To test or not to test
James Campbell

THE proposal to do away with the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR), known in English as the Primary School Evaluation Test which is a national examination taken by all Standard 6 Six (12-year old) students pupils, in Malaysia and the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR), examinations known in English as the Lower Secondary Assessment, a public examination test taken by all Form Three students in schools throughout the country Malaysia, has provoked and stirred an interesting debate.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin’s suggestion that these tests be scrapped has opened up the issue of assessment and testing up for debate in Malaysia and hopefully will provide a good impetus for reform in Malaysian education.

In a sense the Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin has thrown down the gauntlet to parents, academics and teachers to enter a debate discussion as to the future direction of Malaysian local schooling and the way students are assessed in the future.

The question that arises is why have this debate now? What is the problem with examinations as currently constituted? What are the likely outcomes of scrapping these examsthem?

The whole issue of exams and testing in schools is now on the agenda because of the perceived problems that a singular single-minded focus on testing has wrought in the Malaysian education system.

Critics of the way exams are currently constituted in Malaysia argue that the their summative nature of exams produces students who are good at rote recitation of facts learnt in the classroom, but lack an inability to critically think critically or innovate in their thinking. In other words the argument put by critics of currently constituted testing is that it encourages rote learning but does not provide us with useful data on a student’s deep understanding or cognition of a topic or a problem.

Why is the issue of exams considered a problem now?

To understand the arguments over assessment, in Malaysia, we have to grasp it in a deeper context of social, economic and educational change.

Socially, schooling should produce students who have the capacity to work together, cooperate, and trust each other.

Seen from these perspectives, forms of assessment can either add to an environment in school that develops collaboration, discussion and social creativity or assessment they can create an atmosphere in schools which focuses simply on individual achievement and rote recitation.

To be sure, in schools we must be able to assess the extent to which a student actually knows and has learnt something.

We must also recognise that not all forms of testing and examinations are simple right/wrong, or multiple-choice type examinations.
However, when most of us think of exams we do tend to think of exams in terms of summative tests and the regurgitation of facts by students in a pressure cooker environment.

High stakes testing of students accentuates a competitive individualistic and rote centred approach to knowledge.

What is wrong with that you may ask?

The problem is that the social, economic and learning needs of society, the nation and the student are ill served by an over emphasis on rote and summative testing.

Assessment is in fact a social process. Assessment can either be summative insofar as it measures what a student can recite at the end of the semester or year, or formative insofar as it can be used to the help students develop their learning but also help aid teachers to improve their teaching.

The extent to which exams and tests help assist students to improve their learning and teachers to improve their teaching in learning and teaching is an open question.

However, with the needs of Malaysian society evolving and changing under the pressures of globalisation and economic development, the need requirement to have forms of assessment which can help students and teachers learn and adapt to change is all the more necessary.

Economically, forms of traditional exam-centred summative assessment have served the needs of rapidly developing industrial economies well. Exams have acted as a sorting mechanism, which has been useful for providing the proper numbers of students to the requisite needs of an industrialising economy.

However, the shift towards the knowledge economy suggests the need to rethink our attitude towards assessment and exams.

A knowledge economy needs workers who are productive, creative and adaptive to change.

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Rote learning and the habits and stresses that are built up in students through preparation for high stakes assessment need to be looked at closely to see if they provide the necessary aptitudes, abilities and cognitive capacities necessary for the knowledge economy.

As reported in Bernama (June 21) in an article titled, ‘Abolishing UPSR/PMR: Views of Teachers, Parents to be Considered, director-general of education Tan Sri Alimuddin Mohd Dom also agrees that,’ “the country’s education system has been too examination-oriented and change should thus be made, in line with the current education philosophy that places importance on human capital development”.

There is, however, one thing everyone can agree on in regard to exams, assessment and testing. In Malaysia. Before any reform is initiated, there needs to be a rigorous and thorough
study of the problems, implications and issues that characterise shifting away from exams in Malaysia’s schools.

Tan Sri Muhyiddin’s Yassin’s recognition that of the stress and pressure placed on Malaysian school schoolchildren by exams is problematic is a welcome and humane contribution to the debate over about educational reform in Malaysia.

The issue before us is to combine empathy for students with a commitment to shifting assessment towards encouraging deep learning and growth. This is critical, not simply for the needs of a knowledge-based economy but, more importantly, for the growth and development of student’s capacities and potential.

NB: The writer is a Lecturer in Education in Australia and a visiting researcher at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). He is currently working on the APEX monograph series with USM on sustainability and education. Email him at jamesca@deakin.edu.au