
EXAMINATION REFORMS FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

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Abstract: Talking about reforms in higher education has always been in the air for a long time. However, it has been a very slow process in the particular area of examinations. Having been trained mostly in the school of 'Chalk Talk', our educationists have been very slow to accept the fascinating novelties in the school of 'Mouse Click'! While experts in other fields like medicine, entertainment, transport, etc., have adeptly switched to the latest technologies in their respective fields, the educationists are rather reluctant to adopt the latest educational technologies and, in a special way, to those pertaining to the area of examination reforms. In this paper, the author endeavours to bring out the different possibilities in the field of examination reforms for academic excellence. He hopes that such renovations will be gradually accepted in future.

Keywords: Technology-Oriented Assessment, Periodical And Continual Evaluation, Internal Assessment, Systematisation, Overall Grades, Reversible Results, Question Bank, Testing of Non-Academic Areas, Social Climate Against Mal-Practice, Effective Covering of Syllabus, Objecting Scoring, On-Line Testing.

Introduction: Education is a powerful instrument for societal transformation. In functional terms, it is a process of bringing about desirable changes in learners' thinking pattern and behaviour. This definition presupposes a predetermined design directed towards the achievement of some objectives that are considered desirable. It also presumes the manipulation of methods and materials for the creation of suitable learning situations and for the provision of experiences that will enable the learners to acquire the competencies indicative of the achievement of the objectives. To be sure of the achievement of objectives on the part of the learners, we need checks and balances. These are provided through evaluation techniques that help us to know the degree of achievement of the objectives by different learners.

Already in 1966, the Kothari Commission felt that the examination system also needed considerable reform. Its Report said that "A major goal of examination reforms should be to improve the reliability and validity of examinations and to make evaluation a continuous 'process aimed at helping the student to improve his level of achievement rather than at 'certifying' the quality of his performance at a given moment of time" (Ministry of Education and Youth Services, Government of India xvi). According to Srivastava, "There is a need for a movement of examination reforms, without which, no early and effective progress in education is possible." (Hari Shanker Srivastava). "Evaluation ought to be used for the improvement of learners' performance rather than its mere assessment." Thus, unit teaching and testing, diagnoses of strengths and weaknesses of students, guidance through remedial and enrichment programmes for the optimum scholastic and non-scholastic growths of a student's personality become the cornerstones of any new strategy of evaluation. A committee for the evolution of a draft National Policy on Education set up by the Narendra Modi government underlined the revamping of the question pattern too. The Committee headed by T.S.R. Subramanian said the current exam system was based on memorising. "The exam system should be geared to test understanding rather than the ability to reproduce the textbook script," it said. ³A few thoughts in the realm of examination reforms from this perspective are presented here.

The Apparent Impediments to Examination Reforms: The very term ‘reform’ implies the existence of something that needs to be changed. Reforming is invariably a difficult task to accomplish, particularly because the traditional procedures and practices often tend to take deep roots in the existing system. The following are some of the hurdles craving for our attention and remedial action:

- Inherent resistance to change by universities and other governmental agencies as it involves a reorganisation of the administrative machinery and procedures;
- Paucity of financial support as the examination reform will envisage more expenses than the traditional system;
- Lecturers’ unpreparedness for taking up the challenges of the new system because it involves some additional work;
- Inadequate training for the lecturers to move abreast with the changed situation;
- Students’ lack of enthusiasm to changes because more precise and regular study will be required of them;
- Some unscrupulous elements may resist any change as malpractices are likely to lose ground in improved examinations;
- Vested interests may like to maintain the status quo in order to maintain their control or even financial gain;
- Lack of suitable evaluation regime for providing examples for the nature of reform envisaged.

Even though these are the difficulties, it may be mentioned that they are not inherent in the very concept of examinations and hence they can be remedied through effective measures.

Aims and Objectives of Examination Reforms:The main targets of a programme of examination reform should be as follows:

- To so reform examinations that they help in improving the quality and standards of education instead of acting as a hindrance to it;
- To make examination accurate in order that the decisions made on the basis of the results are valid and reliable;
- To de-emphasise the over-stressed importance attached to examinations;
- To reduce the undue stress and strain of examinations on students, lecturers, and parents which, at times, leads to frustration expressed in different ways;
- To eliminate mis-education which is the cause of a multitude of maladies like indiscipline, malpractices, and decline in moral values among students;
- To ultimately eliminate public examinations of the present type and replace them with continual and comprehensive modes of evaluation;
- To replace marks by grades and to give students an opportunity to improve their grades by appearing in the subsequent examinations;
- To dispense with the traditional practice of declaring a student as ‘passed’ or ‘failed’ and to introduce a system of giving him/her a clearance certificate with grades for an examination as a whole or in parts;
- To discourage the use of external examinations as a screening device for every purpose;
- To discontinue the use of raw scores in the determination of a student’s results and to institute appropriate scaling procedures;
- To move towards the experiment of making the autonomous colleges as institutes which can issue their own certificates;
- To create a social climate against malpractices in examinations.

Some Salient Trends in The Sphere of Examination Reforms: Both teaching and testing have to be objective-based. The pedagogical programme is devised for the achievement of the objectives and the evaluation programme is designed for determining not only the level of achievement of the students but also of the effectiveness of the methods and materials employed in instruction.

The Overall Trends: It is now possible to identify certain unmistakable trends. These are briefly discussed here, first in respect of the over-all programme of examination reform and then specifically in

relation to written, practical, and oral examinations which are the three main areas covered by the programme.

- *From Arbitrariness to Systematisation:* The traditional approach, where the evaluator could arbitrarily use any method he/she liked or emphasised any aspect he/she desired, at his/her discretion, is being taken over by more systematic and scientific methods. Now the objectives stand clearly stated and defined, areas of learners' growth desired to be evaluated have been identified and the techniques and tools of evaluation have been devised and refined to give the maximum accuracy and necessary feedback.
- *From The Evaluation of Merely Academic Achievement to The Evaluation of Learners' Growth in Both Academic and Non-Academic Areas:* In the traditional system, educationists and evaluators were content with the evaluation of merely the scholastic aspects of learners' growth. This meant the neglect of several areas of growth which are equally, if not more, important for equipping the learners to face life-situations with confidence and success. Since the evaluation scheme overlooked them, the academic programmes also regarded them as redundant and extra-territorial to their jurisdiction, the endeavour is to correct the situation through an improved evaluation programme which covers both the scholastic and non-scholastic aspects of learners' growth. It thus exerts a very desirable influence on the programmes of the colleges and motivates them to provide for the development of several non-scholastic aspects of learners' growth which they tended to neglect in the past without taking any risk.
- *From Periodical Evaluation to Continual Evaluation:* Assessment of educational achievement in the past used to be held after long gaps of time, in most cases, in the form of quarterly, half-yearly or annual examinations. The new scheme aims at continual evaluation. This has become necessary because of the extension of the areas of evaluation to cover the non-scholastic aspects of learners' growth as also to provide regular feedback for the continual improvement of teaching and learning.
- *From Fewer Techniques of Evaluation to A Variety of Techniques:* This flows naturally from what has been said above. Because the coverage of learners' growth has to be wider and also since evaluation has to be continual, it is not only desirable but necessary to use a variety of evaluation techniques. Therefore, under the programme of examination reform, besides the traditional written examination, the use of other techniques like oral examinations, practical examinations and other observational techniques have also been incorporated.
- *From Limited Uses of Test Results to Their Wider Uses:* The traditional scheme put examination results to very few uses like grading (marking), classification (I, II, III and Failed), and certification for the successful completion of a course. The new programme envisages wider use of the test results. The uses to which examination results were earlier put have been added diagnosis, guidance (remedial instruction) and academic prediction. The comparatively newer use, namely, curriculum evaluation, is also being considered for incorporation in the programme.
- *From Measurement of Achievement to Improvement of Achievement:* The traditional scheme seemed to be content with just the measurement of achievement. It considered its job as accomplished, if evaluation provided some measure of the level of achievement of the learners, when, with the declaration of results, the whole job of evaluation was over. The new scheme, however, aims at making evaluation a means for the qualitative improvement of education, besides, of course, enabling it to perform its measurement function effectively. This end envisaged by adequately sharpening the instruments for correct and valid evaluation and also by providing feedback through test results for the improvement of education.
- *From The Treatment of Testing in Isolation to its Treatment In Relation to Other Elements of The Curriculum:* The traditional scheme tended to look at examinations in isolation as an entity without links with other aspects of education. The new scheme views examinations as an integral part of the whole educational process. The programme for reforming examinations envisages the incorporation of corresponding efforts for the improvement of other aspects like curriculum, instructional materials, text-books, and instructional methodology. This approach is likely to yield valuable results in the simultaneous and qualitative improvement of various aspects of education.

- *From Marks to Grades:* The earlier practice of indicating the level of performance of students in terms of marks on a 100 point scale is now yielding place to grades on a 5/7 point scale. This procedure is a bold admission of our limitations in achieving precision in our estimation. It is also likely to help to overcome the marginal errors of judgement. Furthermore, the step will help resolve the pitfalls of divergence in the range of scores in different subjects.
- *From Overall Grades to Subject-Wise Grades:* Traditionally, the results of candidates in different examinations were declared in terms of overall divisions. This practice is being given up and the practice of giving subject-wise grades is being adopted. The most important outcome of this changeover is expected to be the dethroning of examinations from the position they occupy today as something of multipurpose value. Consequently, the shift will also delink examinations with admission to courses of higher education and jobs. It will, as well, reduce their social and economic importance.
- *From The Need to Clear The Examination at One Stroke to Clearing by Parts:* So far, it has been obligatory for a student to clear all the subjects in one sitting. Now, it is proposed that students could clear their examinations in parts. This will be a great boon to students who cannot devote their entire attention to education.
- *From Irreversibility to Reversible Results:* At present, the marks/grades once obtained by students are final forever. Now, it will be possible for students to improve their grades in different subjects through subsequent attempts. This will help overcome the difficulties due to the elements of chance that pervade examinations.

Trends in Written Examinations: The above are the main trends in the programme of examination reform as a whole. Now let us consider the trends in improving written examinations. The main among these are discussed below:

- *From The Standardised Traditional Form to A More Flexible and Purposeful Form of Question Paper Setting:* In the traditional form, the question papers followed the traditional patterns. The new scheme envisages a structure that helps to serve some well-defined purposes and satisfies some specific educational needs, as is discussed in the paragraphs that follow.
- *From Testing of Memory to Testing of Other Higher Abilities as Well:* Though the value of memorisation cannot be underestimated, it should not receive undue emphasis. The traditional scheme, however, was mainly testing just this and not giving due importance to other higher abilities. The programme of examination reform fixes priorities and does not neglect any of the desirable abilities in the testing programme. It incorporates testing situations for evaluating abilities like understanding, critical thinking, application of knowledge and skills over and above memorisation, in due proportion.
- *From Limited Coverage of The Syllabus to its Effective Coverage:* In the traditional scheme, the question papers covered a comparatively smaller portion of the syllabus and thereby encouraged guesswork and selective study among the students. The new scheme aims at a wider and more effective coverage of the syllabus, by assigning due weightage to the various areas of content for preparing question papers. Thus, no important aspect of the syllabus is left uncovered by the question papers. The natural consequence of this is the discouragement of selective study and selective teaching which were possible in the traditional scheme.
- *From The Use of One Form of Questions to The Use of A Variety of Question Forms:* Essay-type questions requiring long answers were the main form of questions in the traditional question papers. The result was that as they required long answers, they could only be a few in number in a testing situation and the question paper setting could only lead to a poor coverage of the syllabus. The new scheme incorporates the short answer, paragraph, and objective-type questions in the question papers besides the essay type ones. This helps to increase the coverage of the syllabus, thereby, improving the validity as well as the reliability of the instrument of testing.
- *From Fewer Questions to A Large Number of Questions:* A natural corollary to the use of a variety of questions in the question papers is that the number of questions automatically increases, improving the coverage of the syllabus and the reliability of the testing programme and, above-all, encouraging desirable study habits among students.

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- *From Over-All Options to Limited Options:* The traditional system provided for over-all options in question papers of the type, "All questions carry equal marks. Attempt any five". This was a serious shortcoming of the written examinations. It presumed that one aspect of content or ability tested by a particular question could be an index of a student's level of achievement in some other entirely different content area or objective. The supposition was very unscientific. Furthermore, by choosing different sets of questions, the students were, in a way, responding to entirely different question papers (testing situations) and their scores could not justifiably be compared. This practice also encouraged habits of selective study and the adoption of other slipshod methods of teaching and learning. The new scheme advocates the complete elimination of the pattern of over-all options and their substitution by internal comparable options (in respect of the objective tested, content area covered, difficulty level, etc) which are aimed at obviating the above shortcomings.
 - *From Vague Questions to Specifically Worded Questions:* Not much attention was paid to the wording of the questions in the past, which, more often than not, were vague and could be differently interpreted by different students or examiners. In the earlier testing situations, for example, the terms 'discuss', 'evaluate', 'elucidate', were used almost indiscriminately and the examinees wrote all that they knew about that topic rather than giving a precise answer to the question. Diagrams, sketches and examples were given even when they were not required or were omitted, when necessary. The length of the answer and the window-dressing often became more important criteria for judging an answer than its quality and precision. The new scheme aims at making the questions specific so as to clearly define the scope and length of the expected answer with a view to overcoming the aforesaid handicaps. Often booklets are used to restrict space.
 - *From Subjective Scoring to Objective Scoring:* Scoring of answer scripts has been imbued with a very great element of subjectivity. The new scheme provides to the examiners a detailed marking scheme with the outline of the expected answers and the marks to be assigned to the various points of an answer. This helps to secure objectivity in the scoring of scripts and limits inter-examiner variability. The objective type question pattern definitely minimises subjectivity.

Trends in Practical Examinations: Practical work in almost all subject areas, and particularly so in science subjects, is receiving increasing emphasis due to the fast pace of progress in recent times. With the introduction of practical work in the college programmes where it did not exist earlier and with the intensification of the already existing practices in this area, the need for its proper evaluation has also emerged. In our endeavour to improve practical examinations also, as in other areas, certain well-defined trends have become visible. The chief among these are given below:

- *From The Evaluation of Only The Product of Performance to The Evaluation of Both The Process As Well As The Product:* This has been the result of the belief that what is important is not only what a student is able to successfully do but also how he/she accomplishes it. Such evaluation involves the identification of various logical steps in performing various experiments and the observational evaluation of the students through these, besides the evaluation of the final outcome of the experiments. Such an approach is aimed at developing the scientific attitude in students.
- *From a limited coverage to a wider coverage of skills:* In the traditional scheme, normally only one experiment was required to be performed by a student in the course of practical examinations in science subjects. In the improved scheme of practical examinations, one major and three or four minor experiments are set for a student to perform. This is done with a view to affecting a more comprehensive coverage of the skills which students are expected to develop. In this process, the skills are identified and enumerated and experiments or parts of experiments are selected or designed for specifically evaluating the identified skills. Students are thus evaluated on a larger variety of skills than was possible through the traditional scheme. This also motivates the colleges to provide opportunities to students for the development of a larger variety of skills than was attempted earlier.
- *From arbitrary and subjective measure to a more objective scoring:* The improved scheme also attempts to make evaluation more reliable. This is attempted to be accomplished through the development of a detailed marking scheme for assessing the various steps or the processes involved

in the various experiments as well as their final product (results), and the development of evaluation procedures on that basis. This also helps to deduce inter-examiner variability and contributes to the improvements of reliability of evaluation.

Trends in Oral Examinations: Oral examinations in education have an ancient origin in India. At that time, most of the knowledge had to be conserved by individuals as part of memory and examinations were both a test of memory and an assessment of an individual's ability to use the conserved knowledge. But as time passed, oral examinations were almost completely substituted by written examinations for reasons of expediency and in view of the limited purposes that the examinations were supposed to serve. The resultant situation was not a very happy one as one of the very important proficiencies, viz., verbal facility, was neglected in the regular college programmes and only taken indirect cognizance of in the course of some extra-curricular activities like debates or declamation contents.

Even where oral examinations were being conducted, they had a very low weightage in the total scheme and they mainly tested content. Furthermore, they were mainly used as supplements to the written examinations since the coverage by the two was almost similar. In the reformed pattern of oral examinations, however, the following main deviations from the traditional scheme could be observed.

- **From Narrow to Broad-Based Evaluation:** Speech and writing being equally important vehicles of communication, both deserve to be developed in a balanced manner and evaluated appropriately. The schemes of evaluation in the traditional system were basically content-loaded and wherever expression was attempted to be tested, it was assessed in the written form because this was easier and less time-consuming. Thus several aspects of expression which were important in their own right were overlooked and consequently the development of such abilities was neglected in the college programmes. The new scheme aims at the evaluation of expression through the oral form in addition to the written one.
- **From Subject-Based to Expression-Based Evaluation:** As has been stated already in passing, in the improved type of oral examinations, the emphasis is on oral expression rather than on just content. The new scheme attempts to evaluate the following:
 - Expressional skills (pronunciation, intonation, fluency, delivery of organised ideas, self-confidence, etc.)
 - Linguistic content (vocabulary, phrases, idioms, etc.)
 - Ideational content (subject-matter)

This shift in emphasis is the soul of the new programme of evaluation and makes it broad-based.

- **From Arbitrary to A More Rational and Scientific Scoring:** We are all aware of the systems of oral examinations in vogue in the past, where the examiner's over-all judgement was the sole basis of evaluation. This evidently was not free from bias arising out of the fascination of an examiner for vocabulary, fluency or a particular personality trait, etc. The shortcomings of this situation are attempted to be overcome through the precise enumeration of the elements of oral expression to be evaluated and the weightage to be given to each. Evaluation through this scheme and the training of examiners in the art of scoring go a long way in making evaluation more objective.

Conclusion: The above mentioned trends are not the only directions in the reform of examinations in vogue in the country, but these are the ones which have become prominent. There are several other trends under way like preparing working modules to be displayed in an Exhibition, project work, seminar, group discussion, paper presentation, study tour, etc., which are gradually assuming their full significance. It is certain that, in future, certain other trends will come to the fore and contribute to make the educational testing programmes in the country not only valid and reliable but also a powerful means for the qualitative improvement of teaching and learning.

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