

The historical place of exams in Chinese learning systems has to be reshaped for today's world, writes **David Carless**

# Retesting the model

**F**rom around 165BC, during the Han dynasty, formal oral and written tests were used in China to select government officials and military personnel. Examinations were formalised into a complex and systematic selection process for entry into the imperial civil service.

This long history of examinations in Chinese societies has a strong residual impact on assessment practices in Hong Kong. The imperial examination system was a route for social mobility. Through exam success, test-takers could obtain a cherished position in government.

The modern variation is the annual battle to get a place in first a good kindergarten, then good primary and secondary schools, and a fine university. In such a system, the purpose of education is to fight your way up to the next rung of the educational ladder.

In my book, *From Testing to Productive Student Learning*, I analyse the impact of testing on Chinese societies and focus on how tests can be used to promote effective student learning.

Effective learning in the 21st century includes a number of attributes which are not easy to gauge through traditional pen and paper examinations: team work, creativity and lifelong learning.

So, what are some strengths and weaknesses of tests? Tests can push students to study; facilitate identification of their strengths and weaknesses; help to consolidate learning; and be motivating, especially for higher-achieving students.

More negatively, tests tend to judge students rather than support them to improve their learning. Tests result in a narrowing of the curriculum, known as teaching to the test. Valuable skills not needed for the test tend to be ignored.

Examinations often lead to short-term memorisation without long-term learning gains. A cycle of memorising and forgetting means students can accumulate marks without productive learning being achieved. Stress and pressure from tests can reduce the pleasure of learning, and discourage learning for its own sake.

In the past 20 years, there have been various attempts by the government to reduce the pressure of exams. Some modest gains have been made. A notable recent innovation is school-based assessment, which involves a wider variety of tasks than conventional pen and paper examinations.

This is a positive step in diversifying assessment modes, but can add to the



Effective learning has attributes that are not easy to gauge through pen and paper exams, such as creativity

already heavy workload of our teachers. So what might be done to improve assessment policy and practice in Hong Kong? I have four recommendations related to policy. The first is to build stronger links between research, policy and practice. Policy directions could profitably be informed by local research into good assessment practices, attuned as they are to prevailing contextual classroom factors.

Secondly, we should continue to strengthen the quality of testing, so that tests encourage the kind of learning required in today's world. We need assessment that emphasises mastery, rather than short-term performance. We need more assessment tasks that require students to express themselves through

extended written communication, rather than just filling in blanks or completing multiple-choice items.

Thirdly, we should strengthen communication with relevant stakeholders, to ultimately develop more informed and sophisticated concepts of testing where the role of assessment as a tool to enhance learning is prominent.

Fourthly, while Hong Kong has usually looked to the West for sources of educational policy, it is also worth reviewing what is happening elsewhere in the East. The recent Singaporean government initiative to discourage exams in the first year of primary schooling is a positive example. There seems little educational rationale for the current heavy doses of testing in the first year of primary schooling when students are most vulnerable.

In relation to practice, I have three recommendations. Firstly, give more attention to the learning processes surrounding tests. For example, teachers and parents could teach children effective revision strategies: self-testing through covering the page rather than solely reading and re-reading; or identifying the

most challenging aspects of a topic and focusing on that. Secondly, teachers, students and parents could make better use of assessment information to improve learning after a test. Instead of mainly focusing on the mark awarded, a key question is: what have I learnt from my performance in this test that I can use to do better next time?

Thirdly, and related to the above, we need to do more to enable students to be active consumers of assessment, rather than its passive victims. Students need to engage with exemplars and criteria, by interacting with peers and teachers. They also need to be taught how to develop skills in self-evaluation, so they can monitor critically their work before submitting it for grading.

If testing is reconfigured and approached in different ways, it can become a positive force for productive student learning.

**David Carless is an associate professor in the faculty of education at the University of Hong Kong. His book, *From Testing to Productive Student Learning*, was published last month**