

Are Exams Fair?

In the middle of writing an exam question a student ran out of paper. He continued to write, first on the desk, then proceeding to the legs and, finally the floor of the room. By this time the invigilator was standing by him trying to get him to stand up. Eventually two people carried him out of the room.

In another case I saw an exam victim break into hysterical laughter and run out of the room.

These are examples of a widespread ailment—exam stress and anxiety. In its most extreme form examination stress can drive people to mental breakdown. For the majority of students exams are a source of unhappiness and worry.

People don't cause stress, exams do.

Whilst universities produce programmes and counselling for students who suffer from the extreme effects of "evaluation anxiety", they rarely address the fundamental cause of that stress.

It seems obvious that exams are the cause of exam stress. Yet assessment has become such a central part of the educational process that we accept its physical and psychological side effects without question. The scope of the problem is frightening.

In 1968 The British Student Health Association Conference at Leeds University concluded that between eight and eleven per cent of all university students seek medical treatment for examination stress.

The extreme manifestations of examination panic and anxiety are shocking:

"During the course of an examination students are sometimes brought out in a state of almost total psychic collapse, shivering, unable to write, think or even walk," wrote Dr. M. Conway.

Dr. N. Malleon, another British physician, even suggested that there is a similarity between shell shock and exam panic, and that similar treatments should be observed. Symptoms similar to paranoid schizophrenia have been observed in students suffering exam panic, according to the British Student Health Association.

Examination suicides

One of the most delicate questions about exam stress is suicide. Few Universities will admit to student suicide figures or even publicise suicides when they occur. It isn't good for public relations; publicity often invites possible copy-cat deaths

Sadly, some exam-stress students do kill themselves. Many researchers have tried to claim no necessary link between student suicides and examinations. Studies in England, however, indicate that exams are a cause of student suicides.

Unlike most North American colleges, the English examination system groups together the majority of exams in a short period at the end of a student's studies. Year-round suicide figures can be compared with exam period suicides. A study at the Cambridge University by medical writer A. Rook for the period 1948 to 1958 concluded that:

"It is difficult to believe that exams do not have some influence on the Cambridge suicides, for over half of them occurred around the exam period, and four out of five of those who were believed to be worrying over their work died in May (the exam period)."

The medical profession has, however, failed to produce any comprehensive studies of college suicides. Many people will claim that there are numerous reasons behind student suicides, and that it would be impossible to place examinations as the critical concern in every case. That exam stress is certainly a factor in these suicides cannot be denied.

Why exams?

Given the numerous problems that examinations cause we should question their use in our educational system. Medical and psychological pressures, breakdowns, and personal damage should not be accepted as a fact in any institution.

Exams, we are told, prepare students for 'life in the outside world'. Where in the outside world are we faced with a situation in which a specific set of problems have to be solved in silence, without resource material and without co-operation with fellow workers?

It can be argued that stress is to be found in many aspects of life, and that examination stress prepares people for life's many stresses.

Yet different types of stress are not necessarily the same. Ability to perform in an examination does not mean immunity from cracking up in a different form of stress-situation. Panic in an examination does not imply an incapability to perform in other crises.

Dr. D. J. Lucas accounts a story of a patient who suffered extreme exam panic who later experienced no panic or great anxiety when involved in a ferry disaster in Greece. How well can the cool exam candidate handle a real-life crisis?

Even if it were true that the examination situation were duplicated in real life, one has to question the need to prepare people for such rare circumstances.

Are exams fair?

The fundamental justification given for the examination system is that it provides for fairness of assessment. Without delving into the somewhat dubious functions of assessment, we should examine this argument carefully.

Exams, we are told, may cause stress but they do provide an 'objective' and reasonable method of assessment that is neutral of bias and measures every student against the same yardstick.

In fact, examinations examine the people who mark them more than the people who take them. Apart from the level of evaluation anxiety numerous other variable factors influence examinations. The state of health of the student, the amount of sleep the night before, psychology and mood all determine an exam candidate's performance. Ability to cope with stress does not, hence, necessarily indicate understating of material.

The variables involved in the marking process are even more complex.

One of the most comprehensive studies 'The Marks of Examiners' by Hartog and Rhodes with Cyril Burt (1938) brought together large numbers of different university examiners with a range of different samples of completed exams in History, English and Mathematics. The final outcome of the exercise was that the range of results (a rough bell curve) of each marker was roughly the same, but there was no correlation between individual papers. The variance of marks for specific papers varied wildly

from miserable failures to acceptable passes (one paper was marked 17/100 by one examiner and 78/100 by another). Different examiners were not marking consistently poorly or consistently highly — there was, simply, no consistency.

Grade averages may be the same for different examiners, but specific students' marks may vary wildly. These variances have been noted in many studies: The Robbins Report (UK 1963), The Carnegie Corporation

conference on examinations (1936), and Daniels and Schouten 'The Screening of Students' (1970) all reach the conclusion that exam marking introduces a massive number of uncontrollable individual variances. As H. Pierron wrote in Universities Quarterly in 1967:

"All the experimental data has shown that for a particular performance expressed in terms of an exam script, assessment by different examiners produces marks with considerable variability such that in the determination of these marks the part played by the examiner can be greater than the performance of the examinee."

Why exams?

If exams can be shown to cause unnecessary stress, and potential psychological damage without a solid justification on the basis of fairness, 'objectivity' or egalitarianism why do they exist?

Examinations haven't always been an integral part of the educational process. The Jesuit order, well reputed for its humanitarianism, was responsible for introducing examinations in the Western world.

The only thing we can really say about exams is that they foster competition between students. In a society based upon the principle that competition is an inherent human characteristic, examinations serve a practical role as a factor in our social moulding. As students we are trained to see our own advancement in terms of direct competition with our peers for examination marks, grade point averages and academic 'recognition'.

In the extreme cases students have reported the mysterious disappearance of crucial reading materials from the library before exams, law students have found pages missing from reference materials and, in some cases, students have deliberately misinformed their classmates before exams. In this respect examinations are attempting to create a similar environment to the 'outside world' where we are encouraged to seek our social advancement at the expense of others.

On the other hand it is strictly forbidden to co-operate in examinations. It's called plagiarism or 'cheating'.

Whatever the real social function of examinations may be, we can trust that our universities will remain silent on the issue. Flimsy justifications come readily, but substantive proof of the value of the system has yet to be produced. In the words of A. P. Ratensis:

"It is sometimes claimed that students are graded by universities in the same way that eggs are graded by packing stations. This, however, is untrue. There are only two important variables determining the quality of an egg — its size and freshness — and both of these are pretty accurately controlled by the packing station.

"The quality of a student's exam performance is, however, determined by a mass of variables, for example, memory, clarity and originality of thought, articulateness, luck as to which questions appear, none of which is on its own accurately expressed in the single grade awarded to each student. Thus from the point of view of accurate grading, the egg gets a better deal than the student."

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