[**Menace of cheating in exams**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1668259/menace-of-cheating-in-exams)

[Dr A.H. Nayyar](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1513/dr-a-h-nayyar)Published January 8, 2022 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer taught physics at Quaid-i-Azam University and Lums.

CHEATING in examinations in our schools, colleges and universities is nothing surprising for students, teachers and parents. It is commonplace and no one seems to be bothered by it. What is going on? How is cheating taking place? Who cheats? Why? And, can anything be done about it? Those who cheat in exams are not concerned about taking the easy road, getting undue credit or the injustice they are doing to others. For them, success is its own measure. Such conduct is perhaps to be expected given the level of cheating, dishonesty, deception, corruption and fraud that exists in Pakistan.

It may be that our students only mimic all the other kinds of cheaters and dishonest people whom they see as successful in life and without facing consequences. Honest, hardworking and smart people seem to toil for nothing. But let us focus more closely on cheating in exams.

Cheating in public examinations, especially in the high-stakes Class X and XII Board examinations, has become common practice. Question papers are leaked and sold in advance. On the day of the exam, fake student IDs are used. Burqas and hijabs allow the concealing of identities. Copying material is smuggled into the exam halls. Students share answers during examinations. Mobile phones are now in frequent use for cheating purposes. Outside the exam halls, helpers gather to pass answers inside, often using megaphones. Teachers invigilating the exams are not always faithful to their duty. In fact, they are often ‘helpful’. Their insensitivity to this wrong is due perhaps to their own practices in their student days. It is also evident when some teachers with several years of experience take examinations for a higher degree and resort to unfair means.

A society cannot run indefinitely on short-term cramming, fraud and deception.

So who is cheating? It seems obvious that well-prepared students have no need to cheat. Less-prepared students, and those who struggle to learn, tend to cheat in the highly competitive environment of high-stakes examinations. For them, good grades are the path to a better future. The immorality about the use of unfair means does not register.

Then there are the exams themselves. The board exam papers barely rise above memorisation exercises. Exam questions are invariably taken from the prescribed textbook. For instance, it can be established that all the questions in the mathematics exam papers are from the textbook exercises that students are supposed to have done in class.

In formative assessments also, teachers seldom opt for questions other than end-of-the-chapter exercises. Going through the prescribed textbooks, one doesn’t find a question in such exercises that goes beyond memory recall.

Those who cheat are often students who have not worked hard enough to memorise their textbooks. For others, the shortcut is to memorise only key passages and past papers. The raging business of tuition centres helps narrow down the material to memorise.

We cannot blame only the students. In Punjab, as perhaps also in other provinces, an exam-setter has to indicate for each question in the submitted draft the page and paragraph of the textbook it draws on. Those who are grading are also required to check if the answer dutifully reproduces what is in the textbook. All this means that to do well, a student needs to depend only on his or her memorisation skills.

The problem is worse when school assessments restrict testing material to content in one single prescribed textbook. Students and teachers understand that nothing outside the book’s contents can be asked, or else it will be declared ‘out of course’. Given the system, anything ‘out of course’ is seen as unfair.

Rote memorisation was the practical response to bad textbooks, bad teaching and bad exams. It is easier and more effective for most students to memorise and for many to cheat than to try to understand ideas and concepts and develop the practice of reasoning.

It is true that not all students in Pakistan rely on memory; some must pass an exam that is set internationally. After all, this is what our students who sit for the O-Level and A-Level examinations face.

I also know from experience and from those who work in universities in the West that teachers there do not stay in the exam room to monitor students’ conduct. It is left to the students’ sense of integrity and honour to do their best in the exam, and not cheat.

Other than honour, there is also the practical matter of what is actually being examined. Examiners in the West do not ask questions requiring only rote memory. In some exams, questions are such that students are even allowed to consult books and notes. The questions are not repeated from previous exams, and therefore cannot be predicted.

Can examination malpractice be eradicated? It must if education in Pakistan is to have any credibility and validity in the long run. A society cannot run indefinitely on short-term cramming, fraud and deception. Scientists, engineers, doctors and many others must have a good comprehension of what they learn and apply. Otherwise, any new thing will leave them confused and useless.

Exams must aim to test comprehension, the ability to analyse and deductive and inductive thinking. Our examination practices need to evolve to this level.

A lot will have to change. All the 20 examination boards of the country must produce a plan to eliminate cheating. Students must be well-prepared. This means the responsibility lies on better-trained teachers and textbook writers. And, the hardest of all, parents will need to set a better example. But, most important, the practice of prescribing a single textbook for exam material must be reverted to multiple approved textbooks.

*The writer taught physics at Quaid-i-Azam University and Lums.*

*Published in Dawn, January 8th, 2022*