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Test Scores as Indicators of Academic Excellence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This opinion paper challenges the overreliance on test scores as indicators of academic excellence with a focus on the Nigerian educational landscape. While tests serve important functions, they often fail to capture the full complexity of students' intelligence and potential. Rather than act as reliable indicators of excellence, test scores frequently reduce education to rigid benchmarks that ignore cognitive, emotional, and creative dimensions of learning. The discussion is anchored around major themes that expose the limitations of a test-centric system. It begins with an exploration of cognitive diversity and learning styles, emphasising how test-centric assessments marginalise learners whose strengths lie outside conventional academic formats. The paper further critiques the culture of memorisation over mastery, showing how students are trained to recall facts rather than develop deep understanding. Creativity suppression emerges as another concern, where rigid curricula undermine imagination and independent thought. Inflated academic metrics and deflated talent are discussed to illustrate how high scores often mask shallow learning and ignore real-world competencies. The section on dehumanised education portrays how reducing students to numbers compromises their emotional well-being, self-worth, and identity. In addition, the paper delves into the misalignment between academic results and real-world skills, revealing a growing workforce mismatch in Nigeria, as graduates emerge with excellent test records, yet lack practical problem-solving skills. The human cost of this broken system is grave, as the obsession with grades leads to the mass production of graduates trained to memorise definitions that are of limited use outside academic settings. This culminates in a broader decline in innovation, creativity, and national development. The paper concludes that equating test scores with academic excellence is harmful. It proposes a paradigm shift toward holistic education, one that values multiple intelligences, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, creativity, and lifelong learning. Academic success must be redefined to reflect not just what students can reproduce on a test, but what they can contribute to society.

Keywords: Academic, excellence, indicators, Nigeria, scores, test

INTRODUCTION

Tests have long played a crucial role in educational systems worldwide. A test is a structured tool or procedure used to measure a learner's knowledge, skills, abilities, or attitudes in a specific domain. It serves as a method of assessment, providing a snapshot of what students know or can do at a particular point in time. A test serves as a measure of academic progress, a gateway to opportunities, and a tool for accountability. Obilor (2021) defined a test as a set of tasks, questions, and situations intended to elicit particular types of behaviour. In education, tests play a crucial role in monitoring academic progress, diagnosing learning difficulties, motivating learners, and informing instruction. When carefully designed, they contribute to educational quality, equity, and accountability (Black & William, 2018).

In Nigeria, tests such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) are created to facilitate fairness, objectivity, and

uniform standards in measuring students' performance (Popham, 2001; Akpan, 2020). These tests not only affect academic promotion but, at times, the presumed intelligence and fate of students. While tests can provide snapshots of cognitive memory in an instant, equating test scores and academic achievement has become unfair and emotionally destructive. The increased emphasis on test scores has produced an educational system consumed by pressure, performance, and perfectionism. Students are not only encouraged to do their best, but they are pressured to produce specific numerical outcomes or risk being stigmatised as failures. This creates ongoing anxiety, fear of failing, and emotional distress (Putwain, 2008; Yusuf & Adigun, 2010). In Nigeria too, pressures are exerted by family and society, since children are constantly reminded that their grades reflect on the honour of the family, future success, or social worth.

One failure on a test is generally taken to be indicative of the student's lack of ambition, brain power, or focus, without any regard for the larger educational context, so that high and fertile minds are broken under pressure and not because they are incapable, but due to the psychological warfare associated with the Nigerian testing culture. Over-reliance on results from tests comes at the expense of students' psychological well-being and self-worth. Studies have shown that when learners are reduced to numbers, they begin to internalise their performance as personal value, leading to low self-esteem, academic burnout, and a loss of confidence in their potential (Aremu & Sokan, 2003). Furthermore, test anxiety disproportionately affects students from underprivileged backgrounds who may not have access to the same preparatory resources as their peers (Obioma & Salau, 2007). The Nigerian examination system has also faced repeated criticism over technical failures, such as malfunctioning computer-based test (CBT) platforms during UTME, where students are automatically penalised for system errors beyond their control (Punch Editorial Board, 2023). These instances demonstrate that test scores often reflect external circumstances, not intrinsic academic ability. More insidiously, the current system conceals structural bias. Students in rural areas, who are taught by underqualified or unmotivated teachers, are unfairly compared to those in elite urban schools with access to better facilities and instructional support (Eze, 2016). It is unjust to measure these students using the same national metric and then declare one superior or inferior. As a scholar who has evaluated educational outcomes in diverse Nigerian settings, I have come to believe that the inequality embedded in testing practices perpetuates systemic injustice and misrepresents students' potential. Moreover, these biased assessments often lead to stigmatising labels like "brilliant," "average," or "dull" that follow students into adulthood and shape their self-perception in damaging ways.

It is important to acknowledge that tests are not inherently harmful. In fact, Obilor (2021) referred to test as what gives meaning to education. When used as diagnostic tools, they can provide meaningful insights into a learner's growth. However, the problem arises when test scores are treated as the sole indicator of excellence, overshadowing the more holistic elements of educational critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, collaboration, and problemsolving. Nigerian students, for instance, are taught to memorise definitions and regurgitate textbook answers but rarely challenged to apply knowledge in unfamiliar or real-world contexts (Okebukola, 2015). This narrow approach creates a false sense of competence and diminishes the purpose of education itself. Given these realities, we must ask ourselves: Are we raising learners or just training test-takers? This paper posits that test scores are insufficient indicators of true academic excellence, particularly within the Nigerian educational context. Through an exploration of cognitive diversity, memorisation culture, suppressed creativity, inflated metrics, workforce mismatch, and emotional trauma, the discussion will unmask the deeper implications of over-valuing scores and the neglect of cognitive diversity and learning styles.

Cognitive Diversity and Learning Styles

The human brain is not standardised, and yet standardised tests assume it is. Cognitive diversity is the variation in how individuals think and solve problems, which is mostly neglected in educational testing. Learners may be visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or reflective, but traditional tests only emphasise a restricted set of cognitive processing: pressure-induced recall and verbal logic

(Pashler et al., 2008). This is a systematic disadvantage against students whose strengths lie beyond the measured variables of standard tests. In Nigeria, to give an example, the dominance of written theory-driven exams leaves behind students who can excel via experiential, practical, or group learning environments (Udo & Udofia, 2014). The technically skilled learners might not fare well when answering theoretical questions but excel in hands-on assignments, and yet their examination scores determine their fate. This lack of representation of cognitive diversity devalues the talent of many learners. Moreover, this mismatch extends up to the emotional realm. Conformity-students internalise failure and acquire low self-esteem, alienate themselves from school, and, in extreme cases, drop out (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The researcher's personal experience confirms the fact that the majority of students' "average" in high schools subsequently prosper when they are situated in learning settings responsive to their cognitive styles, e.g., vocational education, technology centres, or artistic platforms. Thus, the overreliance on test scores as indicators of academic excellence not only ignores diversity but also erases the value and beauty of differences, leading to the encouragement of memorisation over mastery.

Memorisation over Mastery

A critical flaw in the test-centric educational system is the elevation of memorisation over genuine mastery. Most standardised and high-stakes tests, especially in Nigeria, reward the regurgitation of facts rather than the application of knowledge. This emphasis fosters a shallow approach to learning, where students focus on "cramming to pass" rather than understanding concepts deeply enough to apply them meaningfully (Roediger & Butler, 2011). This problem is not unique to Nigeria but is amplified by Nigeria's test-driven culture, where performance in tests like the West African School Certificate Examinations (WASCE), Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), and others often determines one's educational and career future. As a result, many students resort to "special centres" or cheat sheets just to get by, not to learn (Adeyemi, 2011). In such an environment, the students who can memorise more definitions are praised as brilliant, even though they may not understand how to apply a single concept in a real-world context. This distortion creates an illusion of excellence.

As Bloom (2005) emphasised in his work on educational objectives, true mastery involves knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Test-focused education rarely gets past the first level (knowledge). The system rewards short-term memory, not long-term learning or transferable skills, leaving students ill-prepared for life beyond the classroom (McMillan, 2014). This is disheartening, as many top-performing test-takers struggle in practical settings such as group discussions, real-time problem-solving, or internships. The disconnect between test scores and real-world competence is alarming. Thus, academic excellence, as measured by test scores, becomes a hollow metric; an appearance of intellect rather than evidence of it, an umbrella under which creativity is constantly suppressed.

Creativity Suppression

Standardised testing environments are inherently rigid, offering little room for imagination, originality, or alternative thinking. Creativity, recognised globally as a key 21st-century skill (Robinson, 2011), is often treated as a threat to uniform assessment. Instead of rewarding divergent thinking or innovative problem-solving, most test formats penalise students who think "outside the box." The dominance of multiple-choice and strictly structured essay questions stifles risk-taking and exploration, the very engines of intellectual development. In Nigeria, this suppression is visible in classrooms where teachers, under pressure to "cover the syllabus" and prepare students for national exams, discourage creative expressions such as debate, experimentation, or cross-disciplinary inquiry (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). The result is a learning environment that prioritises conformity over curiosity. Students quickly learn that success lies in reproducing model answers, not in generating new ideas.

Creativity is not merely artistry. It is the skill of generating novel solutions, considering possibilities, and problem-solving competence that is vital in resolving real-world problems significant

to national development and global competitiveness. When students are trained to depend on memorisation rather than thinking, they introduce social stagnation in innovativeness (Sternberg, 2006). Lots of bright students brimming with creative thoughts are muzzled because their thoughts did not align with “marking scheme expectations”, a silent murder of creative confidence. The world is driven by innovation and creativity; hence, a test-centric educational system that ignores these attributes is not only outdated but dangerous. When students are evaluated solely based on rigid test formats that favour rote memorisation over critical thinking and problem-solving, academic metrics are inflated and talents are deflated.

Academic Inflated Metrics, Deflated Talent

Academic inflated metrics refer to situations where test scores, grades, or performance indicators appear impressive on paper but do not accurately reflect a student’s true understanding, capabilities, or readiness for real-world application. On the other hand, deflated talent is the under-recognition, underdevelopment, or dismissal of genuine abilities in students who do not fit into the narrow mould of traditional testing or academic achievement. These students are most times labelled as underperformers or even unintelligent, simply because their strengths are not reflected in test scores. As a result, valuable human potentials are suppressed or lost, which can harm both the individual and society in the long run (Robinson, 2015). Ultimately, when inflated test metrics are mistaken for true excellence, society loses. Talent is wasted, confidence is eroded, and the workforce is flooded with individuals celebrated for their grades but underprepared for the real world.

Test scores often inflate perceived academic competence while simultaneously deflating realworld potential. A high score on a standardised test may signal test-taking prowess, not necessarily deep intellectual ability, problem-solving skills, or emotional intelligence. Conversely, students with exceptional abilities in innovation, leadership, or collaboration may underperform on tests, leaving their talents unrecognised and undeveloped (Duckworth, 2007). This disconnect is evident in the Nigerian context, where entire futures are determined by a single Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) score or the West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE) result. Students are labelled “intelligent” or “dull” based on their ability to conform to a rigid assessment structure, with little consideration of their actual competencies. The tragedy lies in the assumption that a test can accurately capture the complexity of human intellect and potential.

As Obioma (2021), the former Registrar of the National Examinations Council (NECO), acknowledged that many students who fail examinations are not dull; they are simply victims of a misaligned system. Additionally, Sternberg (2005) in his triarchic theory of intelligence emphasises that standardised tests largely measure only analytical intelligence, ignoring creative and practical intelligences that are equally, if not more, important for real-world success. In many cases, students who fail exams but possess strong interpersonal skills, entrepreneurial drive, or artistic talent are unjustly excluded from opportunities to excel. This system creates what should be described as “talent suffocation”. Students who do not thrive in test settings are left believing they are failures, simply because their strengths do not fit into narrow, test-based metrics. The more learners with leadership acumen or technical skills slowly withdraw from academic pursuits due to repeated underperformance in tests that never reflected their capabilities in the first place, the more education is dehumanised, stripping off the humanity aspect of failure (trial and error).

Dehumanised Education

When education becomes synonymous with test scores, it strips learning of its humanity. The focus shifts from developing the whole person to producing grades, rankings, and certificates. Students become statistics defined not by their passions, resilience, values, or contributions, but by a number written at the top of their answer scripts. This mechanical view of education reduces learners to outputs in a production system rather than individuals with diverse potential and evolving capabilities (Noddings, 2005). In Nigeria, this dehumanisation is particularly stark. The nation's obsession with

certificates has led to many students and parents pursuing academic qualifications for any price, even if it means losing integrity, interest, or meaningful learning (Obasi & Asodike, 2014).

Teachers, under the pressure of capturing high pass marks, are most likely to educate to the test rather than teaching for understanding. Students are drilled as machines to give back answers, not to ask why or speculate on what could be. The system also increases emotional trauma. Once failure in school becomes one's identity, rather than a transient anomaly, students experience shame, fear, worthlessness, and psychological harm: this is catastrophic. In the words of Ezenwaji, Ofoegbu, and Ezenwaji (2015), academic stress and anxiety are significant causative agents of low self-esteem and depression in Nigerian adolescents, especially those in their senior year before national examinations. True education should unlock the potential of an individual student and not entomb it under test scripts. In a humane educational system, pupils should be heard, visible, and nurtured and not quantified, classified, and discarded. A test-centric system cannot accomplish this. Ultimately, when inflated test scores are equated to true greatness, society loses, talents are wasted, confidence is lost, empowering a workforce flooded with individuals celebrated for their grades, but underprepared for the real world.

Workforce Mismatch

One of the gravest consequences of test-driven education is its glaring misalignment with realworld demands. While the classroom often rewards rote memorisation, speed, and conformity, the workplace values problem-solving, adaptability, collaboration, communication, and emotional intelligence (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The result is a generation of graduates who are “book-smart” but “life-lazy”, armed with certificates yet ill-equipped for the world outside the school gate. Employers frequently decry the poor employability of graduates, citing a lack of critical thinking, technical know-how, and soft skills (Okuwa & Campbell, 2011).

A report by the National Bureau of Statistics (2020) showed that Nigeria's youth unemployment rate stood at 33.3%, with many graduates lacking the practical skills required in their fields. This is not because they are unintelligent, but because the system that trained them prioritized test preparation over true learning. Exams like the West African School Certificate Examination (WAEC), Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), and the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) rarely assess creativity, emotional resilience, teamwork, or digital literacy; all of which are vital in today's dynamic job market. In disciplines like engineering, education, or the social sciences, graduates often emerge with high scores but little competence in practical application. The unfortunate irony is that students are groomed for success in tests, not for excellence in life. Many students who graduated with top honours in computer science struggle to set up a basic database. These students had aced all theoretical tests but had never been exposed to real coding projects or tech collaboration. The gap was not the student's fault, it was systemic. This misalignment is dangerous not only for individuals but for national development. A country with thousands of graduates and few skilled professionals is set up for stagnation. If academic excellence is reduced to test scores, we risk producing an educated yet unemployable generation, an extremely high cost that humans must pay due to a broken system. The pattern of elevating test scores over true mastery is accompanied by an invisible pain beneath the grades.

The Pain Beneath the Grades

Behind every test score is a human being, often wounded and often unseen. The cost of an educational system that worships test scores is not merely academic; it is deeply personal and societal. In Nigeria, many young people carry invisible scars inflicted by repeated test failures, not because they lack intelligence or ability, but because the system failed to recognise their strengths. In high-stakes testing environments like the West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE), Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), and the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), a single technical glitch such as a computer system failure during the Computer-Based Test (CBT), can determine the course of a student's life. These failures are common in Nigeria due to poor

infrastructure and a lack of backup systems (Adegbija, Fakomogbon, & Daramola, 2021). A brilliant student could be reduced to a "dropout" by a faulty server or an error in data upload. Yet, society quickly labels them as lazy, unserious, or unintelligent.

Further, many teachers are ill-equipped to teach for understanding. Some simply "cover the syllabus" with little emphasis on depth, dialogue, or differentiated instruction. As a result, students with potential are left behind, misunderstood, misjudged, and mislabeled. The teacher's inadequacy becomes the student's burden, often resulting in poor test performance and the stigma of failure. According to Okebukola (2020), a significant proportion of Nigerian teachers are underqualified or lack the skills to facilitate meaningful learning. The most painful aspect is witnessing students internalise failure. Students, after several unsuccessful UTME attempts, conclude that they are not smart enough to go to the university. Some eventually learn a skill and show a high level of artistry, and most of the time, turn out even more successful than skilled test takers. When we define academic excellence through a narrow lens of test scores, we condemn countless capable individuals to emotional, social, and economic exclusion. The loss is incalculable, not just for the students, but for the nation, as there will be constant stagnation and innovation decline.

Innovation Decline

A rigid focus on test scores does more than distort student potential; it slowly suffocates innovation. Innovation thrives in environments where questioning is encouraged, failure is seen as part of growth, and curiosity is celebrated. Unfortunately, the current educational system, especially in test-centric societies like Nigeria, often does the opposite: It rewards compliance, punishes divergence, and trains students to prioritise the "correct answer" over the most creative one. In Nigeria, innovation in schools is largely absent. Students are taught what to think, not how to think. The test-centred culture leaves little room for imagination, experimentation, or intellectual risk-taking. According to Oviawe, Uwameiye, and Uddin (2017), Nigerian education policies still emphasise cognitive evaluation over skill-based and creative competencies, undermining the nation's efforts to build an innovation-driven economy.

Unfortunately, many schools discourage students from expressing unconventional ideas that deviate from the "marking scheme." This stifles original thinking and cultivates a fear of being wrong. Over time, students learn to suppress their creative instincts in favour of rote accuracy; a pattern that continues into adulthood. The result is a workforce that often struggles with ideation, design thinking, and entrepreneurship, despite Nigeria's urgent need for indigenous solutions to its socio-economic challenges. From the researcher's view, some of the most brilliant innovations in the world come from those who performed poorly in tests. A young man, who barely passed the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), built a solar-powered irrigation system for his village farm. Despite his weak academic record, his inventive spirit was alive but was never nurtured in the classroom. As Nigeria continues to prioritise tests over thinking, she risks cultivating a generation that is technically trained but creatively impoverished. Innovation, which should be the heart of the 21st-century education, becomes an afterthought.

CONCLUSION

The argument against equating test scores with academic excellence is neither radical nor dismissive of assessment itself; rather, it is a call for balance, reform, and reality. Testing, when thoughtfully constructed and contextually applied, is undeniably a valuable tool for measuring certain aspects of learning. However, the overreliance on standardised test scores as the definitive measure of a student's intelligence, potential, or future success is deeply flawed, reductionist, and ultimately harmful. Test scores are designed to quantify performance, but they often fail to qualify depth of understanding, originality of thought, emotional maturity, social intelligence, adaptability, resilience, and ethical reasoning, all of which are crucial components of true academic and life success in the 21st century. Academic excellence cannot be confined to right answers on paper when real-world excellence demands innovation, collaboration, empathy, and the ability to think critically across diverse domains.

In the Nigerian educational landscape, the flaws of this score-centric paradigm are particularly pronounced. High-stakes testing environments are often marred by technological failures, especially during computer-based examinations like UTME and WASCE, where system malfunctions unfairly penalise candidates, compounding stress and uncertainty. Moreover, the quality of teaching remains inconsistent, with many underqualified teachers unable to facilitate meaningful learning, particularly in public schools. Students with immense potential are frequently misjudged and mislabelled due to poor test outcomes that reflect systemic weaknesses rather than individual abilities. The emotional toll of this system cannot be overstated. Students burdened by societal, parental, and institutional expectations experience anxiety, depression, and a distorted sense of self-worth when their performance falls short of artificial benchmarks. These test scores become labels that limit, rather than ladders that lift, often branding young minds as “failures” when, in truth, the system has failed them.

Furthermore, test-centric education contributes to a workforce mismatch, where graduates emerge with high grades but low employability. They know the definitions but not the dynamics of real-world problem-solving. This is not merely an educational issue; it is an economic crisis in disguise, especially in a country like Nigeria, where youth unemployment continues to rise despite academic certifications. The current system suppresses creativity, stifles innovation, and breeds conformity over curiosity. It rewards compliance rather than critical inquiry. If we continue to prioritise test scores over talent, we risk nurturing a generation of students who excel at passing exams but struggle in life. Test scores are, therefore, inadequate and misleading indicators of academic excellence. At best, they measure a fraction of what matters; at worst, they obscure the very essence of learning. It is time to redefine academic success, moving from the shallow waters of score-based evaluation to the deeper ocean of holistic development. We must build an educational system that celebrates multiple intelligences, accommodates diverse learning styles, and values practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge. This includes integrating project-based assessments, portfolios, collaborative learning outcomes, socioemotional evaluations, and real-life problem-solving tasks into the framework of student evaluation. True academic excellence lies not in perfection but in potential, not in compliance but in curiosity. It is found in the courage to question, the passion to create, and the empathy to connect. We must stop asking how well students score and start asking how well they learn, grow, and contribute.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Educational systems should adopt multi-dimensional assessments that combine cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains to provide a more holistic view of student development. Tools such as portfolios, peer assessments, project-based learning, performance tasks, and teacher observations should complement standardised tests. This approach captures creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaborative skills not reflected in test scores alone.
2. There is a critical need for continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers in Nigeria and elsewhere, focusing on pedagogical strategies that emphasise depth, inquiry, learnercentred practices, and formative assessment. Teachers must be equipped to recognise and support diverse learners rather than solely preparing them for high-stakes testing.
3. Government and educational authorities should review existing policies that make test scores the only criteria for school admission, scholarships, and employment. More inclusive systems that recognise skills, talents, and real-world problem-solving capabilities should be instituted.

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