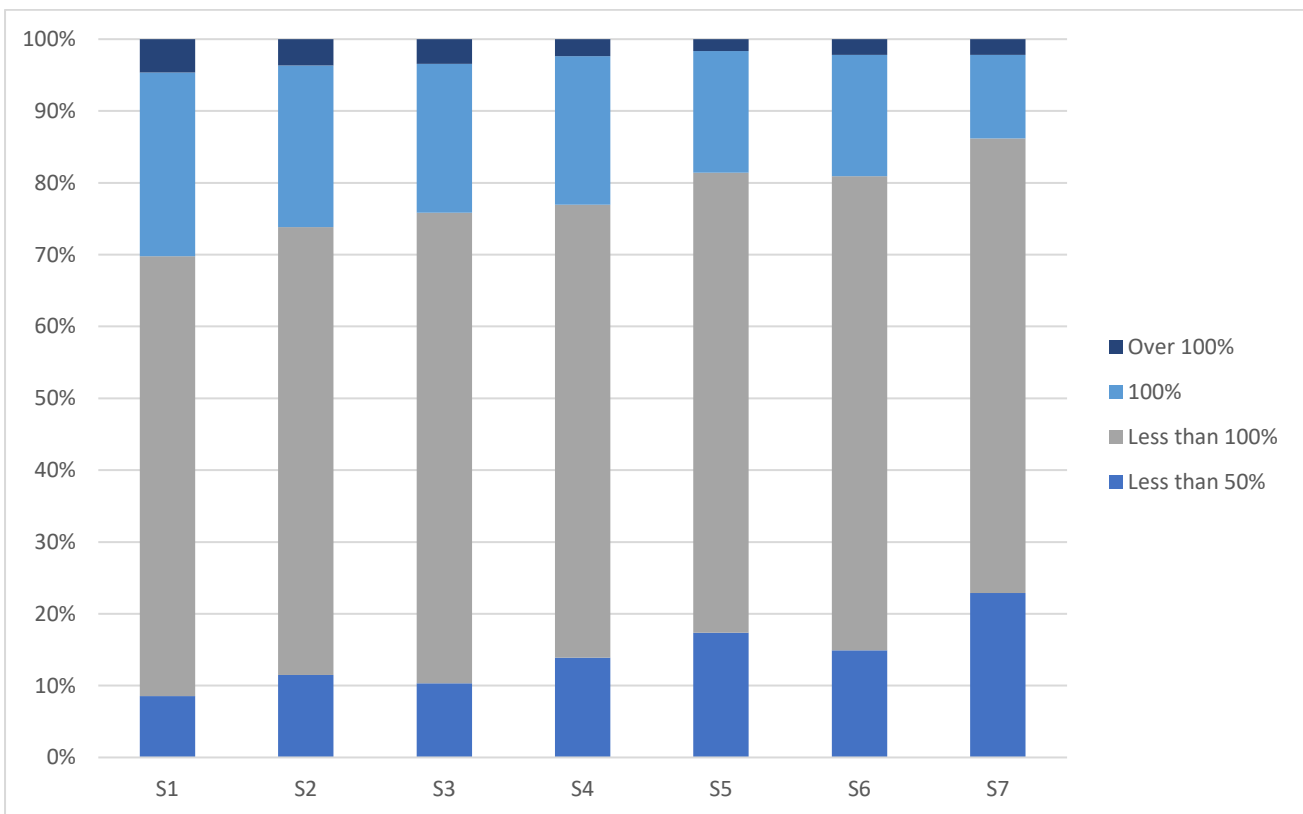


This is a factor in students' mental health, which as also self-reported through personal feedback, seems to be getting worse. Although 15% of all ES students report an improvement in their mental health, the data below clearly show how the students' wellbeing has indeed been compromised either by the ongoing crisis or the sole use of remote learning, without direct social interactions, as a solution, and thus supports the students' feedback that taking the BAC now would put them at a disadvantage.

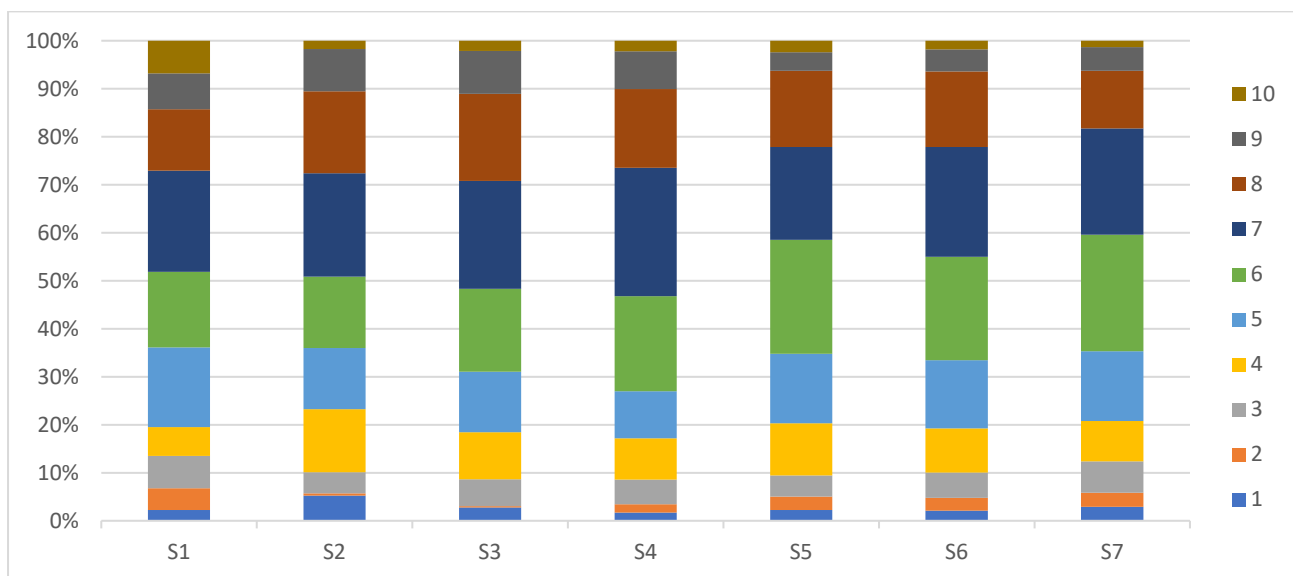




It is also important to mention that the quality of learning as a whole has gravely deteriorated over the past three weeks of isolation, according to the survey. There is lots of work, but students simply cannot absorb the information that would be required for taking the BAC, especially in S7, with most students reporting learning less than 100%. It is precisely the S7 who report a decreased learning experience the most.



When asked to rate the online learning system, the overall average came to be 6.1 based on the feedback of these 2914 students, with most rating the solution a 6 or 7.



## Conclusion

While remote learning during these difficult times is undoubtedly the best solution, there is still room for improvement in reaching the effectiveness of physical learning. On that note, we would like to express our gratitude to the all-round efforts of the ES' administrations, as well as the teachers' dedication to help us meet the exam criteria. Unfortunately, the short notice has forced us to dive into challenging currents right away, without sufficient time to accustom. This, without further doubt, has proven to create non negligible obstruction in the S7 students' preparation for the European Baccalaureate session of 2019-2020. While digital learning can be used very well now (and even more so in the future) for giving out reading tasks, quizzes or writing assignments, and for watching movies and in general substituting "cop-out" class time that does not require physical presence, it is currently not being implemented effectively enough and to prepare the S7 students for the BAC. With enough time and training for the best employment of digital tools, it can eventually become an excellent mean of teaching, but given the current conditions and short notice of implementing the system, this was not the case for the S7s of the European Schools in the 2019-2020 BAC session.

Finally, based on an in-depth analysis of how inherently effective remote learning is, the personal feedback of European School students, and the system wide CoSup remote learning survey fully supporting the feedback of students, it is the opinion of ES students and thus of the CoSup representatives that the European Baccalaureate session for 2019-2020 should be cancelled, to avoid the most disadvantage, to ensure integrity and to make it fair to all the BAC candidates of the system in 2019-2020. Furthermore, the final C-Grade is to be calculated as follows: 40% from PreBac C-grades and 60% from A-grades. Finally, it is further proposed that students who want to retake the S7 year or take the exams in September 2020 without any penalties should be allowed to do so (e.g. those who would otherwise have a failing grade or planned on the BAC to increase their averages).