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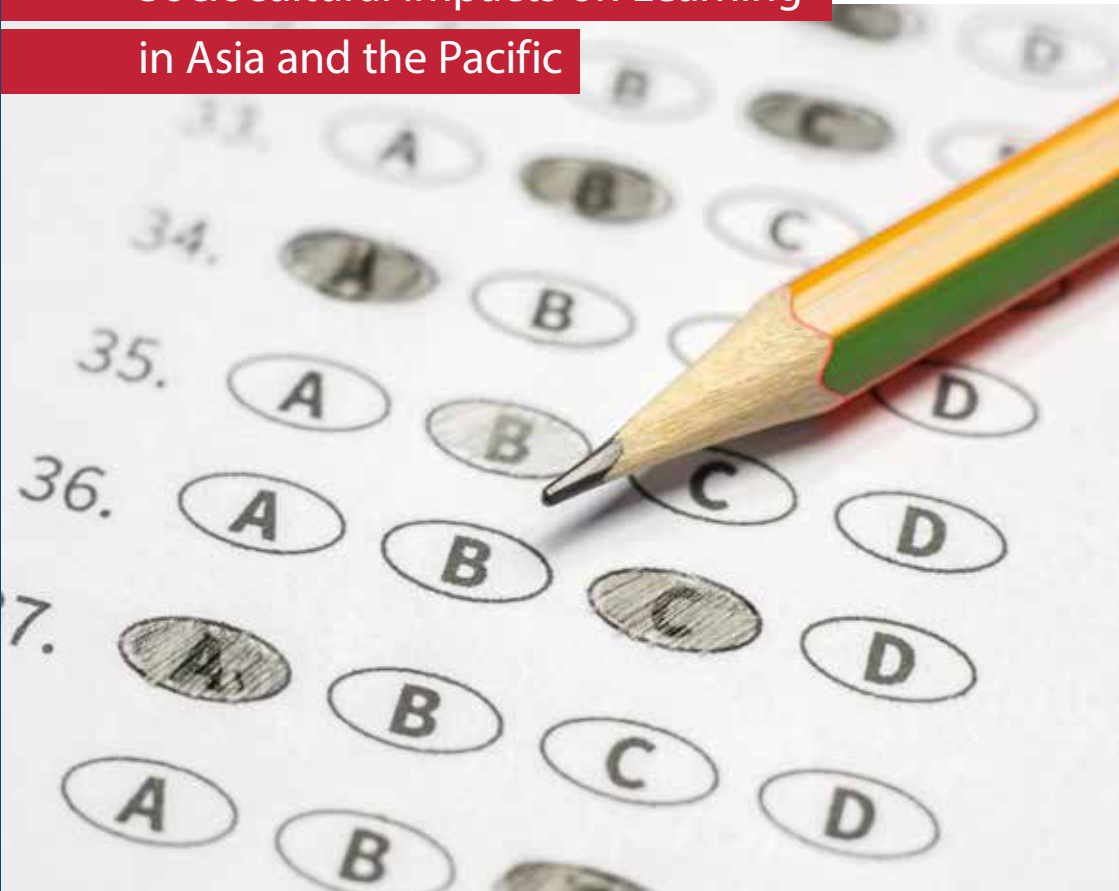


Sustainable  
Development  
Goals

Bangkok Office  
Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau  
for Education

# The Culture of Testing

Sociocultural Impacts on Learning  
in Asia and the Pacific



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in Asia and the Pacific

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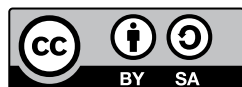
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## Foreword

Our world today is being shaped by social and economic transformations: rapid urbanization, accelerating technological change, aging societies and increased connectivity, as well as increased conflicts, intolerance and inequality. These transformations leave learners with a myriad of challenges when it comes to the purpose of education and how it is perceived. UNESCO's 2015 publication, *Rethinking Education*, shifted our focus of education to how we understand knowledge, and particularly how it can be used to address social needs. In addition, the Sustainable Development Goal 4-Education 2030 Agenda (SDG4-Education 2030) codifies this shift in its focus on quality education, to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. This global agenda includes a renewed focus on effective learning and the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and competencies, namely problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork. It is no longer sufficient to get a child into the classroom — they must develop relevant skills to face this rapidly changing world.

But do societies truly value this approach? Is the purpose of education to extend as much knowledge to our learners for them to navigate these ultra-competitive settings? International competition, whether in finance, politics, trade or technology, is omnipresent. It is also reflected in education, as students are being educated in a world that is highly competitive, stressful and test-focused. High-stakes examinations are the means for controlling access to better schools, higher education and greater life opportunities. Rather than providing learners with the relevant skills to navigate an increasingly complex world, in many cases we are narrowing and limiting their knowledge, skills and competencies through a simplified notion of success. Have education systems and societies lost an emphasis on values and the kind of people they want children to become? Or is the main objective simply achievement and consumption of knowledge to use as a means for better life outcomes or higher status?

The pressure to achieve academic success can come at a cost. Learners are increasingly unhappy and stressed, and the pressure to achieve academically and obtain high scores in tests and exams is seen as one of the main causes. Whether achievement is of more value than other competencies and learner well-being depends on how different societies interpret the value of education. This study therefore follows on from *Rethinking Education*, and within the SDG4-Education 2030 backdrop, to examine the social and cultural values of the quality of education. By examining the relationship between society, culture and the values that they place on examinations and academic success, it helps us to better understand what drives societies to rely on these tests as a measure of success.

This report was conducted by UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and Pacific as part of a series of regional studies on youth engagement and disengagement in secondary education and learning, initiated by UNESCO's Section of Partnerships, Cooperation and Research within the Division for Education 2030 Support and Coordination.



Maki Hayashikawa

*Officer-in-Charge*  
*UNESCO Bangkok*

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## List of acronyms

<b>CBA</b>	Class-Based Assessments
<b>CHCs</b>	Confucian Heritage Cultures
<b>HSC</b>	Higher Secondary Certificate (Bangladesh)
<b>JSC</b>	Junior School Certificate (Bangladesh)
<b>NHSE</b>	National High School Graduation Examination (Viet Nam)
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PISA</b>	Programme for International Student Assessment
<b>SBA</b>	School-Based Assessments
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SEE</b>	Secondary Entrance Examination (Tonga)
<b>SSC</b>	Secondary School Certificate (Bangladesh)
<b>TIMSS</b>	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
<b>TSC</b>	Tonga School Certificate Examination
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNT</b>	Unified National Testing (Kazakhstan)

## Executive summary

Across the world, young learners are faced with the effects of a competitive, stress-fueled and test-focused education system that often measures their success by scores on assessments and examinations. In many countries, student learning outcomes are increasingly being used to measure overall education system performance. This is evidenced by the growing number of countries eager to join international and regional learning assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), as well as the reliance on standardized examinations to gauge, certify and select the best students.

High-stakes exams often determine the future of learners: transition, graduation, entrance to higher education, to better schools, or to better jobs. These exams do not only have high-stakes for students, but also for teachers, schools and families, as the test results can influence funding, recognition and reputation. In some cases, the stakes are so high that examinations can dominate thinking about the purpose and nature of schooling. Students are constantly preparing for examinations, students and their parents are continually anxious about academic success, and the pressure on students to do well can lead to stress, anxiety, depression as well as school violence and even suicide. A growing body of research has highlighted the crucial relationship between happiness and educational quality, whereby schools that prioritize learner well-being have the potential to be more effective, with better learning outcomes and greater achievements in learners' lives (Layard and Hagell, 2015; UNESCO 2016b). This focus on 'high scores' may be undermining other fundamental aspects of learning that are often not captured in tests and examinations, and questions whether education systems have lost sight of the true value and purpose of education. What drives some societies to place such an emphasis on examinations, and how does this pressure affect learners in those societies?

## *Research design and methodology*

This study presents a synthesis of nine case studies in the Asia-Pacific region that seek to examine the manifestations of a ‘culture of testing’, the relationship between sociocultural factors, education and examinations, as well as how this ‘culture of testing’ both shapes and is shaped by education policies and systems.

There were three overarching research questions:

- What are the social and cultural factors that create a ‘culture of testing’?
- What is the relationship between the ‘culture of testing’ and education policies, reform, curriculum, and teacher pedagogy?
- How does the ‘culture of testing’ affect learners and learning outcomes?

Nine country researchers from across the region (Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Philippines, Tonga, and Viet Nam<sup>2</sup>) prepared case studies based on primary and secondary data. The researchers conducted a desk study and literature review of secondary data sources, as well as primary data collection through the distribution of questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions with students, teachers and parents. With data gathered from both public and private schools in urban and rural locations, sample sizes varied across the nine countries from 150 participants to over 5,000. Researchers therefore adopted the most relevant means and methods available for them to complete the study. Students came from across all levels of schooling, but the case studies were careful to include upper secondary school (Grade 11 or 12) students nearing a high-stakes exam.

## *Key findings*

The case studies identified several common sociocultural factors that significantly contribute to what we may call a ‘culture of testing’, namely economic opportunity or social mobility, the strong influence of family, and the notion of hard work, diligence, and studiousness. They also

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<sup>2</sup> Case study summaries are available in Appendix A, p. 123.

highlighted in distinct forms the importance of examinations to the learning process, the value that people place on the role of exams in determining and evaluating learning outcomes, and the promise of what comes from a good exam score.

From the case study results, students, parents and teachers noted how high-stakes examinations affect stakeholders through a combination of competition, internal and external pressures, stress and anxiety related to these pressures, emphasis on private tutoring or exam preparation courses, and impacts on teaching and the curriculum.

The key findings from the three main research questions can be summarized as follows:

*How do social and cultural factors shape a 'culture of learning'?*

Social mobility and future economic opportunity are among the main motivations of students and their families. Students are motivated to find the best opportunities available to them, whether that consists of the right school, the best course or stream of education, or scholarships. Students consistently rated this as one of the main purposes of high-stakes examinations and why they are so important. Family also play a particularly strong role in the development of learners' motivations, perceptions and behaviour towards examinations and educational success. Students and parents also consistently indicated the pride, prestige or honour that would accompany high-scores, and how the family and community would celebrate their success.

Perceptions of the value of examinations were linked to the reputation that comes from obtaining good results: better schools, better career paths and better opportunities in life. The combination of these sociocultural factors and perceptions leads to the notion of tests as a 'tradition', or a social and cultural tool that is very much a part of how societies are constructed to 'socialize' or 'educate'. The role of examinations in education and learning has become embedded into culture and society, and therefore people readily accept and acknowledge the importance that examinations play in the 'socialization' and 'education' of young learners.

### *What is the relationship between the 'culture of testing' and education policies, education reform, curriculum and teacher pedagogy?*

High-stakes exams can shape the curriculum, teaching and learning materials and pedagogy, and also the perceptions of teachers, parents, learners and the general public. Teachers and schools place a great emphasis on examinations as they greatly impact their reputation and perceived effectiveness. As a result, to secure good results for their students, teachers are often forced to teach to the test. The majority of teachers indicated that they find it difficult to complete the required curriculum prepare their students for examinations. In many cases, teachers utilize classroom time for examination preparation and the content or knowledge that will be tested, leaving little time to work on subjects, skills or competencies that are not found in exams.

Yet, many people find exams to be trusted and reliable measures of evaluation. Therefore, the reliance on exams has been built into sociocultural values over time, and as a result, education policy becomes a reflection of these values. Evidence from several of the case studies highlighted the relationship between examinations and education policy. In this instance, the perception of stakeholders plays a significant role in determining how governments shape education policy. Several of the case studies (Fiji, India, Japan) highlighted how governments had eliminated several high-stakes examinations due to the overwhelming pressures students faced, only to reinstate them due to public pressure. Others indicated that they were seeking measures to reduce the burden placed on students by examinations (Republic of Korea and Viet Nam), while recognizing that the importance placed by students, teachers and parents on examinations is still very high.

### *How does the 'culture of testing' affect learners and learning outcomes?*

The competition to obtain high-scores, to secure a place in better schools or to have a better future, were common pressures highlighted by students, teachers and parents in the study. High levels of competition can place a great deal of stress and anxiety on learners, their families and teachers. All case studies indicated that learners worry about performing in exams

or in school, and many are very worried of disappointing their family and teachers. Because students and their families are focused on 'scores' this can simplify or narrow the objectives of learning, and stakeholders come to perceive that high scores equal 'learning'.

In addition, most of the case studies noted the reliance and prevalence of private tutoring to help learners prepare for exams. This emphasis on 'shadow education' follows the impact of competition and pressure to achieve success, as families fear that without the extra help, their children will not be able to compete and to succeed, and ultimately fail to secure a better livelihood. Where private tutoring was not prevalent, many of the stakeholders indicated that schools offer additional preparation courses outside of regular school hours. This emphasis shows the importance that societies place on 'scores' over the process of learning.

### *Way forward*

As the testing culture permeates all levels of society, and all levels of education systems from the classroom to local education boards and national departments or ministries, tackling the symptoms is a challenge. Many of the issues discussed are not isolated simply to a testing culture, but also incorporate other educational challenges related to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. High levels of anxiety are also an issue, and schools need to do a better job of ensuring positive feedback and positive education.

Education policies and practices can be shaped to promote holistic learner well-being in addition to academic success. In fact, happiness and well-being are a crucial component leading to quality education and high learner achievement. Learner centred, classroom-based initiatives can have a significant impact on student learning outcomes, reducing exam-induced stress and anxiety, promoting collaboration and teamwork, and promoting a healthy, happy environment in the classroom. Classroom-based assessments and formative assessments can be utilized to effectively evaluate transversal competencies and skills that are hard to quantify in a standardized exam.

Addressing this prevailing ‘culture of testing’ should be a priority for countries based on their commitment to the SDG4–Education 2030 Agenda to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.’ This global agenda includes a renewed focus on effective learning and the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and competencies such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills and conflict resolution — skills which cannot always be ‘tested’.

Overall, the ‘culture of testing’ both shapes and is shaped by cultural and social norms, and how each society and culture envisions their education system. This creates a cyclical interrelationship of society, culture, political economy and education. The perceived importance of examinations is reflective of wider sociocultural factors such as social prestige and the culture of ‘face’ to protect family honour and dignity, something that was observed in most of the countries that participated in this study. Beneath this wider influence lies the pressure on students to score highly and ‘be the best’, which as they compete against one another, reinforces social structures and inequalities. The findings of this study indicate, therefore, that countries may benefit from introducing alternative forms of ‘positive’ assessment of student learning in a way that promotes unity and cohesion, rather than an over-reliance on examinations that may justify social stratification.

### *Outline of the report*

To guide readers through the report and the presentation of data, the report is structured as follows:

**Part I. Overview** provides an understanding of the concept of the ‘culture of testing’ by looking at the cultural heritage and historical legacies of education across the Asia–Pacific region, and the rationale behind the research study, including the main objectives and research questions. It also presents the methodologies undertaken across nine country case studies.



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**Part II. The culture of testing – key findings** presents key findings that are drawn from the data and information collected from the questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews. The primary data is supplemented where possible with secondary data collected through desk study and literature reviews. This section is organized into three main chapters.

The first provides an overview of the high-stakes examinations that are currently in place in the case studies, as well as an overview of the general coursework and the frequency of testing. The chapter provides a foundation for the understanding of the context across the region, and within each case study, regarding the burden of learning placed on students and teachers.

The second chapter identifies several of the key ‘drivers’ of a ‘culture of testing’, that is, the sociocultural factors that impact the existence of a testing culture. These include: patterns of social mobility and economic opportunity, socio cultural values and family expectations, such as hard work and diligence and the reliance on private tutoring, as well as the perception on the relevance and effectiveness of examinations.

The third chapter looks at the effects that this culture has on learning, notably the prevalence of competition, not only of and among students, but also schools and teachers. It also highlights the stress and anxiety that learners are faced with, as well as the impact it has on teachers and the curriculum. Finally, we look at how education and examination systems have changed as a result of or in response to a testing culture.

**Part III. Reflection** recaps the main findings from the case studies, as well as highlights how the culture of testing has come to be embraced within many societies across the region, how social and family expectations shape perceptions of education and examinations, and how these perceptions then can shape education policies. The report concludes by looking at how stakeholders can move forward by re-examining the purpose of education and how they value learning.

# Part I Overview

## 1 Introduction

In the Asia-Pacific region, a growing ‘culture of testing’ has seen many countries striving to increase levels of student learning achievement as a core focus of their education policies and as a perceived measure of their education system’s performance. A variety of assessments and exams exist throughout the region, both low-stakes and high-stakes, at the system and classroom level, that education systems aim to utilize in order to measure learning outcomes. Low-stakes exams include for example, national, regional and international assessments that measure overall achievement, but bear little or no consequences on a student’s ability or opportunity to progress through the education system. On the other hand, high-stakes exams place great consequences on learners: transition, graduation, entrance to higher education, entrance to better schools and access to better jobs. These exams not only offer high-stakes to students, but can extend to teachers, schools, and families. While the existence of these exams may be rationalized as efforts to enhance educational quality, this focus purely on ‘high scores’ may also undermine other fundamental aspects of learning that are often not captured in tests and examinations, at least in the way that they are traditionally conceived. And more, societies often utilize examinations to instil the purpose and value of education as they see it, which can exclude learners through classifications and divisions, as well as reinforcing and deepening inequality.

This constitutes a growing global testing phenomenon, a ‘culture of testing’ in which high-stakes standardized testing is accepted as a common practice in education which shapes how education is understood in society and used by its stakeholders. The expansion of testing can be captured through the increased number of countries participating in international assessments (such as PISA, TIMSS, etc.) and conducting

national assessments, as well as the overall rise in the number of standardized tests that schools administer (Smith, 2016). But does this 'culture of testing' also have links to individual societies or cultures? For instance, PISA rankings have come to be dominated by countries in East Asia and Singapore, all countries with a link to a Confucian heritage. While the origins of standardized testing systems can be traced back to Confucius with the introduction of testing to select civil servants on the basis of meritocracy, a growing body of research is examining the drivers behind this phenomenon (Kennedy, 2012). How does culture, 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others' (Hofstede, 1980), impact and possibly legitimize national practices regarding examinations. Within the Asia-Pacific region, an incredibly diverse region in terms of geography, demography, cultures, languages, economy and politics, a myriad of important sociocultural factors may be driving this 'culture of testing'.

The existence of this global testing culture and the impact of high-stakes testing places an important emphasis on achievement for both national and international education targets. To counter this, Sustainable Development Goal 4, or the Education 2030 Agenda, continues the global commitment towards education, calling for a shift in priorities. The international community should ensure equitable opportunities for holistic and *lifelong learning*, in which education is seen as a *fundamental human right* and a *public good*. It aims for an inclusive quality education for all. One that is more holistic and quality-driven than in the past, where learning outcomes go beyond traditional aspects such as literacy and numeracy (see Target 4.7<sup>3</sup> for example), as well as re-examining the effectiveness and relevance of learning. The last two are particularly salient for this study.

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3 Sustainable Development Goal 4 and its targets: <https://en.unesco.org/education2030-sdg4/targets>

Building upon UNESCO's ongoing research on rethinking education, transversal competencies and learner well-being (UNESCO, 2015b; 2016a; 2016b), this study analyzes education policies, practices and perceptions with regard to testing in the selected countries. This analysis considers phenomena such as how testing may contribute to the shaping/narrowing of the curriculum, as well as the impact testing has on teaching methods and classroom instruction. The report looks closely at historical legacies of culture, society and education, for example what has motivated people to become educated and to compete for the best positions within schools and employment both in the past and today. These factors include improving one's economic opportunities, the influence of external pressures from family and society, and how these factors are interrelated and often connected. In addition, the effects of these factors will be explored, such as an increase in competition for higher education, increased stress and anxiety on learners and teachers, as well as the rise of private tutoring or 'shadow education'.

## Research design and methodology

This report does not aim to show if or why some countries' learning outcomes are better or worse. The main purpose is to show that a 'culture of testing' exists and to understand what the common elements are across cultures and societies, if any. This 'culture of testing' specifically refers to the reliance and emphasis on examinations utilized for transition and selection purposes, so called 'high-stakes exams'. However, the impact of low-stakes tests, large-scale learning assessments and even class assignments is important, as these may be justified or given relevance due to a testing culture. The study critically analyzes what the manifestations are of this 'culture of testing' and aims to better understand the sociocultural drivers behind it and its effects on the relevance of education. The study examines the perceptions that shape, and are shaped by, education policies and systems as a result of or in response to the 'culture of testing'. It also examines implications for policy making, particularly in light of Sustainable Development Goal 4 targets that aim to improve the quality and relevance of education.

## BOX 1

### KEY DEFINITIONS

#### **Culture of testing**

A culture in which high-stakes standardized testing is accepted as a foundational practice in education and shapes how education is understood in society and used by its stakeholders (Smith, 2016).

#### **Testing**

A procedure intended to establish the quality or performance of a person's proficiency or knowledge; the act of evaluating learners.

#### **Assessment**

The process of collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information to aid classroom-based decision-making, support student learning (formative assessment) and judge student performance at a specific point in time (summative assessment). It is primarily carried out by teachers and students in their classrooms, and encompasses both the formal grading of students' work as well as more informal observations (UNESCO, 2013a).

#### **High-stakes tests/exams**

Test or exam used to evaluate student learning on predesigned standards or benchmarks and used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for the purpose of selection, certification and accountability. Generally, all students who are at the designated age or grade level are tested (UNESCO, 2013a).

#### **Low-stakes tests/exams**

Tests or exams that do not make important decisions about students for the purpose of selection or certifying. Low-stakes exams can be either school based tests that support a formative assessment, or they may be centralized standardized tests, that aim to report on overall student learning outcomes (i.e. large-scale learning assessments at national, regional or international level such as PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, etc.).

#### **Tutorial**

A period of instruction given by a school to an individual or group (for the purposes of this study, tutorial refers to instruction organized and sanctioned by the school).

#### **Private tutoring**

A period of instruction given by a private institution or instructor that is not associated with the student's regular school and is usually at a cost.

#### **Shadow education**

Widespread use of private tutoring and remedial classes mimicking the traditional school system through supplementary education or tutoring that is provided outside the parameters of school as a business enterprise (Bray and Lykins, 2012).

## *Research questions*

The research study is based on the three overarching questions:

1. What are the social and cultural factors that shape a ‘culture of testing’?
2. What is the relationship between the ‘culture of testing’ and education policies and reforms, in particular concerning curriculum, and teacher pedagogy?
3. How does this ‘culture of testing’ affect learners and learning outcomes?

The first question aimed to find out what the ‘culture of testing’ meant within the particular country contexts, and how social and cultural institutions intersect education and testing. For example, beyond measuring learning, what do people believe the purpose of the examinations to be? The second question focused on the relationship between education policies and a ‘culture of testing’ that needed to be explored. Is an exam-oriented education culture the result of education policies, or have policies been enacted as a result of a ‘culture of testing’? How does an emphasis on examinations affect teachers, classroom instruction, and ultimately the curriculum? Finally, the research examines the effects of the ‘culture of testing’ on learning outcomes, including learners’ interest in education, expectations, aspirations and well-being.

## *Methodology and data collection*

The report is based on case studies from nine countries across the Asia-Pacific region: Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Tonga and Viet Nam.<sup>4</sup> The country researchers carried out a case study based on the research framework and questionnaires that they designed collectively with UNESCO Bangkok. Primary data collection methods included a questionnaire, focus group discussions and interviews with students, teachers, parents, principals and education experts.<sup>5</sup> In order

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<sup>4</sup> Case study summaries are available in Appendix A, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the data collection, see Tables 3a and 3b in Appendix B, p. 146-7.

to harmonize the various case studies as much as possible, researchers agreed on several criteria for the surveys: upper secondary school students, including those nearing a high-stakes exam (for instance Grade 11 or 12), public and private schools, and schools in both urban and rural locations. While sample sizes and sampling methodology varied across countries, researchers agreed that a minimum 100 students, 30 teachers and 50 parents should complete the questionnaires. The actual questionnaire samples ranged from 5,094 students in 24 schools in the Philippines to 100 students in ten schools in both Viet Nam and Kazakhstan. In all cases, the focus groups of parents and teachers were purposive and convenience-based samples. Researchers aimed to provide a balanced representation of both male and female students to the extent possible, however, with parents and teachers, this was not always possible. Japan was unable to carry out primary data collection, with the exception of interviews with six high school students.

Secondary data collection in the form of literature reviews and policy analysis was carried out by the country researchers and UNESCO Bangkok. The desk studies, literature reviews, and policy analysis provide an understanding of the theoretical and historical concepts behind education and examinations, and the impact of society and culture with regard to the relevance of both educational provision and student learning achievement in the selected countries of focus. The conclusions indicate associations or relationships and none of the claims or conclusions are causal.

## Limitations

The report is a synthesis of case studies from nine countries across the Asia-Pacific region; however, it is *not* a comparative study. The size and diversity of the region represent a challenge in synthesizing information that has been collected. This diversity is both an advantage and a disadvantage. While the report does attempt to compare and contrast the results from the case studies where possible, the different contexts make it difficult for presenting comparisons and generalizations across countries.

The researchers were given the autonomy to make any necessary changes for their specific country contexts. Further, the researchers may have translated the questionnaires into local languages, and these translations were not controlled across countries. Nuance and variations may therefore exist in the context of the questions being asked.

We also recognize the existence or effect of several biases that may be present in the research, and how these could play a role in the interpretation of the results. To begin, the research is based on the assumption that a ‘culture of testing’ does exist, and this was clearly articulated within the original research framework and research tools. Hence, we did not aim to demonstrate *if* it existed, but rather, *how* it existed.

Second, the questionnaire itself may be affected by a confirmation bias that was built into the questions and design of the questionnaire. There is a strong likelihood of a negative bias towards aspects of examinations and testing, and as a result the outcomes of the questionnaires and literature reviews may be strongly skewed to confirming these negative aspects. Therefore, the results could be misleading or may not be complete.

Third, we need to recognize the effect of a reference bias in the responses to the questionnaires. The same question can be interpreted differently by two people, viewing the same concept from different external reference points. Trusting these results completely without also looking at all other factors is to be cautioned, especially given the varying sample sizes. The data will have signals, but it can also have a lot of noise.

Finally, we must also be careful of reporting bias by the respondents. The respondents could be concealing or altering their responses due to concern over how they may be perceived. In fact, this was noted in the Fiji case, as the researchers noted some teachers seemed to be avoiding some of the questions, holding back their responses, or copying what other teachers had reported.



## 2 Testing culture – a literature review

### Cultural heritage and historical legacies

This section explores the relationship between society, culture and education. It will give an overview of how education has evolved, the cultural heritages in the Asia-Pacific region, and how these have influenced the development of education systems and examinations.

#### *Socialization to modern formal education*

For early societies and civilizations, the concept of education was much different than modern 'school education'. 'Education' was a form of socialization or enculturation, the process by which information, beliefs and customs are transferred from one person to another. Knowledge and wisdom were transferred and transmitted from one generation to the next, with little variation or deviation. The transfer of knowledge was then a form of training, which also incorporated specific stages that young people must pass through. Education of the younger generations was primarily based on observation of their elders: family members or someone close to them in the immediate community and learning by doing. According to Biesta (2009), the socializing function of education is how we become members of society, allows individuals to learn the ways of doing and being, and is an important role in shaping culture and tradition. 'Socialization' encompasses both learning and teaching. It essentially represents the whole process of learning throughout the course of life, and is a central influence on behaviour, beliefs, and actions. The process of socialization is the root of why we learn, and how we learn.

Even today, education and education systems remain critical components of socialization. This is important to note since our current model is quite different from early forms of 'education'. Modern systems of education derive their origins from a host of global influences, both eastern and western. The term 'school' originally had various meanings, and only over the centuries has the word narrowed to what is commonly referred to today. Indeed, many of the earliest 'schools' were religious centres

that aimed to teach scriptures and faith. Early ‘schools’ revolved around disciples being taught the ‘personal’ knowledge of the ‘master’, instruction primarily oral, telling and retelling of lessons learned through demonstration and supervised practice (Schiefelbein and McGinn, 2017).

However, over the years this process of socialization has also been transformed as societies have changed. Social cohesion has changed drastically, and so has the nature of life, work, society and the economy. For example, Durkheim found that industrialization and urbanization weakened our traditional forms of group cohesion — the family, the village, and the church — and that if modern societies were to maintain their cohesion by strengthening the allegiance of their members, they needed to devise new instruments for producing solidarity (Durkheim, 1956). One of these methods for producing social solidarity was the formation of a mass schooling system. First, education was the purview of religion and religious teachings — organized and carried out by the church or religious leaders. Then as nation-states began to form, education became the priority of the state as a means of nation building, and identity-building (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

By the early twentieth century, much of the world had adopted similar models and the demand for education began to grow. Over the past 100 years, schools all over the world have become more and more alike, both in content and methods. And while there are still differences across countries and regions, the underlying structures and systems that oversee education are quite similar in terms of years of schooling, classroom and teaching pedagogies, and examinations used to certify and qualify students. In addition, schooling and education, both in their earliest and current forms, have played a significant role in not only defining but reinforcing social and economic structures, across sociocultural and political boundaries (Schiefelbein and McGinn, 2017).

While it is interesting to note the divergences in thought and relations, this report takes these arguments as a starting point, and looks at the manifestations of examinations, society, culture and the current importance and relevance of learning in different societies.

### *Rise of testing and examinations*

As the demand for education and ‘schooling’ expanded, so did the need to properly evaluate and measure the progress and understanding of those receiving instruction. The purpose ultimately was not so different than today, whereby the teachers aim to evaluate whether learners have sufficiently acquired certain knowledge and skills. Early evaluation methods and more generally teaching were based on oral traditions and observation. However, with the rapid expansion of schools and students, these methods were time-consuming and inefficient to deal with the larger number of students.

The earliest record of standardized testing comes from Imperial China in 605 AD, where hopeful applicants for government jobs had to sit for examinations testing their knowledge of Confucian philosophy and poetry. While the examinations were known for their competitive and meritocratic nature, another purpose was to create a class of knowledgeable or scholarly ruling elites, those who could balance the power of the military aristocrats. Therefore, the earliest examinations were an effective cultural, social, political and educational construct that met the needs of the bureaucracy (Elman, 2000).

The concept was unknown in Western societies until the eighteenth century, when the Chinese system was described in letters written home by Jesuit missionaries. Examinations were advocated by thinkers such as Adam Smith and Voltaire, as a means of moving society to a meritocratic basis, for regulating access to professions and for opening up opportunities for people in all strata of society. Starting in Prussia, then spreading around Europe over the following century, bureaucrats were increasingly required to pass examinations. As more and more people applied to the civil service, the universities — which were mainly prep schools for the civil service — became more crowded and gradually introduced their own entrance examinations. Yet the introduction of national examinations for the appointment of government officials took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In addition, as the Industrial Revolution and mass schooling took school-aged kids out of the farms and factories and put

them behind desks, standardized examinations emerged as an easy way to test large numbers of students quickly (Fletcher, 2009; Kennedy, 2012; 2016; Suh et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2013a). This idea of examination as a means of selection is no longer limited to Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHCs) but has spread to most countries around the world, a by-product of our modern education systems (Kennedy, 2016).

The rise of examinations and testing also coincided with a shift of emphasis from socialization to qualification. A major function of modern education systems (i.e. schools) is to provide learners with the knowledge, skills and understanding to qualify people for jobs or academic placements. And further, qualification is an important rationale for state-funded education rather than to socialize learners, or to provide them with individual characteristics or traits. Historically, testing has fallen mainly under the qualification function with little emphasis on the processes of socialization, or subjectification. Subjectification, is best understood as the individual component or process of education and can include such skills and competencies as ‘critical-thinking’ and problem-solving (Biesta, 2009). These aspects, socialization or subjectification, are often set aside in order to focus learners on the skills and knowledge necessary for succeeding in examinations.

And while the earlier forms of examinations (i.e. those in Imperial China) were formed with the purpose of social mobility and meritocracy, research into social and cultural capital theories have revealed that these goals in fact have been quite limited overall. In fact, in many societies, performance in tests (and in schooling overall) has been heavily dependent upon the social and human capital in the household and community (see for example, Lee and Bowen 2006; Kingston, 2009; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Dika and Singh, 2002). In many cases, the economically advantaged have a significant advantage over other populations and while societies still tout examinations as fair and objective markers that can promote meritocracy and social mobility, inequality and inequity have often underscored examinations from the start.

### *Confucian heritage cultures*

With the Asia-Pacific region being one of the most culturally diverse regions in the world, a range of cultural heritage factors contribute significantly to a 'culture of testing' and an emphasis on educational achievement. A variety of studies identified the link between cultural values and the values of the education system (Wursten and Jacobs, 2013). Perhaps the most prominent within the Asia-Pacific is that of the CHCs, those societies and cultures that have been heavily influenced by Imperial China. Imperial China's examination system was copied at a very early stage by the Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese, and as a consequence, examinations have been entrenched in those countries for over a thousand years. Among numerous Confucian values such as cultivation of the self, a strong work ethic, and a high regard for education as a promise for upward social mobility, Mason (2014) argues that CHCs tend to hold

a belief, generally more widespread than might be the case in other societies, that success depends more on effort than on innate capacity, and hence that everyone can succeed, provided that he or she works hard enough; a commitment to repetitive drilling and to apparently rote learning in an acceptance of the effort needed to succeed (p.2).

In addition, perhaps one of the most distinguishable Confucian traits is that of a 'collectivist' approach combined with filial piety. Both these factors underlie a common notion within CHCs that individual achievement is considered a family achievement. Examination results can either bring great shame or pride to the family name (Huang and Gove, 2012; Starr, 2012; Kennedy, 2016).

While it may be easy to draw comparisons in the prominence of a 'culture of testing' and CHCs, a few studies (Kennedy, 2016; UNESCO, 2013b) have been wary of making such claims, rather suggesting to avoid making the mistake that Confucian values are monolithic or deterministic. Huang and Gove (2012) refute such assertions by implying that while there is variation within Confucian-based cultures, they do 'share a relatively homogenous cultural heritage' (p.1).

The ‘culture of testing’ in **Republic of Korea** is owed a great deal to the traditional national civil service examinations, or *Gwageo*. Similar to Imperial China, the *Gwageo* was a national examination for the appointment of public officials that started from the Goryeo dynasty in 918 AD and continued for 500 years. This was a system that enabled movement along the social ladder solely through the ability of the individual and enabled one to become a government official with high social status. *Gwageo* provided the social drive that maintained social order by respecting an individual’s achievements rather than an individual’s bloodline. Because of *Gwageo*, the competition for the role of a government official was highly intense, even amongst the upper class of society. *Gwageo* also had a big influence on the development of the education system, and higher education institutions. Additionally, since the establishment of the modern school system, schools began to replace the old *Gwageo* system, leading to the modern social atmosphere that regards universities as an indicator for societal success (Kang, 2013).

In **Viet Nam**, ‘exam-oriented’ education existed for centuries, from the feudal dynasties of Confucianism. From 1075 AD, students would go to the capital city to sit for the royal exam. If the student passed, it would be a ‘swift ascendance into royal ranks’. This process lasted until the French officially colonized Indochina<sup>6</sup> on 17 October 1878 (Nguyen et al., 2017).

In **Japan** however, where social and political power mostly remained hereditary, the role of examinations, while important, never reached the same degree as in neighbouring China and Korea.

### *Pacific Islands*

Although CHCs may have a longer legacy and impact on education within certain parts of Asia, the Pacific Islands provide legacies of early forms of socialization, as well as the impact of colonial and missionary education. Pacific nations like Fiji, Tonga, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands share similar traits in culture with regard to collectivism, and education is

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6 Indochina consisted of Viet Nam, Lao PDR and Cambodia.

regarded as a community-owned responsibility (Tikoduadua, 2014). There is limited research as to whether the collectivism and filial piety have any impact on the 'culture of testing' within the Pacific, however, countries such as Fiji and Tonga do have a tradition of an 'examination culture' (Tikoduadua, 2014). These traditions however, are most closely related to their experiences under British colonialism as well as missionary education.

In Pacific Island communities such as Fiji and Tonga, assessment is a part of living. As the young and the uninitiated grow, they learn by observing, listening and imitating their parents, elders and knowledgeable others. For their part, 'teachers' continually demonstrate how things are done, comment on what they see and advise on how to improve. This is consistent with so-called 'traditional societies', where education and learning are a part of 'socialization'.

These customs and traditions have survived despite modern education systems and political economy. While over half a century ago, a quote from Lewis-Jones still resounds in **Fiji** today: 'the participation of the young in various tribal activities constituted what we would call schooling in Fijian society. Most of these activities concerned the immediate needs, or the duties of the social unit; hence the training was direct, realistic and purposeful as well as exacting' (Lewis-Jones, 1957, p. 110).

In **Fiji**, following colonization and the introduction of the modern education system, people quickly realised that in order to succeed outside of school, they had to adhere to the demands and opportunities that schooling and examinations offered. While the existence of modern education and examinations introduced following British colonialism changed the manner and means of education, it did not remove the impact that the community and society have on learners. Modern schooling and examinations brought with it more modern pressures and competition. For this, the whole community supports the learning process to ensure that learners succeed. Success is as important for the community as it is for individuals and is celebrated by all. Bakalevu (1998) explains that the selective function of examinations coupled with

the individual competitiveness that is part of testing is reviled and is as foreign as the culture and knowledge of formal schools: 'Thus, our people are caught in a bind; they want the opportunities that western schooling seems to offer, but to gain them they have to submit to meaningless content and alienating methods' (Bakalevu, 1998).

Similarly in **Tonga**, the formal education system was first introduced in the nineteenth century by British missionaries. Following the conversion of the then king to Christianity, missionary schools were soon established and flourished. The king embraced western education, encouraging more schools to be built and more people to enrol ('Otunuku et al., 2017). This led to a modern education system that meshed the importance of individual and community achievement, and that education was an important stepping stone to achieve honour for oneself, their family, and their community.

Similar to the experiences in the Pacific, education for the early peoples of the **Philippines** involved preserving the cultural heritage of the country through the teachings of beliefs and traditions by *Babaylan* and *Katalonan*<sup>7</sup>—respected people in the community and society. In a sense, during the pre-colonial era, education was valued for how it maintained Filipinos' beliefs and traditions, and how it was a means of passing on knowledge for survival (Ibañez et al., 2017).

Following several years of colonial rule, first by Spanish and then by the Japanese, it was under the Americans that education was made accessible to all, regardless of status in accordance with the 1935 Constitution. Religious teachings were set aside and Filipinos were given vocational training along with teachings about agriculture and business, and subjects such as arithmetic, language, good manners and right conduct, domestic science, as well as American and Philippine history; all of which were introduced with English as the medium of instruction. Filipinos who excelled academically were given the chance to study in the United

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7 These are traditional priests, priestesses, healers or shamans within the indigenous religions of the Philippines.



States; which arguably provided Filipinos a chance for greater social and economic mobility (Ibañez et al., 2017).

### *South Asia*

In South Asia, education has historically been influenced by spiritual beliefs, and has also been highly stratified. Most of the earliest forms of education were based on religious and spiritual teachings. Education in the Indian sub-continent began from an indigenous educational system in ancient times, continued through religious and spiritual teachings in the Vedic (3000 B.C. to 500 B.C.) and Buddhist eras (500 B.C. to 1200 A.D.), to an Islamic style of education as a result of Muslim invasions (1200 A.D. to 1700 A.D.), and to imperialistic education delivered during British colonization (Rahman et al., 2010). The modern education systems of **India, Bangladesh** and Pakistan have been significantly impacted by all of these different forms.

The overall features of ancient Vedic education were based on the Hindu religion, which provided the religious based education as well as the knowledge of human life. Education included both theoretical knowledge and the practical knowledge to develop the healthy civic and aesthetic sense of the pupils. The methods of teaching were mainly oral method. In the early Vedic period, discipline meant physical, mental and spiritual control (Zinnah et al., 2017).

Hierarchy prevalent in society also impacted access and participation in the system, the same kind of education was not available to all. Ancient Indian society was hierarchically arranged in four *varna* (castes)—*Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudras*. Each *varna* had its own function and occupational specialization. As a result, acquisition of knowledge and skills was linked more to one's position in the *varna* hierarchy. While the *Brahmins* were supposed to learn sacred texts and philosophy, *Kshatriyas, Vaishya* and *sudras* were expected to acquire knowledge and skills relevant to their position and prospective life and status. The methods of assessment and evaluation of pupils' learning was primarily oral and was solely at the discretion of the teacher. There was hardly any system of

challenging the system of evaluation and grade, and often the decision of the teacher was final (Altekar 1957; Das, 1930; Mascarenhas, 1991; Mookerjee, 1960; Mukherjee, 1986).

Buddhist and Muslim periods brought education that was quite holistic in nature, emphasizing physical development for good health, development of knowledge and vocational development, education of social behaviour (such as compassion and kindness, preservation and development of human culture, character formation, morality) and religious teachings. Moreover, the teaching and evaluation of knowledge and skills encompassed demonstration, experiments and practice (Zinnah et al., 2017).

The British colonial period was extremely influential in the development of modern formal education in India and Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2010). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, missionary schools and the East India Company began to take an interest in the education in the British territories. In the early nineteenth century, the East India Company took responsibility for education in the entire sub-continent. By 1835, schools and colleges began to expand rapidly and English began to dominate the entire field of education as the medium of instruction. Legacies of the colonial education system remain today in the structure of education, education streams, types of schools, levels of education, and management structures, among others (Zinnah et al, 2017).

### *Central Asia*

Throughout history this region has been shaped by both eastern and western civilizations, strategically placed along the Silk Road. The region has been influenced by Islamic traditions in education, but more recently impacted by Russian Imperialism followed by Soviet control. This had a tremendous effect on society, culture and education. The unraveling of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s presented the newly independent Republics of Central Asia with many challenges for their education systems. Previously under the Soviet Union, the education systems of the Central Asian Soviet Republics were guided and provisioned by Moscow. Education served an ideological and economic role — to promote the

goals of the Soviet state and to meet the skill needs of the centrally planned economy. Skills needs of the economy were established in Moscow, and a large number of secondary students were oriented into vocational programs that served the needs of the planned economy. Access to higher education was strictly controlled, and the content of higher education programmes emphasized the engineering and technical needs of the economy (Mertaugh, 2004).

With independence in the early 1990s, Central Asian states had to transform their education systems. For example, national testing and assessment had not been carried out under the soviet system, leading Kazakhstan to open its first national testing center in 1992 (Iskakov et al., 2017).

European colonization between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries has also played a significant role on cultures and societies across Asia-Pacific. Nearly every country has been shaped by colonialism to some extent, and many have adopted or imported a modern education system based on a nineteenth century mass schooling model first introduced in Prussia, as well as western methods in a reaction to colonialism and globalization in the late nineteenth century. Therefore, the impact of cultural heritage on testing is not limited to Confucian heritage in East Asia or the examples from the Pacific Islands. South Asia, Central Asia and South-East Asia have strong histories of systems of examination and rigorous selection influenced by historical and ancient times as well as more recently through importing foreign such as the British, American, or Russian examination systems (UNESCO, 2013a). Indeed, the global testing culture and modern education can sometimes be seen as a continuation of colonial practices, as many education systems have been exported from the West over the past centuries (Morris, 2016, cited in Stromquist, 2017).

Over the years, education systems have changed drastically, from individualized teacher-student transmission of wisdom, cultural traditions and knowledge, to a formal mass schooling system. This has led to an emphasis on preparing learners to be productive workers and has been criticized as the 'factory model' of education. While that criticism can be debated, without a doubt one of the main functions of education systems

today is the preparation and training of a new cohort of workers. As such, economic opportunity has been a foundation of modern education. This information has been discussed earlier as part of the cultural legacy, however here the emphasis is on how the economic opportunity and the drive for social mobility has remained constant over the years.

### *Testing as 'tradition'*

Cultural and social legacies, in addition to modern economic pressures have continually placed an emphasis on educational achievement, and families will take great efforts to help their children to succeed. What was true and characteristic 100 years ago may not necessarily be true and characteristic today. However, some ideas remain constant and 'traditions' can remain intact. This is true for education and examinations as well as other cultural 'traditions'. 'Tradition', as opposed to 'custom' differs in the amount of variance (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), meaning that traditions do not vary a great deal over time. In this sense, looking at examinations — the 'examination' is the 'tradition' and the mode and method of exam the 'custom'. Once the exam has been introduced, it gathers a tremendous amount of importance and respect, and its value, use and relevance to society can remain more or less constant (see CHCs). The means and customs by which exams are carried out have varied over the past years, but exams are culturally and socially significant. And it is not just the legacy of CHCs, many countries in the region have adopted examinations with fervour, thinking that these will transform their society and learning. This allows for 'invented traditions'<sup>8</sup> (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) to arise in other societies and cultures. This would be the case in societies that have recently introduced or adopted education systems and examinations (such as Kazakhstan, the Pacific islands or the Philippines) that are quite different than traditional models.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Invented traditions' are practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, p. 1).

Examinations that have been introduced in places like Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Philippines and Tonga, do not have the historical connection or continuity, and therefore are ‘invented’ to a certain degree. This means that the customs and beliefs that follow these examinations are relatively new, only as old as the modern education systems — in many of these post-colonial societies less than 100 years.

Similar to how Anderson (1983) has defined ‘imagined communities’ (i.e. a socially constructed community, imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of that group) the purpose and function of examinations are also socially imagined. In this case, socially imagined concepts (i.e. examinations or education) shape identities, aspirations, and expectations within communities. For example,

a social imaginary is a way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people, the common understandings that make everyday practices possible, giving them sense and legitimacy. It is largely implicit, embedded in ideas and practices, carrying within it deeper normative notions and images, constitutive of a society (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p.34).

It is possible then that examinations in this case are genuine, ‘invented’ and ‘imagined’, and yet still a ‘tradition’; case in point, examinations in CHCs clearly have strength historically and, although adapted to modern times, the ‘tradition’ has continued, and is still imagined in a similar fashion today as it was in the past. In other societies — for instance the Pacific Islands — the introduction of the education system is relatively new and the examinations have already been adapted and are deeply important within the cultures and society.

For example, in post-colonial **Fiji**, examinations served rigorous selection purposes, and those who succeeded continued to the next levels, while those who failed had to repeat the year. Nowadays, examinations continue to serve a selection purpose, but more for scholarships. No student is pushed out of the system. Instead, all students progress to the next level. So, it would seem that there has been an evolution of the purpose of examinations in Fiji, where presently they serve more to assess students’

learning, identify students' strengths and weaknesses, and measure teacher and school effectiveness, than to enable social mobility or define educational tracks. In addition, the exam continues an educational 'tradition', one that has changed its functions and purposes over the years, yet still remains culturally and socially important.

Other evidence of examinations as tradition includes the relationship between education and religion in the **Philippines**. From the interview and focus group discussions, Filipino students shared that they were 'praying before an exam' or 'at least visiting certain churches' to prepare them for an examination. It was also mentioned that they would visit a *shaman* (healer) to be able to acquire good luck or blessing before taking an examination (Ibañez et al., 2017). This belief in the help of religious practice stems from the idea that testing is an ordeal in and of itself, requiring external help from a Supreme Being or at least good luck to be able to meet such a challenge.

Examinations are thus an important 'tradition' within societies and cultures, and they are used to structure social practices as well as explain social goals and objectives.

### *Testing as a 'rite of passage'*

In some ways, education is such an important part of society and culture, that it serves as an enculturation process and ideological framework highlighted in the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Anderson (1983), and others. This process is seen as a stage in life that is crucial in the development of the young. This is not different across cultures and societies, particularly in present day, as many countries (societies and cultures) offer very similar education structure, goals, and methods. In this sense, education, and more specifically these high-stakes exams, which serve a strict selection process for moving on to the next stage in life, can be thought of as a modern day 'rite of passage'. The term 'rite of passage' was first used in anthropology to encapsulate rituals that symbolize the transition of an individual or a group from one status to another, or to denote the passage of time, but soon it was embraced in other disciplines (Van Gennep, 1960).

The modern education system and structure seen in most countries, from kindergarten to high school through college, resembles a series of 'rites of passage'. Every student must go through the stages in order to progress from one stage to the next, and these stages include a variety of challenges and experiences similar to a 'rite of passage', albeit, much less structured and ritualized compared to similar 'rites of passage' for traditional societies or institutionalized religions. Another of the problems regarding 'rites of passage' is its inherent vagueness, since it allows social scientists to construct almost every transitional stage as a 'rite of passage'.

Many of the case studies supplied evidence that families and communities treat success in an examination similar to a 'rite of passage' and would celebrate this as the success and transition to the next level. However, these traditions are not as institutionalized, and there are individual and familial variations on how they interpret these transitions. Many of the cases indicated that communities organize ceremonies, either official or unofficial (Bangladesh, Fiji, Philippines, Tonga, Vietnam). Overall, while examinations certainly provide an educational purpose of evaluating student learning and knowledge, there is also evidence that examinations provide a cultural and social purpose.

***Tests are necessary, and they exist in every other country. Even though tests exert pressure on students, the most important reason as to why tests are useful is the fact that tests allow students to become more mature. As we live life, we always encounter some sort of pressure, and experiencing pressure is just another stage of life. Only when one encounters such a stage can one evolve as a person and start to think in different and diverse ways. Tests are just a part of a student's life.***

– Parent, Republic of Korea

## Rationale for high-stakes testing and the global testing culture

In many parts of the world, high-stakes examinations are the means for controlling access and transition to secondary schools and higher education, including the most prestigious schools, and greater life opportunities. In other words, good performance and results in school are extremely important for students and their families, as the consequences can be far reaching.

### BOX 2

#### PURPOSE OF EXAMINATIONS

##### **Selection**

Controlling access to different levels (generally secondary) of schooling and higher education institutions.

##### **Accountability**

Evaluating the effectiveness of instruction and schools.

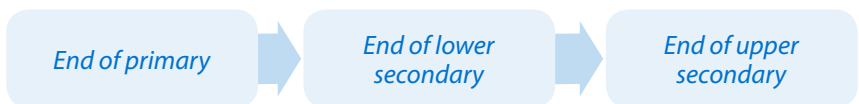
##### **Certification**

Obtaining knowledge of and reporting on student achievement.

Source: UNESCO 2013a

Many examinations are specifically designed for the purposes of certifying or selecting students, usually covering the main subject areas in the school curriculum. These include university entrance exams or high school entrance exams. Historically, the most common arrangement has involved three examinations, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Most common points for high-stakes examinations





While not exactly alike, these three examinations all have the purpose of controlling access to the next level of education. The latter two can also be used as recruitment into the workplace. The exams range from general curriculum knowledge at the end of primary to more specific subject-related matter at the end of lower secondary and end of upper secondary.

High-stakes examinations are often seen as an objective and equitable mechanism for assessing learning (Kennedy, 2016; Vlaardingerbroek and Taylor, 2009; Tikoduadua, 2014). Particularly when high-stakes examinations are used for selection purposes, objectivity is seen as crucial. The belief is that the objective nature of the exam allows students to obtain entry into the best schools or institutions in an equitable manner. A number of studies (Chang, 2004; Hau, 2004; Madaus and Russell, 2010; IBM, 2003) argue that the public mistrust placed on the reliability of teachers' judgment to assess student's ability accurately, increases the importance and objectivity of the examination, and in turn the stakes.

However, many have come to question the usefulness of these high-stakes exams, as many of these examinations concentrate on 'hard' competencies and qualifying learners, as opposed to 'soft' skills, such as communication skills and critical thinking (which fall in the socialization and subjectification functions of education) that can be just as important to learning. There is, however, a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, like Australia, Hong Kong (China), New Zealand and the Republic of Korea that solely use school-based assessments or in conjunction with weighted examinations as a tertiary entrance mark, rather than just an external examination (UNESCO, 2013a). This suggests that there are some countries/jurisdictions that are able to distribute the pressure of tertiary entrance across a range of assessment types.

As many countries in Asia-Pacific are expanding free and compulsory education to include secondary schooling, this has resulted in the reduction in traditional high-stakes testing as a basis for selection in transition from primary school to secondary. However, there is still a requirement by most countries to use high-stakes testing as part of progression into upper

secondary school as well as onto higher and tertiary education, which suggests a culture of high-stakes testing (Biggs, 1996; UNESCO 2013a).

With many economies aiming to become a more knowledge-based society, education is a significant influence in achieving global economic success (Moses and Nanna, 2007; Lange and Topel, 2006; Kennedy, 2016). One link between developing knowledge-based societies and access to further levels of education, sees examinations as an important means of selecting and regulating access to secondary and tertiary institutions, creating a cadre of experts. While useful, examinations can also lead to stratified educational tracks (which mimic social stratification), as well as marginalization and discrimination based on socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability.

### *Using testing to support policy*

Testing policies may have originally begun as a way of identifying problems within an education system, but policy makers soon realized that testing policies could in fact work as a solution to problems within an education system. For example, attaching high-stakes to an examination forces teachers and schools to adjust their teaching to ensure optimal results in the content that is being examined (Madaus and Russell, 2010; Greaney and Kellaghan, 1995). Testing in some sense can be seen as a ‘vehicle of change, driving what is taught and how it is taught, what is being learnt and how’ (Madaus and Russell, 2010, p. 21).

The emphasis on testing may be fuelled by countries’ efforts to reform their education systems to reach so-called ‘international standards’, and thereby increase their performance in international league tables, or by perceptions of high performance in such assessments as a proxy for competitiveness in the global economy. While international league tables may not themselves be the problem, they do influence policymakers, driving them to place excessive emphasis on the results of such assessments and in turn justify investment into education, schools, innovation centres and to attract foreign investment to their economies. As a result, policies often impose standards on school systems in order

to compare and benchmark their performance with their counterparts in other countries (Robinson and Aronica, 2015). These assessments are valuable tools for national accountability of learning outcomes and investment in education, particularly by monitoring the learning outcomes of those most disadvantaged by educational systems. Across the Asia-Pacific region, an increasing number of countries are participating in large-scale assessments (national, regional or international) to analyze education system performance and areas for improvement. As of 2013, 69 per cent of countries in the region had carried out a national assessment, compared with only 17 per cent in the 1990s (Tobin et al., 2015). In addition, a majority of countries indicated their desire to participate in upcoming international assessments, such as PISA and TIMSS (UNESCO, 2017a).

This increased participation in large-scale assessments follows a trend in ‘global testing culture’, in which testing is treated as a foundation of education, and in turn, learning (Smith, 2016). This culture also shapes how people across all societies understand education and utilize examinations for policy formation. This includes and is influenced by the omnipresence of the mass media, and the attention that international large-scale assessment systems garner (Lundby, 2009; Meyer and Benavot, 2013; Hamilton, 2017).

The importance that the public and society place on international rankings, can significantly impact the directions that national governments take with regard to education policy. Governments, and the public, rely on these test scores of both international and national assessments and examinations to determine the quality of their education systems. Similar to how numbers and evidence have power in conferring legitimacy on political culture and democracy (Rose, 1991), examinations and test scores act as legitimizing agents for education policy. Social imaginaries work in much the same manner, and in order to ensure consensus and legitimize policies, governments tend to match policy discourse to the dominant collective imaginaries (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). In addition, current global trends in education policy — heavily entrenched in the neoliberal social

imaginary — privilege efficiency and liberty marginalizing other values such as equality and learning for the sake of learning (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

A major consequence of this perspective has been to undermine the link that education has traditionally had with the notion of common goods – for instance, goods that are common to all people as part of a collective societal endeavour, that emphasize concepts of well-being and knowledge (UNESCO, 2015a).

## Implications for learning

Yet with a growing number of countries entering into international assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS as a way of promoting education quality, there is much literature that suggests that there is a narrowing of the curriculum to ensure success in areas of curriculum that are tested in such assessments (Au, 2007, 2011; Baird et al., 2011; Robinson and Aronica, 2015; Layard and Hagell, 2015; UNESCO 2015b; 2016b). Large-scale assessments can undermine the quality, relevance and diversity of educational experiences by encouraging teaching to the test and thus a convergence in curriculum development since policies tend to focus on a narrow range of educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2016b). In order to align themselves with international standards and practices, countries narrow the educational outcomes within their borders. At the same time, increased mobility has also meant that there is a growing market for students looking to study in universities either in major cities or abroad, which has also increased competition among students. In some sub-regions such as Central Asia for instance, education systems transitioned to align themselves with a globalized market economy in the late 1990s (World Bank, 2000) resulting in relatively young ‘global’ education systems. As a result, high-stakes examinations for university entrance and secondary school certificates are often designed to allow students to compete globally.

As most university-entrance requirements continue to focus on examination results, little is known of what other ‘non-academic’ factors are taken into

consideration when selecting students for admission. Unfortunately, in the Asia-Pacific region as well as other parts of the world, high-stakes examinations tend to focus on the accumulation and memorization of knowledge at the expense of other aspects of learner development. This has led to growing debate in international discourse as to what exactly is being measured as part of assessment efforts, and whether assessment programmes are focusing on those skills and competencies that will enable learners to contribute to more peaceful and happier societies. As argued by Layard and Hagell (2015), 'if you treasure it, measure it. If schools do not measure the well-being of their children but do measure their intellectual development, the latter will always take precedence'(p. 118).

While some countries are increasingly reorienting their education policies to include the teaching and assessment of transversal skills and competencies, a number of factors have made this challenging, including how to define, operationalize and assess these skills (UNESCO, 2015b; Zhou, 2016). As a result, many teachers and educators continue to focus on the more 'academic' domains of learning that are far more likely to be tested as part of public examinations and national assessments and that are easier to quantify as a 'test score'.

### *Social pressures, stress and anxiety*

In many countries of the Asia-Pacific region, high achievement is considered an obligation and responsibility to respect and build the family reputation, as well as students' personal worth and value. This obligation can place a significant burden on some students (Wang and Brown, 2014). In addition, students' fixation on perfection and the pressure of one particular examination can lead to negative and harmful self-beliefs, and in some extreme cases, suicide (Alam et al., 2011). Even when students have performed quite well, they may not be satisfied with their results, the notion of perfection and constant self-improvement being a common motivation (Alam et al., 2011; Kennedy, 2016; Li, 2005).

The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's 2015 PISA results looked closely at how stress and anxiety relate to learning

outcomes. Proponents of examinations often cite them as major motivators for students, and for providing a clear purpose and goal for students to achieve. However, the PISA 2015 results call this into question somewhat. Students indicated that assignments and tests present a source of deep anxiety rather than motivation to learn. More specifically, feelings of anxiety related to school work are common among 15-year-old students. On average across OECD countries, more than one in two students often worry about the difficulty of exams and feel very anxious, even if they are well prepared for a test. And schoolwork-related anxiety is negatively related to performance at school and to life satisfaction (OECD, 2017).

The PISA 2015 results found that anxiety is more frequent among girls than among boys. Around 64 per cent of girls but 47 per cent of boys reported that they feel very anxious even if they are well prepared for a test. In all countries and economies with the exception of Japan, girls were also more likely than boys to report that they get very tense when they study and that they get nervous when they don't know how to solve a task at school. Yet, girls whose parents encourage them to be confident were less likely to report feeling tense when they study. This is one practical and positive recommendation that can be highlighted to all parents. In addition, a teacher's efforts to provide individual guidance, or to adapt the lesson for the classroom were important in reducing student anxiety (OECD, 2017).

Another finding of the recent PISA results is that it may not be the frequency of tests, but rather students' perception of the assessment as more or less threatening that determines how anxious students feel about tests. These perceptions are influenced by several factors, namely the weight that students place on their future opportunities, and the influence of family and personal factors. These are not the only factors that influence student anxiety. According to Zeidner (1998), the nature of the task, difficulty, atmosphere, time constraints, the examiner's characteristics, mode of administration and physical setting determine whether an assessment is more or less likely to generate anxiety. These features of the testing environment interact with personal characteristics, such as study skills, test-taking skills, the desire for achievement, self-efficacy and academic

ability. An important caveat in the interpretation of this result is that PISA data do not make a distinction between high-stake tests and low-stake tests (OECD, 2017).

### *Teacher pedagogy*

As a key stakeholder of the examination process, a teacher's role and view of testing often determines the ways in which they teach. Many argue that the high-stakes nature of assessments will often lead to teachers teaching to the test and a return to teacher-centred instruction (Barret, 2009; Polesel et al., 2012), thereby affecting their pedagogy and often undermining the purposes of testing (Polesel et al., 2012; Au, 2007).

In fact, examinations and testing often increase the level and number of tasks that teachers become responsible for, including collecting, grading and analyzing data related to the tests, as well as responding to students' tests scores by trying to align the curriculum depending on the students' needs (NCTE, 2014). These tasks are in addition to their regular teaching duties, which usually results in teachers having less time to teach. Not only is the teaching time diminished, so too can instruction quality. Examinations often have mandatory curriculum, lesson plans, or force the teachers to spend in-class instruction time on practice tests (NCTE, 2014).

In addition to teaching to the test, the publication of school rankings based on exams or assessments creates a high-stakes situation for not only the students but the teachers as well. For example, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) assessment used in Australia with Grades 3, 5, 7, and 9 is considered to be a low-stakes test as it is utilised for 'certifying'<sup>9</sup> measures. However, since the results are made public, the assessment exhibits a high-stakes nature, whereby the public scrutiny places pressure on schools and teachers to ensure their students perform to the test. Thompson and Harbaugh (2012) claim that a majority of teachers within their study on the NAPLAN are either choosing or being instructed to teach to the test.

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<sup>9</sup> As defined in UNESCO's report on Examination Systems (UNESCO, 2013a), certifying is a means of reporting on student achievement, not for selection purposes.

### *Simplified learning and narrowed curricula*

Simplifying learning into a score has become the accepted, normative practice, thereby also contributing to a ‘culture of testing’ (Moses and Nanna, 2007; NCTE 2014). Moses and Nanna (2007) argue that examination marks aim to simplify the very nature of complex acts such as teaching and learning. With a high level of household expenditure and parental involvement in student education in the Asia-Pacific region there is an expectation for understanding student achievement and drawing comparison by parents and the community (Bray, 2007). Testing makes it easier to put a value on success, and the easier it is to interpret by parents and others the more society is habitually inclined to accept the test mark as a reasonable analysis. In addition, standardized tests narrow the curriculum in many schools, often neglecting subjects such as music, art, foreign languages, and social studies, because they are not included in tests. Most importantly, examinations limit student learning because they focus mainly on cognitive dimensions, ignoring many other qualities that are essential to student success, such as creativity, critical-thinking and communication (such as transversal competencies, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, or ‘soft’ skills) (UNESCO 2015b; 2016b, NCTE, 2014).

### *Shadow education*

The dominance of a ‘culture of testing’ has also created a parallel education system built around providing assistance to learners outside the traditional classroom. Private tutoring and private after-school classes are found all across the Asia-Pacific region and have come to be known as ‘shadow education’. Shadow education is defined as supplementary education or tutoring that is provided outside the parameters of school as a business enterprise (Bray and Lykins, 2012). Kwok (2004) suggests that the industry began to flourish when an awareness of examination pressures was recognized. Pallegedara’s empirical study (2011) indicates that in 1995–96 private tutoring was seen as a luxury but by 2006–07 it was generally viewed as a necessity (p. 26).



A 2014 UNESCO report (Bray and Kwo, 2014) on shadow education identified countries like India where 73 per cent of students were receiving some form of tutoring in 2012 in parts of the country, or in the Republic of Korea, where 86 per cent of elementary students were estimated to be receiving tutoring in 2010. Another UNESCO report (Bray, 2007) and Lee's (2006) study of the Republic of Korea's examination culture outlines the problem with such high levels of shadow education being utilized as illustrating the unfair advantage students have in progressing and accessing education if their families are in a financial position to afford it. In essence, it demonstrates the very paradox of examinations, once used as an objective tool to promote social mobility and meritocracy in Imperial China, now being utilized as endorsement for an industry that enables social inequality.

Most alarmingly, shadow education without regulation can often be seen to undermine the validity and confidence within mainstream schooling to provide an adequate education. Bray (2009) uses the case of Sri Lanka, where students at the end of senior secondary education often do not attend school in order to attend tutoring centres or 'cramming schools' in preparation for end of year examinations.

### *Alternatives to high-stakes tests*

Most countries still have a tertiary entrance examination, and studies like UNESCO's shadow education report (Bray, 2007), indicate that there is still a 'backwash' or bottleneck effect on the pressure of the rest of schooling, even if a large number of high-stakes tests have been removed. However, Asia-Pacific countries are undertaking a range of initiatives to remove high-stakes assessments which limit access to the progression of schooling (UNESCO, 2013a). Countries like Japan and Republic of Korea are investigating options to move towards a university admission system that evaluates the applicants more broadly by considering more subjective attributes that are not captured on these tests (New York Times Editorial Board, 2013; Suh et al., 2017).

Another area of practice to reduce the impact of high-stakes testing is to realign the purpose of testing in a more formative sense. A crucial component in reforming assessment policy is stakeholder ‘buy-in’. The teacher’s and parent’s perception of the assessment is crucial in the success of any reform, and therefore it may be better to make a slow progression in policy reform by using summative assessments for formative purposes so that it does not force teachers to completely realign their assumptions of assessment purposes in predominantly summative assessment contexts (Kennedy, 2016).

Historically, education systems have relied on summative assessments such as examinations to evaluate student learning following a period of instruction by comparing it against standards or benchmarks. Summative assessment is characterized as assessment of learning and is contrasted with formative assessment, which is assessment for learning. The goal of formative assessment is to monitor student learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning. Formative assessments are generally low-stakes and can be a very quick assessment of whether the child has learned the content. Formative assessments include what is termed school or class-based assessments, which can rely on observing and monitoring the students while they work.

Many schools and teachers across the region now embrace school-based assessments as a tool to equip teachers and students with knowledge on the strengths and weaknesses of student learning. This trend is growing with the recognition of the value of transversal competencies and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (UNESCO, 2016b; 2016b) particularly since most summative evaluations and examinations struggle to capture the essence of these ‘soft skills’. In fact, in many contexts, these school or class-based assessments seek to serve the dual purpose of both formative and summative assessment—that is assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning.

However, challenges include questions of subjectivity and unreliability on the part of the teachers. Kennedy’s (2016) study on teacher’s conceptions

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of assessment in CHCs notes that teachers did not respond positively to the use of school-based assessment and using their own judgments to assess student's capabilities. This highlights the need for further understanding in teacher efficacy in conducting assessments and the link to an overreliance on standardized and external assessments. Without an external evaluator, the legitimacy of the evaluations can be put into question by students, parents, and other stakeholders. As such, this requires the education systems to develop policy that develops trust in school-level marking and evaluation, as well as that enhances the qualifications and capacity of teachers to assess students' work fairly, robustly, defensibly and consistently (UNESCO, 2018 forthcoming).

## Part II The culture of testing – key findings

What drives societies to place an emphasis on high-stakes examinations, and how does the associated pressure affect the youth and learners of those societies? This section of the report describes and analyzes the key findings from the nine case studies, with the aim of addressing three main research questions.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of various examinations, including high-stakes examinations and general testing, and their impact on stakeholders from both a policy and general perspective. Chapter 4 examines some of the key social and cultural drivers that shape the ‘culture of testing’ in the region, from economic opportunities to family. Finally, Chapter 5 looks at the effects that this culture has on learning, looking more closely at academic competition, learner stress, the impact on teachers and finally alternative assessment methods. The analysis aims to synthesize as much information as possible from all case studies, however some may not have provided information on particular themes. In addition, due to varying sample sizes, particularly small samples of teachers and parents, the data is not directly comparable across countries.

### 3 Testing and examination practices

This chapter provides an overview of examination practices and relevant high-stakes examinations across the case studies, as well as the assessment practices at the school level, including the frequency of testing.

Table 1. High-stakes examinations by case study

Country	Main High-Stakes Examinations	Grade and Purpose
<b>Bangladesh<sup>1</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination</li> <li>• Junior School Certificate (JSC) examination</li> <li>• Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSC)</li> <li>• Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 6 (entrance to lower secondary)</li> <li>• End of Grade 8 (entry to Grade 9)</li> <li>• End of Grade 10 (entry to Grade 11)</li> <li>• End of Grade 12 (completion of upper secondary and entry to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>Fiji</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiji Intermediate Examination</li> <li>• Fiji Eighth Year Examination</li> <li>• Fiji Junior Certificate Examination</li> <li>• Fiji Leaving Certificate Examination</li> <li>• Fiji Seventh Form Examination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 6 (entry to lower secondary)</li> <li>• End of Grade 8 (entry to Grade 9)</li> <li>• End of Grade 10 (entry to upper secondary)</li> <li>• End of Grade 12 (completion of Grade 12 and entry to Grade 13)</li> <li>• End of Grade 13 (entry to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>India<sup>2</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All India Secondary School Examination (AISSE)</li> <li>• Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE)</li> <li>• All India Senior School Certificate Examination (AISSCE)</li> <li>• Indian School Certificate (ISC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 10 (completion of Grade 10 and entry to Grade 11)</li> <li>• End of Grade 10 (completion of Grade 10 and entry to Grade 11)</li> <li>• End of Grade 12 (entry to higher education)</li> <li>• End of Grade 12 (entry to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>Japan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High School Entrance examinations</li> <li>• National Center Test of University Admissions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 9 (entry to upper secondary)</li> <li>• End of Grade 12 (entry to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary School Completion Certificate</li> <li>• Unified National Test (UNT)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 11 (completion of upper secondary)</li> <li>• End of Grade 11 (entry to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>Republic of Korea</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College Scholastic Ability Test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 12 (entry to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>Philippines</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The National Achievement Test</li> <li>• National Career Assessment Examination</li> <li>• College or University Entrance Tests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 3, 6, 10 (general learning assessment)</li> <li>• End of Grade 10 (assessment of career choice for higher education)</li> <li>• End of Grade 12 (entrance to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>Tonga</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary Entrance Exam</li> <li>• Tonga School Certificate Examination</li> <li>• Tonga Form Six Examination</li> <li>• Tonga Form Seven Examination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 6 (entrance to lower secondary)</li> <li>• End of Grade 11 (completion of Grade 11 and entry to Grade 12)</li> <li>• End of Grade 12 (completion of Grade 12 and entry to Grade 13)</li> <li>• End of Grade 13 (entry to higher education)</li> </ul>
<b>Viet Nam</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National High School Graduation Exam (NHSE)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of Grade 12 (completion of upper secondary and entry to higher education)</li> </ul>

Source: UNESCO, 2013a

Note:

1. Bangladesh has similar examinations at the same points for the Madrasah stream of education.
2. In India, different educational boards/governing bodies have different examinations.

## High-stakes examinations

As noted earlier, countries typically administer high-stakes testing at the end of primary level, lower secondary and upper secondary. Among the case studies, three countries conduct external examinations that control access into secondary schools: Bangladesh, Fiji, and Tonga. The remaining case studies (India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea Philippines and Viet Nam) focus high-stakes testing in secondary schools and students, particularly university entrance examinations. More details are found in Table 1, and the descriptions that follow.

The examination culture has increasingly gained prominence as the measure for assessing educational performance and indicator of school quality in **Fiji** (Tavola, cited in Bakalevu, 2017). ‘The Education Policy on Examinations and Assessment in Fiji’ outlines eight external examinations or assessments. This includes five ‘high-stakes’ examinations at Grades 6, 8, 10, 12 and 13 which measure students’ learning and provide information to higher institutions in the selection of students for scholarships. There are also three examinations at Grades 7, 9 and 11 which aim to monitor and improve teaching and learning strategies. The Fiji Islands Education Commission 2000 viewed the five external examinations as ‘very demanding’ and recommended the removal of the Grade 6, 8 and 10 examinations. It also instituted a move towards school-based assessment to replace the end of year examinations and the statewide examinations. However, since 2015 the Ministry of Education has reinstated the Grade 6, 8 and 10 exams at that were previously removed. The eight examinations, as well as a centralized model of development and administration of assessments suggest an endless cycle of exam-based teaching-learning-assessment (Bakalevu, 2017; Thimmappa and Sharma, 2003).

**Tonga** has two main points in the education process where high-stakes examinations are administered. The first is the Secondary Entrance Examination (SEE) administered at Grade 6 of Primary School. This is the transit point from primary to secondary schooling. The second point includes the last three years of secondary schooling where three

high-stakes examinations are administered at Grade 11, 12 and 13. These are annual external national examinations, namely: the Tonga School Certificate Examination (TSC) at the end of Form 5 (Grade 11), the Tonga Form 6 Examination at the end of Form 6 (Grade 12), and the Tonga Form Seven Examination at Form 7 (Grade 13). The main purpose of these examinations is certification for secondary school leavers, however they also function as selection mechanisms for opportunities for further study, such as the award of scholarships to study abroad. Failing to pass Grade 11 or 12 forces a student to find other pathways to tertiary education and may limit employment opportunities (‘Otunuku et al., 2017).

Another recent change was the **Tonga** Ministry of Education and Training’s 2016 policy of using students’ class subject scores instead of the usual practice of standardized secondary examination scores. This change was in response to the increasing dissatisfaction among parents and system administrators with regard to the results of previous years’ upper secondary examinations. However, participants in the case study were concerned with one of the drawbacks of this policy. Given that raw scores are not recognized by foreign universities, students who wanted to continue studying abroad needed to take extra bridging courses before enrolment.

Educational assessment in the **Philippines** is greatly affected by education reforms which impact the success of its implementation and changes. A new national assessment and grading system framework was developed in line with the implementation of the new Kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum reforms (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2015). The new assessment framework and grading system highlights changes in the national and school-based examinations based on the new curriculum. In addition, regional and division achievement tests, as well as any other similar achievement tools used by the regions and divisions have undergone major reforms. Specifically, the new assessment and grading framework has two main goals: 1) to ensure that students learn and perform according to a set of given standards, and 2) to ensure the quality of education given to achieve successful learning outcomes (Department of Education, 2012; Ibañez et al., 2017).

Currently, Filipino students are subject to three major examinations throughout the course of their studies: The National Achievement Test (Grades 3, 6 and 10), the National Career Assessment Examinations (Grade 12), and the College or University Entrance Tests (Ibañez et al., 2017). The case study also looked at the impact of the School Readiness Year-End Assessment, which is administered to all kindergarten students to evaluate their progress.

In **Bangladesh**, education is divided into secular government schools and Madrasah schools, and all students are subject to national examinations at three stages (end of primary, end of lower secondary and end of upper secondary). At the end of primary school, the students in government schools sit for the Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination, which is the first public examination for them. On the other hand, the students in Madrasah schools sit for the Ebtedayee Education Completion (EEC) examination. After completing Grade 8, students in government schools sit for the Junior School Certificate (JSC) examination at the end of primary school, and in secondary schools they sit for the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination at Grade 10. Students then take the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination after completing Grade 12. In Madrasah education however, students take the Junior Dakhil Completion (JDC) examination after completing Grade 8, as well as the Dakhil Examination at Grade 10. They also obtain the *Alim* Examination Certificate after completing Grades 11 and 12 (Ahmed, 2015; Zinnah et al., 2017).

Then there are countries that have significant high-stakes exams mainly for entrance into higher education. In India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea and Viet Nam, the most significant high-stakes exams take place at the secondary level.

In the **Republic of Korea**, higher education examinations have been frequently revised over the past several decades due to criticism that they were reducing education to rote memorization (Nam, 2005). The current examination, the College Scholastic Ability Test, or *Suneung*, was implemented to replace the College Entrance Examination in 1993.



The *Suneung* is the most influential examination in the Republic of Korea and has an enormous impact on college admissions. Entrance into college used to be based mainly on student scores in the *Suneung*, and since this encouraged competition for better scores, the government introduced a modified admissions process called 'early decision' (Lee and Choi, 2016). 'Early decision' allows universities to evaluate students based on scores from the *Suneung*, as well as their school GPA, essays and non-academic skills and interests, leading to a more holistic evaluation of the student. Since its implementation in 1997, 'early decision' has greatly expanded, with prestigious colleges admitting 70–80 per cent of their students via this method. Students who cannot gain admission into universities with this modified 'early selection' must rely on very high scores in the *Suneung*.

Previously, the Law of Education (2005) in **Viet Nam** required that students who have completed the high school curriculum take the National High School Graduation Examination (NHSE) in order to earn the high school diploma. The Law of Higher Education (2012) stated that 'higher education institutions can exercise their autonomy by choosing their own methods of enrolment, including examinations, admissions, or combinations of both types' (Nguyen et al., 2017). Therefore, students wishing to advance to higher education, had to sit for both the NHSE as well as a university entrance exam.

In **Viet Nam**, the content-based general education curriculum (MoET, 2006) has unintentionally contributed to the spread of a test-oriented culture, that is, teach and learn only what is likely to be tested, teaching and learning for the test, rather than human development. Since 2015, the NHSE and university admission exams were combined, and the result of the joint exam was used to both certify high school graduation and to admit students to university. This has alleviated some of the pressure on students (such as learning for the sake of the examination and focusing solely on exam subjects), and reduced the financial costs for both the education system and students (Nguyen et al., 2017). And recently, the Ministry of Education and Training has been developing a competence-based curriculum in which it hopes to reorient the educational culture

towards focusing on the measurement of students' competencies and to assist students with their future development (Nguyen et al., 2017).

In the case of **India**, students in Grades 10 and 12 are subject to standardized board examinations, which are the most important high-stakes examinations at the school level. Both examinations are important in deciding the career path of students. Performance in the Grade 10 standard examination is used to decide which stream of education—science, commerce or humanities—the students will follow (Suresh, 2017). In 2012 the government allowed the Grade 10 examination to be optional, in response to a high occurrence of student stress and examination pressure. However, this has since been reinstated due to the perception of stakeholders that students were not motivated to learn or attending class regularly. Similarly, policy-makers are proposing examinations for Grade 5 and Grade 8, as a response to improving student achievement and motivation (Suresh, 2017).

Performance in the Grade 12 board examination is directly linked to admission to post-secondary and higher education. Some universities also conduct their own entrance examinations. In these cases, a students' score in the board examination is combined with the score of the university entrance exam in order to select students (Suresh, 2017).

In **Japan**, examinations for entrance into upper secondary level (high school) and university are the most important for students. Students generally take public high school entrance examinations that are standardized at the prefectural level. Private high schools have their own entrance examinations. Therefore, students often sit for several entrance exams across public and private schools to increase their chances of getting into a school of their choice.

For higher education, the National Center Test for University Admissions was launched in 1990, which is used by all national (public) universities as well as a majority (over 70 per cent) of private universities. However, some universities still conduct their own entrance examinations (UNESCO, 2013a).

During the school year, regular examinations for each subject are usually conducted twice in each semester in Japanese secondary schools — midterm exams in the middle of the semester and final exams at the end of the semester. These are important factors that determine a student's grade in each semester. The importance of examinations is highlighted by the fact that during the examination period no regular classes or extracurricular activities are held, and students go to school only to study and sit for examinations (Numano, 2017).

National examinations are relatively new in **Kazakhstan** — in 2004 the Unified National Testing (UNT) was introduced that combined both final exams in schools and entrance exams for higher education. Since 2016 however, the process has been divided into two stages. Students now sit for examinations in their schools in order to obtain a secondary school completion certificate, and students who wish to progress onto higher education will sit for the UNT, which will be used for university admission and scholarship purposes (Iskakov et al., 2017). The change in policy was in part a response to a World Bank evaluation in 2014, which deemed that a single examination was not suitable to achieve both goals of high school certification and university admission, as well as highlighting that the UNT at the time did not comply with international standards with regard to test items and their evaluation. Another part of the justification for the transition was explained by the fact that stakeholders (students, teachers and parents) treated the UNT exclusively as a university entrance exam. As a result, in order to avoid the UNT, many students would opt out (at one point more than 30 per cent of students) and would aim to enter foreign universities and study abroad. Therefore, the objectives of the test were not being met, and were not being utilized to show the quality of education in Kazakhstan either. Therefore, the policy change was not a direct result of a 'culture of testing', but perhaps more influenced by international pressure and internal inconsistencies in effectively measuring student learning (Iskakov et al., 2017).

The case studies show that these high-stakes exams determine progression to the next level of education, types of schools, or to different education

tracks. All case studies indicate that the most important exams are at the secondary school level, where they are used to control selection and access to higher education. In addition, some of the cases highlighted how examination policies are a response to a ‘culture of testing’, as can be seen in Fiji, India, Republic of Korea and Viet Nam. In India, the policies themselves are involved in perpetuating an emphasis on examinations, as stakeholders deem them necessary to motivate students. In Fiji, a lack of understanding in the class-based assessment (CBA) policy and little support from parents and the community, resulted in repealing the CBA and reinstating several high-stakes exams. Recently, Viet Nam has undertaken a concerted effort to reduce the consequences of testing culture by eliminating and combining two examinations into one. In the Republic of Korea, a recent policy has introduced the Free-Semester system at lower secondary level. While there have been efforts to change examination practices, the prevalence of high-stakes testing continues. However, do these high-stakes tests impact the students and teachers on a regular basis? The next section of the report will look at whether high-stakes testing impacts school and teaching practices at the classroom level.

### **Frequency of tests, school work and exam preparation**

Previous research (Au, 2007, 2011; Moses and Nanna, 2007; Crocco and Costigan, 2007) has indicated that high-stakes examinations can lead to a simplification of learning and a narrowing of the curriculum, limiting teachers to preparing specifically for the tests and examinations. To understand this more, this study aimed to get a sense of the overall coursework and demands that are placed on learners and teachers. In addition, the research wanted to examine whether stakeholders felt there were too many tests or exams. Unlike the previous section on high-stakes exams, these questions seek to examine assessments consisting of general coursework, formative assessments and low-stakes exams.

Table 2 shows the average number of subjects that students reported in each case study, as well as the responses of the students, teachers and parents (where available) when asked the frequency of testing. The

responses are for one subject per semester.<sup>10</sup> Respondents could choose from: 1–2 times per semester, once a month, more than once a month, once a week, and more than once a week. This provides a useful guide to the nature of school work and the course requirements that are placed upon students, as well as teachers.<sup>11</sup>

Table 2. Frequency of tests and examinations by country and respondent

Country	Subjects <sup>1</sup>	Students	Teachers	Parents
<b>Bangladesh</b>	6	• 57% reported 1–2 per semester	• 44% reported 1–2 per semester	–
<b>Fiji<sup>2</sup></b>	4–5	–	–	–
<b>India</b>	6	• 30% reported more 1–2 per semester	• 44% reported more 1–2 per semester	• 44% parents reported once a month
<b>Japan<sup>3</sup></b>	10	–	–	–
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	–	• 38% reported more than once a month	• 80% reported 1–2 per semester	• 38% reported more than once a month
<b>Republic of Korea</b>	9	• 49% reported 1–2 per semester	• 56% reported 1–2 per semester	• 55% reported 1–2 per semester
<b>Philippines</b>	8	• 30% reported 1–2 per semester	• 29% reported 1–2 per semester	–
<b>Tonga</b>	5	• 61% reported 1–2 per semester	• 41% reported 1–2 per semester	• 36% reported more than once a month
<b>Viet Nam</b>	9	• 42% reported more than once a month	• 40% reported more than 2 per semester	• 30% reported 1–2 per semester

Notes:

1. Subjects: this is the average number of subjects students are required to take per semester.
2. Fiji: the case study presented information by school, not by individual respondents. All rural schools reported having tests more than once a month, while urban schools split between once a month and more than once a month.
3. Japan did not conduct a questionnaire.

10 Semester: a period of study. In some cases, the word 'term' or 'quarter' was used to denote this period of study.

11 These findings are based on varying sample sizes from country to country.

The majority of the respondents indicated that there are tests once a month or more frequently (only the majority of students in Bangladesh and Tonga, teachers in Kazakhstan and Republic of Korea, and parents in Republic of Korea indicated that tests and examinations were 1-2 times per semester). More frequent responses suggest that some places do rely on more tests, quizzes or exams. However, we should take these results with caution, as the interpretation of 'exam' or 'test' may not have been clear, and some respondents may have only indicated examinations and not all tests that can occur in one semester.

Depending on the number of subjects a student is required to attend, the total number of tests and exams could become a significant burden. For example, in cases that reported students must take eight or more classes or subjects per term (Japan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Viet Nam) this would lead to a larger number of test and exams overall than those who only need to take six subjects (Bangladesh and India).

A few points of difference were highlighted by the case studies. In **Bangladesh**, the frequency of tests appears to depend on the geographic location, as 68 per cent of urban students reported they have tests 1–2 times per semester compared with 46 per cent rural students, and a larger proportion of rural students (39 per cent compared with 25 per cent urban) indicated they have tests once a month.

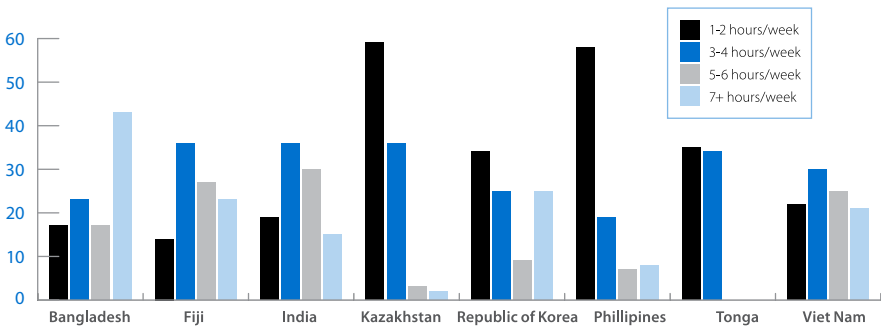
In **Republic of Korea**, typically, the number of tests or evaluations do not vary from primary to middle or high school students, as all three school levels have two major exams a semester (midterm and final exam), with various performance assessments during the term. However, the responses from the students indicated there was a difference. A third of the primary school students reported that they have tests more than twice a month, while 72 per cent of secondary school students indicated that tests are held 1–2 times per semester.

The difference between teachers and students in **Kazakhstan** is also noteworthy: 80 per cent of teachers reported that they administer tests or exams 1–2 times per term, but only 36 per cent of students confirmed

that they have tests that frequently. In fact, 38 per cent of the students and parents indicated that they have tests more than once a month. Perhaps the definition was not clear to both groups, or the students overestimate the frequency of tests.

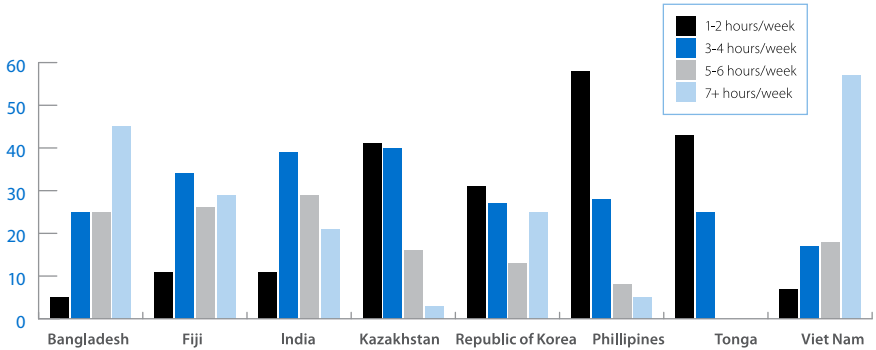
Primary data from the questionnaires shows just how much time students spend preparing for tests or exams, both inside and outside of the classroom. An overview of study habits reported by the students is summarized in Figures 2 and 3. The students were asked how much time they spent studying for tests and examinations in general. Due to the various school and examination schedules across countries, it was not easy to survey students who were soon to take a high-stakes examination, therefore this information corresponds to the general nature of education in the locations where the questionnaires were conducted. The following analysis is an overview of how respondents viewed their work ethic in relation to education and examinations in general.

**Figure 2.** Hours spent preparing for tests or exams inside the classroom



Notes:

1. Japan did not conduct a questionnaire.
2. For studies that utilized more than one grade level (i.e. Philippines, Republic of Korea, Bangladesh) these numbers reflect overall totals.
3. Some missing information is due to 'no response' on the questionnaire or the information was not provided in the case study.

**Figure 3.** Hours spent preparing for tests or exams outside the classroom**Notes:**

1. Japan did not conduct a questionnaire.
2. For studies that utilized more than one grade level (i.e. Philippines, Republic of Korea, Bangladesh) these numbers reflect overall totals.
3. Some missing information is due to 'no response' on the questionnaire or the information was not provided in the case study.

There is great variation from country to country, which could be due to samples sizes or distributions. However, most respondents indicated that they prepare for tests or examinations either 1–2 hours or 3–4 hours per week, both inside and outside the classroom. The only outlier was Bangladesh, whose students reported spending more than 7 hours per week preparing for tests both inside and outside the classroom. Other trends that the case studies noted were:

**Trend 1.** *Number of hours studying for exams increases as students progress*

Not surprisingly, as students progress to later stages of secondary school, the number of hours studying for exams increases. A closer look at some of the data from the studies that included responses from several grades indicates that Grade 11 or 12 students spend considerably more time studying, both inside and outside the classroom (**Philippines, Republic of Korea and Viet Nam**). However, not all case studies included information from several grades. In addition, there are interesting differences to be gleaned from the data regarding the tendencies of male and female students, students in urban and rural locations.



### *Trend 2. Females report studying more (both inside and outside class)*

Also noteworthy was that 63 per cent of females in **Viet Nam** reported that they spend 7+ hours per week studying outside of class, compared to 43 per cent of males. Females also reported more time in class spent on examination and test preparation than their male counterparts (40 per cent of males reported 1–2hrs; 30 per cent of females reported 5–6 hrs).

Students in **Bangladesh** reported to spend a great deal of time (more than 7 hours per week) studying for exams both inside (43 per cent) and outside (45 per cent) of class. For example, one female student in Dhaka asserts: 'I try to study almost 6 hours every day. I revise those chapters that are not easily understandable to me again and again. I also consult the difficult content with my teachers and friends from time to time' (Zinnah et al., 2017).

A slightly higher percentage of females in **Fiji** also reported that they spend more time after school preparing for the exams, with the largest proportion (38 per cent) reporting 3-4 hours per week compared with only 30 per cent of males. However, the perception inside class was the opposite, with 40 per cent of males reporting they spend 3-4 hours per week in class preparing, compared to 32 per cent of females.

Given that all of these numbers represent overall figures, teasing out the information based on urban or rural males and females, or by grade level was not available.

### *Trend 3. Rural students study more (both inside and outside class)*

In **Republic of Korea**, a greater number of students from small cities or towns (37 per cent) responded that they study 7 or more hours per week for exams or tests inside the classroom than their urban counterparts (15 per cent), while the majority of urban students (43 per cent) study 1–2 hours per week. A similar trend was observed for study outside the class. This was the total of all students across three grade levels, and urban/rural data on particular grade levels was not available.

In **Viet Nam**, rural students also reported studying more than their urban counterparts. Thirty per cent of rural students said they study 7 or more

hours per week inside class, double the 15 per cent of urban students. Outside of class, even though a large percentage (57 per cent) of the overall students reported spending 7 or more hours a week preparing for exams or tests, this number rose to 68 per cent for rural students.

Rural students in **Bangladesh** reported studying 7 or more hours both inside and outside of the classroom (56 per cent and 45 per cent respectively), while urban students reported studying 3–4 hours per week (36 per cent inside and 40 per cent outside of the classroom). Both male and female rural students said that they spend 7 or more hours outside of class studying (42 per cent of males and 46 per cent of females), while the largest response for both male and female urban students reported studying 3–4 hours per week outside class (43 per cent of males and 34 per cent of females).

Not all of the case studies provided disaggregated data on sex, grade levels or urban/rural differences. In the cases that did report urban and rural differences, there appears to be a slight trend towards rural students spending more hours preparing for examinations both inside and outside of class. This could also be explained if urban students have more opportunities for private tutoring, something that will be discussed in Chapter 5 on ‘the culture of learning’, more choices of schools, better teachers, better opportunities for higher education and for work. Therefore, rural students (and parents or teachers) could perceive that they have to work harder than urban students because they have to get the best score in order to succeed.

### *Perception on frequency of tests and exams*

After asking respondents the frequency of testing and examinations, and how much time they spend preparing for these tests, the research also wanted to understand the respondents’ perceptions on whether they felt that there were too many exams. Figure 4 provides an overview of the responses by country.<sup>12</sup>

The results do not necessarily indicate that stakeholders deem there to be too many exams — in some cases there was large agreement, but in other

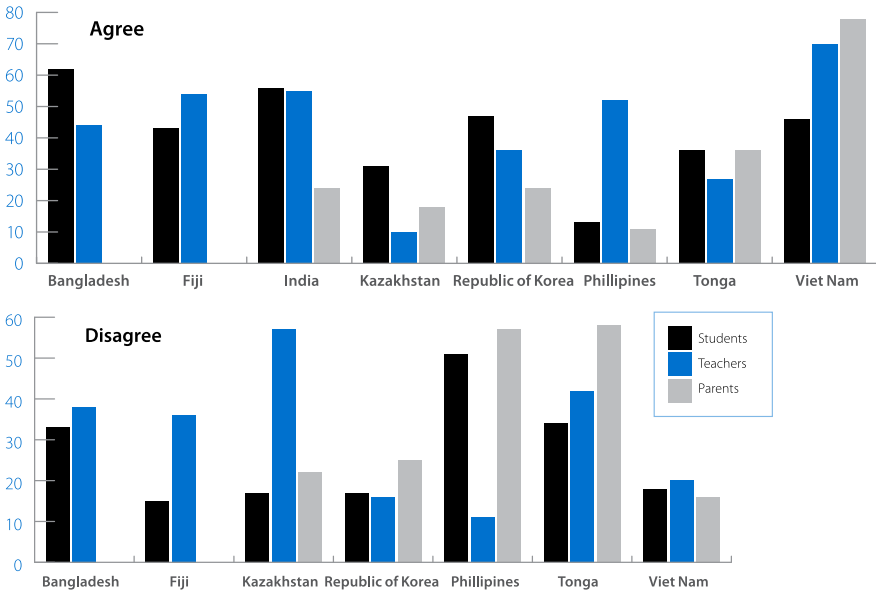
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<sup>12</sup> These findings are based on varying sample sizes from country to country.

cases the results were more neutral. At least a third of students across the board (except Philippines) and a third of teachers in all but Kazakhstan and Tonga agreed there were too many exams. In fact, a higher proportion of teachers, relative to students, in Fiji, Philippines and Viet Nam thinks that there are too many exams. For teachers, over half of the respondents in Fiji, India, Philippines and Viet Nam all agreed, perhaps an indication of the amount of work that they are required to do preparing and marking the tests.

A majority of students in Bangladesh, India, and Republic of Korea indicated there were too many exams. Students and parents in Philippines, as well as the teachers in Kazakhstan and parents in Viet Nam, did not believe there were too many exams. Looking across the countries when it comes to parents, there does not seem to be a trend.

**Figure 4.** Are there too many tests or exams?



Notes:

1. Japan did not conduct a questionnaire.
2. No data available for disagreement in India.
3. No data available for parents in Bangladesh and Fiji.

Since these tests and exams may not have been ‘high-stakes’, perhaps stakeholders do not see them as overburdening, and in fact, they are perhaps a useful tool for learning. This information somewhat confirms the PISA 2015 findings indicating that it is not the frequency of testing that is directly related to the pressure, but more the weight of the exam that is more important (OECD, 2017). This suggests that one extremely important exam can cause much more anxiety and pressure than many smaller tests and exams.

### *Class and school-based tutorials*

Tutorials or study sessions internally organized by schools can also fuel a ‘culture of testing’. Many of the countries indicated that schools organize tutorials to prepare students for examinations, and many of the teachers must also teach these additional classes. With a large population and high competition for places, **India** has seen a rise in the number of coaching classes to help students prepare for examinations. In **Bangladesh**, a majority of students and teachers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that tutorial sessions for examination preparation are arranged and offered in their schools. However, the amount of time students spent at these tutorials varied by region. For example, the majority of students in Dhaka (82 per cent) attend 3–4 hours per week of in-school tutorials, compared to a significantly lower proportion outside the capital (22–31 per cent in the other three regions). However, at least 20 per cent of students in these regions spent more than 7 hours a week at in-school tutorials.

In **Kazakhstan**, schools understand the lack of compulsory time to prepare for the UNT in class. The overwhelming majority (92 per cent) of students noted that schools organize additional classes to prepare for the UNT and attend them. One-third of students spend an additional 3–4 hours a week, and another third spend 5–6 hours a week, attending tutorial lessons organized at school.

In **Republic of Korea**, 80 per cent of students responded that they attend the tutorial sessions that their schools organize for high-stakes exams and 90 per cent of teachers reported teaching these sessions. Similarly, in Viet Nam, schools organize tutorial sessions to help students prepare for the

NHSE, but fewer teachers (40 per cent) responded that they teach these tutorial sessions within the schools.

**Fiji** reported that since private tutoring is quite uncommon, most schools organize in-school tutorials for their students after regular classes or on Saturdays. Tutorial sessions are more frequently held in the third term, closer to the end of the school year, when students will prepare for exams.

While private tutoring is common in **Tonga** for secondary students, primary schools organize extra tutorials, either in the morning or evening, taught by the same classroom teachers.

However, in both public and private schools in the **Philippines**, remedial classes are being offered for free to specifically address the learning gaps of students. All public high schools organize and provide remedial instruction programs to increase their chances of completing high school. This is a response to the results of the national achievement test for Grade 6 students, which indicated that a large portion of those who enter high school have not yet mastered the elementary education curriculum and are therefore unprepared for secondary education.

Most students in the case studies have more than 1–2 tests or exams per term, and spend anywhere from 1–4 hours per week studying and preparing for those tests in the classroom, as well as attending tutorials arranged by their schools or teachers. This alone does not indicate a ‘culture of testing’, however it is worth providing this information as an overall picture of the amount of work students and teachers are required to do in one term. It is fair to say that not just tests or examinations, but the efforts required for students, teachers and schools to prepare for national (or regional/international) learning assessments also impacts the development of a testing culture. Regardless of the high-stakes nature, the preparation and process for undertaking these assessments does not change, and the impact that these have on the learning process and the expectations of stakeholders remains. The next chapter aims to deconstruct the potential social and cultural motivations and influences that may lay behind the use, or reliance, on high-stakes examinations.

## 4 Sociocultural drivers

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, examinations are the chief means for controlling access to the next level of schooling and access to the most prestigious schools, good jobs, universities, and greater life opportunities (UNESCO, 2013a). In other words, these examinations have enormous influence over the life of students and their future. Some argue that one of the major drivers behind examination and education pressure, in addition to other traditional values, is the chance for social mobility, where parents wish for their children to have a future beyond ‘the factory or the farm’ (Larmer, 2014). Evidence that social mobility is a key driver in an exam-oriented culture is also presented in the case studies. As part of the questionnaire, students, parents and teachers were asked what the purpose of the examinations was — and all countries showed a tendency to indicate that exams were extremely important for future career opportunities. This section will examine how this core function of the modern education system has impacted examinations. It will explore how learners, families and governments perceive this opportunity as the main goal or objective of education, creating and reinforcing a ‘culture of testing’ and reliance on examinations in order to achieve economic and social success.

From the case studies, the research clearly identifies several common sociocultural factors that significantly contribute to what we may call a ‘culture of testing’. The various cultural legacies regarding education and examinations from socialization to qualification to subjectification, and how societies have constructed, or ‘imagined’, education and learning. This section continues from this by looking at the major drivers of ‘achievement’—namely economic opportunity or social mobility (i.e. the social imaginary of education), the strong influence of family, and the various expectations and practices that are seen across societies (i.e. notion of hard work, diligence, and studiousness, pride and honour, etc.). The chapter concludes by examining the perceptions of stakeholders towards the relevance and effectiveness of testing, particularly high-stakes examinations.

## Social mobility and future economic opportunity

***The exam is very important because it will affect my whole life.***

– Student, Japan

Secondary data and literature from the case studies indicate that social mobility and status is one of the key drivers for education, and provides a rationale for relying on high-stakes testing as a measure of success. To understand whether this was relevant for stakeholders today, the researchers asked students, teachers and parents<sup>13</sup> what they felt the main purpose of 'high-stakes' exams were. While recognizing that there are officially stated purposes of the exam, the questionnaires asked what respondents believed was the purpose of the exams. The responses included the following indications:

- to get promoted to the next level;
- to identify student's position or rank;
- to get certification;
- to gain/apply for scholarship;
- to identify career path; and
- to assess what the students have learned.

Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents across the countries indicated that exams allow them to be promoted (as a mode of selection or certification), followed by assessing what the students have learned. Beyond this, the responses from students as well as parents and teachers consistently identified that exams help to identify a career path. The results from all nine countries are not directly comparable due to the limitations in sampling, however, it was clear that a focus on career and economic opportunity was among the most reported in the findings.

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13 The responses from students, teachers and parents come from the questionnaire results, interviews and focus group discussions, depending on the case study.

In **India**, both the Grade 10 and 12 examinations are considered important in deciding the career path of students. The first determines which stream of education a student may take (for instance, subjects or type of education) while the second exam determines which higher education institute students will enter. Good performances and scores are also seen as the major deciding factor of student career paths. The questionnaire responses clearly support this, as all respondents (students, parents and teachers) noted the main purpose of exams are: assessment of learning, promotion to the next level and identifying a career path. In addition, the majority of the students (89 per cent) reported that they want to be able to select the best opportunities available to them following graduation.

In Tonga, success in formal education is a widely recognised means of social mobility. Tonga has a traditional social structure based on three classes: The Royal household, the noble households, and commoners, the latter of which is the majority of the population. It is seen to offer opportunities to enhance families, power and material wealth, and has resulted in the emergence of a class of educated commoners who are influential in their communities. Kavaliku (1966) reaffirms the high importance placed by Tongans' on education, by stating that Tongans value education not only for itself — producing an educated person — but also for two other reasons: means for employment and a means for upward mobility. An educated person has status in the Tongan society and the more educated (in terms of diplomas and degrees) the higher the status (Kavaliku 1966, p. 11., cited in 'Otunuku et al., 2017).

Thus, getting a good formal education has become very highly valued by most Tongans. Student responses to the questionnaire indicated clearly that examinations are very significant in helping them choose their career path (94 per cent). The results of the examinations therefore allow for better opportunities for commoners.

For many people in **Fiji**, education is equated with passing examinations as a means to higher education and future employment, and school committees and teachers alike are as firmly wedded as ever to examination pass rates as a necessary measure of their success (Whitehead, 1986).



From the questionnaire results, all students (100 per cent) consider the Grade 12 examination as 'very important' and were very clear about their expectations of it. Over 90 per cent of students identified 'moving up to the next level', 'assessing what students have learned', 'opening doors to scholarships' and 'identifying a career path' as the leading purpose of the examination. Thus, students, schools and communities are committed to examinations as a measure of success, and students have high expectations in their efforts to be the best and do well.

In the **Philippines**, a common belief of the purpose of education is also the avenue for upward social mobility. This perspective was greatly influenced by American institutions following World War II, which gave emphasis to mass public education during their colonial rule. Filipinos internalized the American ideal that in a democratic, meritocratic society, individuals could get ahead through attainment of a good education (Dolan, 1991; Ibañez et al., 2017). While the majority of students, parents and teachers in the questionnaires and focus groups indicated that exams are vital in assessing and gauging learning, as well as measuring the effectiveness of teachers, 86 per cent of students responded that they want to be able to select from the best available opportunities when they graduate. The role that education and examinations play in securing future economic opportunities is still quite important to students.

Looking at the traditional education culture in **Republic of Korea**, 'testing' has been a powerful mechanism to decide the success and quality of life, and ultimately social status (Suh et al., 2017). Even though education is regarded as a goal in and of itself, in practice education still serves as a means of elevating socio-economic status and determining positions (Kwon et al., 2017). The desire to move up the social ladder and become social 'elites' by succeeding in academic competition has intensified over the years, resulting in what Koreans term 'education fever' (Oh, 2015).

Respondents to the questionnaire confirmed that social mobility is still a motivation in the Republic of Korea. The students' top three answers with regard to the purpose and importance of high-stakes tests were to assess

learning, get promoted to the next level and identify career paths. In this sense, respondents view tests as a practical tool for school admission and employment. While most parents and students responded that the purpose of exams is to get promoted to the next level (62 per cent of parents and 56 per cent of students) and identify career paths (35 per cent of parents and 38 per cent of students), the majority of teachers (71 per cent) responded that the purpose of testing is to assess student learning.

Most people in **Viet Nam** have the belief that ‘if children are willing to learn, they will be able to have a stable career that ensures a future life free from poverty’, so every family, whether rich or poor, regards children’s education to be the most important aspect and ‘most influential aspect to learning achievement at Grade 5’ and ‘the most significant impact on academic performance of students in Grades 9 and 11’ (VNIES, no date).

In **Viet Nam**, student responses from the questionnaire confirmed that the aim and goal of examinations is ‘high achievement’, which determines the career path and aspirations of high school graduates and their admission to university. Almost all students (98 per cent) said that the NHSE (the main high-stakes exam) is extremely important because it is the ticket to entry into life. Without a high school diploma, one will not have the opportunity to study at a higher level, nor can they get a decent job in society. For students, getting into university is the most convenient path to securing potential employment and having high economic resources. In the group discussions, many students stressed: ‘this examination determines the failure or success in my life’ (Nguyen et al., 2017).

The same is seen in **Kazakhstan**, where the purpose and importance of exams for social mobility was evident from the responses to the questionnaire with 93 per cent of students indicating that they want to be able to choose from the best available opportunities when they graduate. The majority of surveyed students (64 per cent) and parents (68 per cent) indicated one of the main goals of the UNT to be admission to university. Only half of the surveyed teachers considered admission to higher education to be the end goal of the UNT, which could be a legacy

of the dual purpose of the UNT prior to 2016, as it was utilized both for university entrance and for secondary school certification. While social mobility and future study was important to students, according to the questionnaire a lower percentage, 63 per cent, indicated they strove for top marks or grades. The results were even more muted when it was phrased as 'wanting to be the best student in my class' (only 44 per cent). This could indicate a lack of competition for placements, something that will be discussed in Chapter 5, 'the culture of learning'.

In addition, in **Kazakhstan** about a quarter of parents and students see the purpose of the UNT in getting educational scholarships. In general, obtaining a scholarship is the goal of families with lower incomes. One interesting note was that the respondents from the lone private school in the study indicated that the UNT is not important, since the pupils are going to enter a foreign university, and parents are ready to pay for it. This reinforces the purpose of the UNT as potential for promotion, since wealthier families do not need this to secure higher education.

Further evidence from interviews and focus group discussions gives a better idea about just how important social mobility, career, and rankings are to students as well as their parents. For example, in **Bangladesh** both female and male students consider these examinations very important to their higher education and the future career. A student's success in studying their desired subject, or in a prestigious institution provides an opportunity for getting good jobs and better earnings. As one male student from a government college in Dhaka admitted

examinations hold an important status in our education system. I want to be admitted into my desired university in the upcoming session. It would be quite impossible for me if I do not obtain an excellent CGPA<sup>14</sup> in the final examinations. At the same time, I have to achieve excellent scores in the admission test that is usually conducted based on the syllabus of the HSC level. Therefore, this examination is the important foundation for my career development (Zinnah et al., 2017).

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14 CGPA: Cumulative Grade Point Average

In this context, students' satisfactory results in these examinations provide them with a positive attitude towards their ability for future success. The socio-economic impact of examinations in relation to student's opportunity is also exposed through the views of some parents in **Bangladesh**. For illustration, the mother of a male student stated that

students are classified as excellent, good or bad based on their performance in examinations. The students with excellent results have more possibility to attain good jobs and social status. This possibility is almost the same in the case of my son. We expect that he will be able to improve the financial condition of my family, and for that, we are trying to provide him all the support within our capacity (Zinnah et al., 2017).

In general, providing the opportunity, or 'ticket', for promotion or upward mobility was the most common underlying component for a 'culture of testing' found in the case studies — the impact that education, and more specifically an examination, has on their future opportunities and potential. Internal motivations of students to achieve and be the best is possible, however, as some of the case studies noted, not all students want to 'be the best'. Some students are motivated to learn and enjoy learning and the learning process. Yet there are often many external pressures and motivations that impact student learning, and as a result, their focus on achievement.

Economic opportunities and the chance to advance one's social status is a significant impetus towards cultivating a 'culture of testing'. However, the motivations for this are both internal and external, and positive and negative — meaning that the child is motivated (or burdened) to be the best and to have the best opportunity, from such factors as their family or friends.

## Social and familial expectations

***I like exams because now my child is spending more time studying and not wasting time. The exam results will get him a job and that is good. How can they get a job without exam results?***

– Parent, Fiji

While governments may try to minimize the impact of economic motivations and selection, and set its objects more holistically with ‘knowledge, skills, values, virtues’, families certainly understand that the true value in education is its opportunity. Families teach their children that they must do well in order to get best opportunity. This is crucial in understanding why a ‘culture of testing’ exists, since the families play an important role in shaping and perpetuating the importance of examinations. Parental expectations play a tremendous role in increasing pressure on students to perform academically, and should not be underestimated in terms of how these may be fuelling such a ‘culture of testing’.

There are some striking similarities across the countries on how parents perceive education, and examinations in particular. In all cases, families view the importance of exams as an opportunity. Indeed, as was previously discussed, social mobility plays a significant role in shaping parents and families’ perceptions on education. Parents tend to view education as the ‘way out’, or as an extension of their social status and privilege. However, in some cases it is much more than this. Children’s education and achievement provide the confirmation of the parents’ own worth; for example, parents may see a failure of their child as their failure. This highlights the importance of reputation, honour, dignity, and the influence of the culture of ‘face’ in Asian societies.

### *Family prestige, pride and honour*

In many cases, education is a source of family pride and honour, bringing joy and happiness to the parents. And to hold their place in society (or advance), parents and families expect students to succeed and perform well. This brings both pressure and motivation, both positive and negative

to students. When students do succeed, families will often rejoice and celebrate, as well as prepare gifts and rewards for students.

The Pacific Islands of **Fiji** and **Tonga**, with similar cultural and historical backgrounds, observed similar responses to how the family and community view examinations. All parents affirmed their support for their children's preparation for exams and looked forward to the examination results. There was indication that success in examinations is very important as it brings joy and pride to families who then celebrate with feasting and prayer, either at home or with the community. Tonga also highlighted the role that family legacies play, as many students feel pride when seeing the names of their parents, grandparents or relatives that are engraved in honour boards and hung in the halls of some of the schools. Students use this as motivation, as they want to get their names on the same walls and join their family legacy ('Otunuku et al., 2017). The Tonga case study also noted the challenges of being a small island state. As an economy that relies on remittances from family members abroad, there is an additional source of responsibility, honour and pride, as well as pressure for students to do well in order to study and work abroad.

Most parents in **Bangladesh** (82 per cent) reported they celebrated their child's exam or learning outcomes. From the focus group discussions, parents revealed that some will cook delicious meals to celebrate their success, and some parents and close relatives present gifts such as money or new clothes (Zinnah et al., 2017). Bangladeshi families will often share their success with the relatives and neighbours; and many parents distribute sweets among teachers, relatives and neighbours as well. People from the community sometimes distribute sweets or gifts to students. In some places, community clubs or cultural organizations arrange formal dinners and give prizes, certificates and scholarships to the successful students for a particular period. All of these arrangements are encouraging for students as well as their parents. The mother of a male student in Khulna Division stated, 'we share this good news with our relatives and neighbours and distribute sweets among the teachers, relatives and neighbours. We also present our children favourite gifts' (Zinnah et al., 2017).

There is a great emphasis on family over its individual members in **Republic of Korea**. Traditionally, social life revolves around the family, and familism<sup>15</sup> creates a strong vertical hierarchy of family members, promoting the collective development of the family, and expanding the hierarchal value of the family into society. This has also been influenced by the historical legacy of the *Gwageo*, where success in the examination secured a position as a government official and brought great social power to the family (Kwon et al., 2017). Even today, the social consciousness of the family has not disappeared, and even Korean social life is viewed as an extension of hierarchical family relationships. It is not unsurprising that families take education so seriously.

**Viet Nam**, with its Confucian heritage, offers up similar evidence. Parents' beliefs and expectations for children are crucial to shaping learning motivation, while also increasing the pressure on students to achieve high scores and to get into university to uphold the honor of the family (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Approximately 70 per cent of parents in Viet Nam mentioned the significance of the NHSE. Most importantly, it helps to identify their child's learning ability so that they could make appropriate decisions about their career paths and pathways for further study. But parents also noted that it affects family traditions and public appreciation of the family's academic prowess. One parent said: 'I have invested so much in my child's education, I always stay by his side to encourage him and put great expectations on him. If he gets into university, we would be very reassured and proud'. Another parent responded: 'I wish my child success in the examination because he would be able to escape the poverty, farming life in the countryside.'

In **Kazakhstan**, the vast majority of students and parents said that achievement and success in the examination is very important. In fact, when a child shows good results at school, the vast majority of parents praise

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<sup>15</sup> Familism refers to the importance of the family as a social structure, which takes precedence over its individual members.

the child and rejoice at his or her success. Students turned out to be very demanding of themselves: of all groups, they indicated they are the most significant influence in their own motivations and expectations. Parents also believe that they have more influence on students than teachers.

Family pride and honour can often lead to the expectations that children must succeed at any task and that a child's performance becomes a reflection of their parents' skills.

### *'Tiger-parenting' – parental motivation and support*

***I monitor his progress of learning in every subject that he learns from the teachers and private tutors, and as such, I help him to be well prepared for examinations.***

– Mother, Bangladesh

While many parents do urge their children to do the best, and at times 'impose' great expectations, many parents also assist their children. Education is important, and parents make a lot of effort to spend time with their children and help them with their studies. Sometimes referred to by terms such as 'tiger parenting', this hands-on approach by parents greatly enhances the expectations for both the child and the parent. For example, 'tiger parenting' has formed an important part of the debate with regard to parental pressures on their children's academic achievement, with some arguing that closely supervising their children's homework, reducing extracurricular and other social activities, and using punishment and shaming as negative motivation are key to ensuring that they excel academically (Chua, 2011). With parents and the family often considered as more influential on students' choices and perspectives than teachers, their role within the context of the 'culture of testing' deserves further exploration.

When asking students directly, the majority across all case studies confirmed that their parents provided the most external pressure or influence on their learning.



In **Fiji**, the assistance of parents is quite significant. A large number of parents in the respondent cohorts have either secondary or post-secondary qualifications, and therefore not only their personal values and experiences play a role in their family's perception of education and examinations, but they are well placed to participate and assist their children and instil values of hard work. One parent in the focus groups stated that

I can sit up with my daughter and support her when she is doing her studies. I can help with English because that was my best subject in school. I advise my daughter to read a lot — I buy the newspaper every day and some novels. Maybe they can do some projects and research. But exams are easy and the results are clear to us. (Bakalevu, 2017)

Parents in **Viet Nam** consider the education of their children the most important issue with the belief that 'a blessed family has children more well-off than their parents' (Nguyen et al., 2017). Combined with the motivation to have a stable career and a bright future, families fervently provide care and support for children's learning. For example, some families will allocate more time and provide material support for their children's learning and assist in their children's learning at home (76 per cent of parents were reported to be supportive of children's learning, 42 per cent reported spending 1–3 hours a week).

In **Republic of Korea**, 85 per cent of students responded in the questionnaire that expectations and influence regarding exams and academic achievements stem from their parents. This was confirmed in the student interviews, and it is clear that the level of interest and expectations of parents are very high. The pressure can be felt by how parents comment directly to their children. For instance, one student remarked: 'After the test, they congratulate me. But after they do they add that they are a bit let down. In fourth grade when I got one question wrong, they congratulated me but followed it up by saying "it's a shame..."' (Suh et al., 2017).

To this end, 70 per cent of all questionnaire respondents in **Republic of Korea** ranked parents as the biggest source of influence on students with regard to examinations. Indeed, the level of interest by parents is extremely

high, and they are strongly determined to support their children in any way they can to help them achieve. Notably, responses in the discussion groups from the parents indicate that ‘parents identify themselves with their children and think that their children’s achievement is their own’, therefore parents expect high levels of achievement. One of the teachers interviewed, stated that

parents feel that they are judged by the achievements of their children, and they feel that their duty is to provide good education for their children, and if their children are not as smart as they would’ve wanted, they cannot accept this and at least have to say that they sent the children to study abroad (Suh et al., 2017).

In other cultures and societies, unsurprisingly the family seems to be extremely important in shaping the perceptions of students. In **India**, children are subjected to enormous examination pressure through high expectations coming from the parents, teachers, schools and community at large. Although some of the parents directly help their child in study and preparation for the examination, the majority reported that support and assistance comes indirectly. One of the parents mentioned, ‘I help her in researching about topics which she is supposed to learn from the internet sources. I also encourage her to reproduce before me definitions or any concept which she has to memorize’. In another case, the mother of a child puts all possible efforts to help her child in exam preparation. She said, ‘to help the child in preparation for exam I prepare worksheets, and help do sample papers’ (Suresh, 2017).

In **Bangladesh**, the students indicated that the pressure and expectations for education generally come from their parents, siblings and teachers. According to almost all Bangladeshi students, their parents become very happy and congratulate them for their success. For example, the mother of a female student in Dhaka stated: ‘as a mother, I am happy that she is doing well in the examinations under our family guidance and support. It increases my confidence that she will be able to establish herself in the near future’ (Zinnah et al., 2017).

Students in **Bangladesh** indicate the majority of the parents' focus on the outcomes of the SSC and HSC exams, or their equivalent examinations in the Madrasah education stream. For example, one male student in a private college in Sylhet Division asserted, 'my parents expect the best result from me in the HSC examination like the SSC examination.' Qualitative data reveal that the majority of the male and female students are conscious about fulfilling their own expectations as well as that of their parents, teachers, relatives and friends, to succeed in examinations (Zinnah et al., 2017).

In the **Philippines**, the sociocultural factors that shape the prevalence of the 'culture of testing' are typically associated with family. The expectation that their child be able to perform well in any given task, whether in a classroom assessment or a national examination, is common among all parents. The results of parents' questionnaire revealed that most of the parents claimed that they want their students to receive top grades (84 per cent) in their courses and be one of the best students in class (79 per cent), and to select the best opportunities when the graduate (93 per cent). According to the focus group discussions, particularly among teachers, students' parents and family expect them to pass the exam with high academic performance (Ibañez et al., 2017).

Family plays a vital role in setting expectations for students to pass a test or any high-stake assessments, and parents view the performance of their child as an extension of their worth as a parent and a reflection of their parenting skills. In the **Philippines** focus group discussions, parents noted that students' performance in class is an indication of whether the parents are fulfilling their 'job' in parenting. The parents also claimed that they too feel pressure every time their children are about to take a test because they have a sense that the results of the test or an examination is a reflection of their parenting skills. Good test results serve as a source of pride for the entire family. Parents are often overly focused on their child's achievement, and particularly on whether their child will enter top university. For some parents, having a bright child is also seen as equivalent to having good genes — a sense of pride, prestige and power of their family (Ibañez et al., 2017).

Parents also feel that they need to compete with other families in order to ensure their child has the best opportunities in life. In the focus groups, one of the Filipino parents shared, 'even [if] my child performs well I enrol my daughter in *Kumon*, which is a tutorial for mathematics. This is to advance their knowledge as well as for quiz bee and entrance examinations'. They expect their child to obtain high grades and be at the top of their class or in 'gifted' or 'top' performing sections in public schools. That is why as much as possible, parents may tend to exert their full effort in supporting their children in order to attain a desirable academic standing (Ibañez et al., 2017).

Families in **Viet Nam** also indicated that they tend to spend significant amounts on sending their children to school, particularly the urban families (roughly equivalent to US\$32 for urban families and US\$15 for rural families). In general, parents also reported the importance of helping and supporting their children's learning. The majority of parents indicated their support by helping them with their homework or to study and prepare for exams 1–3 hours per week.

### *Scolding and punishment as a motivator*

Not all of the cases indicated that parents support and respond positively. Bangladesh, India, Kazakhstan and Republic of Korea highlighted some of the negative aspects that can be brought about by family expectations and tiger-parenting.

The **Bangladesh** case study reported some very candid discussions with parents who admitted to being disappointed or losing their temper with their children due to the child's unsatisfactory results. Approximately 30 per cent of the parents expressed immediate displeasure to their children. For example, the father of a female student in Dhaka stated: 'I feel very unhappy, become angry and scold her for the poor performance. Then, I try to be normal and advise her to pay more attention to study.' Likewise, the mother of a male student in Chittagong Division asserts: 'I become disheartened and do misbehave with him for the time being. After that, I try to convince him to be sincere in studying for achieving better results in the future examinations' (Zinnah et al., 2017).

A similar example was highlighted in the **Republic of Korea** case. The majority of students indicated that they receive negative responses from their parents when they get poor grades or results on exams. Since the child's achievement can negatively impact the family's reputation, parents can impose a great deal of pressure towards their child's study. The example from one parent in an interview highlights this characteristic:

when I see my child studying, I am never satisfied. There is always something lacking. Why does my child have so much free time? I think like this and feel like my child hasn't studied that much. If the test scores come out poorly I think 'You did not study enough'. Just because you sit down on a chair in front of a desk does not mean that you are studying. Of course, in the back of my mind I try to think 'You did well!'; but after the result comes out, I feel that my child shows no signs of reflection, and then I get angry (Suh et al., 2017).

A teacher also reinforced this notion of disappointing the family, adding that 'when the students get even one thing wrong in exams they need to consider their mother's reaction and face the backlash... There is an environment that is centered on purely studying; everyone is very sensitive, on edge, and aggressive' (Suh et al., 2017).

In **Kazakhstan**, parents' opinions were divided when asked about what they do when their children get low grades in the tests. Some answered that they are not upset but are trying to find the reasons for the poor result and are trying to support their child. Others consider it as a fair indicator of their child's knowledge, while others get upset and punish their child. In the opposite case, when a child shows good results at school, the vast majority of parents praise the child and rejoice at his or her success. Parents also believe that they have more influence on students than teachers.

### *Hard work and diligence*

The notion of hard work and diligence is a common characteristic across cultures and societies in Asia-Pacific. While this characteristic is certainly linked to Confucianism, it is not uncommon in other societies and cultures,

and is linked with other socio-religious beliefs and political economy.<sup>16</sup> In short, hard work and diligence is a common virtue in both our modern education and modern economic systems. The virtue of hard work was also one of the underlying forces that created capitalism, and coincided with the similar trajectories of modern schooling, and the building of nation-states and common ideologies. It plays a very important role in the relationship between learning and education.

It is clear to parents in the **Philippines** that if their major role in the family is to provide for the needs of the family members, it is also the ‘job’ of their children to study hard, pass all examinations and get a good grade. For the parents, good performance in a test or having a good performance in class is an indication of the relation between the ‘true meaning of hardship and success in life’. In this way, students are fulfilling their basic role in the family if they study hard (Ibañez et al., 2017).

It was also evident from the focus group discussions that parents in **Fiji** were happy that the government had reinstated several of the examinations in recent years. This was important because their children were again occupied with schoolwork both in and after school, and ‘it kept them out of mischief and trouble’ (Bakalevu, 2017). While they agreed that they allowed children free time to watch movies and do whatever they wanted, it was important that, ‘they have to get back to study’. The majority (82 per cent) of students reported they had ‘very little’ free time, while 6 per cent said they had ‘no free time’ at all. This ties in well with the parents’ views of exams as necessary to keep students occupied and working hard. Parents’ did not think that students should have more free time and preferred that their children were in school and studying (Bakalevu, 2017).

A similar result was observed in **India**, as all students agreed that hard work was needed in order to do well in the examinations. And in **Bangladesh**, studying hard and academic achievement was seen as a duty to be fulfilled.

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16 See Weber, M. 2001. *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London, Routledge.

In Confucian heritage cultures, the concept of hard work and diligence is of significant importance. In **Viet Nam**, parents and students have a strong belief that 'diligence is more important than intelligence', 'where there's a will there's a way', and 'practice makes perfect', and do not rely on innate abilities. In **Japan** and **Republic of Korea**, this work ethic has not only been influenced by Confucian heritage, but also from the legacy and impact of World War II and the Korean War. In both countries following these wars, many social institutions had collapsed, and the people, as a whole, believed that they could succeed in life through their own efforts, and thus by working hard they would one day succeed. This idea is shared today, as comments from the **Republic of Korea** focus groups indicated: 'confidence can come from effort and achievement', 'students' scores reflect the time and effort they have put in' and 'parents are not satisfied with their children's test preparation and want them to put in more effort' (Suh et al., 2017). Overall, when asked how they deal with the pressures of tests and exams, the most common response from students was to 'study harder'. This is a common characteristic in Republic of Korea, where people value diligence and hard work.

### *Parental support varies*

However, not all families and parents indicate a hands-on approach to motivate their child to perform. Parental support can vary depending on several factors, such as socio-economic backgrounds, and the idea of what is best for the child.

The overwhelming majority of parents (86 per cent) in Kazakhstan want their children to choose the best specialties after graduation. However, this is not purely related to traditional academic and knowledge accumulation. According to the results of the questionnaire, many parents (84 per cent) would like children to get life skills<sup>17</sup> at school. This ranked higher than 'best grades' or 'to be the best students'. And just half the parents worry

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<sup>17</sup> Life skills refer to competencies and skills that are not related to academic content such as creativity, problem-solving, communication, teamwork and collaboration. These are sometimes referred to as transversal competencies or 21st century skills.

about their children's performance. It's possible that parents consider that exams are not as important as real skills that can be useful in later life.

In **Bangladesh**, the sociocultural, financial and educational conditions of the parents also impact on the support to their children differently for preparing them for examinations. 80 per cent of the surveyed fathers indicated they help their children with their schoolwork and to prepare them for examinations as opposed to only 30 per cent of mothers. The large difference between fathers and mothers could be a reflection of the sampling, on the differing levels of education, or of other sociocultural values, but the case study did not conclusively determine why more fathers help their children than mothers.

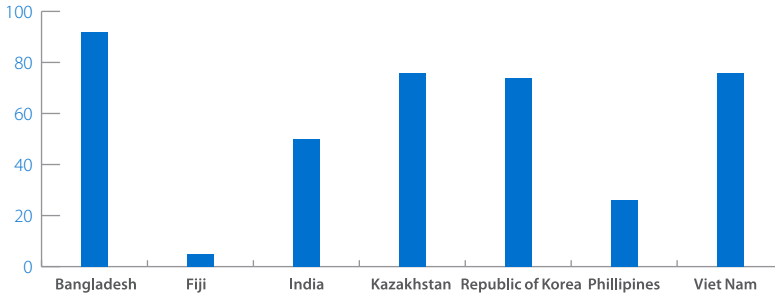
### *Private tutoring as educational support*

Parental assistance can include motivation and encouragement, working directly with their children on their school work, but increasingly it often emphasizes hiring tutors and remedial education. Increasingly across the region, parents feel it necessary to send their children to providers of private tuition preparing students for high-stakes exams from as early as pre-school all the way to the lead up to high school graduation and university entrance exams. In general, shadow education serves to supplement formal schooling, however in many cases, students and families start to rely on it not only for exam preparation, but also to reduce the learning gap. In many countries, teachers also rely on private tutoring to supplement their own income.

Most of the case studies reported that private tutoring classes are extremely important for students to succeed, and at least half of the sampled students in five of the cases spend time at private tutoring classes. And more than 70 per cent of students in Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea and Viet Nam receive extra help from private centres (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Percentage of students that attend private tutoring



*Notes:*

1. This is the overall percentage of surveyed students, across multiple grades.
2. Japan and Tonga did not provide any data on students attending private tutoring

At present, private tuition and coaching centers have become rampant in **Bangladesh**. The parents' high expectation for their children's highest achievement in examinations has encouraged the rapid growth of private tutoring and coaching. Coaching, cram schools, or tutoring, has become so ingrained in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh that parents of young children feel they must hire private tutors to improve their child's performance in school. From the questionnaire results, almost all students seek the help of private tutors or coaching centers in the four regions, with 92 per cent of students overall. The majority of students study 3–5 hours per week at the private center. For example, one female student in Chittagong Division stated: 'I work hard for completing my study every day. I also get the help of private tutors go to the coaching centre for developing a clear understanding on difficult aspects. The textbooks are too difficult to learn by myself' (Zinnah et al., 2017).

Many students and teachers in Bangladesh are fully or partially dependent on the private tutoring system. Private tutoring is delivered by mainstream teachers, teachers from other institutions or even non-teachers, and is an important method to earn extra income (Zinnah et al., 2017).

The pressure and competition among parents in the **Republic of Korea** can be quite significant, and as a result, many families are forced to spend a significant amount of money on private tutoring for their children. On the one hand parents send children to *Hagwons*<sup>18</sup> to provide assistance to those who are willing to go and have the determination, while on the other hand they also send children to *Hagwons* to gain comfort and a feeling of security due to the anxiety of being left behind in the country's competitive education culture. From interviews with the mothers of students, this conflict on how best to support their child was evident. One of the mothers stated that

it is hard to do as I want, because when I look at others, I just think we should just go with it [send children to Hagwons]. This is what is required to do well in this country. More than me, my husband who is working says that our child 'has to go this way' [cannot fall behind], and constantly says 'this is the way' (Suh et al., 2017).

Another mother pointed out that

some mothers send their kids to Hagwons so that they don't fall behind others, because they think their child won't be able to make friends and will become the minority, or just to satisfy themselves. Mothers don't send their children to Hagwons only for the sake of the child, but also for self-satisfaction, to make sure that they are doing the right thing as a parent (Suh et al., 2017).

While parents in **Kazakhstan** are keen on their children's education, the parents surveyed did not indicate that they spent a great deal of time with their children. It turns out that about 80 per cent of parents either do not help their child in the preparation for the UNT or do it on average less than one hour a day. Responses from the students confirmed this, as they reported seeking assistance from their teachers, tutors or friends before looking to their parents for support. When parents were asked about what exactly they are doing by helping the child prepare for UNT most of the answers were about joint problem solving, analysis

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18 *Hagwon* is the Korean-language word for a for-profit private institute, academy or cram school.

of incomprehensible questions and work on mistakes. Some parents however, indicated hiring a tutor and providing moral support as a form of help in preparing for the UNT.

Over half of the parents surveyed in **Kazakhstan** (56 per cent) provide children with private tutoring outside of school. Most of these private lessons are aimed at preparation for the UNT exam, to improve understanding of the subject, or to improve assessments on exam papers and academic results in general. However, 70 per cent of students answered that they attend private tutoring, with the vast majority (90 per cent) looking for help in preparation for examinations and the UNT. Both students (27 per cent) and parents (30 per cent) indicated that about 3–5 hours a week was spent attending private lessons (Iskakov et al., 2017). The level of student interest in private lessons suggests a lack of confidence in preparation at school. In general, students are very positive about private lessons and associate their progress with private lessons.

In **India**, private tutoring is significant trend and the responses of students, teachers and parents indicate that private tutoring is considered an important means of improving students' performance in examination as well as to improve students' understanding of concepts learned in regular classes. Demographic and socio-economic factors influence the prevalence of private tutoring, where it tends to be more common among the private school students. While 50 per cent of students indicated that they take private tutoring classes, other studies (see Bray and Kwo, 2014) have shown that the incidence is much higher (Suresh, 2017).

In **Viet Nam**, private tutoring is usually focused on required subjects for university entrance such as mathematics, language arts, foreign languages, physics and chemistry. Approximately 70 per cent of surveyed students attended private tutoring, in which the figure for public schools is slightly higher than the figure for private schools (78 per cent compared to 73 per cent). Students cited that the most important reasons for private tutoring included: 'to prepare for graduation exam or entrance exam', 'to get higher scores in exams' and 'to improve their understanding and comprehension'.

Nearly one-third of public school students and one-fifth of private school students spent 6–8 hours per week in private tutoring. The majority of students studied 2–3 subjects at these tutorials (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Private tutoring is also important for Vietnamese teachers. Approximately 40 per cent of surveyed teachers teach in private tutoring centers, and among those teaching within the centres, 50 per cent are private school teachers and 33 per cent are public school teachers. It could be that private school teachers have more outside-of-class time to work in these centres or do not have to teach in-school tutorials compared to public school teachers (Nguyen et al., 2017).

In **Tonga**, private tutoring is now a very common means of preparing students for the three national examinations at the end of secondary schooling. Evidence from the *talanoa*<sup>19</sup> suggested that parents viewed schooling in traditional terms, with a strong positive regard for examinations and teacher authority. Such reliance can limit parents' active participation in their children's school and impede their involvement in making informed decisions about their children's schooling. However, the case study also noted the importance of the parents and community in terms of organizing private tutorials outside the school. In some villages, the parents do fundraising activities during *faikava*, or 'kava gatherings', to support education activities, including private tutoring.<sup>20</sup> In addition, a group of secondary school teachers on the main island of Tongatapu offer paid private tutoring for upper secondary school students towards the end of the year before the national examinations. Students pay a fee to participate and it is a popular option for families ('Otunuku et al., 2017).

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19 *Talanoa* is a widely used Polynesian research method, similar to a focus group discussion, to reflect a process of inclusive, participatory and transparent dialogue.

20 *Faikava*, or *kava* gatherings, are the Tongan *kava* ceremony involving a social gathering of Tongan males to drink *kava* in the afternoons and evenings. *Kava* is a plant native to the Pacific, in which the roots are used to make a popular drink used in the ceremony.

However, not all case studies indicated a prevalence of private tutoring. In **Fiji**, only a small minority of parents (2 out of 20) who participated in the focus groups reported that they paid for their children to take private tutoring. They indicated that private tutoring helped to clarify understanding and gave added confidence to their children. Only a minority of students, eight from two leading urban schools, answered that they attended private tutoring. It appears that with so much time in schools dedicated to revision, there is not much need for private tutoring. It also appears that private tutoring, which was fairly popular in the past, is no longer sought after (Bakalevu, 2017).

In the **Philippines**, according to the respondents in focus group discussions, 'private tutoring motivates and guides the student to study, improve grades, and prepares us for the upcoming tests.' Interestingly, even though the Philippines reported that private tutoring was quite important, a low number of students responded that they attended these lessons (26 per cent). Reasons for this include socio-economic, as many parents in public schools view private tutoring as additional financial expense that they cannot afford. However, when disaggregating the data by school level, a much higher proportion of secondary school students (over 50 per cent) reported attending private tutoring classes (Ibañez et al., 2017).

The demand for exam preparation courses, shows the prevalence of a 'culture of testing', and the importance of the exams. Seeking additional tutoring is important for all of the countries — either private or in class. The demand for private tutoring outside of the school is particularly noted in the countries, and areas with larger populations and demographics may also influence this demand. Rural and remote areas (for instance Fiji and Tonga) may see more in-class tutorials simply as a result of the smaller populations, and therefore schools and the community need to step in to organize extra classes.

Another finding was that several of the cases indicated that private tutoring is favoured because there is sometimes a lack of confidence in classroom teachers or the instruction that public schools provide, particularly when it comes to preparing students for exams. As a result of pressure from students

and their families, this can lead many schools and teachers to devote more in-class time preparing for high-stakes examinations and assessments.

The qualitative aspect of the research shows the existence of an important relationship between social and family expectations and a ‘culture of testing’. However, it is difficult to measure the depth or extent of this relationship to a degree that it can be compared across cultures. To understand this relationship more, the next section will look at students’, parents’, and teachers’ perceptions toward examinations, how exams motivate and reinforce learning, how effective they are, and how they have become ‘tradition’.

## The relevance and effectiveness of testing

A significant point of interest for this research was the perspectives or beliefs of the stakeholders with regard to not only high-stakes exams, but also low-stakes exams and assignments. The case studies reported that many of the respondents agreed that exams are positive, reliable and trustworthy measures of student performance. In addition, they often serve to provide relevant feedback on performance, not only to students, but to teachers and schools as well. Finally, the majority of respondents indicated that examinations were essential for motivating students and determining future success. Stakeholder perceptions and beliefs shape and reinforce the social and cultural ties to education, examinations and achievement.

In the **Philippines**, teachers have a positive view of testing, where its purpose to gauge learning has been highlighted. The same scenario can be said with the perception of the parents as they say that examinations assess students’ knowledge and level of understanding. In this case, most of them have a positive perception regarding the usefulness and relevance of tests and examinations.

Many Filipino students, in consensus with the teachers and parents, claim that testing is a tool to assess whether or not students have learned inside the class. It is viewed as a means to be able to evaluate the students’ knowledge, skills and abilities. Testing provides feedback on many counts.

One school principal that was interviewed reported that

it allowed us to determine what competencies need to be elaborated on more, and emphasize more to the students. Testing also helped us to plan for future learning activities and has allowed us to determine who among our students was in need of intervention. So testing allows us to evaluate our students that way. It gave us indicators of our school's performance, and enabled us to make the necessary adjustments (Ibañez et al., 2017).

Another school principal commented, 'it measures the quality of instruction, programs and projects implemented to improve education.' Another also said, 'it can gauge performance of the children and the school.' All the 11 school administrators who were interviewed consider tests and examinations as relevant measures of learning, mainly to determine the level of achievement of their students in order to help schools and teachers determine what educational interventions are appropriate for their students. For examinations, they share that 'examinations impact learning in that examination results are used for remediation purposes. Knowing how they fared in examinations enables students to gauge their achievement of or knowledge of the skills that they learned in class.' Examinations will also help them to review for lessons or competencies which they have not mastered yet. They also reported that formative evaluations are particularly important in order to know what area of the subject matter is to be learned and focused on.

In **India**, examinations, especially high-stakes examinations are considered very important by both the students and parents. The students of both private and government schools and their parents emphatically made the point that examinations are essential for the students. A female student from Sri Vidya Pre-University College, Bangalore, expressed

I feel that exams are very important. Since the opportunity to study in a premium college is limited and the student population is so vast, an exam is perhaps one of the only ways to select the best candidate. So, it is even more important to me to be able to do well, not only so that I can know where I stand based on the knowledge that I have but also to know what kind of competition I'm up against, so that I can achieve my goals (Suresh, 2017).

In **Republic of Korea**, the fact that tests and exams have been able to withstand long periods of time is because people trust the method of testing. There have always been arguments as to whether or not tests are the best way to measure one's capabilities and abilities. Even stakeholders who have continuously criticized the negative aspects of tests eventually end up using tests as an evaluation method (Korea School Education Research Network, 2011), and people have been working endlessly to increase fairness for the existing test system (Kim, 2014). The faith that people have on the system of testing and the constant efforts for improvement have allowed people to believe that the test system is better than any other evaluation system in terms of fairness.

This faith in examinations is entirely shared by students in the country. They tended not to agree that exams helped them learn, or that they enjoyed taking exams. This dislike of exams increased with school level, as older students are more likely to have more high-stakes exams and face more pressure or stress. However, all three groups (students, parents and teachers) agreed that exams are relevant to the content studied in class. Both parents and teachers had a slight tendency to agree with the statement 'exams are effective at measuring what students have learned'. Respondents were mostly neutral with the statement that exams are necessary to achieve success.

In **Tonga**, over 80 per cent of parents agree that exams are relevant and effective, and 93 per cent feel they are necessary to achieve success. Teachers have a very positive perception about exams and their subsequent impact on students' learning. 76 per cent agreed that students learn more because of the exam, and 84 per cent agreed that exams are relevant to the content they teach in class. Teachers also agreed (75 per cent) that exams are effective at measuring what students have learnt, and 73 per cent agreed that exams are necessary to achieve success.

In **Kazakhstan**, almost half of the students (47 per cent) believe that exams do not force them to study more, which confirms the conclusion about the insignificance of such exams for many students. Only half of the



students believe that exams contribute to progress in learning. However, overall, students do consider the examinations to be positive, as this motivates them to learn, which can positively affect their well-being.

Most teachers (83 per cent) recognize examinations as a relevant and effective measure of student knowledge and 60 per cent believe they are necessary for success. A majority of the parents indicated that the examinations were relevant (80 per cent), but far fewer felt they were effective (42 per cent). And only one-quarter of the interviewed teachers and parents believe that the examinations motivate children to study harder, or that students learn more because of exams. There are two points of view among parents and teachers regarding the effects of examinations: on the one hand, it can provide students the motivation to study and learn, while on the other hand it can provide undue pressure and stress.

It is clear that while perceptions regarding examinations and testing vary, there appears to be a strong recognition of their importance in the educational process for measuring knowledge and ability, as well as the fact that most people recognize its importance for future success. Perhaps these strong positive perceptions indicate there is a strong 'tradition' for tests — and that since these tests are relevant, useful and important for learning — it is a part of a 'culture of testing'.

In all of the case studies, there exists a very strong influence of family and community in the perception of education, examinations, and learning. Much of this influence is a result of economic opportunity and social mobility, but manifests itself as either originating or being reinforced through family relations. For example, parents want the best for their child, so they place a lot of pressure on their children to succeed in school, and as a result at examinations. Students, not wanting to disappoint their family, embrace the importance and opportunity that education and examinations can provide. Is this cultural legacy more important in one culture or society than others? The culture of 'face', the combination of social standing, reputation, influence, dignity and honor can be particularly strong in Asian societies. The social pressure to achieve and to

succeed manifests itself in all the case studies, where the family wants the child to succeed in order for the family to succeed. Pride and prestige are a significant driving force for achievement in examinations.

This driving force can be very positive and instil great pride in both learners and parents. However, this pressure and input from parents and families can also have negative manifestations. These include excess pressure to succeed which leads to physical and mental illness and abuse, as well as systematic corruption and cheating in the examination process.

## 5 The 'culture of learning' – the impact of testing

With the predominance of high-stakes exams and a testing culture, there is a large body of knowledge on the effects these have on various stakeholders and the education system as a whole. From both the literature reviews and the case study results, students, parents and teachers are all affected by a combination of competition, internal and external pressures, privatization and a lack of teaching resources and time. This section will look at how the 'culture of testing' impacts learning, by looking at the competition it creates in learners and the education system in general, private tutoring and shadow education, stress and anxiety, and the impact on teaching and the curriculum.

### Competition

One aspect that deserves more close attention is the competition that surrounds the 'culture of testing'. Competition due to the demand for better positions, spaces, and schools has a significant effect not only on the persistence and depth of a 'culture of testing', but also the impact this competition has on the learners in terms of stress and anxiety. This section looks at the various aspects of competition that the case studies highlighted: competition among students for admission and employment; competition (or lack thereof) that breeds cooperation among students; as well as competition that fuels corruption, stress and anxiety.

### *Factors that fuel competition – awards and rewards*

The previous chapter highlighted the social expectations and motivations that fuel the testing culture and competition to achieve. However, it is not always families that can motivate the students. Sometimes, the competition is based on policies and rewards that are actively promoted by schools or government. For instance, in **Fiji**, in 2017, the Ministry of Education launched the Minister's Excellence Awards to recognize exceptional achievement in various categories. It showed the Ministry's appreciation to schools, teachers and heads for remarkable results and bringing prestige to the education sector. These rewards are a form of motivation for the students as well as schools. They often provide positive feedback from the students, teachers and schools who appreciate the recognition for their work and dedication (Bakalevu, 2017).

### *Competition for admission and employment*

The competition for spaces in higher education is quite pronounced in **Bangladesh**. Public universities are preferred over private universities for a number of reasons: lower tuition, low-cost residential facilities, priority to government and non-government jobs upon graduation, education quality, research provision and a fair and competitive admission test system. Recent studies indicate that in terms of university admission, only a limited number of the total candidates are finally selected for entry to public universities, with the remainder of the students left to enter private universities. Recent statistics for the University of Dhaka, which is the top university in Bangladesh, showed that in 2016–17, there were 302,489 admission seekers against 6,800 seats at public universities, or 45 candidates per seat. This ratio has increased since the previous session where there were 254,404 students applying against 6,655 seats available, or 38 candidates per seat (Ahmed, 2016).

Similarly, in **India**, the cutthroat competition for admission to post-secondary institutions adds pressure on students to 'perform well' and score highly. However, peer competition compels the students to concentrate on the preparation for examination and score rather than on learning (Suresh, 2017).

Earlier in the report we highlighted how competition for civil service positions in **Republic of Korea** has influenced their society for thousands of years. Similar trends are found today. In previous studies, it has been noted that a strong majority of parents have the perception that ‘students have to beat every competitor and be the best’ (Lee et al., 1992), and that there is discrimination based on whether or not someone has a college diploma (KEDI, 2016).

Another factor in the **Republic of Korea** is the current instability in the labour market and the high rates of youth unemployment and temporary employment, which can lead to greater competition for college graduates in search of stable employment (Suh et al., 2017). The case study highlighted this competition based on interviews with students: ‘I compare my grades to my peers frequently, and when my peers belittle me about my grades, it motivates me to study more. I need to study to achieve my dreams.’ (Suh et al., 2017).

### *Competition breeds corruption*

There are also other negative aspects of the examination culture, particularly in the form of corruption and cheating. In the **Philippines**, however, is the integrity of national assessments and high-stake assessments. Many participants, especially teachers and principals, noted that there are inappropriate practices such as test leakages, cheating of students, and bonuses for teachers with good test results.

In **Viet Nam**, for some parents, their child’s education is so important that they are readily willing to take advantage of their personal relationship with teacher to gain favour for their children, in order to acquire falsely higher scores, and usually ignore to their children’s cheating behaviours in examination (Nguyen et al., 2017).

The competition to achieve is a result of the sociocultural conditions that exist. This competition includes not only competition among students, but also competition that exists among families, as an extension of the importance of social status and prestige. As the motivation to succeed

stems from students' and societies' desire to achieve and gain better opportunities, this pressure can create significant stress and anxiety among students. Most of the countries indicated that testing and examinations reveal competition and motivations for students, their families, or teachers to succeed. Only Kazakhstan reported that students did not feel overly motivated because of examinations.

### *Competition fuels stress and anxiety*

***The negative effects of exams on people can be different because in some cases students can become depressed because of their scores. They get extremely pressured from their parents, their peers and their teachers. Educators can cause stress for them, and anxiety.***

– Student, Philippines

Pressure on students is an important factor that affects the learning process. It can either help students by motivating them to achieve the best results, or disastrously affect their results, as children can become overwhelmed, experiencing stress or panic. The focus on academic achievement, particularly in subjects such as reading and mathematics as well as the results of student examinations, have been seen as undermining student happiness and well-being in the Asia-Pacific region. According to UNESCO's (2016) report on Happy Schools, respondents to a regional survey ranked 'high student workload and stress driven by exams and grades' as the second most important factor resulting in 'unhappy schools'. The report also indicates that this pressure on students to perform in tests and exams may also be related to disengagement from education, increased stress among students, growing cases of bullying and school violence, and in the worst cases, higher suicide rates among youth in some countries. This section looks at the pressure and stress of students by linking the findings from the previous section to motivations for achievement based on social and family pressures.

In the **Republic of Korea**, according to the PISA Well-Being Report of 2015, the satisfaction rate of students was the lowest among the 28 OECD

countries and the second lowest among the 48 non-OECD countries. The percentage of students worried about their academic performance and the percentage of students who wish to become the best student in the class were higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2017). Other studies have also revealed that high school students experienced stress from testing, the competition for testing or grades, and that this stress can lead to severe depression and thoughts of suicide (Park, 2009; Ko, 2013; Keun et al., 2011). Even elementary students experienced a high level of test anxiety and this has an overall negative impact on their academic performance (Kang and Shim, 2010).

The results of the questionnaire found consistent results with these previous studies. Sixty-five per cent of students surveyed in **Republic of Korea** responded that they ‘worry’ they will do poorly in tests or get poor grades at school. Students in the interviews also indicated that, overall, exams do not have a positive impact on student well-being or happiness. Some of the major issues listed by the students were: school violence, bullying, game addiction, hopelessness and helplessness. One of the teachers answered: ‘except for the 10 per cent that get a perfect score, everyone is unhappy. And even the kids who get a perfect score are not happy.’ (Suh et al., 2017).

Filipino students are expected to study hard. The **Philippines** questionnaire results showed that 71 per cent of students worry they will get poor grades, 61 per cent worry that a test will be difficult, and 65 per cent reported that they get nervous when they don’t know how to solve a problem. The **Philippines** results also indicate a similar trend to the one reported in the 2017 OECD report on learner well-being — a larger percentage of females strongly agreed with the statements: ‘I worry about getting poor grades’, ‘I get nervous when I don’t know how to solve a problem’ and ‘I worry that taking test will be difficult’.

In **Fiji**, as a matter of policy, students will progress through to the next grade regardless of their score on the exam. Interviews with senior personnel at the Ministry of Education and teachers indicated their belief that students

do not necessarily worry about examinations anymore because the stakes have been lowered. However, this was not supported by the findings. Most of the students indicated that they are worried about getting poor grades (72 per cent), and that they are tense or nervous when they are studying (88 per cent strongly agree or agree). On questions about the expectations that come from examinations, almost all students (93 per cent) want to pass in all subjects and to be the best student in the class and a high proportion (72 per cent) worry that they will get low marks.

In **Bangladesh**, most of the students expect to get better grades and scores in comparison to their classmates, and wish for the best opportunities after their graduation. Therefore, they get very tense when studying for tests even if they are well-prepared, and feel nervous when they do not know how to solve a problem or answer a question.

Like in other countries in the region, most students surveyed in **Kazakhstan** are concerned about their grades at school. A main concern of Kazakh students is choosing the best specialization after graduation (93 per cent). 58 per cent of the students are worried if they get bad grades, and 54 per cent get tense when they do not know how to answer a problem or question. However, in general students were not overly worried about their achievement or taking tests. More than half of the students are indifferent to becoming one of the best students in the class. According to the questionnaire results, the vast majority of children (about 90 per cent) do not experience pressure during the preparation for in-class assessments, which indicates their low-stakes nature, as well as suggesting that a 'culture of testing' is not particularly strong in Kazakhstan.

Similarly, students in **India** did not report that they worry overly about tests (30 per cent) or getting poor grades (30 per cent). However, 56 per cent of students reported that they feel anxious for a test, even after studying and preparing well. This contradiction could indicate that only the immediacy of the tests causes anxiety, or it may reflect problems in the questionnaire design or interpretation of the questions by the respondents.

### *Stress from social and family expectations*

Stress and anxiety as a result of family pressure was also observed in most of the other cases study. In **India** and **Viet Nam**, a majority of the students surveyed indicated that they worry they will disappoint their parents if they perform poorly on an examination or get poor grades.

The results also indicated that students in **Republic of Korea** face significant pressures from family and society. When asked whether the students feel they have let down their parents if they get a low score, 53 per cent of all students agreed, but the percentage rose to 66 per cent for students in Grade 11. This shows that the pressure and anxiety rise as the students get closer to the university entrance exam.

In **Fiji**, the pressure from family was quite strong, and the majority of the students indicated that they worried about disappointing their families. 85 per cent of students surveyed worried about ‘letting parents and family down’, and 78 per cent indicated they worry about letting their teacher down as well. While most students (70 per cent) are satisfied with their achievement and progress, examinations still generate an element of worry and fear that could negatively impact their performance. The fear of failure and judgement by important ‘others’, like their parents, family, and teachers, is very real. These results indicate that the ‘culture of testing’ in Fiji has a strong relationship with family and community expectations, and not necessarily the student’s individual motivations to succeed.

**Tonga** reported similar results regarding the stress and pressure related to exams. Eighty-three per cent of the students reported that they worry they will let their family down if they get low scores, and 79 per cent also reported that they worry they will let their teacher. Overall, 89 per cent worry they will do poorly in exams, 72 per cent worry they will get poor grades, and 76 per cent of the students reported they get nervous when they don’t know the answer or how to solve a problem.

In the **Philippines**, the pressure and expectations from their parents and teachers causes anxiety, where 64 per cent of students agree that they will



let their parents down if they get a poor score, while 57 per cent worry about letting their teacher down.

Even in **Kazakhstan**, where students had indicated that they are not overly worried about their achievement and performance, students (71 per cent) think they will upset their parents when they get low grades in school.

### *Cooperation and collaboration*

Students comparing their performance with one another can also be a source of positive pressure. More than half of the students surveyed in the **Philippines** (57 per cent) admitted that they compare exam or test results with their peers. The students noted it can be positive, as testing breeds cooperation among students where those who score better provide help to students who receive lower scores on an exam. They see the purpose of testing as a meaningful exercise to be able to help them improve their performance in class. There is also an expectation that examinations contribute to students' morale (Ibañez et al., 2017).

Students surveyed in **Kazakhstan** reported that when they receive their examination results, 85 per cent compare them with the results of their classmates, which begs the question of whether there is competition or rivalry between students. However, 40 per cent of the students reported that they are not upset if classmates get better grades than their own. Based on the questionnaire results, the examinations do not have a strong impact on students' motivation and desires. Only half of the students' reported that examinations make them study harder. Overall, the results from Kazakhstan indicate that examinations do not motivate most of the surveyed students and do not help to determine their specialty in later life.

While Kazakh students reported being worried about grades, more than half of the students are indifferent to becoming one of the best students in the class. This also suggests a lack of competition among the students, and the case study seems to highlight little evidence of competition for grades.

While a good number of Fijian students in the questionnaire and focus groups acknowledged the motivating effect of exams towards study, few were motivated to compete with peers (68 per cent were not concerned with their peers' scores), nor did they see the Grade 12 exam as a way of ranking in school and country.

Examinations and testing in general can provide the motivation to achieve and succeed, however they can also bring negative pressure, from the students themselves as well as from social factors such as family and society. The case studies indicated that in many cases students struggle with these expectations (with the exception of Kazakhstan), and this burden causes significant stress. This negative pressure inevitably has a negative effect on learning. The most recent OECD PISA results, as well as UNESCO's Happy Schools report among others, point out that learner well-being can often lead to better outcomes (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2016b).

## Teaching and curriculum

***We just teach the tests. That is what is expected, isn't it?***

– Teacher, Fiji

Another major effect of the 'culture of testing' is the relationship between the teachers, the curriculum and the test. The objectives and tasks of the examinations can have a significant impact on the curriculum, and this pressures schools and teachers to prepare students specifically for these tests. As a result, teachers focus only on the test subjects—i.e. teach to the test—and this exam preparation can take time away from other class activities. In addition, examination results can be a significant motivator for teachers, as they can be used as a measure of the teachers' effectiveness and ultimately, their reputation.

### *Simplification and narrowing of curriculum*

The fact that many examinations cover only a limited number of subjects (typically mathematics, language and one or two others) means that the focus of learning is often simplified. Even while schools aim to offer

a broad, holistic education that can cover many different aspects, the examinations tend to narrow the curriculum, particularly closer to the examination period (Au, 2007, 2011; Moses and Nanna, 2007; Crocco and Costigan, 2007).

The **Viet Nam** report indicates that the connection between examinations and learning was virtually non-existent. Most schools' Grade 12 only focused on exam subjects and neglected the remaining subjects. For instance, most students concentrated on preparing for the university entrance exams and ignored other academic subjects as well as educational activities. Moreover, the case study argues that the content-based general education curriculum (MoET, 2006) has unintentionally contributed to the spread of test-oriented culture. That is, teachers focus on what is likely to be tested rather than content that may promote holistic human development. The teachers and schools often narrow the Grade 12 curriculum by reducing the number of educational activity-related classes or cancelling the teaching of educational activities, decreasing instructional contents and time devoted to non-exam subjects, and by enhancing private tutoring, preparation and after-school classes for exam subjects.

In **Fiji**, the researchers hinted that examinations perpetuate narrow beliefs and expectations of education and schools. Examinations end up limiting the taught curriculum and stagnate teaching and learning into the old didactic instruction and rote memorization. In the Education Commission 2020 report, Sadler and Sharma (2000) discussed employers' concern about the lack of initiative shown by new graduates and their inability to think critically and apply learning to life-long needs.

However, with regard to testing and curriculum alignment in the **Philippines**, the principals articulated that by and large, examinations are properly aligned to the curriculum. Curriculum reviews are conducted during the summer break, at the same time that examinations are collaboratively evaluated by the teachers. As one school principal who was interviewed described

the competencies that are covered for the particular quarter have corresponding items in the examinations to ensure that the content of the curriculum matches with the items in the test, like in the standardized tests. When we conduct our curriculum review, we also ensure that all the competencies given by the Department of Education are included in our examinations. There's the Teacher's Guide, activities, evaluations to know if it's aligned to instructional objectives and the National Achievement Test-aligned subjects. It serves as an assessment evaluation as to what the learners have achieved through the school's learning processes (Ibañez et al., 2017).

The impact that examinations have on the curriculum of course translates to how the teachers can prepare and deliver the knowledge necessary for students.

### *Teaching to the test*

A related effect is that teachers often find themselves with not enough time to prepare properly, cover the entire syllabus, or pressure to prepare their students for the tests.

In the **Philippines**, educational institutions and their teachers have the tendency to 'teach to the test' (Ibañez et al., 2017). School standing and performance are crucial for budget allocation due to performance-based incentives, especially for public schools. Teachers are left with little choice but to frame their teaching towards topics covered in examinations, especially high-stakes assessments. This is conventionally done among teachers across public and private schools. Testing, in essence, breeds the practice of teaching to the test.

In **Viet Nam**, many of the teachers consider examination results the most important aspect of teaching, as opposed to the individual learning progress of students. While some teachers are enthusiastic, with extensive teaching knowledge and comprehensive skills, there are also a number of teachers who are merely dedicated to teaching the students with exam tips and techniques. According to one of the education experts interviewed in the Viet Nam case study, 'in the past, teachers tried their best to offer good teaching so that students could acquire comprehensive

knowledge. Today however, they tend to focus on teaching and training students only to achieve high scores in examinations' (Nguyen et al., 2017).

As a result, exams have an effect on how classroom strategies are carried out. The majority of Vietnamese teachers (57 per cent) spent 3–4 hours or more per week on teaching for exam preparation. In one semester, nearly half of the teachers (40 per cent) administered exams or tests more than twice per semester. Teachers generally accepted that 'the time spent for the NHSE exam is sufficient', and disagreed that 'preparation for the exam takes class time away from other activities'. While there was some evidence that teachers focus mainly on the test items, when asked directly, the teachers didn't feel like the test was taking away time that could be spent on something else (Nguyen et al., 2017).

With regard to their classroom practice, a majority (66 per cent) of teachers in **Fiji** indicated that exam preparation takes away class time for other activities. The view of one teacher highlighted that 'we teach [to] the test'. This view is widely shared and even echoed by Ministry officials. Another teacher explained that intense concentration on exam preparation in the last semester of the year can often lead to cancelled sessions for physical education, computer education, library and culture. Yet when asked on the questionnaire if they have enough time to cover the entire curriculum, the teachers were fairly neutral.

The results from **Kazakhstan** also show that teachers prepare for tests and exams. More than half (59 per cent) of the surveyed teachers prepare students for tests on average 1–2 hours per week. Another 40 per cent of teachers spend on average 3–4 hours on in-the-class training for tests or other assessments. At the same time, 70 per cent of teachers noted that preparation for the UNT exam takes time away from other activities or learning in school. Teachers are given little time to fully prepare students for the UNT and do not have time to cover all the material in the curriculum.

With regard to the methods of preparing pupils for assessment, teachers prefer to provide them with practical tasks, such as sample tests, as well as to discuss important topics before the exam. And judging from the results of the teacher questionnaire, preparation for tests or exams does not take as much time as preparing for daily teaching activities. More than half of the teachers (53 per cent) spend 10 or more hours a week preparing for regular lessons compared with 2 hours a week preparing and marking tests.

In the **Republic of Korea**, the most common methods teachers use to prepare students for high-stakes exams consist of providing additional classes (63 per cent), followed by spending more time in class on practice exercises (53 per cent) according to the responses of students. There was also a slight tendency for teachers to provide additional classes for students in higher grades.

Perhaps as a result of the additional classes, teachers were neutral in responding to whether the preparation for exams takes away class time from other activities and that they have enough time to cover all the contents. When asked if they teach content or activities that will not be covered in the high-stakes exam, 63 per cent of teachers answered that they do not. The biggest difference in response to this question was between the different school levels. A higher percentage of secondary school teachers (78 per cent of middle school teachers and 67 per cent of high school teachers) answered that they do not teach unrelated content in the period leading up to the exam. It is interesting to note that a higher percentage of lower secondary school teachers answered 'no' to the question, which might suggest that pressure to stick to exam content is higher in middle school. The reason why it is higher in middle school, rather than high school when students are closer to taking the *Suneung* exam remains to be seen and would require further research.

In **Bangladesh**, the teachers highlighted issues with completing and finishing the syllabus in the amount of time provided. Many of them face difficulties to complete the course contents in addition to conducting and administering the examinations. The case study noted some of the challenges that schools and staff face such as the shortage of teachers

in relation to allocated posts, large class sizes, insufficient teaching hours, lack of equipment (such as computers), and infrastructural constraints. As one of the female teachers of a Government college in Dhaka claimed: 'our main concern is completing the syllabus and conducting examinations in time. You know that it is always challenging for us as we get comparatively less actual working hours due to many reasons'. Furthermore, one female student in the Madrasah education stream in Khulna Division argues: 'we cannot complete our syllabus in due time. Sometimes, we do not understand some lessons during the classroom teaching. We get extra care and a clear understanding of that content from the private tutors as well as coaching centers' (Zinnah et al., 2017).

This last reference points to the relationship and pressure that examinations can put on the entire system — teachers are under pressure to shape their work towards the goal of the examination, and the students, understanding the limitations of the schools or teachers, require the assistance of extra study and private tutoring.

### *Reputation and measure of teacher effectiveness*

The impetus for teaching to the test is not always just to serve students, and the results of exams also impact the teachers and schools, particularly in their perceived effectiveness or reputation. Student learning outcomes, i.e. test scores, are commonly used as part of teacher evaluations, and these in turn can impact teachers' salary, promotions, and in the case of poor results, sanctions. This can have significant consequences for instruction, learning and equity, including an unhealthy competitive environment, reducing teacher motivation, and teaching to the test at the expense of weaker students (UNESCO, 2017b).

In **Bangladesh** and **Republic of Korea**, a majority of the teachers indicated that the examinations play a significant role on their reputation as a teacher. Moreover, teachers in Republic of Korea indicated that students' scores are critical to their school's reputation and their admissions, making it very difficult for teachers to think of and implement alternative evaluation methods.

In the **Philippines**, students' results are perceived to be a measure of a teacher's effectiveness. Results from the focus group discussions indicate that most people believe teaching strategies and classroom practices of teachers can be assessed based on the test results of the students. For example, if most of the students receive high scores in a test or examination, it would illustrate that the teacher's classroom practices and strategies are effective. However, a large number of low scores would indicate a 'red flag' and the teacher must rethink teaching strategies as these may not be effective in improving student learning. Many of the students claim that testing 'serves as an assessment of teachers' teaching styles and approaches used,' it is also a reflection of how teachers teach the students'. Parents share the same sentiment as they view test results as reflective not just of their child's performance but also as a barometer of teacher effectiveness. This typical association between the effectiveness of the teachers and the learning of their child based on test results or scores in examinations exacerbates the practice of teaching to the test.

The results of examinations have a clear impact, not only on what the teacher can or will teach, but also on their reputation. As one teacher shared, 'students' results in the exam impact my reputation as a teacher' (Ibañez et al., 2017). This may pertain to the effectiveness and efficiency of the teacher's teaching strategies, but more so since the examinations have quality assurance purposes.

Teachers in **Viet Nam** who teach the NHSE examination subjects face pressure and stress from management, students and parents, because they have the obligation to prepare students for a better life and to uphold the reputation of the school. As a result of this pressure for 'high performance' they focus only on teaching test items. Similar to the case in the Philippines, some teachers assume students' high performance to be a boost for their reputation, with some teachers requiring students to attend their own private tutoring classes for monetary gains.

In **Fiji**, the stress and worry are not limited to students. Teachers also find that an emphasis on examinations affects them increases their



concern over students' in the exam. Of particular importance is how teachers fear these results impact on their performance or reputation as a teacher. More than half of the teachers in Fiji responded that these were significant concerns. One teacher said: 'We just teach the tests. That is what is expected, isn't it?' This implies that examination results and student achievement are the yardstick for measuring both teacher and school performance.

According to the questionnaire results, a significant number of teachers (70 per cent) in **Tonga** worry that their students may do poorly in the exams, while the same percentage (70 per cent) expect all students in their school to pass the exam. Exams may be the biggest motivator for teachers to prepare students (90 per cent) and to be better teachers (87 per cent), but only half the surveyed teachers were motivated by competition with other teachers or schools (55 per cent). A significant number of teachers (69 per cent) agreed that students' results on exams impacted on their reputation and 68 per cent agreed that it impacted their performance appraisals.

In **Kazakhstan**, more than half of teachers believe that the test results affect their reputation and performance. At the same time, almost all of the interviewed teachers (97 per cent) are worried about the progress and life of their students after graduation. This suggests that many teachers care about the future of their students before their own reputation in school.

The case studies clearly show that teachers value examination results for the impact they can have on their own reputation, as well as the reputation of their school. The competition that exists with the students for high achievement is also seen among teachers and schools. A better reputation can have significant implications for school funding, as well as a teacher's career and remuneration. These effects make it difficult to implement different teaching methods and practices, and reinforce the 'culture of testing', even when education systems and educators are aware of the benefits of more formative evaluations.

Genuine teacher evaluation feedback is often poor in high-stakes systems (UNESCO, 2017b), as the results (either positive or negative) can be attributed unfairly to the teachers. Test results often come from a variety of different factors that are outside the control of teachers. Yes, teachers have the primary responsibility for providing high-quality instruction, but they are expected to do far more than teach. However, to disproportionately represent the value of teachers based on test results alone can create problems for how societies value testing.

## Alternate methods of assessment

*'I'm no longer teaching the syllabus, now I'm teaching the children'*

– Teacher, Fiji

As a response to some of the negative aspects of examinations, many education systems have attempted to introduce more student-centred learning and holistic evaluations. Learner-centred and classroom-based initiatives can have a significant impact on the learning outcomes of students: reducing stress and anxiety related to examinations, promoting collaboration and teamwork, and promoting a healthy, happy environment in the classroom. The case study research also looked at whether the countries and teachers were implementing or utilizing alternative forms of assessment, in an effort to reduce the pressure and demands of high-stakes testing.

Across the case studies, several countries noted the use of formative assessments, such as class-based assessments or performance assessments (Fiji, Republic of Korea, Philippines, Tonga and Viet Nam) as an alternative to high-stakes examinations or traditional pen and paper tests. Other countries noted the use of oral assessments, presentations or a mix of other practical assignments and activities (Bangladesh, Kazakhstan and India).

The **Fiji** National Curriculum Framework of 2008 supported the move to assessment *for* learning, rather than assessment *of* learning. In 2010 the Ministry implemented these recommendations and abolished several of

the year end examinations. Both parents and teachers from the Fiji case study research talked about their knowledge and experience with the CBA. The few parents that had some recollection said that they did not really understand it and that there was confusion with the CBA tasks and activities. One parent said that her child who was in a boarding school could not complete a number of tasks in a particular subject and needed his parents to source help from outside. Another parent reported the experience of a relative who actually completed a number of tasks for her child. 'Exams are better and it is all done at the school' was the general conclusion from parents.

However, a larger group of teachers (87 per cent) noted in their questionnaire that the CBA tasks were viable alternatives but 'there was just too much recording and paperwork that took away teaching time. We were doing more recording and less teaching.' This indicates that perhaps the implementation strategies were flawed, and that more training and effort to educate the community is necessary. The general feeling is that CBA was not given time and space to realize its potential.

In the **Philippines**, performance-based assessments and many strategies are also taken into consideration to be able to achieve the best assessment practice. Performance assessment using a rubric are collaboratively developed by subject matter groups (for instance in science, mathematics, English and Filipino). Portfolio assessment is also done, compiling students' best outputs and grading them using appropriate rubric. Oral examinations are preferred by some teachers to control cheating, which is easier to do during written examinations. Group work where students cooperate in producing output to creatively demonstrate synthesized learning is also conducted. In order to lower exam pressure, some teachers also provide alternative methods of instruction or preparation and conduct review classes or sessions. As one teacher shared, they enforce school and testing policies like 'no homework policy and give ample time to study.'

Teachers in **Viet Nam** are gradually shifting from focusing on 'summative assessment' to 'formative assessment' and in turn focusing on the students'

progress rather than the accumulation of knowledge. Many classrooms, schools and teachers are now aware of combining teaching activities and assessment activities into one process. The result hopefully being that students are not under pressure to get high scores and they can avoid pressure so that they feel comfortable and confident in learning. Since 2010, educators, with the consent of parents, have been transitioning the curriculum to a competency-based approach, developing integrated content for the assessment of learners' competencies.

Teachers have gradually learned how to look for and assess the skills and competencies of their students. In addition, teachers know how to adjust lesson plans, teaching methods, and the organization of teaching based on the use of these assessment results. This allows them to focus on the learning style of each student and to create opportunities for students to learn in their own way and for self-assessment (Nguyen, 2016). As a result of these fundamental changes, there are observable indications that there is a reduction in pressure and expectations on students, especially in primary school. However, the psychology of 'high score' is still present in most parents, and it is very difficult for them to accept and understand evaluations based on teachers comments as opposed to traditional grades or scores. At the same time, another challenge is that the teachers are not always provided with the tools and means to support the assessment by commenting or assessing the development of the learner's competences.

The education system in **Japan** has also seen the introduction of more formative assessment methods. In 1996, a report of the Central Education Council aimed at securing the 'Zest for Living' (a training that emphasizes the ability to learn and think) and 'comfortableness'. Government guidelines based on the Central Education Council recommendations were announced in 1998 for primary and lower secondary school, and in 1999 for upper secondary school. The guidelines aimed to foster a 'zest for living' by developing basic knowledge and ideas and cultivating the 'quality and ability to discover challenges, to do self-learning and self-thinking, to judge, act and solve problems, no matter how society changes', and encourage the shift to a lifelong learning society. The course of study

aimed to ‘foster life-competency under less pressure’ was conducted at primary and lower secondary levels in 2002, and at upper secondary level in 2003, and at the same time the five-day school week system was also started. By 2008-2009, low academic achievement had resulted in the government revising the course of study once again to ensure students received a balanced education with abilities in knowledge, morality and physical fitness (Numano, 2017).

In **Kazakhstan**, as an alternative to written examinations, teachers, parents and students most often suggested the introduction of an oral exam, with fewer objectives than written examinations. This allows the teacher to holistically evaluate and understand the student. According to most of the respondents, in the oral exams the students will not be able to ‘cheat’, so it will be clearly visible what the student knows. Another alternative would be to incorporate practical tasks aimed at real-life situations, although the case study did not indicate whether this method was currently being utilized.

Students’ opinions as to whether the school is doing anything to reduce pressure from exams are divided into two parts. As far as measures to limit examination pressure, students indicated that they have the option to work with a psychologist to undertake various trainings and receive moral support. More than half of the teachers (56 per cent) also answered that the school takes measures to reduce examination pressure, such as talking with the students regularly, working with a psychologist and organizing extracurricular activities.

In **Bangladesh**, students, their parents and teachers possess different views about alternative methods for evaluating students’ learning effectively. Just over half of the students (55 per cent), half of the parents (50 per cent) and most of the teachers are in favour of evaluating their learning performance through different alternatives such as assignment-based activities, group work, presentations, seminars, quiz competitions, co-curricular activities, practical classes, assignment of term papers and internship-oriented learning and evaluating among others, rather than examinations (Zinnah et al., 2017).

Similarly, in **India**, students, teachers and parents noted a variety of alternative methods of evaluation and testing that are being used, from oral testing, group discussion, debates, assignment-based evaluation, and school excursions (Suresh, 2017).

However, many stakeholders across the region are also concerned that formative assessments, or performance assessments, will not provide the objectivity of traditional tests or exams. This was an influence in reintroducing examinations in Fiji recently, and many of the teachers and parents in places such as Japan, India, Bangladesh, Viet Nam, Tonga and Republic of Korea have also noted their concerns.

As mentioned earlier in this report, the **Republic of Korea** recently introduced the Free-Semester system, which eliminates exams for one semester in lower secondary schools. In addition, primary schools have introduced performance assessment, which is the elimination of examinations (i.e. paper and pencil tests) and focus on formative assessments based on tasks. Performance assessment is recognized as an alternative for knowledge-based memorization education by evaluating higher-order thinking and multidisciplinary ability. But as shown in the interview results, there are concerns about the transition to performance assessment. One social studies teacher points out that

performance assessments can allow teachers to see a different side of students that cannot be seen through written paper tests, but there are problems of conducting ideal performance assessments. With performance assessments, parents cannot know where their students lie on a spectrum of all the students. Moreover, to prepare for performance assessments and for teachers to evaluate students, teachers need to put in a significant amount of time and effort, which they do not have. Teachers spend a lot of time writing out plans and reports, and homeroom teachers spend a lot of time counselling the students. So, it's true that the method of evaluating inevitably goes back to a method that creates the least amount of controversy (Suh et al., 2017).

Even students are not sure that this alternative will be beneficial. One stated, 'If we switch from written paper tests to performance assessments,

I think I will be more nervous because I will be evaluated every day' (Suh et al., 2017).

The **Tonga** School Assessment Policy of 2009 integrates both formative and summative tools of assessment. An essential component of this reform is the revision of its school curriculum and the shift from summative to more formative assessments undertaken in schools. The transition to formative assessment required an increase in the internal continuous 'assessment for learning' of students and includes a formative assessment component (Internal Assessment) to the national examinations at upper secondary level. However, results from the *talanoa* focus groups with secondary school teachers showed that they were very concerned about the Internal Assessment component at the end of secondary school. In the past, teachers were allowed to design their own assessment tasks, however they had to be approved by the Exam Unit before they could be implemented in schools. Now, these components are pre-decided by the Curriculum Division Unit (CDU) and are stipulated in the syllabus. In addition, a staff member(s) from the Exam Unit needs to be present in class during their implementation of certain tasks. Teaching has now become a series of technical activities where 'testing scripts' are the de facto curriculum and teaching pedagogy is no longer an innovative exercise but a strict prescribed activity. This has caused confusion and concern among teachers as to whether the implementation is effective and efficient ('Otunuku et al., 2017).

The examples presented from the case studies show that while countries and teachers are trying to establish classroom-based or school-based assessments, there are challenges in effectively incorporating these into the system. Parent and teacher perceptions of these assessments also varied. While teachers felt that the alternative evaluations provided them with an opportunity to get closer to their students and to impact their learning in a more effective manner, there were issues with objectivity, as well as proper training for designing tasks and measures. Parents noted a lack of understanding of the process and prefer the traditional 'scores' that can accompany an examination to the comment and feedback

structure of a formative assessment. These challenges highlight the need for proper stakeholder engagement when reforming education and examination policies, as well as the need for teacher training, retraining, and continuous support.



## Part III Reflection

### 6 Conclusion

The research started with the assumption that there *is* a ‘culture of testing’, or in other words: the reliance on examinations to determine academic success, quality education and learning. The research comprised a synthesis of case studies from nine countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Philippines, Tonga and Viet Nam). The study wanted to find the conditions and factors that define this ‘culture of testing’ and what the relationship between social institutions and examinations are. First, the researchers looked at the history of education in each country, as well as important cultural and social factors that relate to education. Second, we wanted to find out what effects these conditions, or this ‘culture of testing’, have on learners, both positive and negative. Finally, we wanted to consider the relationship between education policy, particularly those relating to examination and assessment, and the ‘culture of testing’. For instance, does policy create or ‘deepen’ the ‘culture of testing’? Or is it that the testing culture impacts upon the types of policies that countries enact? Overall, the case studies have provided an interesting account of how the culture of testing represents a collective idea, or a social imaginary, of what and how education should be. A quick review of the research questions and the main takeaways is provided below.

#### Lessons learned

*What are the social and cultural factors that shape a ‘culture of testing’?*

The case studies provided evidence that economic opportunities, social mobility and family are the greatest drivers behind the examination culture. As stakeholders in all countries pointed out, the fact that these

high-stakes exams control access to the next level of education, better schools, and preferred education streams and courses, the importance of doing well is paramount to students' future. However, the degree to which this culture and reliance on testing at the classroom level varies.

Social and family pressure was reportedly quite strong in most countries. Examinations and testing impacted not only the students' success, but also the family's reputation and pride.

Shadow education and private tutoring has become prevalent in almost all the cases, and is a major means for families to prepare their children not only for examinations, but to address any learning gaps they feel exist in schooling.

The role of examinations in education and learning has become embedded into culture and society, and therefore people readily accept and acknowledge the importance that examinations play in the 'socialization' and 'education' of young learners. The importance on future opportunity, family and society, have created cultures and societies that value hard work and diligence. This provides learners with the notion that examinations are a 'struggle', which they have to endure and overcome. In some sense, this has become modern societies' 'rite of passage'. Families and society value effort and hard work, and as a result, the pride, status and honour that accompany success in examinations. As a result, tests are a cultural 'tradition', on par with other traditions and customs, and given similar reverence.

In sum, the case studies clearly indicated that social mobility and economic opportunity are the main drivers of a 'culture of testing', and these are both created and reinforced through motivation of the family.

*What is the relationship between the 'culture of testing' and education policies, education reform, curriculum, and teacher pedagogy?*

The research indicates that where there is a desire from a great number of people for examinations, this will then drive the processes that shape and reinforce a 'culture of testing' within society and education. The existence of high-stakes exams can drive the curriculum, materials, pedagogy, and

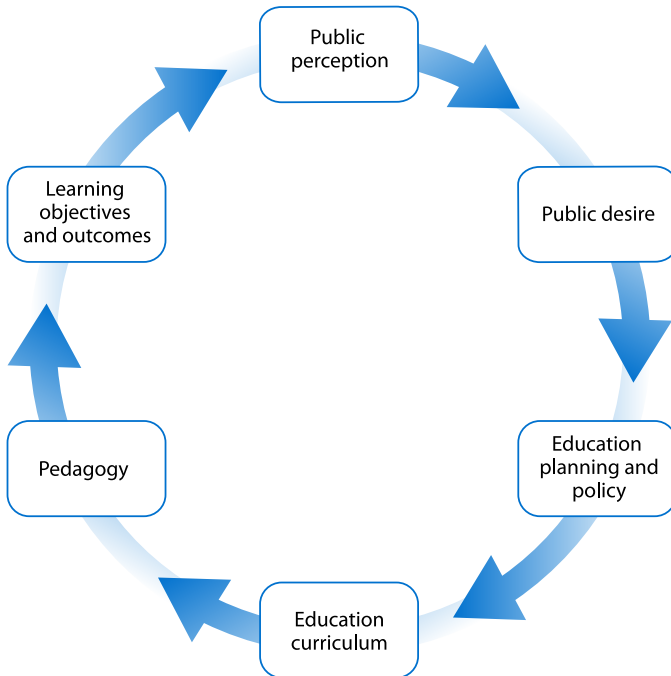
perceptions of teachers, parents, learners, and the public in general. In some ways, it becomes a cycle that reinforces itself. The origins of this desire could be multifaceted (social, cultural, economic, political) and may have shifted and swayed over the course of history, as societies, cultures, countries and education systems have changed.

Evidence from several of the case studies highlighted the relationship of examinations and education policy. In several cases, education or examination policies have been changed based on the perceptions of the stakeholders. In several cases evidence from the case studies showed that high-stakes examinations were eliminated due to the negative burden and pressure, only to be reintroduced. Factors for this included: the perception that learners were no longer motivated or attending classes, poor implementation leading to confusion on new assessment methods, and decreasing learning outcomes leading to indicate that exams were a factor in student performance.

Satisfaction with learning outcomes and the purpose of examinations can lead to a mainstay in examination culture (for instance tradition in the Republic of Korea). Despite public desire to change student behaviour and to mitigate negative aspects of exams, the public still sees exams as effective and purposeful, and therefore desire examinations. However, several of the countries involved in this research noted that they are introducing measures that aim to lessen the negative impact of these examinations on learning, including more holistic and learner-centred measures of assessment and evaluations such as school-based and performance-based assessments.

The impact of examinations on accountability is quite pronounced, not only for education systems but for individual schools and teachers. Results impact the amount of funding that schools may receive from the national budget, and results are often used to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of teachers—directly influencing salary, promotions and their reputation. These influences from the policy perspective, through the development of curricula and teacher pedagogy, ultimately connect back to the social image and public perception.

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**Figure 6.** Testing culture cycle

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*How does the ‘culture of testing’ affect learners and learning outcomes?*

The impact on learning can be significant. High levels of competition for grades and spaces in schools can place a great deal of stress and anxiety on learners, their families, and teachers. All case studies indicated that learners worry about performing in an exam or in school, and many of them are very worried to disappoint their family and teachers. Some countries noted a high proportion of students that suffer from stress, anxiety and are unhappy at school.

As mentioned previously, examinations can greatly impact the reputation and perceived effectiveness of teachers and schools. As a result, teachers are often forced to teach to the test, neglecting skills, competencies, as

well as entire subjects or courses, that may be left off the examinations. The majority of teachers indicated that they have difficulty completing the entire curriculum, and often limit their teaching content to what is in the exam. This simplification of learning calls into question what the true purpose and nature of education is, and whether examinations really help us ‘learn’.

The case studies also indicated that alternative forms of evaluation are increasingly available, and that countries are looking at ways to increase the use of performance-based assessments or school-based assessments. While teachers have enjoyed using these methods and found them very beneficial for students, many also find these alternatives are difficult to carry out and time consuming. There is a need for more teacher support and training, as well as better communication with parents and students.

## Way forward

Examinations are an effective tool for evaluation and measurement. They can identify knowledge gaps, provide feedback and are objective tools for monitoring and evaluating learners, as well as education systems. However, there are also significant drawbacks (see the earlier argument on the mismatch between qualification, socialization, subjectification functions of education) and the effect they have social issues such as inequality and inequity.

As the testing culture spreads through all levels of society and all levels of education systems (in classrooms, local education boards and national departments or ministries), tackling the adverse symptoms is a challenge. Many of the issues discussed are not isolated to a testing culture, and incorporate other educational challenges related to curriculum, pedagogy, instruction and assessment. Certainly, high levels of anxiety are also an issue, and schools need to do a better job of ensuring positive feedback and positive education.

There are some general recommendations that countries and educators can heed to embrace a more holistic and balanced education system. Many of these can be found in the targets and objectives of SDG4-Education

2030, starting with a focus on the relevance and effectiveness of education, promoting inclusive quality education, and bringing a more holistic approach to learning. These include:

- **Realigning national policies**, curricula and assessments to promote a balanced and holistic education, and one that emphasizes the quality, relevance and effectiveness of learning, rather than achievement.
- **Creating effective assessment frameworks** for classroom and school-based assessment as well as formative evaluations and clear communication with stakeholders.
- **Limiting the influence of international rankings** based on large-scale assessments, with national policies aligned with the national priorities and not competing on the global stage.
- **Balancing assessment of learning and assessment for learning.**
- **Emphasizing holistic learning and learner well-being**; raising awareness of the negative aspects of high-stakes examinations, particularly the effects of stress and anxiety on students and teachers.
- **Improving classroom strategies and evaluation of transversal competencies**, 21st century skills and soft skills for relevance and effectiveness of learning.
- **Providing more resources and support for teachers** to teach and undertake alternative assessment methods, rather than prepare students mainly for standardized tests.

Learner centred, classroom-based initiatives can have a significant impact on student learning outcomes, reducing stress and anxiety related to examinations, promoting collaboration and teamwork, and promoting a healthy, happy environment in the classroom. Classroom-based assessments and formative assessments can be utilized to effectively evaluate transversal competencies and skills that are hard to quantify in a standardized exam. These skills include problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills and conflict resolution, competencies that are all vital for a broad range of careers. These skills and competencies are a key component to improving the relevance, effectiveness and quality of learning.

Challenges still remain in implementing formative assessments as a key component in measuring educational outcomes, such as proper training, resources and support for the teachers, increased awareness, and buy-in from the education establishment and parents. To fully integrate these concepts within national education systems, and to improve the relevance, effectiveness and quality of learning, people need to cherish and value these concepts as much as they value examinations. Examinations do not need to be abolished, but the negative aspects can be diminished. Indeed, evaluation systems and assessments can be both *of* learning and *for* learning.

Overall, a 'culture of testing' both shapes and is shaped by the cultural and social norms within a particular society, and how each society and culture imagines their education. Indeed, in many instances it is also true that examination culture shapes both education and society, reinforcing the cyclical nature and interrelationship of society, culture, political economy and education. A 'culture of testing' may be more prevalent in one culture or another, however there are commonalities that exist as a result of modern economic and education systems. The true indicator of the worth of examinations, and the 'culture of testing', is that it has been able to withstand the changes over time, becoming a tradition that societies embrace and trust.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Country summaries

#### ■ Bangladesh

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A culture of high-stakes examinations exists at all levels and streams of education in Bangladesh. At the end of primary school, students must take the Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination. After completing Grade 8, students sit for their second public examination, the Junior School Certificate (JSC). Students who progress onto secondary school will take two additional examinations, the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) after Grade 9 and 10, and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination after completing Grades 11–12. The Madrasah education stream has similar public examinations at the *Dhakil* and *Alim* levels (secondary school levels). All of these examinations are perceived as influential in forming the career paths of students.

#### Methods

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The case study integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the sociocultural drivers behind the ‘culture of testing’ and their effects on the relevance of education and aspirations of youth through collecting data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected via questionnaires, developed by UNESCO and the country researchers, as well as through focus group discussions. A total of 240 students, 32 teachers and 64 parents were selected from four regions (Dhaka, Sylhet, Chittagong and Khulna) to represent the rural and urban context, as well as from private and public schools. The students were selected randomly, the teachers were selected purposively and parents were selected conveniently.

## Highlights

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### *Social mobility and family*

Almost all students and parents grasp the immediate and long-term importance of the SSC and HSC or equivalent *Alim* examinations. The immediate importance focuses on students' performance in learning and achievement in these examinations, while the long-term importance highlights the contribution of these examinations to building a career, achieving better jobs and future socio-economic status. The majority of the parents expect immediate satisfactory achievement of their children in the SSC and HSC (or equivalent examinations) as these examinations play a vital role in enabling them to study their desired disciplines or subjects at higher education, and thus, selecting a future career. However, some respondents noted the weakness of examinations in assessing students' inner qualities, values and human characteristics.

Most of the students expect top grades or scores in comparison to their classmates and best opportunities after their graduation. The majority of the male and female students are concerned and conscious about fulfilling their own expectations as well as that of their parents, teachers, relatives and friends, and therefore, students prepare themselves in different ways to succeed.

### *Hard work and perceptions of the exams*

Students spend more time studying outside the classroom in comparison to inside leading up to examinations, which indicates the importance of the examination. In addition, these students are utilizing private tutors or coaching during this time. Except for the majority of students in Khulna Division, their counterparts in Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet Division spend 3–5 hours in private tutoring and even more than 8 hours per week in some cases.

Overall, most of the students, parents and teachers support the necessity of examinations and found their usefulness in achieving academic success. Almost all the parents are happy with the satisfactory achievement of

their children in examinations, yet their children's poor achievement in examinations creates negative feelings among them.

### *Teaching and learning*

The respondent students in Dhaka, Sylhet, Chittagong and Khulna Divisions reported that they have to sit, on average, for at least one examination or test a month. In some cases, students took more than one test or exam a month. These tests are a normal part of the course work, and are used as part of continuous evaluation and grading.

In Bangladesh, private tutoring and extra tutorial sessions are the norm — students and families make great efforts to ensure they are well-prepared for exams. A majority of the respondent students attend the tutorial sessions arranged by their schools. The breakdown by region however, shows that only about 34 per cent of the students in Dhaka attend private tutorials in comparison to Sylhet (about 98 per cent), Chittagong (72 per cent) and Khulna Divisions (84 per cent). The teachers also attend these sessions to monitor students' preparation for the examinations.

Overall, students, parents and teachers recognize the importance of high-stakes examinations in securing both their immediate success in academics, and their long-term success in life.

## ■ Fiji

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The British colonial regime left behind an education legacy of modern (or western) educational institutions and practices that are highly academic and elitist, and which rewards students in a meritocratic manner. The examination system and the culture that accompanies it, is highly characteristic of this. For traditional Fijian society however, education and learning are contextual, relevant, definitive, continuous and meaningful. It is not a separate institution but is integrated within everyday society. Achievement is a community effort and in turn brings honour, power and endurance to the *vanua* or clan. Community elders act as the authority of knowledge and skills, and the ‘tellers’ who are duty-bound to pass on traditions, while the young are the ‘listeners’, obliged to gather information so that in due course they also become transmitters of knowledge. The whole community supports the learning process to ensure that learners succeed.

However, while foreign to the traditional Fijian concept of learning, for many people in Fiji, the current education system is equated with passing examinations as a means to higher education and future employment.

Fijian students are subject to 8 high-stakes exams throughout their school life: five external summative examinations at Grades 6, 8, 10, 12 and 13 which measure students’ learning and also provides information to higher institutions in the selection of students for scholarships, and three summative examinations at Grades 7, 9 and 11 which are seen to monitor and improve teaching and learning strategies.

## Methods

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The case study research methodology consisted of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Secondary data included a literature review of major educational policies on testing, national assessments and entrance examinations, as well as on previous literature on the sociocultural impact

on education and examinations. Primary data for the Fiji study came from a cohort of students and teachers from 10 secondary schools. The schools were a mixture of public and private institutions, in both urban and rural locations, including five from the main island Viti Levu, and five from Vanua Levu, the other large island to the North. Primary data included a questionnaire administered to 157 male and female students in grade 12 and 13. The questionnaire was also administered to 33 Grade 12 teachers, and 20 parents and leaders of the same schools. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted with nine teachers and 20 parents, as well as interviews with six education experts and professionals from the Ministry of Education and the University of the South Pacific.

## Highlights

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### *Social mobility, family and society*

All the students agreed that the grade 12 examination is both necessary and 'very important' because it served to indicate their academic ability and readiness for grade 13, as well as their chances of obtaining a scholarship. Responses to the questionnaire indicated that over 90 per cent of students identified 'assessing what students have learned', 'moving up to the next level', 'opening doors to scholarships' and 'identifying a career path' as the leading purposes of the examination.

Traditional Fijian society is characterized by strong and close-knit family units, and since education is highly valued, success in examinations brings joy and pride to families who then often celebrate with feasting and prayer. All parents indicated their support for their children's preparation for exams and looked forward to the examination results.

Most students rated the expectations and influence of parents and teachers as one of the most important influences regarding exams and achievement. In line with this, there were very strong feelings about letting parents and teachers down if they got low scores.

### *Hard work*

Most parents were happy that their children were occupied with school-work both in school and after school because it kept them out of mischief. Parents view time spent studying as a good indicator of how hard their child is working, and this is a source of pride.

### *Perceptions of the examinations and classroom practices*

The majority of the respondents and participants agreed that there are too many tests and examinations. However, they did feel that exams are relevant to the content taught and learned. Parents overwhelmingly agreed that reintroducing the examinations (that had been removed in prior education reforms) was the right move because their children are now studying and working hard.

Overall, students are generally satisfied with their progress at school and want to be the best and do well. While a good number acknowledge the motivating effect of exams towards study, very few were motivated to compete with peers nor did they see the Grade 12 exam as a form of ranking in school and country.

Schools and students spend a lot of time on preparation for examinations. The highest number of students indicated that they spend 3–4 hours per week both in school and after school to prepare for exams. Students and teachers also reported that exams take away class time from other activities, and the students reported that they have very little free time outside of school. Teachers are teaching to the test and exams as teachers worry that student achievement impacts on their reputation and performance appraisal.

The prevalence of both high-stakes and low-stakes examinations in Fiji, in order to measure learning outcomes and enhance the quality of education, is undermined by the focus on pass rates and high scores.



## ■ India

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Examination and testing in the contemporary education system in India, like many other countries of the Asia-Pacific region, has come to occupy a central place. The examination-centric approach to education has adversely impacted the teaching and learning process. Different stakeholders of the education system — parents, teachers, schools, administrators, policy makers and planners, are mainly concerned about the performance of children in examinations, which is measured in terms of high scores. In India, Grade 10 and 12 examinations are the most important high-stakes examinations at the school level. Both the examinations are important in deciding the career path of students.

### Methods

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The case study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary sources of data included the analysis of education policies related to high-stakes examinations and testing. Primary data comprised a questionnaire for students, teachers and parents. This included collecting information from a group of 105 Grade 12 students from 10 government and private schools in the following states: Delhi or National Capital Region, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Karnataka and Telangana. The primary data sample also included 58 teachers and 50 parents from the selected schools.

### Highlights

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#### *Social mobility, family and society*

Scarce opportunities and a high level of competition for admission in good institutions and different kinds of professional courses are the main drivers of examinations and thrust for securing high scores at secondary and higher secondary levels. The cutthroat competition for admission to post-secondary institutions, both in general and vocational courses adds pressure on students to 'perform well' and score highly. Competition among peer groups for spaces in these schools or programs compel

students to concentrate on the preparation for examinations and score rather than learn. This highly competitive system has created high demand for private tuition and coaching classes. According to the questionnaire, a majority of students receive private tuition. Two-thirds of students saw expectations from their parents as a motivating factor and therefore use private tuition to prepare for exams.

### *Perceptions of examinations*

Across the three stakeholder groups (students, parents and teachers) there was a common view that examinations are important as study and learning happens due to an upcoming examination. An extension of this view is the perception that children will not learn if there isn't an examination to prepare for. For example, the majority of respondents indicated that exams are the main factor that push students to learn.

Most of the teachers (49 out of 58) reported that students only learn content in order to pass an exam, and that the education system has become too focused on exam results and less focused on skill development. Seventy-four per cent of the students agreed that they learn because of the exams, and nearly 70 per cent believe exams are necessary to achieve success.

The competition for admission into good colleges, universities and professional courses has led to the increase of private tutoring and coaching centers in India. Private tutoring and coaching centers promise high performance of students in examinations and tests for selection. As such, 60 per cent of students reported that they attend remedial classes for a total of nine hours per week for at least three or more subjects to improve their knowledge and skills. In addition, the fear of failure to do well in studies is causing anxiety among students, which has substantial negative effects on their academic and social success.

Overall, the report highlighted that scarce opportunities and a high level of competition for admission to good institutions and courses are the main drivers of an examination culture. This emphasis on preparing children for examinations and securing high scores often undermines creativity, intellectual curiosity and critical thinking as educational goals in India.

## ■ Japan

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The testing culture in Japan has been influenced by the historical legacies of Chinese culture, Buddhism and Confucianism. Though Japanese officials were chosen through an Imperial examination system, contrary to other Confucian Heritage Cultures, the system never fully took hold and many officials and titles remained hereditary family possessions.

After World War II, the Japanese education system was built around highly competitive and rigorous high school testing, which required enormous discipline and study. The goal was to prepare students for equally arduous employment in Japan's industrial capitalist economy, where men worked basically all the time. Therefore, good scores on tests ensured good jobs in Japan's corporate economy during its era of high economic growth (until the 1990s) — a pattern that is still seen in some areas today.

The university entrance exam is the main high-stakes exam, but entrance into high schools is also very competitive.

## Methods

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The Japan case study relied on secondary data from the 'Basic Research on Academic Performance' survey, a study which has been conducted by Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute since 1990. This is a survey on the perceptions and behaviours of student learning for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school students. The data selected for analysis in this case study describes lower secondary and upper secondary school students. The researchers analyzed selected questions from the survey that corresponded to similar questions to the questionnaire developed by UNESCO and the research team. The 'Basic Research on Academic Performance' survey sampled students from lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools in both urban and rural areas across Japan. The case study also included some limited primary data, as the researchers interviewed six students from upper secondary schools.

## Highlights

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### *Social mobility, family and society*

According to the Benesse research, around 70 per cent of respondents want to raise their grades for their further education. The number of lower and upper secondary school students who answered 'I want to raise my grade to enter a good school or university' increased had also increased between 2006 and 2015. There seems to be an increase in the realization of the importance of studying and raising grades among students.

In addition, over 80 per cent of lower and upper secondary school students want to raise their grades in order 'to work for a good company' and 'to become a person to help in the development of society'. It can be seen that students strongly believe in the idea of studying at school as useful for their future and success in society. The amount of lower and upper secondary school students who feel that 'studying is the most important thing right now' has been increasing since 2001.

The average number of days spent by lower and upper secondary school students to study at home has been increasing since 2001 with an average of four days a week. The number of lower and upper secondary school students who answered 'almost every day' increased significantly compared with the previous survey in 2006 (by 11 per cent and 13 per cent for lower secondary school and upper secondary school students, respectively), whereas those who answered 'almost none' decreased (by 8 per cent and 12 per cent for lower secondary school and upper secondary school students, respectively), and are at the lowest level since the survey was started.

### *Perceptions*

Interviews with six high school students provided some interesting anecdotal information. The tests and examinations that students consider important are the upper secondary school entrance exam for first-year students, the university entrance exam for second- and third-year students, as well as job-hunting exams.

One of the students said that she 'would really be in trouble if she could not pass', while another indicated that the next important exam they will take is a job-hunting exam, and 'it is very important because it will affect my whole life'. Another student indicated that while recognizing the importance of the exam, 'it is not something that will affect her life'.

In Japan, the examination culture has been described in the past using such colourful expressions such as 'examination hell', or 'four pass, five fail', which means those who sleep for 4 hours a day may pass, and those who sleep for 5 hours a day will fail the exam. Emphasis on the adverse effects of examination competition, such as high stress and anxiety, school violence and bullying, and the resulting emphasis on private tutoring (cram schools) in education have prompted the Japanese Government to attempt education reforms to lessen the impact and stress on learning and to balance the objectives of education between the acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as the expression of ability and thinking.

## ■ Kazakhstan

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The concept of a ‘testing culture’ is quite new for Kazakhstan. As part of the USSR, national testing procedures were not conducted, and national testing began to function only after the country gained independence in 1992. The school system under the USSR was highly stratified, and there were several tracks of education

Students in Grade 11 in Kazakhstan sit for only one high-stakes exam, the Unified National Testing (UNT). Previously, it had the dual purpose of certifying high school graduates as well as deciding entrance into universities. However, this test has been split into two separate examinations, and the UNT now only serves the purpose of university entrance.

The work of teachers, efforts of learners and their parents, and the effectiveness of education system are all measured by academic results of students. Therefore, nowadays more attention is paid to the preparation and conducting of ‘high- and low-stakes’ exams. The modern education system is based on mid-term and final examinations to measure learning outcomes.

### Methods

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The case study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. The researchers conducted questionnaires with 180 respondents, of which there were 30 teachers, 100 students and 50 parents in two regions of the country: Astana and Akmola. An individual and standardized face-to-face interview was used for the questionnaire. The questionnaire was conducted 3–4 months prior the upcoming high-stakes UNT exam.

## Highlights

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### *Social mobility, family and society*

According to the questionnaire results, the majority of students (64 per cent) and parents (68 per cent) consider the main goal of the UNT to be admission to universities. In addition, most students (93 per cent) are primarily concerned with choosing the best specialties after their graduation. Parents are concerned with their child's education and performance, and the majority of students (71 per cent) worry that they will upset their parents if they get poor grades in school.

### *Perceptions of the examinations and teaching*

Two-thirds of students would like to have the highest grades in the classroom and worry if they get poorer grades than others. However, the tests themselves do not have a strong impact on raising students' motivation and desire. Most of the surveyed students indicated that tests neither motivate them to learn or to study more, nor do they help determine the students' specialty in later life. In addition, parents suggest that testing is not as important as real skills that can be useful in later life. The vast majority of students (90 per cent) do not feel that they experience pressure during the preparation for examinations. Only 40 per cent of teachers agree with the statement that they have enough time to give all the training materials for the preparation of the UNT. Perhaps as a result, 92 per cent of students stated that schools provide additional classes to help them prepare for the UNT, which was confirmed by both the teachers (93 per cent) and parents (86 per cent).

The report indicates that many of the respondents are not heavily or strongly influenced by the examinations, and that a 'culture of testing' has not quite developed in Kazakhstan. While stakeholders are aware of the importance of examinations in securing promotion to university, and that most students are concerned with their academic achievement, the examinations do not present a significant source of stress for them.

## ■ Republic of Korea

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In the Republic of Korea, testing has existed as a means of appointing government officials since the Middle Ages and is deeply related to the Confucian cultural tradition. Tests and examinations are widely used in society as a means of selection, promotion, evaluation and social stratification, forming a complex relationship with sociocultural factors that influence and are influenced by testing.

Currently, the ‘culture of testing’ in Republic of Korea is largely shaped by the College Scholastic Aptitude Test, known as *Suneung*. ‘Education fever’, or the intense interest in education, especially higher education for relevant stakeholders and the huge popularity of private education and *Hagwons* (cram schools), has come to dominate the social and cultural atmosphere.

### Methods

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For this case study, a desk study was first conducted, followed by primary data collection through questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaire sampling was conducted through random sampling based on UNESCO’s proposed methodology standards, and surveyed a total of 2,323 students, teachers and parents from 31 schools. As for the interviews, six schools were selected, with one urban school and one rural school for each school level, with a total of 64 respondents interviewed. A balance between public and private schools, in both urban and rural locations, were utilized for both the questionnaire samples and the interviews.

### Highlights

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#### *Social mobility, family and society*

For over a thousand years, successes in the *Gwageo* examinations (that selected government officials) determined the reputation and fortune of a



family because it brought great social power. Traditionally, social life in the Republic of Korea also revolves around the family, where it is understood that the happiness of the family is more important than any individual member. This is still true today, and the burden that students face is often a result of the strong family influence, as most students worry that they will let their parents down if they get a low score in an exam or low grades in general.

The questionnaire respondents answered that the main purpose and importance of high-stakes tests is getting promoted to the next level and future employment. While most teachers and students both responded that the purpose of the exam is to get promoted to the next level, the majority of parents responded that the purpose of testing is to assess student learning.

### *Perception*

In looking at students' perception of exams, almost half agreed that there are too many exams and tests (47 per cent), whereas parents and teachers mostly responded 'neither agree/disagree'. In addition, most students also disagreed that exams help them learn more. However, all three groups (students, parents, teachers) agreed that exams are relevant to the content studied in class. Both parents and teachers agreed that exams are effective in measuring what students have learned, but they did not agree with the statement that the exams are necessary to achieve success.

The results showed that people trust the function of high-stakes exams, not only for evaluating learning but also selecting someone to be promoted to the next level by assigning great value to fairness. In general, even though students, teachers, and parents feel that they have a lot of psychological burden and pressure on the test from their respective positions, they seem to strongly believe that tests are important and necessary.

### *Teaching and learning*

Examinations place a significant burden on students and teachers to prepare for exams, inside and outside the classroom. Often additional

classes are arranged for exam preparation. Teachers indicated that they have enough time to teach or cover all the contents, but when asked if they teach content or activities that will not be covered on the high-stakes exam, 63 per cent of teachers answered that they do not. In addition, to preparing for examinations in class, most of students receive private tutoring education in order to prepare the university entrance exam.

The 'culture of testing' is quite strong in Republic of Korea, and it stimulates learners' motivation and desires. Students, teachers, and parents all have high expectations and motivations for learning and achievement, which has been the driving force behind the term 'education fever'. This includes a 'culture of testing' and the prevalence of private tutoring.

The country's testing culture is perceived to improve the quality and efficiency of learning by increasing the accountability of parents, teachers, administrators and other stakeholders. However, it also increases student anxiety and negatively affects academic satisfaction and happiness. It is necessary to set a direction for public education reform strategies to improve the quality of education in order to better benefit from the education-oriented system and 'education fever' in the country.

## ■ Philippines

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The Philippine educational system has been heavily influenced by western education systems, a legacy from the country's American colonizers. Some of these influences include policies in school management, classroom practices, and assessments and evaluation.

The 'culture of testing' in the Philippines has various manifestations on how stakeholders view the nature of testing and its intended purpose. Overall, the views on testing are gauged on three fronts, examinations are: a tool to measure student learning, a barometer of teacher's effectiveness, and a reflection of overall efficacy of the Philippine education system.

The sociocultural factors that shape the prevalence of the 'culture of testing' are typically associated with family and religion. Most people view the purpose of testing as a meaningful exercise to be able to help them improve their performance in class.

## Methods

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Through the use of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the team was able to conduct data-gathering activities with 24 schools across the country, 13 of which are public schools and 11 private schools. The researchers administered questionnaires to 5,094 students across multiple grade levels in primary and secondary schools. In addition, 192 teachers and 117 parents were administered the questionnaire. A separate focus group discussion was conducted for students, parents and teachers, and key informant interviews were also conducted with available school principals, administrators and Department of Education's Division representatives. A non-probability sampling technique was utilized, specifically purposive sampling, in selecting school focus group participants, key informant interviewees, and survey questionnaire respondents. The respondents of this study were purposively chosen from urban and rural areas, and from small and large public and private schools.

## Highlights

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### *Social mobility, family and society*

Filipinos share a common view in which education serves as the principal avenue for upward social mobility, a legacy of the American influence and introduction of mass public education during their colonial rule. Filipinos have internalized the American ideal that in a democratic society, individuals could get ahead through the attainment of a good education. The questionnaires and focus groups confirmed this notion, as a majority of the students want the best opportunities available to them once they graduate and it is very important to families that students work hard to succeed.

The family plays a vital role in setting expectations for students to pass a test or any high-stake assessments. Parents indicated that they expect their child to be able to perform in any given task, and that performance in class is an indication of the child fulfilling their role in the family. This extends to the parent in that parents value their own self-worth based on the performance of their children, and a good performance brings the pride of the entire family.

The importance of religion was also highlighted, and students reported that they are 'praying before an exam' or 'visiting churches' to help prepare them for an examination. Students viewed testing not just a simple classroom activity, but rather, as an ordeal that must be solved through practicing religious rituals and superstitious beliefs.

The expectations of families are that students will work hard in order to succeed. In addition, the case study noted that testing breeds cooperation among students where they provide help to students who receive low scores in an exam. The social aspect of learning is evident, and students work hard to support each other.

### *Perception of examinations and teaching*

A majority of the stakeholders that participated in the study claim that testing is a useful tool in measuring and assessing students' performance. The test is viewed as an effective and reliable means to evaluate the students' knowledge, skills, and abilities.

This typical association between the effectiveness of the teachers and the learning of their child based on the test results or scores in examinations exacerbates the practice of teaching to the test. Teachers are left with little choice but to frame their teaching in accordance with the topics covered in the examinations especially if it involves high-stakes assessments.

The majority of respondent groups agree that shadow education or private tutoring is beneficial in achieving academic success but not to the extent that it is necessary due to financial constraints.

Many participants, especially teachers and principals, share the view that there are inappropriate practices during the conduct of assessments, such as unorganized test administration, test leakages, unwarranted cheating of students, and bonuses for teachers with good test results, among others.

Overall, the case study reported that family is the main driver of the examination culture, as parents expect their children to work and study hard, to achieve good result, and to make their families proud. Parents view the child's success as an extension of their own success as a parent.

## ■ Tonga

Social institutions, like families and churches, play a vital role in perpetuating the ‘culture of testing’ among the Tongan communities in Tonga and abroad. In part a legacy of British missionaries and colonialism, modern education and examinations shape the progression and success of learners in Tongan society.

Tonga has high-stakes examinations at both the primary and secondary levels. The first is the Secondary Entrance Examination (SEE) administered at Class 6 of primary school. This is the transit point from primary to secondary schooling. Then students have three ‘high-stakes examinations’ in the last three years of secondary school. These are annual external national examinations, namely: the Tonga School Certificate Examination (TSC) at the end of Form 5 (Grade 11), the Tonga Form 6 Examination at the end of Form 6 (Grade 12), and the Tonga Form Seven Examination at Form 7 (Grade 13).

## Methods

The research was conducted in six schools in total: three were located in rural or remote areas and three in urban or town areas. Two of the six schools were government schools, while the others were private or church schools.

Methods	Questionnaire			Talanoa focus groups			Focus Groups
Participants	Students	Teachers	Parents	Teacher	Parents	School Admin	Teachers
Sample (n)	112 m=40 f=72	74 m=23 f=51	50 m=16 f=34	6 m=2 f=4	10 m=7 f=3	5 m=3 f=2	7 m=3 f=4
Data collection	Self-administered questionnaires			Discussion with <i>talanoa</i> approach			Semi-structured with <i>talanoa</i> approach
Analysis Technique	Basic EXCEL & Frequencies & Percentage			Thematic analysis			Thematic analysis

The *Talanoa* method allows the participants to interact and communicate in their local language, and is an effective and ethical means by which a researcher may collect valid data from participants in a culturally appropriate manner.

## Highlights

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### *Social mobility, family and society*

The Tongan traditional social structure reflects a pyramid of three social classes. At the apex is the Tongan king and the royal household, in the middle are the nobles and their households, and at the base are the 'commoners', which comprise the majority of the population. Success in formal education is a widely recognised means of social mobility within the strictly stratified social structure of the Tongan community, especially for the majority of the people born as 'commoners'. It is seen to offer opportunities to enhance families, power and material wealth, and has resulted in the emergence of a class of educated commoners who are influential in their communities. Thus, getting a good formal education has become very highly valued by most Tongans.

The case study revealed that Tongan parents' perceptions about examinations appears to be consistent with a culture dominated by high-stakes public examinations, in which high student performance in examinations is publicly applauded in society and social institutions like the church, and in which such performance brings about significant social consequences (such as access to scholarships to study abroad). In Tonga, many young people migrate overseas to study and work, and the economy is highly reliant on the remittances of cash and goods from migrants who live and work overseas. This desire to achieve success abroad and to support the family, is also a factor in motivating students and families to study hard.

### *Perceptions of examinations*

There is great emphasis on doing well in examinations and in education in general. While parents and teachers do not agree that there are too many examinations, students do feel that there are too many. However, all participants rated examinations highly in terms of their importance in maintaining a 'good education'. Furthermore, because examinations have such a powerful and positive incentive, they act as a significant lever for motivating students to improve their performance.

### *Teaching and learning*

Schools are also impacted by the SEE grades of their students, with accountability perceptions shaped by the number of students passing the SEE examination from each primary school. 'Good schools' are those with high numbers of students passing into the government high schools. In addition, teachers who have had consistently high numbers of successful passes in their classes have sometimes been rewarded by the Ministry of Education, either through promotion or by other means.

The Ministry of Education and Training and private school authorities in the Kingdom of Tonga place high emphasis on good exam results and this has negative implications and consequences for education as a whole. Tonga needs an education system that caters for the diverse characteristics and abilities of its student population. It needs an education system that offers students a wide variety of options and career pathways to choose from.

The case study highlights that traditions of family and society play a significant role in forming a testing culture within Tonga. Students are proud and motivated to do well for their family. However, as a small island state, social mobility and opportunity are also important drivers for students to succeed.



## ■ Viet Nam

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Viet Nam is one of the countries in Asia that is deeply influenced by the cultural heritage of Confucianism, and also has a long history of civil examinations. As such, *'focusing on preparation for exam'* education has existed for a long time. In every family, whether rich or poor, education is considered to be the most important thing for children. The parents do not only endeavor to meet the financial needs of their children's studies, but also devote their time and passion to motivating and encouraging them to go to school.

The main high-stakes examination in Viet Nam is the National High School Graduation Examination. From 2015, the high school graduation exam and university admission exam were combined and the result of the joint exam was used to certify high school graduation and for university admission in order to alleviate the simplification of learning and to reduce costs.

## Methods

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The researchers distributed questionnaires, and conducted focus group discussions and interviews with various stakeholders. Information was collected from 100 students, 30 teachers, 50 parents, 10 principals and five education experts. The research locations (both rural and urban) were in three provinces: Bac Ninh (in the Red River Delta), Phu Tho (Northern Midlands) and Ha Noi (the capital).

## Highlights

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### *Social mobility, family and society*

Most people have the belief that 'if children are willing to learn, they will be able to have a stable career that ensures a future life free from poverty'. The questionnaire results indicated that 'students strive for high scores that can increase their chances of success in the future', and that 'the result of the exam would confirm the results of high school education and

the student's career path in the future'. Families regard education as a first priority, and most of the parents agreed that they want their child to have a stable career and a bright future.

### *Perceptions of the examinations*

The legacy of feudal Confucianism still deeply influences the perceptions of education in Vietnam. People believe in learning because of the deeply ingrained belief that 'diligence is more important than intelligence', 'where there's a will there's a way', and 'practice makes perfect'. People truly believe that success can be achieved with effort rather than innate talent. Most of the students surveyed indicated that their main goal is to 'get a high score'.

### *Teaching and learning*

The case study reported that education can become mainly focused on the preparation for examinations, and that the connection between examinations and learning was virtually non-existent. In Grade 12 for example, most teachers only focus the achievement of the students, and therefore limit teaching to exam subjects and neglect the remaining subjects. In addition, most students concentrate on preparing for the university entrance exams and ignore other academic subjects as well.

This pressure to succeed has also led to the prevalence of private tutoring classes. Most of the students indicated that they attend private tutoring classes, and many teachers seek students to attend their own private tutoring classes for monetary gains.

However, Viet Nam is attempting to move towards a more balanced assessment scheme, and introduce more formative assessments, aiming for a fair, objective and accurate assessment. Not all stakeholders are convinced, as it is often difficult for parents to accept the substitution of 'scores' by 'comments'.

Overall, the historical legacy of testing continues, and examinations play a large role in the educational and academic lives of students. Economic motivations, as well as influence of the family, are the main drivers behind the 'culture of testing'.

## Appendix B: Data collection

The following table summarizes the data collection methods across the nine country case studies.

Table 3a. Data collection across the case studies

Country	Schools	Grade levels
<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>8 total</b> 1 government school and 1 Madrasah school, 1 urban and 1 rural school from 4 education divisions	12
<b>Fiji</b>	<b>10 total</b> 5 from main island, Viti Levu, and 5 from Vanua Levu, Mix of private/public; urban/rural	12, 13
<b>India</b>	<b>10 total</b> Mix of rural/urban; public/private; girls/co-educational	11, 12
<b>Japan</b>	–	10, 11, 12
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>10 total</b> 9 public schools (4 urban, 5 rural); 1 private urban school; Mix of Russian language schools and Kazakh language schools	11
<b>Republic of Korea</b>	<b>31 total</b> Mix of public and private, urban and rural schools	6, 9, 11
<b>Philippines</b>	<b>24 total</b> Mix of public and private, urban and rural schools	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
<b>Tonga</b>	<b>6 total</b> 2 government schools, 4 faith-based schools; 3 rural 3 urban	Secondary school students
<b>Viet Nam</b>	<b>10 total</b> Mix of urban and rural	10, 11, 12

Table 3b. Data collection across the case studies

Country	Questionnaires			Focus Groups or Interviews			Notes
	Students	Parents	Teachers	Students	Parents	Teachers	
<b>Bangladesh</b>	240	30	32	16	8	8	Researchers also interviewed 8 district education board members
<b>Fiji</b>	157	–	33	–	20	9	Researchers also interviewed education officials and experts, 2 from MOE, 1 retired MOE, and 3 academics from USP
<b>India</b>	105	58	50	2	2	–	Researchers held 2 additional focus group discussions/interviews with: Educational administrators working at District level in different states, and experts working in the university system as academic administrators and faculty.
<b>Japan</b>	–	–	–	6	–	–	Researchers used secondary data from the 'Basic Survey on Learning' conducted by Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, a longitudinal study conducted 4 times since 1990. Researchers used primary data from interviews with 6 high school students (1m, 5f) for this study.
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	100	50	30	–	–	–	–
<b>Republic of Korea</b>	859	840	624	23	21	20	–
<b>Philippines</b>	5094	117	192	236	67	155	Researchers also held key informant interviews with 11 school principals, administrators, and Department of Education's Division representatives.
<b>Tonga</b>	112	50	74	–	–	7	In addition to the focus group discussion with 7 teachers, Tonga utilized a talanoa, or traditional style council gathering, with three groups: teachers (6), parents (10), and school administrators (5).
<b>Viet Nam</b>	100	50	30 (+10 principals)	10	5	3	In addition to the questionnaire and focus groups, education experts and principals submitted written essays on the topic.







United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Education  
Sector

# The Culture of Testing

## Sociocultural Impacts on Learning

### in Asia and the Pacific

In many countries in Asia and the Pacific, high-stakes examinations are the means for controlling access to better schools, higher education and greater life opportunities. Students are being educated in a world that is highly competitive, stressful and test-focused and the pressure to obtain high scores in tests and exams can come at the expense of other relevant skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex world. Whether academic achievement is of more value than other competencies and learner well-being depends on how different societies interpret the value of education. This study, following on from UNESCO's 2015 *Rethinking Education*, and within the SDG4-Education 2030 backdrop, examines the social and cultural values of the quality of education. By examining the relationship between society, culture and the values that are placed on examinations and academic success, this report illuminates what drives societies to rely on tests as a measure of success.

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