



Time to abolish high stakes exit exams as we know them

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H Institute – March 24, 2016

High stakes exams have been around for quite awhile that most concerned people are taking them for granted. These exams come in a variety of forms and scales, and serve diverse purposes like end of program certification, entrance to particular university programs, or induction into certain professions. Research from around the globe shows that high stakes exams have critical viability flaws (validity, reliability, efficiency, etc.) and grave repercussions on students, teachers, and all other stakeholders in the educational community and concerned professional communities.

This commentary is about high stakes exit exams, and their negative impact on various stakeholders. It is not about all sorts of high stakes exams. It is strictly about exit exams like middle school or secondary school exit exams mandated in many countries for passing from primary to secondary or from secondary to tertiary education. It is also not about inherent and processing issues like content validity and marking reliability which deserve a commentary by its own. Nevertheless, many if not all addressed points somewhat apply to all sorts of high stakes exams – and to be fair, only to those exams I am familiar with in a number of countries around the world.

High stakes exit exams (HSE) have many documented pitfalls that, in many instances, warrant their abolishment altogether. In the following is an outline list of a number of such pitfalls. The list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. It applies to variable degrees to different exams I am familiar with through research and/or reform efforts I have been involved in. It especially applies to those exit exams that are mandated as the sole passport for transition from one educational cycle to another.

1. *Validity and fairness:* HSE are supposedly used to ascertain whether students have attained a certain level of competence by the end of a given cycle or course of education. “Competence” is hereby used in a broad sense that encompasses what students actually know and what they can do with what they know. This includes content and process knowledge, whether generic (that cuts across the board within and across subjects) or specific (competencies to accomplish particular tasks). This raises, among others, the following issues:
 - a. No single set of exams, especially not paper and pencil exams, can ascertain competence, especially not reasoning skills, motor dexterities or affects (dispositions and values included). At best, a given exam can ascertain particular learning outcomes (and not learning per se or learning habits), mostly content related outcomes, in a very specific context, and at a very specific point of the examinee’s life. It is thus not fair, to say the least, to make any judgment about a student competence based on HSE.
 - b. Many factors, other than the ascertained outcomes, significantly affect an examinee’s performance on an exam and are not usually accounted for in HSE. These include the state of mind and physical health of the examinee at the time of the exam. When

such state is disturbed, it may have devastating implications. It would thus not be fair at all to decide the fate of the examinee when concomitant variables that are not accounted for in HSE determine that person's performance on the exams.

2. *Validity and justice:* Aside from fairness, the issue of exam validity for ascertaining competence raises critical justice concerns.
 - a. Competence assessment requires a track record of every examinee, a record that offers not only snapshots of that person's performance on specific exams at particular points of time, but more importantly the evolution of that person's competence across all schooling years.
 - b. Above all, it is not just at all to judge students and decide their fate based on a single set of exams, no matter how valid and reliable those exams might be, and ignore or underestimate the entire track record of those people during all school years. Would HSE have been perfectly viable (which is of course not the case), failing such exams after passing all school exams and making it throughout the years and grades would indicate that flopping students should not have made it to those exit exams in the first place, and that past school exams were not valid and reliable to say the least. Would that serve justice to students and all those who oversaw their education throughout the years?
3. *Equity:* HSE are usually designed as one size fits all by an exclusive group of people. This raises, among others, the following concerns:
 - a. Interests of all students and special needs of at least some of them are disregarded. This puts students who have less interest in a particular subject than others and all special needs students at a disadvantage by comparison to their peers.
 - b. The performance gap is widened among students of different socio-economic background, especially between students who can afford "good education" and extra tutoring outside school and those who cannot.
 - c. Local authorities have no voice in HSE and the needs and aspirations of their communities are often not accounted for.
4. *Trust and honesty:* An implicit reason behind ignoring examinees' track record in their schools is the lack of trust in the capabilities and honesty of schools and teachers, especially when it comes to assessment. A culture of distrust is in fact sweeping across the board in many educational systems that adopt HSE, and is slowly but surely leading to the deterioration of these systems.
5. *Ethics:* Many teachers find in HSE a source of extra profit through out of school tutoring or "how to solve it" publications that students acquire to memorize what is needed to passing such exams. Some teachers in many countries are unfortunately known not to do their job properly at school so that they induce students to seek their help out of school. What is even worse is that, at least in one country that I know of abroad, such lack of ethics is supported by school administrators who turn the blind eye on students who quit school long before the end of the year to prepare themselves for their exit exams through private tutoring.
6. *Elitism:* Some people see in HSE gauging means for students and schools. They assume that passing rates and levels are indicators of the quality of learning and teaching. No research has ever supported that claim. To the contrary, research often indicates that passing typical HSE takes more memorization of answers to typical questions and routines for solving particular problems than understanding of what is behind those answers and solutions. What is worse is that students who really have such understanding are often at a disadvantage that HSE results reflect backwards elitism. They raise rote learners instead of meaningful and creative learners high on a pedestal.

7. *Self-esteem*: Low performance on HSE is sometimes interpreted as an indication of poor competence, bad learning habits, and even worse, “low intelligence”. This often leads to a decline in student self-esteem that could mark that person for life. The same goes for conscientious teachers and parents who end up wrongly believing that they are failing with their children. Nothing could be more wrong than attaching so much unwarranted value to HSE and more unjust and unethical than leading people to succumb to detrimental psychological consequences.
8. *Meaningful learning*: Meaningful learning is about developing authentic competence with generic content and process knowledge that can be readily deployed in novel situations within the same and different contexts in which such knowledge was originally developed, especially in real world situations. HSE cannot ascertain such knowledge as indicated above. What is even worse is that HSE have instituted a school culture for rote learning rather than meaningful learning. My twin daughters happen to have to take typical HSE this year. One of their teachers had the honesty and the guts to tell them the first day of school: “You are here this year not to learn meaningful materials but to do what it takes to pass the [national exit] exams”.
9. *Motivation and life quality*: There is no evidence that HSE motivate students for better achievement, especially not better understanding of course materials. To the contrary, and as already mentioned above, these exams induce students only to study to the test, and to blindly memorize specific routines for answering questions and solving problems. As a consequence, students are not motivated to pursue education meaningfully, and end up stressed out even to the point of hating school altogether. Teachers and parents are also caught by the same bug to the extent that classroom and home environment become somewhat disrupted and disruptive.
10. *Educational standards*: Some people erroneously believe that HSE set or help enforcing high educational standards. In fact, and as discussed above, HSE as they stand lead only to lowering educational standards and watering curricula down for the sake of blindly passing those exams. HSE or any other high stake or large scale exam could contribute to raising educational standards if they were to meet at least two conditions, neither of which is currently met. First, they need to provide viable indicators of students’ competence. Second, they need to be associated with proper feedback mechanisms that would help all stakeholders follow adequate ways for raising student competence.
11. *Authentic assessment*: Where HSE are in place, educational systems are entirely geared to preparing students to pass such exams, and are subsequently making assessment an end by itself. Assessment “of” certain learning outcomes for sanction purposes (and not of learning per se or of competence) thus predominates the educational scene at the detriment of assessment “for” learning (i. e., assessment that guides learning, instruction and curriculum reform), and especially assessment “as” learning (i. e., assessment as means of meaningful learning, since student answers or solutions to test questions and problems do not simply mirror what they have learned in the past, but more importantly what they can originate while taking the test since the brain constantly reinvents itself in the process of any thought or action).
12. *Certification*: Based on all the above, diplomas granted based on HSE are by no means authentic certification of student competence, and cannot be used as passports for student transition from one educational cycle to another. At best, these diplomas can only certify what students have accomplished on specific tasks under the exam conditions, and definitely not what they can accomplish on different tasks and under different conditions.
13. *Professionalism*: Under HSE pressure, teachers are reduced to test crunching machines, and their mission reduced to teaching to the test. Remember my daughters’ teacher announcement! Teaching is perhaps the profession with the most enduring consequences. It is about forming students’ minds. What a teacher does at a particular point in time may stamp students’ competence and personality for life. It is very likely

that physicians can heal physical injury and correct physical deformation, but very unlikely that anyone can heal a deformation or correct a wrong idea or skill in long term memory (in fact, what goes in long term memory stays there forever!).

14. *School value:* Schools are often being judged by their students' passing rates and level of performance on HSE. Some schools are even strongly pushing this fallacy and exploiting it to the point of showing off their students' high passing rates (especially when 100%!) in promotional materials (including street billboards!), as if those exams were reliable indicators of student competence, and as if student performance on HSE were a reliable indicator of the quality of education at those schools.
15. *Cost.* Money, time, and effort invested by authorities administering large scale HSE, not to mention all other stakeholders from students and parents to teachers, are often unjustified, and could be better invested in areas other than prevalent HSE to improve the educational system and lead to a better return on local and global communities.

Education is meant to empower students for lifelong learning and success, even excellence, in life. Exams and all sorts of assessment are supposed to be means to this end and not an end by itself as it is currently the case with HSE and even regular course exams. HSE defeat the very purpose they are meant to serve, and fall short of being means to the true end of education. As they currently stand, these exams result in so much damage to students and the society at large that nothing can justify their continuous enforcement, especially not as exclusive passports for the transition from one educational cycle to another. Policy and decision makers thus need to be audacious enough to reconsider these exams and what they are about, and to face up to special interest individuals and groups who continue to promote such exams for unwarranted or unacceptable reasons.

Until better alternatives are put in place, it is far less detrimental to put a moratorium on high stakes exit exams as we know them than to hold on to them. Until and after then, and as the seminal McKinsey report of 2010 on "How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better", authorities behind HSE may consider to increase "the responsibilities and flexibilities of schools and teachers to shape instructional practice [assessment included... and] decentralize pedagogical rights to the middle layer (e.g. districts) or schools... [while] establishing mechanisms that make teachers responsible to each other as professionals for both their own performance and that of their colleagues". Meanwhile, and as the report continues, six interventions are needed "across the entire improvement journey: building the instructional skills of teachers and management skills of principals, assessing students, improving data systems, facilitating improvement through the introduction of policy documents and education laws, revising standards and curriculum, and ensuring an appropriate reward and remuneration structure for teachers and principals."

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Prof. Halloun has dedicated his career to the improvement of education in all fields and at all grade levels, but especially in science at the secondary and tertiary levels. He contributed to curriculum reform in many countries around the world. Through classroom-based research, he has developed, among others, Modeling Theory in science education which evolved recently into Systemic Cognition and Education (SCE). SCE is a generic pedagogical framework grounded in reliable educational and cognitive research, especially neuroscience related, and designed to empower students of all grade levels with a profile for success and excellence in modern life.

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