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**The case for exams 2021**

File photo

Last Monday, the Inter-Provincial Education Ministers Conference announced its decision to conduct local school examinations for grades 9 to 12 after June 20, with higher priority given to transitioning grades 10 (Matric) and 12 (Inter). This is the right decision, for two principal reasons.

The first reason is that last year we did not have any centralized board exams for any grades. Students, especially of grades 10 and 12, who are transitioning to Intermediate level and universities need assessments to know where they stand. Matric students have to choose a stream (pre-medical, pre-engineering, computer science, etc) and need a sense of their own strengths and weaknesses. The situation is more dire for Intermediate students.

Universities need a solid basis on which to accept or reject applicants to undergraduate programmes. The competition for admission to some universities is notoriously cut-throat. For example, in years past the acceptance rate at one highly sought after Pakistani public university has been as low as two percent. For reference, Harvard’s acceptance rate in an ordinary year is between four and five percent. Universities cannot and should not admit students with no assessment results for the last two years of high school.

Government representatives made several public announcements throughout the school year, clearly stating that exams would be held this year under all circumstances. Despite that, there are loud demands for cancelling exams citing two justifications: a) Fear of Covid infection; and b) No learning during the school year.

Last year, the world did not yet know if open schools contribute to the spread of Covid-19 in communities and put school children at greater risk. So, out of an abundance of caution, much of the world closed schools. By December 2020, National Geographic reported on the results of an extensive study conducted in Iceland involving 40,000 students that sought to answer these questions. The results are good news.

Children shed only half as much virus as adults, drastically reducing the probability of infection. The study also showed that rates of infection seen in schools are just reflective of adherence to precautionary measures of communities outside schools – reopening schools does not increase infection rates, provided SOPs are followed outside and inside the school. Therefore, it is social and individual behaviors which determine whether schools can be safely opened or not. The study is reassuring – albeit carried out in a context of more responsible social behaviors.

Apart from the Iceland study, we now also know that the probability of surface transmission is very low, which means that the primary weapons against Covid-19 are vaccines and facemasks. The fact that exams will be held during summer break (when schools are closed) further reduces exposure. Reasonable precautions such as vaccination for those who are eligible, mask-wearing and distanced seating enable conduct of exams without elevating the risk of infection.

On April 26, the day of the first Cambridge exam, there were indeed still shortcomings in arrangements at isolated venues but those were quickly addressed by the next exam. The biggest risk that remained was created by parents crowding outside the exam venue, which is social behavior, something government departments cannot be held responsible for. In hindsight, the A2-year exams went by without a hitch.

The CDC recently announced that Covid-vaccinated individuals shed too little virus to infect others and are, effectively, not carriers. Conducting exams, even reopening schools, does not significantly raise the probability of infection. As the study puts it, in this pandemic, schools ought to be the last thing to close, and the first to reopen.

The other reason given to justify the demand for cancellation of exams is that students have not learned anything all year. This reason ties into the second reason exams must be conducted: accountability.

All of last school year, we heard about the various measures being taken by public and private schools to adjust to constraints in the pandemic. On the government side, there were educational TV programs, the Radio School, online learning resources, a reduction in the curriculum for instruction and, by extension, exams, distribution and collection of lessons / worksheets / homework on scheduled school days, and school attendance for high / higher secondary students on alternate days. Private schools claimed they had successfully transitioned to online education, deployed learning management systems (claims which were proudly highlighted on websites, in ads and brochures) and continued to charge parents tuition fees to make hay while the sun was shining.

Exam time is when the rubber hits the road – it is judgment day. Were all these claims just a performance or did they amount to something? I want to know. Parents, particularly private school parents who paid high tuition fees all year, should want to know what they got for it. The results of this year’s exams will show which schools, which exam boards, which provinces fully or partially met the Covid-challenge and which ones just talked. Which combination of programmes worked, and which did not.

While accountability is important, ultimately the most important question these exams will answer is which students, particularly grade 12 students, are academically prepared to start the next phase of their academic career, and which ones are not. For parents who will discover that their provincial education departments and districts failed them, or their school misled them, or their (almost-adult) children were too disinterested in their own future, exam results could prove a much-needed kick in the head. It is not enough to just pay school bills. However big the tuition fee bill is, parents need to stay engaged with their schools, teachers and, when necessary, government departments, and maintain a hands-on approach when it comes to their children’s education.

It is worth remembering the scale of the challenge. According to 2017-18 figures, there are about 761,053 grade 12 and 1,521,214 grade 10 students (public and private) across Pakistan. If that sounds like a lot, remember that these are scattered across more than 25 exam boards across the country. Many of them will sit in different exams which means only subsets will be coming to exam centers on different days. That makes following the same SOPs used in Cambridge A2 exams an addressable challenge if the public acts responsibly. For students and parents that means following SOPs coming from and going to exam centers. There are further options available to reduce disruption due to sudden micro lockdowns such as reducing the durations of exams or limiting exams to key subjects.

The exams for IGCSE / O-Level and AS grades could have been conducted the same way. Instead, misguided and under-informed activism made the government falter under public pressure. Exams for AS-grade will still be held in November and will now encroach on the next academic year. A few hours before this piece was written, Cambridge issued an update that it will conduct significantly shortened replacement exams in Pakistan for the most widely enrolled IGCSE and O-level subjects at the end of July. This will allow students to move to the next grade before the end of the summer. The same idea of shortened exams of key subjects that Cambridge is deploying for IGCSE / O-level exams is an option that can be considered by our local exam boards.

There is also an important lesson from the handling and conduct of A2 Cambridge exams a few weeks earlier. There was a lot of misinformation floating on the internet and social media regarding Cambridge exams. Even the supposedly most (tech-)literate segment of our society fell for reassuring false news from unofficial accounts that fed readers’ wishes. Several parents had false hope that those skipping the exams might receive school assessed grades while those who sit for the exam will miss out on that ‘generosity’. As a result, many pulled their children out of exams at the last moment. The result is that A2 students who could have taken their exams, graduated and be done with high school opted not to. This action will now delay their entry into universities by a year, something that was completely avoidable.

Going forward, the government must ensure clarity of communication with stakeholders. Exam boards that are ultimately responsible for on-ground logistics need to stay on top and ahead of the additional measures necessary this year. On exam day, if snap inspections reveal arrangements to be lacking in some exam venue(s), they should refrain from dramatic measures (such as cancelling exams) and instead do the best that’s possible to address problems.

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