

Straits Times, 2 Oct 2018, Dispelling 3 fallacies about examinations

(<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/dispelling-three-fallacies-about-examinations>)

On an otherwise un-extraordinary Friday evening, when most 12-year-olds in Singapore were halfway through their momentous Primary School Leaving Examination, Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung announced a slew of changes to the school system that seek to de-emphasise grades.

These include doing away with examinations for Primary 1 and 2 pupils, and mid-year examinations for pupils in Primary 3 and 5 and students in Secondary 1 and 3. In addition, all students from Primary 3 to Secondary 4 or 5 will have no more than one weighted assessment per subject per school term. Across all levels, report books will stop the practice of indicating the students' rankings and the mean subject grades and overall scores.

The news quickly went viral on social media, with many parents weighing in, from those enthusiastically expressing support to those declaring grave reservations.

I personally welcomed the news on three levels - as a parent, as an educator, and as an academic who researches technological and social transformations. So I was keen to understand what naysayers consider ill-advised about this seemingly bold shift in our much-vaunted education system.

Essentially, critics harp on the value of examinations, crediting them with keeping our education system robust and competitive, enabling us to gauge how well students are learning, and keeping our students on their toes. As an educator, I recognise that examinations can play a useful role in all these respects. But arguing that de-emphasising examinations is detrimental to our educational goals introduces three dangerous fallacies:

FALLACY 1: DE-EMPHASISING EXAMINATIONS ERODES ACADEMIC RIGOUR

When examinations assume an oversized presence in our education system, far too much time and energy are expended on "teaching to the test". Consequently, students learn to the test rather than absorbing concepts and ideas on a more sustained and enduring level.

Students commit to repetitive rote learning, undergoing extra tuition to pass and even ace examinations. Weary must be the teacher who has to mark mounds of compositions with a proliferation of "wow" words and phrases that students are taught to include so as to score the maximum attainable grade.

With an examination-oriented education system, we essentially churn out students who are good at test-taking, and who may then expunge the knowledge from their brains once the examination ends. Such short-term and short-lived gains do not prepare our students for an increasingly complex world where challenges such as climate change, terrorism and the impact of digitalisation demand the nimble application of knowledge and an appreciation for multiple, contesting perspectives.

A system that generates students who do well in tests is not necessarily one that is academically rigorous. Instead, the rigour of an education system is determined by the range of essential skills and knowledge vested in students. This is done by maintaining a high quality of instruction and ensuring that learning outcomes are successfully realised. All of these can be achieved without an over-reliance on examinations.

FALLACY 2: DE-EMPHASISING EXAMINATIONS UNDERMINES OUR ABILITY TO ASSESS STUDENTS' ABILITIES

Teachers do need to keep track of how well their students are coping with curricular content so that they can effectively tailor their instruction to different levels of competency. However, examinations are but one of a swathe of tools that teachers can use to assess their students' performance.

In-class activities, bite-sized assessments that do not count towards the final grade and educational online games can be tapped to identify the concepts students are struggling with, so that the requisite support can be introduced. To be sure, some degree of assessment is necessary, but we can afford to have examinations feature less prominently in our children's educational experience, and not remain the millstone around their necks that breeds an aversion to learning, reinventing and innovating.

FALLACY 3: DE-EMPHASISING EXAMINATIONS DEMOTIVATES STUDENTS

Another concern about doing away with examinations is that students will not take their studies seriously and be less motivated to work hard in school. However, motivation to prepare for examinations must be distinguished from the motivation to learn.

As a professor, I am excited about entering the classroom and creating "aha" moments for my students. I look forward to sharing theoretical concepts in a way they can best relate to, so that they engage me after class with e-mails and in conversation, energised by their new-found knowledge. From such exchanges, I see a motivation to learn and a natural curiosity to find out more about the world and their role within it.

Granted, examinations can encourage students to work hard and to do well, but they do not necessarily motivate learning. Learning can be spurred in many ways - through creative pedagogical approaches, stimulating environments, and meaningful tasks and challenges. The motivation to learn is timeless, whereas the motivation to perform well in examinations is transient. We must seek to nurture the former to instil the spirit of lifelong learning.

Propagating the above three fallacies about the virtues of examinations hinders efforts to refine our education system in the face of emerging global uncertainties. One could say that our education system has itself passed examinations with flying colours and is the subject of much admiration. Indeed, in the last round of the Programme for International Student Assessment, our students came out tops in reading, maths and science, and in collaborative problem-solving.

However, in a study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Singaporean students again outdid the global competition, by being significantly more anxious about tests and grades compared with their international peers. Such adverse effects of an over-emphasis on examinations lead our students to associate studying with drudgery, and extinguish a love for learning that will be crucial for them as they advance through life.

Fundamentally, as our society transitions towards a future of relentless change and constant adaptation, imbuing our children with a positive mindset towards learning is the best asset we can develop in them all.

- Professor Lim Sun Sun is head of humanities, arts and social sciences at the Singapore University of Technology and Design and a Nominated Member of Parliament.