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Exams distract from learning

Culture of 'mugging' and regurgitation precludes education in real-world skills

Letter from Kwan Jin Yao

I REFER to the report "A one-stop portal for teachers" (July 14) by Ms Joanne Chan.

As we applaud the Ministry of Education's (MOE) well-intentioned decision to render the learning process for a select group of primary school pupils more flexible and engaging, the fast-evolving global landscape leads many to wonder if the proposed changes are too little, too late.

Gone are the days when pedantic pedagogies of rote-learning and enforced memorisation were embraced as norms; stakeholders are realising that mere excellence in standardised examinations alone is a poor representation of an individual's overall abilities.

The MOE also has recognised that strict adherence to existing curricula and antiquated methodologies would be detrimental for students. Reducing the current emphasis on tests, examinations and grades would encourage parents and teachers to

focus more attentively upon the kid's holistic development, taking into account his pursuits and endeavours in fields beyond the strictly academic.

While a probation period would be needed to gauge receptivity and the general effectiveness of the implementation, the MOE must be prepared to progress swiftly thereafter.

The modes and criteria for assessment should be calibrated to encompass a variety of elements beyond the traditional emphasis on the written and regurgitation aspects, such as research or oratory skills.

Ultimately, these adjustments would achieve insignificant long-term benefits if the entire examination culture and presence is not tweaked or gradually done away with.

Regardless of the new portals or programmes, the major standardised examinations – the Primary School Leaving Examination and the GCE N, O and A Levels – would continue to provide nuanced incentives and impetus to revert to the

tried-and-tested methods of dull studying and "mugging". There would be a perpetual obsession with aceing examinations without caring for the actual teaching-learning process.

The most sustainable approach would be to spread out a subject's weighting over a variety of skills and components, instead of hedging everything on singular assessments.

Allow a student to be evaluated continuously, granting him exploration and development across disciplines: For instance, language subjects should balance the speaking, comprehension and written aspects, while science subjects – especially at the introductory levels – should be premised upon hands-on experimentation to provide a fertile ground for future research and independent exploration.

Change is the new constant; if we persist on staying in our comfort zone, we will only be disadvantaging future generations of students in Singapore.

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