

# Upholding our conventional exit exams is a crime against students and society

Ibrahim A. Halloun

H Institute

P. O. Box 2882, Jounieh, Lebanon & 4727 E. Bell Rd, Suite 45-332, Phoenix, AZ 85032, USA

Email: [halloun@halloun.net](mailto:halloun@halloun.net) & [halloun@hinstitute.org](mailto:halloun@hinstitute.org)

Web: [www.halloun.net](http://www.halloun.net) & [www.hinstitute.org](http://www.hinstitute.org)



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Brevet and Baccalaureate exams  
as we know them

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The Lebanese Brevet and Baccalaureate exams (as they are still commonly known) have been around for quite awhile that most people are taking them for granted. Very little research has been undertaken to ascertain the viability (validity, reliability, efficiency, etc.) of these national exit exams and their repercussions on students, teachers, and other stakeholders in the educational community and on the nation at large. However, what is sometimes revealed about these exams and research from around the globe about similar high stakes exit exams provide some indication as to how flawed they are and how grave their repercussions are on various stakeholders.

This position paper is about the negative impact of our Brevet and Baccalaureate exams (and similar exit exams) on students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders. The impact, as it shall hopefully be hereby revealed, is so bad that it significantly overshadows whatever positive claims that might be out there about these exams, some of which I may even agree with. The paper is not about inherent and processing issues like content validity and marking reliability which deserve a paper by its own. It provides an outline list of a number of repercussions of our national exit exams on major stakeholders. The list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. It is based on my personal observations, pertinent literature, and findings about these and similar exit exams I am familiar with through research and/or reform efforts I have been involved in around the world for over 30 years now.

1. *Fairness*: Our Brevet and Baccalaureate exams (B&B) are supposedly mandated to ascertain whether students have attained a certain level of competence by the end of basic and secondary education that would warrant their transition to subsequent cycles. "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 (e.g., competencies to accomplish particular tasks). This raises, among others, the following issues:
  - a. No single set of exams, especially not paper and pencil exams like ours, can ascertain competence, especially not reasoning skills, motor dexterities or affects (dispositions and values included, if targeted). At best, a given exam can ascertain particular learning outcomes (and not learning per se or learning habits), mostly content related outcomes in the case of

*No single exam can ascertain student knowledge about any subject, especially not reasoning skills, motor dexterities, and dispositions*

- B&B, 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 our B&B.
- b. Many factors, other than the B&B ascertained outcomes, significantly affect an examinee's performance on an exam and are not usually accounted for in our national exit exams. Among these factors is 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 B&B determine that person's performance on the exams.
2. *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 the entire track record of those people during all school years. Would B&B 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*: B&B are 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 B&B and the needs and aspirations of their communities are virtually not accounted for.
  4. *Certification*: Based on all the above, B&B diplomas by no means provide authentic certification of student competence, and cannot be used as sole passports for student transition from one educational cycle to another (and especially not to prevent such transition). 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.
  5. *Trust*: 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 our educational system, and is slowly but surely leading, along with other critical factors that are beyond the scope of this paper, to the deterioration of this system.
  6. *Educational standards*: Some people erroneously believe that B&B set or help enforcing high educational standards. In fact, and as discussed above, B&B as they stand lead only to lowering educational standards and watering curricula down for the sake of blindly passing those exams. B&B 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.

*Authentic certification is not about a single set of exit exams but about a student entire track record throughout all school years*

7. *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. B&B cannot ascertain such knowledge as indicated above. What is even worse is that B&B have instituted a school culture for rote learning rather than meaningful learning. My twin daughters happen to have to sit for the Brevet 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 Brevet exams".
8. *Authentic assessment:* With B&B as they stand, our educational system is entirely geared to preparing students to pass those exams, and is 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 our 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).
9. *Elitism:* Some people see in B&B 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 high stakes exit exams 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 these exams' results reflect backwards elitism. They raise rote learners instead of meaningful and creative learners high on a pedestal.
10. *Self-esteem:* Low performance on B&B is sometimes interpreted as an indication of poor competence, bad learning habits, and even worse, "low intelligence". This often leads to a drastic 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 that they are failing with their children. Nothing could be more wrong than attaching so much unwarranted value to B&B and more unjust and unethical than leading people to succumb to detrimental psychological consequences.
11. *Enjoyment:* There is no evidence that B&B motivate students for distinguished achievement, or for meaningful learning of life enriching materials. To the contrary, students often feel coerced by these exams to learn by rote things that they are not interested in and do not value in their lives. Teachers and parents often sympathize with those feelings. As a consequence, students end up stressed out to the point of getting rebellious against the system and/or hating school altogether, and classroom and home environment become somewhat disrupted and disruptive.
12. *Professionalism:* Under B&B pressure, teachers and schools 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!).
13. *Ethics:* Many teachers find in B&B a source of extra profit through out of school tutoring or "how to solve it" publications (annals) that students acquire to memorize what is needed to passing such exams. There are rumors that some teachers do not do their job properly at school so that they induce students to seek their compensated help out of school. What is even worse is that, rumors also have it, that some school administrators turn the blind eye on such unethical practice.

*Visionary and audacious policy and decision makers are needed to put a moratorium on our Brevet and Baccalaureate exams until an authentic certification scheme is in place*

14. *School value:* Schools are often being judged by their students' passing rates and level of performance on B&B. 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 posts and billboards!), as if those exams were reliable indicators of student competence, and as if student performance on B&B were a reliable indicator of the quality of education at those schools.
15. *Cost:* Money, time, and effort invested by authorities administering B&B, not to mention all other stakeholders from students and parents to teachers, are unjustified, and could be better invested in areas other than B&B to improve the educational system and lead to a better return on local communities and our nation at large.

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 B&B and regular school exams. B&B 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 to the secondary and tertiary cycles.

Policy and decision makers thus need to be visionary and audacious enough to reconsider the Brevet and Baccalaureate diplomas and what they are about, and to face up to special interest and narrow-minded individuals and groups who continue to promote the corresponding exams for unwarranted or unacceptable reasons.

Until authentic diplomas are put in place, it is far less detrimental to put a moratorium on our Brevet and Baccalaureate exams than to hold on to them. In fact, with their inherent flaws and their serious repercussions, it is an unforgivable crime against our students and our nation to uphold these exit exams as they currently stand.

Until and after then, and as the seminal McKinsey report of 2010 on "How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better", our government and parliament 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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Ibrahim A. Halloun is Founding President of H Institute, a nonprofit research and development organization dedicated to engraining the Culture of Excellence in various sectors of society, especially the educational and cultural sectors. In 1984, he earned a PhD in Physics / Education from Arizona State University (ASU). He then joined Lebanese University where he is currently tenured Professor of Physics and Education, and held, since, joint appointments at many institutions in Lebanon and abroad, including ASU, American University of Beirut, and UNESCO-Paris.

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 provides 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.

His achievements are recognized by renowned scholars around the globe as "pioneering", "ground-breaking", "seminal", "leading", "profound", "unique", "setting standards"...