Reforming Tertiary Examination Systems in Bangladesh: Towards a Competency-Based, Inclusive, and Equitable Future

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ABSTRACT

A remarkable change in Bangladesh's tertiary examination system is now in urgent demand. Competency, Inclusivity, and Equity are essential elements in education and are required to be applied today. By considering all these factors, the article analyses the assessment context of higher education in Bangladesh, noting misalignment with global standards, issues with assessment design, and policy weaknesses. Based on a mixed-methods approach in a range of institutions, the study identifies underlying faults, such as out-of-date exam formats and inconsistent pedagogical applications, and provides recommendations drawing on global best practice and constructivist theory. There is a vision for a four-stranded reform architecture, with policy, pedagogy, infrastructure, and teacher professional development to create an equitable competency-based system of assessment. This paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge on education reform within developing contexts by offering a data-driven and scalable pathway towards system change in assessment.

Keywords: Tertiary Education in Bangladesh, Examination Reform, Competency-Based Assessment, Higher Education Policy, Inclusive Education, Assessment Design.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is fundamental to ensuring quality, motivating learners, and credentialing in higher education. In Bangladesh, tertiary institutions have traditionally depended on examination-driven, summative types of assessments with colonial origins. This creates challenges for equity, alignment of skills, and international comparability. The demand for graduates who can think critically, solve problems, and learn flexibly has increased significantly with the rise of the global knowledge economy (Rahman et al., 2016). However, the existing exam systems at Bangladeshi universities are more focused on memorisation than on higher-order thinking (Rami, 2024).

Notwithstanding policy interventions at transforming education systems, such as the implementation of outcomes-based education (OBE) systems, practice is still uneven across institutions (Kabir, 2016). Added to that, inequalities between public and private universities in terms of infrastructure, staff capacity development, and institutional leadership have propelled these differences (Sarkar & Hossain, 2018). This research is based on the conviction that access to quality assessment on a level playing field is not just needed for academic integrity but also for universal social mobility and national development.

This paper will investigate the prevailing evaluation practice in Bangladesh's higher education, determine structural and pedagogical shortcomings, and suggest an evidence-informed, context-responsive reform agenda. This project addresses a large literature gap by offering empirical evidence on the dialectic between

local interests and global trends in education testing. By concentrating on public and private universities, the research presents a comparative strategy that addresses national policy and institutional practice. The suggested model emphasizes bringing together policy alignment, pedagogical innovation, capacity building, and technological inclusivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The origin of assessment in Bangladesh is found in British-period designs with a focus on memorization. Education commissions, as well as policy reform since independence, have been compromised through partial and intermittent systemic reforms. The recent expansion of private universities has instituted diversity in assessment procedures, but frequently without quality assurance (Rami et al., 2024). The literature of higher education reform discusses the limitations of conventional, memory-based assessment systems and their inability to promote critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving capabilities (Kabir, 2016; Bryan & Clegg, 2019). Scholars stress that Bangladesh's education system continues to lack systemic quality assurance mechanisms and academic auditing (Mohsin & Kamal, 2012), leading to variable standards among institutions. Comparative Singapore and Malaysia models show the successful operation of continuous assessment, stakeholder feedback systems, and strategic use of digital technologies (Sultana &et al, 2020). The informing theory for the study is constructivist theory, which supports learner-centered teaching and authentic practice in assessment. Constructivist theory supports formative assessment, application in real life, and skill alignment to the needs of the labour market (Rami, 2024). The literature also promotes the utilization of culturally localized reform measures that take into consideration socio-economic and technological differences, making reform not just pedagogical but also structural (Ray et al., 2022; Rami et al., 2023).

Table 1: Theoretical Paradigm

Component	Description
Ontology	The reality of testing in Bangladesh is institutionally based on colonial, summative assessment models, which promote inequality and disfavour critical thinking.
Epistemology	Understanding of assessment reform derives from constructivist, contextually grounded, and evidence-based research combining international models with local needs.
Theoretical Lens	Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, Piaget): Learning occurs through experience, social interaction, and authentic tasks; assessment must be aligned suitably.
Assumptions	1) Assessment can facilitate competency, inclusivity, and equity. 2) Learner-centred assessment encourages enhanced lifelong skills. 3) Technology can bridge gaps.
Methodological Basis	Mixed Methods Approach (Creswell, 2017): Combines curriculum analysis, document review, and interviews to provide an overall picture of gaps and reforms in place.
Analytical Focus	1) A disconnect between learning objectives and assessment. 2) Structural imbalances in access and teacher capacity. 3) Stakeholder views for policy reform.
Reform Framework	A four-pillar model: Policy Alignment, Pedagogical Innovation, Capacity Building, Digital Inclusivity.

This paradigm harmonizes constructivist theory of learning and empirical evidence from mixed methods research to propose a competency-oriented, context-driven reform of the tertiary examination system of Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach (Creswell & et al, 2017) was adopted to combine the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches:

Curriculum Review

We contrasted the syllabus and examination regulations of 12 private and public universities for the period 2020-2023. We focused on mapping to learning outcomes, balancing the types of assessment (formative and summative), and embedding technology.

Document Analysis

Evaluation included:

1. Examination question papers (n = 50)
2. Course syllabi and regulations (n = 24)
3. UGC and Ministry of Education reports (2018–2023)

Stakeholder Interviews

We conducted 75 semi-structured interviews:

1. 40 personnel of diverse professional backgrounds
2. 20 university administrators
3. 15 students from five universities

Problems discussed included perceived fairness, congruence with learning outcomes, the problem of implementation, and recommendations for change.

Data Analysis

Data analysis integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a multidimensional snapshot of the

current evaluation landscape in Bangladeshi tertiary education.
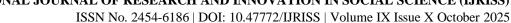
Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data, largely from question papers and curriculum analysis, were entered into SPSS for descriptive statistical analysis. Key indicators were the proportion of formative to summative assessment, the frequency of question types (e.g., MCQs, short-answer, essays), and digital integration. For example, t-tests compared public and private universities regarding the number of project-based assignments. Public universities averaged 1.2 such assignments per course, whereas private universities had 2.5, a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

Qualitative Analysis

NVivo software was used to code interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses. Themes for coding were: "Inclusivity of assessment," "Faculty training needs," "Digital readiness," and "Perceived fairness." Four dominant themes were determined by thematic analysis:

1. Pedagogical conservatism
2. Structural capacity gaps
3. Institutional resistance to change
4. Equity and digital divide issues

To triangulate findings, document analysis results were also compared with stakeholder attitudes. For instance, while 65% of the respondents reported an absence of formative feedback in their programs, only 12% of the

syllabi analyzed explicitly included such components, indicating a gap between perceived needs and institutional priorities.

Visualization and Synthesis

The following table summarizes key contrasts between traditional and modern assessment systems provided by Rami (2024):

Table 2: Key features of traditional examination vs. modern assessment

Feature	Traditional Examination System	Modern Assessment Approaches
Focus	Memorization of facts	Critical thinking and analytical skills
Assessment Methods	Written exams, timed tests	Continuous assessment, project-based learning
Implementation Challenges	Overreliance on rote learning	Structural and pedagogical limitations
Global Job Market Needs	Often misaligned	Equipping graduates with relevant skills
Use of Technology	Limited	Incorporated in exams and assessments
Adoption Barriers	Slow pace of change	Structural and pedagogical limitations

These analyses provided the empirical foundation for the reform framework discussed in "Reform Framework", linking evidence to practical interventions.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The Research findings establish colossal structural, pedagogical, and contextual problems in existing assessment practice in Bangladeshi higher education institutions. The table below discloses the research findings:

Table 3: Results and findings

Theme	FINDINGS
Structural and Pedagogical Gaps	1) Over 70% of question papers put excessive focus on rote memorization. 2) Formative or project-based testing was referred to in only 12% of syllabi. 3) Curriculum analysis revealed inconsistency between course learning objectives and assessment practices in 8 of the 12 universities under review.
Technological and Faculty Challenges	1) Less than 30% of the institutions had functional online tools for assessment. 2) 65% of the faculty reported having no professional training in test construction or technology.
Barriers to Equity and Accessibility	1) Rural and disadvantaged area students had limited access to hardware and reliable internet connections. 2) Racially biased language and inflexible examination formats were utilized to disadvantage minority and non-urban students.
Stakeholder Views	1) Administrators named limited autonomy and unclear regulatory stipulations as barriers to change. 2) Students strongly favored realistic and practical tests. 3) Faculty asked for help in reorganizing curricula and accessing training materials.

Reform Framework

To address the identified problems, the research proposes a four-pillar reform plan.

Table 4: Four-pillar Reform Plan

Pillar	Plan
Policy Alignment	1) Establish a National Assessment Authority to set, monitor, and enforce standards of assessments. 2) Develop harmonized policies in public and private institutions with a focus on competency-based education.
Pedagogical Innovation	1) Integrate continuous and authentic assessments (e.g., case studies, portfolios, presentations). 2) Encourage academic freedom in developing subject-specific, context-sensitive assessments.
Capacity Building	1) Develop and disseminate national-level MOOCs on assessment literacy. 2) Adopt peer-reviewed assessment practices and rewards for faculty development. 3) Develop and disseminate national-level MOOCs on assessment literacy. 4) Adopt peer-reviewed assessment practices and rewards for faculty development.
Digital Infrastructure and Inclusivity	1) Spend on scalable, open-access digital test platforms. 2) Give poor students subsidized internet and hardware.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Keeping the findings and plans in mind, we suggest some recommendations to policymakers, Universities, educators and tech developers.

1. **Policy Makers:** Compel curriculum and assessment reviews; create performance dashboards for institutions.
2. **Universities:** Recreate curricula with measurable learning outcomes and a diverse assessment portfolio.
3. **Educators:** Use rubrics, reflective journals, and collaborative assessments to engage students.
4. **Tech Developers:** Collaborate with universities to localize and scale inclusive assessment technologies.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh's higher education assessment system is at a turning point. While the heritage of exam-based pedagogy still dominates, both institutional and stakeholder preparedness for change is apparent. This research identifies key areas of concern—pedagogical inflexibility, digital divides, and uneven policies—and suggests a comprehensive, context-sensitive reform strategy. Adopting the framework described above will align the system more with international standards and will see future generations of graduates being prepared with the skills required in a fluid, knowledge-based economy.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
OBE	Outcome-Based Education
UGC	University Grants Commission
MCQs	Multiple Choice Questions
MOOCs	Massive Open Online Courses

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