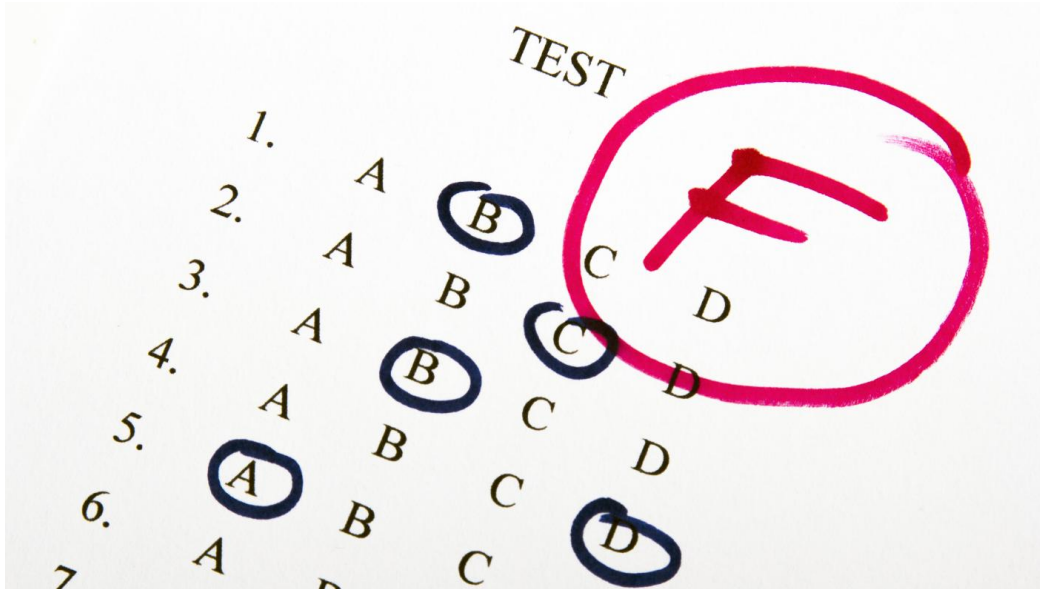


GCSE results day: 'Why we need to abandon exams'

By Peter T Howe 12 August 2018



Exams are an outdated practice – let's find another way to enable students to develop 21st-century skills, says one head

To quote author [Simon Sinek](#), "Start with the why." What is the point of education and why do we still use exams to try to assess a student's abilities? I say "try" because in my opinion exams don't assess abilities, they merely provide a snapshot of the knowledge an individual has been able to retain at that given point in time.

Exams are a holdover from the past, a vestigial process to discriminate between those who – by a 19th-century definition – had the innate ability to retain the information needed to progress up the educational ladder and those who were better suited to be the workers.

Yet, in the age of big data and machine learning, as we stand on the cusp of the ubiquitous power of artificial intelligence, why do we continue to educate and assess the minds of tomorrow by the archaic processes of the past?

Pre-internet, the ability to retain and apply information verbatim was necessary. Today, this "knowledge" is a click away. If exams primarily assess retained information, how relevant is that skill to today's students?

You can argue that characterising exams as the ability to regurgitate facts is an oversimplification, that exams offer a means to assess critical thinking and the ability to comprehend and apply knowledge into a cogent argument. For some students, this will be the case, but not all.

Teaching pupils how to pass exams

The truth is that exams reward those who have an aptitude for the artificial nature of exam taking. And thus to compensate, the majority of educators must resort to teaching students how to pass exams as much as they focus on learning. In the all too common scenario where exam results fail to recognise an individual's true ability, it's easy for otherwise talented students to become so disenfranchised that they walk away from education. I know I'm not the only person questioning the sense here.

Putting aside the "why?" for the moment, let's consider the "what?": what are we ultimately trying to achieve as educators? Speaking as a [United World Colleges](#) (UWC) principal, my colleagues and I are trying to **enable students** to develop the skills and mindsets that will enable them to be agents of change and to make the world a better, more peaceful place.

Like in all the colleges in our global education movement, here at UWC Atlantic College students follow the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma programme. Yes, the IB includes a substantial exam component, but, in my opinion, it's the best application of a bad practice.

You might find it surprising that I take that stance considering UWC Atlantic College played a leading role in the creation of the IB 50 years ago. Fifty years is a long time. Over that period the IB has evolved, and more can be and is being done. But by their very nature, IB exams will share the flaws of practically every other standardised examination system. The stress felt by students, the pressure to focus months of work into a single exam. Within the IB, examiners do have the flexibility to award top marks for a

cogent and evidenced argument, even if it was not the anticipated response, but that really doesn't solve the systemic issues with exams themselves.

The fact remains that the IB, too, needs a rethink to meet the educational needs of students in the 21st century. This is something we, in collaboration with educators and organisations from across the world, are working towards. At our first meeting, I said that the one thing we are not going to talk about, as we dream of a programme that will help students to realise their promise and potential, is assessment. Because assessment, for far too long, has been the tail wagging the dog.

Our project is ongoing, and its goal is intrinsic to this discussion. The mission is to create holistic pathways, allowing students to tap into their unknown and unknowable potential.

Why exams are flawed

Exam grades do not capture the progress that a student has made, their ability to work with others, their ability to ask questions, their empathy, their character. Is it enough that a student remembers the month and year Martin Luther King Jr had a dream? Or would it be more valuable to appraise a student's ability to analyse and discuss with others why Dr King had that dream and if it has truly been realised? And if not, what they are going to do about it.

Exams are the path to a grade. For many students, that system devalues the skills they develop to achieve that grade as a mere means to an end. The reality is that those skills will be their most important assets, [not the mark they achieved](#).

When students go into the world, the challenges they face in their lives, careers and relationships aren't overcome through an essay written in silence. Success in the real world takes vision, problem-solving, practicality, realism, communication, compromise, teamwork and community building. These are things that can be better learned and assessed outside of the archaic exam format.

For example, this very summer a well known A-level revision YouTuber, [UnJaded Jade, made national headlines](#) after she live-streamed herself in fits of tears following a bad exam experience. This academically gifted individual, who documented her strict revision regime to be viewed by thousands, to help others her age and younger by sharing advice, was betrayed by the very system she championed. In not getting the "approval" she expected from the system, her confidence and self-esteem abandoned her and she was left questioning her worth.

Stop turning young minds into hard drives

The probability is that she has actually learned much more than she realises, but in that moment of needless public despair, she became the public face of exam stress in the media. She became the victim of an outdated educational practice that is not fit for purpose. If Jade doesn't get the grades she expected, her learning pathway will be disrupted, not only in terms of university options but also in terms of her confidence and sense of what is possible. It is a flawed system when her effort, talent, hard work and preparation can ultimately have no bearing on the way her paper is graded.

So, going back to the "why?": why can't we create a system that removes exams altogether, but still allows students to gain the skills we know will be invaluable in taking on the challenges of the 21st century?

Why can't we stop trying to turn young minds into hard drives full of pub quiz information, and instead use technology and project-based learning to help students grow at their own pace and realise the most of their potential?

I hope that an educator from the private sector preaching about education reform isn't too jarring for teachers in state schools. What you should know is that, as a UWC College, more than half of my students are able to join us due to scholarships and bursaries. If we wanted to, we could raise our IB score averages overnight by not admitting refugees and students from less advantaged backgrounds. Exam results are not what drives us.

I'm also all too aware that education will forever be a political football. But, crucially, I hope that we all share a desire for the education we provide to be truly beneficial to our students and, in turn, our communities.

The result of education should be the ability to ask the right questions, to engage in dialogue to understand alternative perspectives and to apply knowledge for the benefit of others as well as ourselves. The world needs a new generation of innovators and critical thinkers. We've created the cloud to house our facts and crunch data, why are we still using exams to turn students into stressed robots?

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[A level](#)[Exams and assessment](#)[GCSE](#)