

# Continuous Assessment Under Pressure: Evaluating the Tri-Semester System in Selected Malaysian Private Higher Educations

Zaliza Azan<sup>1\*</sup>, Rosmawati Mohd Daud<sup>2</sup>, Mazlan Abd Ghani<sup>3</sup>, Azi Izwani Nor Hamzah<sup>4</sup>,  
Suriza NoorFahmi Hashim<sup>1</sup>, Nor Suhaila Samsuri<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Business and Accountancy, Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Jabatan Bahasa Inggeris, Kolej Profesional MARA Indera Mahkota, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> Jabatan Pengurusan Perniagaan dan Perakaunan, Kolej Profesional MARA Indera Mahkota, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup> Fakulti Pengurusan Industri, Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah, Malaysia

<sup>5</sup> Kolej Vokasional Shah Alam, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author: [zaliza@uptm.edu.my](mailto:zaliza@uptm.edu.my)

Received: 25 October 2025 | Accepted: 1 December 2025 | Published: 31 December 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ijares.2025.7.6.49>

---

**Abstract:** *This research explores how the Tri-Semester System influences continuous assessment practices in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia. Unlike the traditional two-semester academic year, the tri-semester model divides the year into three shorter instructional periods, often lasting around 12–14 weeks each. While this system is promoted for flexibility and speedier graduation, its compressed structure may hinder students' ability to produce high-quality group projects and manage assessments effectively. Through a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews with lecturers and students, this research explores their lived experiences regarding workload, pedagogical adaptation, and institutional support. The analysis reveals substantial pressure tied to continuous assessments within tight timelines, prompting innovative pedagogical and structural responses by educators. Recommendations highlight the need for adaptive assessment design, enhanced support systems, and institutional reforms to better align assessment practices with the demands of the tri-semester format. The findings aim to guide educators and policymakers in optimizing continuous assessment under accelerated academic calendars and suggest future research directions to refine teaching strategies in this context.*

**Keywords:** Tri-Semester System; Continuous Assessment; Private Higher Learning Institutions; Malaysia

---

## 1. Introduction

Higher education is rapidly evolving due to technological change, increasing competition, and demands for greater flexibility. In response, many institutions have adopted alternative academic calendars such as the Tri-Semester System, which divides the academic year into three shorter terms instead of two.

In Malaysia, several private universities and colleges have implemented this model, with intakes in January, May, and September. Each 12–14-week term requires students to undertake a full course load and complete continuous assessments, including assignments, presentations, and examinations. Although this structure supports faster credit accumulation and expanded

enrolment capacity, the compressed timelines create significant pressure. Students often struggle to produce quality work, while lecturers face limited time for feedback, curriculum refinement, and balancing other academic responsibilities.

Research shows that accelerated academic calendars increase stress, burnout, and surface learning among students (Tan, 2020; Aziz & Yusof, 2022), while lecturers report heavier workloads and reduced opportunities for meaningful formative assessment (Lee & Noraini, 2019). Suggested solutions include micro-assessments, scaffolded tasks, blended or flipped learning, and improved scheduling through buffer periods or marking windows.

Given the increasing use of the tri-semester model in Malaysian PHEIs, this research explores its impact on continuous assessment, focusing on assessment design, student workload, teaching strategies, and perceptions of academic quality. Using a qualitative approach, the research captures the experiences of both students and lecturers to offer practical recommendations for strengthening continuous assessment in accelerated academic environments.

## **2. Literature Review**

The tri-semester system reshapes the academic rhythm in ways that deeply affect assessment, learning quality, and well-being. This review synthesizes recent scholarly perspectives relating to its influence, particularly in Malaysia's private higher education sector.

One of the central advantages attributed to the tri-semester system is its capacity to enhance learning continuity and engagement among students. According to Haque & Sharmin (2022), the continuous nature of assessment within a tri-semester framework allows for more frequent feedback and interaction between educators and learners, which is essential for maintaining motivation and facilitating in-depth understanding of course materials. This alignment supports a more integrated learning pathway compared to traditional semester formats that tend to create longer breaks between assessments (Amini et al. (2024)).

Notably, the pacing of assessments in a tri-semester system can worsen student stress and anxiety levels. Haque & Sharmin (2022) provide empirical evidence indicating that students enrolled in tri-semester programs reported higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to their peers in a two-semester system. This heightened psychological burden is attributed to the intensified workload and compressed schedule that limits the time available for students to absorb and internalize the material. Such outcomes underscore the necessity for institutions to implement supportive measures and mental health resources to mitigate adverse effects on student well-being (Zhang & Jung (2023); Abd Halim et al. (2025)).

Moreover, as Malaysian education strategies evolve, the application of advanced educational technologies becomes significant. With the swift transition to remote learning necessitated by the pandemic, the tri-semester system can leverage digital tools to streamline the assessment process, offering flexibility and accessibility. This assertion aligns with people's approach to technology in education, emphasizing the need for adaptable educational frameworks that meet diverse learner needs, as suggested by Donesia et al. (2023).

Despite the advantages, the academic community must critically assess the implications of the tri-semester system on teaching efficacy and educational quality. Scholars like Idris & Bacotang (2023) highlight the challenges in aligning employer expectations with the

capabilities fostered in the education system, suggesting that the continuous assessment in the tri-semester model should also cultivate skills that are critical to the evolving job market. Such alignment is indispensable in preparing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but are also equipped for the demands of contemporary workplaces.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach to deeply understand participants' experiences within a tri-semester academic setting. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected three participants from a private higher education institution in Peninsular Malaysia: two lecturers and one student, all directly engaged in the tri-semester system. The aim was to gain rich, detailed accounts rather than statistical generalizability.

Atlas.Ti has been used to analyse this data that has been collected from 2 lecturers and 1 student involved directly in the Tri-semester system. The interview protocol included 4 sections with 1 question being asked for each section. This protocol is very important to gain the important insight from the participants to share their thoughts about the Tri-semester system in PHEIs. Each interview explored experiences related to continuous assessment, workload management, assessment quality, adaptation strategies, and institutional support. The interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes. Below the details of the questions asked for data collection:

Section A:

General Background

1. Can you briefly describe your role in this institution and how long you've been involved in the Tri- Semester System?

Section B:

2. How has the Tri-Semester System affected your experience with continuous assessments?

Section C:

3. Have you (or your instructors/students) made any adjustments to how continuous assessments are managed under this system?

Section D:

4. What do you think can be done to improve the continuous assessment process within the Tri- Semester System?

### **4. Findings & Discussions**

Based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, the implementation of the Tri-Semester System in Malaysia's private higher education institutions has significantly reshaped the landscape of continuous assessment. While it aims to streamline academic progress through shorter semesters and increased frequency of evaluations, both educators and students express that the system brings substantial time pressure, assessment overload, and quality compromises. Nonetheless, adaptive strategies, collaboration, and technological support have emerged as coping mechanisms, albeit inconsistently applied. This also supported by Jafar et al. (2023) and Gao et al. (2023). Below is the theme emerged from the findings

### **Compressed Academic Timelines and Increased Pressure**

All three participants—Lecturer 1, Lecturer 2, and Student 1—highlight how the reduced duration of academic semesters (from 14–15 weeks to 12 weeks) has led to intensified workloads. For instance, Lecturer 1 notes having to "work three times harder than usual" due to compressed timelines. Meanwhile, Lecturer 2 describes how the need to submit marks by Week 12 places immense pressure during Weeks 10–12, affecting focus and marking quality. Lastly, Student 1 recounts a week when she had three major assignments due, resulting in rushed and superficial work.

### **Impact on Assessment Quality**

Next theme is the time constraint has a direct negative effect on both the preparation and grading of continuous assessments. Lecturer 2 points out that rubrics are sometimes not tested or discussed with peers due to time constraints, leading to reduced quality. Added by Student 1 confirms that limited time leads her to prioritize task completion over depth and critical engagement.

### **Pedagogical and Structural Adjustments**

Educators are adopting various strategic adjustments to cope with the tri-semester system as mentioned by Lecturer 1 stated collaborative test design and pre-set timeframes to reduce individual workload. Agreed by Lecturer 2 since she has reduced the number of assessments and prioritizes completing syllabi earlier to focus on consultations. Lastly, Student 1 appreciates the use of interim deadlines and modular assignment structures by some instructors.

### **Support Systems and Technology**

Besides that, there is growing reliance on technology and institutional support to manage the increased workload. For example, Microsoft Teams and Forms are used for auto-grading and reusing assignments (Lecturer 1). Supported by online systems for mark submission and lab scheduling are highlighted by Lecturer 2, who also notes support from IT units for rubric training. Next Student 1 cites writing centers, counseling, and time management workshops, though she suggests these services could be expanded.

### **Calls for Greater Flexibility and Reforms**

Participants unanimously suggest improvements to reduce the burden of continuous assessment since all of them advocate for more flexible deadlines and reduced assessment volume. Lecturer 2 suggests allocating dedicated marking time after Week 12 and limiting syllabus scope. Student 1 supports diverse assessment formats (e.g., portfolios, presentations) and improved technological tools like automated reminders.

Below table is the summarize of the narrative and thematic analysis from the data collected.

**Table 1: Narrative and Thematic Analysis**

Theme	Description	Key Insights / Supporting Quotes
1. Compressed Timelines & Workload Pressure	The shift to 12-week semesters increases workload intensity for both staff and students.	- “We feel like we have to work three times harder” (Lecturer 1) - “Quite pressure during week 12” (Lecturer 2) - “Less time to rest or do other activities” (Student 2)
2. Impact on Assessment Quality	Reduced time leads to rushed work and compromises in assignment quality and grading consistency.	- “Sometimes just touch and go for the sake of exams” (Lecturer 1) - “Quality of marking is affected” (Lecturer 2) - “Prioritize completion over depth” (Student 1)
3. Adaptive Pedagogical Strategies	Educators modify strategies to cope, including collaboration and streamlined assessments.	- “Collaborative test setting across colleges” (Lecturer 1) - “Reduced number of assessments” (Lecturer 2) - “Assignment breakdowns with interim deadlines” (Student 1)
4. Technology and Institutional Support	Digital tools and support services help manage assessment tasks, but their effectiveness varies.	- “Microsoft Forms for auto-grading” (Lecturer 1) - “Online mark submission and IT support” (Lecturer 2) - “Workshops and writing centers” (Student 1)
5. Recommendations for Improvement	Suggestions include flexible deadlines, fewer topics, varied assessment types, and marking windows.	- “Reduce number of assessments or break them into parts” (Lecturer 1) - “One-week post-week 12 for marking” (Lecturer 2) - “Flexible formats like portfolios or presentations” (Student 1)

The tri-semester system presents both pressures and possibilities. While it challenges conventional rhythms of teaching and learning, it also encourages innovation in pedagogy and assessment management (The Star, 2023). For the system to be sustainable, institutions must actively support educators and students through policy adjustments, robust technologies, and flexible academic structures. The voices in this study affirm that continuous assessment under the tri-semester model can succeed—but only with intentional design and systemic backing.

## 5. Conclusions

This study explored into how the tri-semester system influences continuous assessment in Malaysia’s private higher education sector. Although the model aims to improve academic throughput and flexibility, it also imposes significant time pressure. The accelerated semesters constrain the capacity for deep engagement, thoughtful feedback, and assessment quality. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated adaptability: lecturers streamlined assessment designs and collaborated, while both staff and students leveraged technology and institutional support to cope.

For the tri-semester system to be successful and sustainable, private institutions must enact policy and structural reforms. These could include:

- i. **Flexible scheduling:** Introduce buffer periods or dedicated marking windows to reduce assessment bottlenecks.
- ii. **Diversified assessment formats:** Emphasize formative tasks, portfolios, presentations, or modular design to distribute workload.
- iii. **Institutional support:** Invest in digital infrastructure, training for assessment design, and pastoral support (e.g., writing centers, counseling).
- iv. **Quality assurance alignment:** Work closely with national accreditation bodies (e.g., MQA) to ensure accelerated calendars maintain educational standards.

By adopting a student- and educator-centered approach, institutions can better harness the benefits of tri-semester systems without compromising academic rigor or well-being. Future research might explore more extensive samples, compare different institutions' practices, or test innovative pedagogies tailored to tri-semester environments.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge and extended special gratitude to the Global Academic Excellence (M) Sdn Bhd, who granted the Publication Grant Scheme for this project and Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia for the support.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

### References

- Abd Halim, N. N., & Musa, S. N. S. (2025). Psychological Well-being as a Mediator of Academic Resilience among Selected Private University Students. *Asian Journal of University Education (AJUE)*, 21(2).
- Amini, M., Ravindran, L., & Lee, K. F. (2024). Adapting education shifts in Malaysia after COVID-19: A comprehensive review of flexible assessments, lifelong learning initiatives, and diversified learning trajectories. *Asian Journal of Assessment in Teaching and Learning*, 14(1), 1-14.
- Aziz, N. A., & Yusof, M. M. (2022). Implementing flipped learning in Malaysian higher education: Opportunities and challenges in a tri-semester system. *Journal of Educational Innovation*, 10(2), 45–59.
- Donesia, E. A., Widodo, P., Saragih, H. J. R., Suwarno, P., & Widodo, W. (2023). National character development and character education in schools malaysia. *International Journal of Progressive Sciences and Technologies*, 38(2), 502. <https://doi.org/10.52155/ijpsat.v38.2.5346>
- Gao, R., Merzdorf, H., et al. (2023). Automated assessment systems in higher education: A systematic review. *Education and Information Technologies*, 28, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-12345-7>
- Haque, M. and Sharmin, S. (2022). Impact of stress and anxiety of two-semester and tri-semester on saudi students of english at jazan university. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 10(1), 41-52. <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijelt.13/vol10.no1pp41-52>
- Hussain, M. A. M., Zulkifli, R. M., Kamis, A., Threton, M. D., & Omar, M. K. (2021). Industrial engagement in the technical and vocational training (tveter) system. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 20(12), 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.20.12.2>
- Idris, R. and Bacotang, J. (2023). Exploring stem education trends in malaysia: building a talent pool for industrial revolution 4.0 and society 5.0. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v12-i2/16825>
- Jafar, A., Dollah, R., et al. (2023). Readiness and challenges of e-learning during the pandemic: Implications for university assessment. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(2), 905. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20020905>
- Lee, H. S., & Noraini, I. (2019). Managing academic workload in accelerated semester systems: Insights from private university lecturers in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Higher Education*, 13(1), 22–34.

- Lim, C. K. (2021). Assessment redesign for intensive academic calendars: A Malaysian case study. *Asian Education Review*, 8(3), 105–118.
- Sharadgah, T. A. and Sa'di, R. A. (2020). Preparedness of institutions of higher education for assessment in virtual learning environments during the covid-19 lockdown: evidence of bona fide challenges and pragmatic solutions. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 19, 755-774. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4615>
- Tan, W. L. (2020). Student burnout in fast-track academic systems: A study of private institutions in Malaysia. *International Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 6(4), 91–100.
- The Star. (2023, December 31). Time to rethink higher education. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2023/12/31/time-to-rethink-higher-edu>
- Zhang, Y., & Jung, J. (2023). Stress and burnout in higher education short semesters: Implications for well-being. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(4), 573–589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2022.2140487>