

It's a toss-up

Mixed views over abolition of exams after 2 roundtable sessions

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PUTRAJAYA: Retain the Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) and Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) but review the way students are assessed in the two examinations.

This was what participants at the second and final roundtable discussions on the UPSR and PMR examinations concluded yesterday.

Retired and serving academics, representatives from non-governmental organisations, parent-teacher associations and other interest groups, and politicians from both sides of the divide agreed that UPSR and PMR should not be abolished but instead reviewed so that there is less emphasis on rote

learning.

The general consensus at the closed-door session was that students should be tested on their understanding of a subject, not their memorisation skills. As such, the way students are currently tested in the two exams needed to be relooked to produce students who can think critically and analytically.

This was in marked contrast to what participants at the first roundtable session on July 19 had concluded. They had then largely agreed that the two exams be scrapped.

The participants yesterday expressed strong reservations over the proposal to abolish these Year

Six and Form Three exams.

Some queried whether teachers, who would be the main drivers, were ready for such a drastic policy change.

Others wanted to know the basis for this proposal to abolish what was essentially sound. They said there was nothing wrong with the exams — only the attitudes of schools, teachers and the public at large.

The emphasis on scoring a string of As — “now there is even A+”, interjected a participant — is why the exams are perceived

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Most favour change but want exams retained

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negatively, some pointed out. In this regard, the exams are not to blame, but the obsession with feigning and celebrating top scores.

Several million students have sat for the two exams and are doing well, was the other argument brought up. Former education director-general Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Arshad, when approached at the end of the four-hour session, said that while the majority of the 100 participants agreed that a change was needed, they also believed the examinations should be retained.

“Amendments should be implemented to improve the current system and produce a more effective and balanced form of assessment,” the UCSI University

chancellor said. Thirty-three participants were given an opportunity to speak for five minutes each during the roundtable. The others offered their views in a form distributed.

Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk S.K. Devamany said the government should find a way to combine the national assessment system with “a more holistic approach”.

He said long-term, periodic studies should be conducted to ensure the feasibility of school-based assessments, proposed to replace the UPSR and PMR exams.

“Teachers, students and parents must be adequately prepared before any change is implemented. Abrupt withdrawal of the exams, without giving time for adjustments and detailed research, is risky.”

MIC Education Bureau chairman Datuk Dr T. Marinuthu said the UPSR should be retained as a method to assess the effectiveness of the primary school syllabus.

“The first five years lay the foundation for our national education. There is a need to keep track of our students' ability to read, write, count and think.”

He felt school-based assessments may be open to manipulation and abuse, without proper supervision.

“We are concerned about the potential for bias and the additional burden placed on teachers in formulating their own tests.”

Parent Action Group for Education (Page) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim agreed, saying the independent and regulated nature of national examinations gave a more

accurate picture of students' progress.

However, she said the format of both examinations needed adjustments to improve students' critical-thinking skills.

“The questions posed should be more open-ended. They should test a student's ability to solve problems, rather than their ability to memorise facts.”

Education director-general Tan Sri Alimuddin Mohd Dom, who chaired yesterday's session, had said on July 5 that the results of the two sessions would be compiled in a report to be submitted to Deputy Prime Minister

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin early next month.

Muhyiddin, who is also education minister, announced last month that the decision on whether to abolish or retain the UPSR and PMR would be made by September.

The government is reviewing the two examinations in an effort to restructure the learning system which is seen to be too examination-oriented.

The existing system is also seen as being unsuccessful in providing a holistic education or encouraging teachers and students to improve their creativity, co-curricular activities and involvement in sports.

Meanwhile, MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek proposed that UPSR be retained and PMR be abolished.

Speaking after chairing the party presidential council meeting, he said the UPSR should be less exam-oriented. He suggested that 70 per cent of the exam be the school's assessment of a student.

“The government should have a more holistic education system which allows for sportsmanship, creativity and innovativeness to be developed.”

Dr Chua said the party had sent a memorandum on the matter to Muhyiddin.



Tan Sri Alimuddin Mohd Dom (centre) with Education Ministry deputy secretary-general Datuk Badaruddin Abd Rahman and Malaysian Examinations Syndicate director Datuk Dr Saibiah Ismail at the roundtable discussion in Putrajaya yesterday. — NST picture by Lihari Arifin