The Star

‘I still believe in final exams’

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Bring it on: A Year Six pupil at a school in Kuching, Sarawak, giving the thumbs up before sitting for the UPSR, which was scrapped in 2021. — File photo

Despite popular support for their scrapping, traditional assessments hold valuable merits

THIS might raise a few eyebrows in academic circles, but I still believe in final exams, even after listening to countless arguments for scrapping them.

Yes, the kind that happens in an exam hall, where the candidate concentrates on answering written questions.



The type where an invigilator goes around handing out the question scripts and keeps watch to prevent cheating.

The same exam that makes you break into a cold sweat when you realise the questions are nothing like what you prepared for.

But yes, I do miss these exams – not just as a student, but later as a teacher developing and administering them.

As nerve-wracking and anxiety-producing as they were, there was a sense of achievement in the marks you earned, especially when you did well.

But we have come a long way from the days of traditional final exams, especially in higher education.
Some academics frown at the mere mention of final exams, and their disapproval deepens if you bring up terms like exam modes or passing grades.

“Final exams are so outdated! Why subject students to such archaic methods? Shouldn’t we focus on more holistic assessments?” they argue.

Other formative assessment proponents might contend that assessments should provide feedback, address gaps and foster development, not just test surface-level retention of facts.

“Why make a student sit through a three-hour exam when he might simply have a bad day or suffer from exam anxiety? Is it fair to judge his performance based on one test?”

In reality, final exams in higher education rarely make up 100% of a course assessment.

They are usually combined with continuous assessments like assignments, projects, case studies or presentations, which are formative in nature.

The final exam component, if present, typically accounts for 30% to 70% of the total marks for a course.

Assessments in schools have also diversified to include alternative forms such as portfolios, projects and practical components alongside final exams.

The combination of formative and summative assessments ensures that student evaluations are fair, holistic and reflective of true learning outcomes.

However, anti-final exam advocates persistently push for their complete removal from academic institutions.

While their resistance has merit, it overlooks the potential value of final exams.

Continuous formative assessments provide ongoing feedback to both students and teachers, guiding instructional modifications, promoting student engagement, and ultimately improving learning outcomes.

To ensure fairness, methods may vary to include quizzes, interviews, projects, forums and oral presentations.

In contrast, final exams serve as summative assessments that evaluate students' overall learning, contribute to final grades, and offer feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

Although criticisms of final exams include their tendency to encourage cramming and surface-level skills, these exams may actually promote the knowledge retention and recall that many students lack today.

Final exams also play a significant role in decisions regarding eligibility for higher education institutions, scholarships and awards. The standardised evaluation methods associated with final exams provide a sense of accountability and consistency, helping to ensure fairness across the board.

While discussing assessments – whether final exams or class assignments – another pressing question is how to ensure that the work submitted by students is genuinely authentic.

How do we educate students on the meaning of open book exams and the ethical use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and online materials?

Those of us in higher education face the challenge of ensuring that students' submissions reflect their own ideas, even when they are permitted to use GenAI tools.

Despite incorporating similarity checking tools, allowing GenAI in exams often feels like permitting plagiarism.

I am glad that proctoring tools are now being used by many higher education institutions for online final exams, although many have reported initial student resistance.

This may reflect how comfortable students have become with a cut-and-paste culture, making independent thinking on assignments or tests seem like a foreign activity – something they even find unfair.

They feel deprived of the chance to pass off work that isn’t their own as theirs; in short, they feel deprived of the opportunity to cheat.

Perhaps above all, this is the greatest challenge: educating students at all levels about the true purpose of assessments, the definitions of plagiarism and cheating, and why these practices should be avoided at all costs, whether in formative assessments or final exams.

Dr G. Mallika Vasugi, who currently teaches at a local university, provides insights into the teaching profession. The views expressed here are the writer’s own.