

Our obsession with national exams is failing our children



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Last week's release of the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) results has, once again, been treated as breaking news. But let me ask: should it be? In a functioning system, a child sitting an exam should be as normal as a new day dawning.

Yet here we are, whipping up national excitement and anxiety over the performance of minors mostly aged between 12 and 13 years. We even fear some actually "failed." But who in their right mind declares a 13-year-old a failure?

So, it is time we confront the truth: our national examination system is broken. It prioritizes a single, high-stakes score over actual competency and it's holding our children as well as our nation behind.

Take the example of the fact that of the top 100 performing schools in the country, only eight are from Kampala. Is this realistic? The answer is an overwhelming NO!

These figures are put out to the public because the system isn't working. The real tragedy is our collective reluctance to change it. Why? Because powerful interests benefit from the status quo. If you're doubting, just look around. You will realise that schools now market themselves as "first-grade factories" and gullible parents scramble to get their children in. It is sad that we in the education sector have commodified education, yet seldom stop to ask about the elephant in the room; what are learners in these schools actually learning?

Last year, I urged the Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) to show courage and scrap national exams starting

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with PLE and Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE). These exams have become a nuisance, causing so much unnecessary panic and trauma that Uneb deploys police officers to guard learners sitting exams. This isn't education, it's a disaster.

I know some critics will worry that without national exams, how will we judge our children's progress? The answer is already within our reach; education is all about continuous assessment. A learner's journey should be evaluated through what they consistently produce, not what they scribble under exam hall duress.

Therefore, just imagine a more comprehensive, fairer system. One where a student's final grade reflects a blend of district assessments (25%), school-based continuous assessment (20%), projects and presentations (20%), character and participation (10%), patriotism and community engagement (5%), volunteering or apprenticeships (15%), and tech skills (5%). This paints a fuller picture of a learner's ability, values and readiness for the world.

So, we should replace phased-out national exams with teacher-designed continuous assessments tailored to local needs. Sincerely, is a student in Kaabong facing the same challenges and opportunities as one in Kampala? Our assessments should reflect that reality.

To support this, Uneb must evolve. I have said this before and I repeat; let's transform it into a Research, Evaluation, Assessment, and Development (READ) body. Its new role would be to support District Evaluation Boards in creating frameworks that measure true learning

gains. Each district would then have the authority to design curricula that serve its community's specific needs. This would also keep young learners in schools within their communities, ending the disruptive cross-country movement for primary education.

This shift must be part of a broader move toward competence-based education at all levels. While it's encouraging to see this approach at O-level, a major gap remains and our universities are lagging. They continue to test 19th-century skills in a 21st-century world.

Take this simple but shocking fact: public universities spend over Shs 15 billion annually on paper and printing answer books, yet many of their graduates cannot type a basic report on a computer. What employer today asks for a handwritten report? If exams were conducted on computers, students would graduate with a tangible, marketable skill.

Beyond PLE, we must also challenge rigid timelines of learning. Why must bachelor's degree take three fixed years? Can a learner master a module in less time? Why hold them back? True competence-based learning assesses capability, not calendar years.

All in all, our children are more than a grade on a slip of paper. Our education system should see that, nurture them, assess that. It's time to stop the madness, scrap the archaic exam factory and build a system that truly prepares learners for life. The future is waiting and it doesn't come with an invigilator escorted by policemen.

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