


Rethinking SSC exams



A file photo shows students taking the Secondary School Certificate examinations. | United News of Bangladesh

THIS year, more than 1.8 million students are sitting for the Secondary School Certificate and equivalent examinations. The examinations shape not only academic pathways but also the emotional landscape of an entire generation. For decades, the examinations have been treated as a gateway to higher secondary  education and beyond. Yet, from policy and pedagogical perspectives, a more fundamental question now emerges: not how to better administer the examinations, but whether the authorities should plan its gradual phase-out.

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The secondary-final examinations are widely regarded as the first 'public' examinations in a student's life. However, the outsized importance has transformed the examinations into something far more consequential than a simple assessment. They have become a high-stakes filter that compresses years of learning into a few hours of performance under intense pressure. At the age of 15 or 16, students find themselves judged by a system that often equates academic worth with examination-day performance. This is not merely an issue of assessment design. It is also a deep systemic distortion that shapes how learning is understood and practised.

High-stake examinations such as the Secondary School Certificate tend to reshape the entire education systems in their own image. This has led to an overwhelming emphasis on rote learning, coaching culture and strategic memorisation. For many students, education becomes less about understanding and more about 'preparing for the exams.' Schools narrow the syllabus to focus on likely questions, teachers prioritise test-oriented instruction and students internalise a culture where curiosity is secondary to correctness.

This phenomenon is not unique to Bangladesh. Scholars and practitioners across South Asia have for long criticised what may be termed an 'exams tyranny.' The systems often produce learners who are compliant and test-savvy, but not necessarily creative, critical or adaptable. The secondary-final examinations reinforce inequalities as well. Students with access to private tutoring, well-resourced schools and supportive family environments have an advantage. Meanwhile, those from marginalised or rural backgrounds face structural barriers that limit their performance not because of a lack of ability, but because of unequal opportunities. In this way, the examination system reproduces inequality rather than mitigating it.

Beyond academic distortions, the psychological impact of high-stake examinations is profound. Every year, the exams season brings with it a wave of anxiety, sleepless nights and, in extreme cases, emotional breakdown of students. The pervasive narrative that 'these exams will decide your life' creates a burden that is disproportionate and harmful.

While policymakers often focus on logistical aspects, ensuring question paper security, preventing cheating or installing surveillance systems, the deep issue of student well-being receives far less attention. [Education](#) systems around the world increasingly recognise that such high-pressure models are outdated. Countries such as Finland, for instance, have deliberately delayed high-stake testing and instead prioritised continuous, formative assessment that supports holistic development. Bangladesh must ask whether its current approach aligns with what we now know about effective and humane education.


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At its core, the SSC Exams claim to evaluate what students have learnt over roughly 10 years of schooling. But this claim deserves scrutiny. Can standardised, time-bound written examinations capture the breadth and depth of student learning? Can they measure critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration or ethical reasoning?

They cannot. The SSC Examinations largely assess a narrow set of abilities: the recall of information, writing speed and familiarity with examination formats. They reward the students who can reproduce content efficiently under pressure while overlooking other forms of intelligence and expression. Students who may excel in creative thinking, practical problem-solving or collaborative work often find their strengths invisible within this framework. As a result, the examinations not only limit what is assessed but also shape what is valued in the education system.

Phasing out the examinations does not mean eliminating assessment. It, rather, calls for a fundamental rethinking of how learning is evaluated. A more balanced and meaningful system would move away from one-off, high-pressure examinations towards continuous, inclusive and multi-dimensional assessment approaches. Such a system could incorporate school-based continuous assessment, where students are evaluated over time through assignments, class participation and periodic tests. To ensure fairness and consistency, the assessments could be externally moderated using national standards. This would allow for a more accurate reflection of a student's learning journey rather than a snapshot taken in stressful condition.

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Portfolio-based evaluation could further enrich this approach by capturing a student's work across subjects and over time. Projects, essays, creative outputs and practical tasks could all be included, providing a more comprehensive picture of abilities and progress. This method would recognise diverse talent and reduce the narrow focus on examination-centric performance. In addition, competency-based assessments could shift the emphasis from memorisation to skills development. Instead of asking what students can recall, the system would ask what they can do with their knowledge. Skills such as critical thinking, communication and problem-solving, which are essential for higher  education and employment, would become central.

Equally important is the creation of flexible learning pathways. Students should be able to pursue academic, technical or vocational routes without stigma. By diversifying opportunities and reducing the dominance of a single examination, the system would become more equitable and responsive to different aspirations. Such reforms would bring Bangladesh closer to global best practices and significantly reduce the disproportionate weight placed on one examination.

Education

Critics of phasing out the SSC Examinations often raise valid concern about maintaining standards and ensuring accountability. National examinations, they argue, provides a uniform benchmark against which all students can be measured. However, international experience suggests that standardisation does not require single high-stake examinations. Many countries use a combination of national benchmarks, sample-based assessments and rigorous school inspections to maintain quality.

Another concern is whether Bangladesh is ready for such a transition. Moving away from the SSC Examinations would, indeed, require careful planning, investment in teacher capacity and a cultural shift in how assessment is perceived. Trust in schools and teachers would need to be strengthened, and robust systems for moderation and quality assurance would have to be developed. However, reform does not have to be abrupt. A phased approach could begin by reducing the weight of the SSC Examinations, introducing alternative assessment methods and gradually building the necessary institutional capacity. Pilot programmes could be tested in selected regions before nationwide scale-up. With thoughtful planning, the transition can be manageable and effective.

That policy-makers are already discussing ways to reduce 'exams fear' indicates an awareness of the problem. Yet, incremental adjustments such as shortening the syllabus or increasing monitoring do not address the structural issues at the heart of the system. What is needed is not just reform, but re-imagination.

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Bangladesh is at a critical juncture in its development journey. As the country aspires to build a knowledge-based economy and equip its youth for a rapidly changing world, it must reconsider whether a decade-old examinations model can meet the ambitions. The SSC Examinations, in the current form, reflects an earlier era that prioritised standardisation and control over creativity and critical thinking. Moving beyond this model requires will,

institutional innovation and a willingness to challenge long-standing assumptions. It requires recognising that the purpose of education is not merely to sort and rank students, but to nurture their potential.

The millions of students sitting for the SSC today deserved more than a system that judges them by a single metric. They deserved an education system that would recognise their diverse abilities, support their mental well-being and prepare them for life in all its complexity. Phasing out high-stake examinations is not a simple or immediate task. It will require time, resources and sustained commitment. But it is a necessary step if Bangladesh is to create an education system that is equitable, relevant and future-ready.

Because, ultimately, the purpose of education is not to produce test scores.. it is to help young people learn, grow and thrive.