

Premises for authentic diplomas in the context of reformed curricula and educational systems

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In response and appreciation to all colleagues and friends who reacted to a previous post on conventional exit exams, this post outlines major premises for revamping educational diplomas, curricula and systems, as part of our drive for authentic reform of education.

In a previous position paper entitled “*Upholding our conventional exit exams is a crime against students and society*” (www.hinstitute.org/Site/blogs, April 4, 2016), I outlined major repercussions of such exams and called for a moratorium on them until authentic general education diplomas are put in place. In response, and through private communication or social media comments and posts, many colleagues and friends recommended either to abolish exit exams and ensuing diplomas altogether, or to revamp general education diplomas so that they reliably indicate how students’ profiles evolve across all schooling years. A few respondents called for a compromise that would take into consideration students’ school achievement and their performance on some new forms of exit exams.



Whatever the solution might be, it has to come in the context of reformed curricula and educational systems, and it has to bring about some reliable passport for student transition to higher / upper level education. That passport might include some form of a “diploma” that does not come about as a consequence of exit exams, but as part of, or as a summative account of, comprehensive school transcripts. In the following, I propose some premises for such a “diploma” to be truly authentic, whatever its form, its level, or the granting authority might be. The proposed premises pertain as well to curricula and educational systems in the context of which the diploma may be granted.

1. Any diploma must be conceived in the context of a well defined curriculum (or curricula), and must assume in the context of that curriculum a number of structural and functional attributes including, but not limited to, fidelity, reasonability and effectiveness.
 - a. A diploma is characterized with fidelity when it is faithfully related to a given curriculum (or curricula) and shows with transparency, objectivity, and precision, the degree to which each student has actually attained the desired learning outcomes and how these outcomes have evolved across the schooling years.
 - b. A reasonable diploma corresponds to learning outcomes that students can actually attain at specific stages of their mental and physical development, and that they may eventually need in subsequent stages and everyday life.
 - c. An effective diploma reveals a student’s readiness to pursue further education and succeed in life, and makes it possible to determine, if necessary, how to reset the student on the proper development track.

2. The diploma attributes mentioned above require that the corresponding curriculum (or curricula) be set in the context of a proper pedagogical framework for the purpose of bringing about well-rounded citizens empowered for lifelong learning and success in life:
 - a. The curriculum must therefore consist not of a rigid system for the transmission of a repertoire of canned information and routines, but of a dynamic system that brings about students with a profile that embodies patterns of success and excellence in modern life. Such a profile would pertain to a citizen of progressive mindset, productive habits, profound knowledge, and principled affects (4P Profile).
 - b. The profile must be flexibly defined, and subsequently developed within a suitable learning ecology, in the context of a pedagogical framework that is common to all curricula which a student may follow throughout schooling years in order to ensure coherence within and across different subject matters.
 - c. The pedagogical framework must include reasonable and affordable tenets and principles that stem from pertinent educational and cognitive research, especially about brain structure and development, and mind processes and evolution, and about the learning ecology that is most suitable for students to gradually develop the desired profile throughout the years.
 - d. The flexible profile must be explicitly translated in a program of study in the form of attainable learning outcomes that cover all four cognitive and behavioral dimensions pertaining respectively to knowledge content, reasoning skills, practical dexterities (perceptual and motor skills, communication included), and affective controls (values and dispositions included).
 - e. Learning outcomes may be grouped in clusters that reflect specific systemic patterns. Each cluster would cover all four dimensions and pertain to a particular system or set of similar systems of conceptual or physical nature. A cluster may also be designed so as to make up either a specific competency to achieve a specific task (e.g., solving a specific problem about a particular system/situation) or a generic competency that allows the deployment of attained learning outcomes in novel situations and in the development of new learning outcomes (and subsequently new competencies).
 - f. The curriculum must follow the dictum “less is more” in setting its program of study and concentrate more on generic than specific learning outcomes, and more on skills for knowledge construction and deployment than on the content of knowledge in any subject matter. Many reasons stand behind this point including but not limited to the following:
 - Knowledge proliferates in our era – and even changes in certain fields – at an exponential rate that no textbook or any other traditional medium can keep up with, even at the level of fundamental conceptions. Meanwhile, anybody with electronic communication devices at their disposition may have spontaneous access to virtually any information they need.
 - Content knowledge and specific skills that students may need in their daily life and eventually in their professional life vary depending on their current and prospective interests and needs. Nevertheless, there may always be things that are of common interest and value within any subject matter and that would be worth attending to in the corresponding curriculum.
 - We constantly witness the surge of new life conditions and new professions that are often unpredictable and that require new knowledge and skills that may never be accounted for in any traditional textbook.
 - Meaningful learning that should be the object of any curriculum is about empowering students for the deployment of any attained learning outcome in novel and unfamiliar situations within and outside the domain in which the outcome had been attained, especially in everyday life situations.

- g. The curriculum must be flexible in specifying the learning outcomes to be attained at various age levels, and the desired evolution tracks across various levels. For mental and physical development tracks normally vary among students because of morphologic and ecologic factors that may not be necessarily controllable within the school confinement, notwithstanding the existence of common (but not identical) factors. This has nothing to do with “intelligence” which research has proven to be no more than 24% genetic, and constantly variable, not constant as some still believe, depending on life conditions and meaningful learning opportunities.
3. Any diploma must abide by a value system including, but not limited to, fairness, justice, and equity.
- a. A fair diploma pertains to all fundamental and critical learning outcomes in the corresponding curriculum (or curricula), and accounts for all factors that may affect the attainment of such outcomes.
 - b. A just diploma relies on students’ history across all years covered by the curriculum, and not on a single spot of that history (like conventional exit exams), and on assessments that pertain strictly to profile development; it does not hold students accountable for whatever they are not responsible of (like teachers’ lack of proper professional competencies).
 - c. An equitable diploma, and curriculum alike, accounts for all pertinent differences among students, especially those pertaining to developmental tracks, communication skills, interests, and demographic status.
4. The curriculum must abide by the same value system of the diploma and must satisfy a number of conditions to this end including but not limited to the following:
- a. The curriculum must specify the fundamental and critical learning outcomes that must be targeted in ascertaining student profiles at specific points and in specific contexts, and the standard tracks against which the profile evolution must be ascertained across the years.
 - b. The curriculum must flexibly set assessment types and corresponding mechanisms for each type of learning outcomes, as well as the benchmarks for ascertaining the extent to which each outcome has been attained and the manner in which it has evolved.
 - c. Assessment must not be an end by itself, but an integral part of a curriculum, and its mechanisms, especially feedback mechanisms, must be an integral part of the comprehensive learning ecology that the curriculum is about.
 - d. The curriculum must give due merits to the three functions of authentic assessment: assessment “of” learning, assessment “for” learning, and assessment “as” learning, with an increasing focus from the former to the latter that is the most important function of them all.
5. A curriculum cannot fulfill its function, and subsequently a diploma cannot viably reflect the development of the desired profile, unless the curriculum is designed and deployed in the context of a proper educational system. The “diploma” we are calling for in the context of the above set curricula requires that the educational system be set on a number of premises including the following:
- a. Education must be considered as fundamental assets for the very existence of a nation, and a national investment for sustainability and continuous development.
 - b. The educational system must be laid on purposeful foundations, and on objective and transparent principles, rules, and standards for every component of the system, especially the curriculum (for its design, deployment, evaluation, and refinement), the school, and the teacher.

- c. Laws and regulations must be in place and enforced at the regional and national levels that allow continuous development of the system and mandated curricula.
 - d. Various educational types and levels must complement each other, and various educational institutions in a given community must closely cooperate for sustainable education and community development.
 - e. Common national standards must be flexibly set so as to mandate in broad terms specific knowledge and learning outcomes that are necessary for success in modern life, along with a variety of satisfactory tracks (not a one-size fits all track) that may be acknowledged for the evolution of student profile at various levels in various educational sectors.
 - f. The educational system must be flexible enough to allow every school, public or private, and every teacher, to conduct their own business with a certain degree of freedom, including the choice of certain curricular materials like the content of subject matters and the methods and means of learning, instruction, and assessment.
 - g. Monitoring, communication, and exchange mechanisms must be in place within and among schools.
 - h. Lifelong learning must be an across-the-board mandate that applies to all those involved in curriculum design, deployment, and refinement, especially school principals and teachers, and that requires continuous professional development programs which they all need to pursue at accredited institutions in order to maintain their jobs.
 - i. National regulations must be in place to sustain the quality of education at common standards in all schools, and to induce every school and every teacher to continuously improve their performance. Regulatory commissions must thus be in place with across the board constituents and constituency, and operate in accordance with points (a), (b), and (c) above.
6. All the above requires new concepts of educational system, curriculum, subject matter and program of study, learning, instruction, assessment, school, teacher, student... It also requires reasonable and affordable plans for gradual evolution, without detrimental repercussions, from the current state of an educational system to the aspired state.

Until a viable and sustainable alternative to diplomas ensuing from conventional exit exams is in place, I continue to hold that “it is far less detrimental to put a moratorium on [such] exams than to hold on to them”, and that “with their inherent flaws and their serious repercussions, it is an unforgivable crime against our students and our nation[s] to uphold these exit exams as they currently stand” (www.hinstitute.org/Site/blogs). When a patient is under treatment that turns out to have life threatening repercussions, which alternative would have less detrimental consequences: maintaining the malicious treatment until a sound alternative is found, or immediately suspending that treatment and then looking for a sound alternative?