UCN: [redacted]

Question: Are traditional public examinations justified? If so, on what grounds?

Justifying Traditional Examinations: The Philosophy of Social Submission

Examinations are the centrepiece in many education systems, defining students' education, careers, and, subsequently, life. Socially, they are very effective and crucial means of socialisation, influencing even the social arrangements of a nation (e.g. *keju* and *gaokao* in China (The China Project, 2022)). Despite this, rarely are traditional exams and their idiosyncrasies specifically justified, which leaves unanswered why particular features (e.g. closed book recitation, marking schemes, time constraints) should be the way they are. In light of growing criticism about examinations rewarding "pointless skills", like paper drilling and exam techniques, this essay will justify traditional examinations and their rigidity by finding their unspoken aim. Ultimately, it will exhibit the pertinence of the "pointless skills" that exams bring to students, expounding why "*submission*" to a social framework should be embraced.

To start, assumptions and criticisms of exams should be addressed. The explicit assessment objectives (AOs) show us the claimed justifications for exams. Conventional wisdom/assumption tells us that education is for, at least predominantly, learning knowledge (be it for the sake of academics or careers), something nominally echoed by the curriculum. Using wordcounter.net on the Ofqual webpage of all GCSE, AS, and A-Levels subject assessment objectives (*GCSE, AS and A level assessment objectives, GOV.UK*, 2017), the 30 most frequently used "non-common words" are:

Table 1 – Most Frequently used "non-common words on Ofqual AO Page

Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
AO	239	level	51	language	29
&bull	122	ideas	43	weighting	28
understanding	105	make	38	interpret	25
knowledge	96	judgements	37	processes	25
demonstrate	71	use	36	conclusions	25

analyse	70	issues	35	design	25
objective	69	concepts	33	procedures	23
requirements	66	including	31	assessment	23
evaluate	65	contexts	30	historical	21
apply	51	techniques	30	media	21

From the above, the two main strata of learning relate to subject knowledge itself (words: understanding, knowledge, ideas, issues, concepts, contexts), and to subject skills (words: analyse, objective, evaluate, apply, judgements, techniques, interpret, conclusions). Public examinations are, on the surface, deemed to summatively assess them, but upon inspection, two corresponding questions arise: 1. If the goal is to learn knowledge (alone), what merit is there to recalling and regurgitating them in a time-limited, closed-book assessment, especially since we are in a world where factual data is always at our fingertips (Cowie, 2021)?, and 2. Are there no better, more authentic ways to assess subject knowledge and skills, like project-based learning? Indeed, examinations are far from the best assessment when the objective is to test subject knowledge and skills. In a House of Commons Education Committee oral examination, Ofqual admitted that 1/4th of all grades is wrongly awarded (Taylor et al., 2020), while a poll (YouGov, 2020) found that, among 1003 surveyed teachers, 92% found that exams do not fully reflect young people's talents. This is further echoed by Ofqual head Simon Lebus, who compared exams to snapshots, showing their deficient holisticness and inaccuracy (Stone, 2021). Unsurprisingly, plenty argues that exams are outdated and incapable of testing knowledge. Consequently, examinations would be unjustified if their case rests upon testing these claimed explicit assessment objectives alone.

An issue with this common line of reasoning is that it conflates education with examinations. The reality is, examinations are simply a ring to education, and their functions are not necessarily to assess those two strata of learning, nor should they have to. To see examinations in a different light and seek their true purpose, one must consider a third, unspoken stratum of learning that is rarely admitted by qualification setters, which this essay will refer to as "Navigation, Compliance, and Strategies skills" (NCS). In the context of examinations, *NCS* refers to the skills required to understand the qualification

structure, marking peculiarities and demands, specific exam tactics, and gambits. Upon navigating the system and structural realities, possessing *NCS* also allow you to comply with these criteria, in an effective, utilitarian manner, and formulate strategies optimising one's habits or personal life to satisfy these demands. In short: exam and study skills. To illustrate this, consider the following curriculum-specific example of each ring of *NCS*:

Table 2 – Curriculum-specific example of *NCS*

Task/Skillset	Navigation	Compliance	Strategy
AS Levels Chemistry	Understand that all papers have at least X marks allocated to "comparing ionisation energy" Read and remember the mark scheme rewards 2 points among 1-3 of the points about "shielding, radii, nuclear charge"	Develop the ability to immediately identify what marking points to write down when a question shows a keyword When answering, always structure your answer with three sections: "name the element", "difference in electronic arrangements", and "how those 3 points are (not) relevant in explaining this"	Make time. Doing past papers with a particular focus on ingraining the pattern of answers into one's memory.

Fig. 1a, 1b – Marking scheme from three year's chemistry papers (to exhibit the phenomenon in Table 2)

Marking Scheme					Year
(d)	(i)		(sodium is lower than magnesium) because they are both in the same period / both have same amount of shielding (1) sodium has fewer protons (1)	2	Autumn 2020
	(ii)		(potassium is lower than sodium) because potassium is in the next period (1) potassium has a bigger atomic radius / potassium has more shielding (1)	2	
(b)	(i)		increasing number of protons present (in the nucleus) / greater nuclear charge (1) greater attraction therefore more energy is needed to remove electron (1) ignore references to shielding	2	Summer 2019

1a: (*GCE AS MARKING SCHEME Autumn 2020 AS Chemistry*, 2020)

1b: (*GCE AS MARKING SCHEME Summer 2020 AS Chemistry*, 2019)

Exam and study skills are often dismissed as pointless, and the focus on only what is being tested is deemed undesirable (Ross, 2012), but such is actually a direct proxy to the crucial abilities of *NCS*. By putting pupils through examinations with such particular requirements, it effectively creates a game

with its unique yet transparent demands through the syllabus and marking schemes, much like, albeit incredibly simplified, the demands one faces in life. Indeed, other methods of assessments also demand their respective task-fulfilment and working skills, such as needing to fill in particular details in a project file or time management for the Extended Project Qualification (*WJEC Level 3 Extended Project*, 2014), but uniquely, only time-constrained, closed-book, and rigidly structured examinations require *NCS* in such a pure and intense form, where a mastering of *NCS* is directly, proportionally awarded solid marks according to a clear scheme. In other words, it promotes and rewards the attitude and ability of "giving people what they demand". What must be admitted is that, therefore, in secondary-level examinations, subject knowledge is often just the medium in a test that aims to introduce and test exam skills/*NCS*.

All of this shows that examinations are best at *formatively training* and *summatively exhibiting* the learning of *NCS*, showing how this is the true role of examinations. Then, what merit is there to a system that rewards *NCS*, at least at the secondary level?

In terms of authenticity, a test that demands *NCS* is one that truly reflects how people cooperate in a society of fellow humans, where one navigates and responds to others' demands. In other words, students equipped with *NCS* can transfer them to tackle all sorts of issues in life. In society, and in a market economy, things become items of value and merit when it is needed or wanted by others, and thus, it is by giving others what they need that one creates value. Before providing them, one must first navigate and identify these needs and wants, and to be able to do this is to be a better collaborator. This is manifested in more explicit ways in the market of goods and services, such as the teachings about "identifying a market" (Dunne, 2022), but it can apply equally albeit subtly to things like establishing oneself in a workplace or even, for politicians, making policies. For the prior, consider electric cars. The technology was there since the 1830s (Roth, 2011), and yet it was not until Tesla's advent that it became popularised, and behind that is successful navigation of and response to the

market, through advertisements and the willingness to capture opportunities (Baer, 2014). Analogously, just having knowledge is not the point (consider trivia's value), especially not in secondary school where genuinely new knowledge discovery is minimal. Rather, it is the ability to be thrown at with these "given points of demands" and, applying *NCS*, use them to one's advantage that is the most impactful and sought-after in society. As such, the rigid traditional examination serves as one such introductory test for students for these skills.

Indeed, this is not a reality that many want to admit having; they do not want to admit that the education system is supposed to teach students to essentially *submit* to the marking scheme, the pinnacle of fundamentally arbitrary rules. But consider adults. They understand that qualifications, marketing, and capital allow for *mobilising* other members of *society*, who otherwise would not know them in a world with attention scarcity, for their own ambitions and projects. In that sense, adults too are *submitting* to society's attention and resource demands, and therefore teaching children about this is simply a necessity borne out of how society prioritises those who comply with its own framework, which exams do so in an already much less hostile way. Moreover, is *submission* to a social framework, as arbitrary as it is, necessarily a bad thing? Humans live in a society where cooperation entails frameworks, therefore submitting to said framework is just the flip side of better cooperation. This cooperation can be the very foundation of noble ambitions, be it to manipulate tech market waves to "greenify" automobiles, or to climb up ladders of political parties to right injustices, or even reinvent that very framework they had to initially submit to. Grand ambitions and ideals are plenty, and so it is those that can *convince* and *mobilise* <u>*others*</u>, through said framework, that really make changes. To teach *submission* does not mean teaching uncritical acceptance, nor is it pessimistic realism of one being tamed by cruel, unchanging social institutions, rather, it teaches good use of others' aid in empowering ambitions and visions to make them work.

It is important to note that, despite everything above, examinations can be justified on many other grounds. Indeed, there are more intuitive justifications, like how exams are a summative report of learning outcomes, encouragement of hard work, et cetera. While this essay emphasises data showing the ineffectiveness and inconclusiveness of examinations as a method of knowledge testing, as with any pedagogical research, data cannot be translated into facts (nor are the data always agreeing), so examinations may well be justified based on effectiveness grounds. Regardless, the weakness of those justifications makes the need for a philosophical justification clear, which this essay identified as examinations' ability to promote *NCS*, which in turn supports pupils to make good use of social framework and rules, as rigid and arbitrary as they are. It challenges the opinion that teaching submission to rules is uncritical or pessimistically realist, hence also showcasing how submission (and encouraging it through traditional exams) are not a bad idea per se. Finally, this line of reasoning does not mean conserving the *education* and *assessment system*, as the justification above does recognise that there ought to be other means to test other capabilities, particularly subject knowledge and skills (the areas where exams fail at testing). Traditional examinations ought to be preserved, but so must assessment reforms be made to achieve the goals of equipping students with equally important subject knowledge and skills. This essay, by bringing in new considerations of what learning should entail, presents a vision where the assessment system utilises various methods to equip students with a complete set of attributes, prepare them for careers, and advance their lives.

(1641 words, excl. tables, figures, title, graphs & bibliography)

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