

EDUCATION

UoL to revert to closed-book examinations: What it means for students

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For those who aspire to pursue legal careers in Bangladesh, qualifying as a British barrister offers a fair share of advantages along with some lucrative opportunities. However, students who wish to receive their call to the bar at any of the Inns of Court in London must first have undergraduate qualifications, or their equivalent, in English law.

A popular, cost-effective way of achieving this is by completing one's LLB degree under the University of London (UoL), studying at one of their recognised teaching centres in Bangladesh, such as London College of Legal Studies (LCLS) (South), British School of Law (BSL), and others. However, this year, with the UoL deciding to revert back to closed-book examinations from 2025, many students habituated to open-book exams are understandably bracing for a rough transition.

Open-book examinations were first started by the UoL in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. From that time onwards till this year's October/November session, students have been allowed to carry desired hard copy study material during exams—books, teachers' handouts, and personal notes. The exams also went from being pen and paper-based to computer-based, being conducted via the InSpera exam portal. In addition to that, the examination time, which used to be three hours and thirty minutes, was increased to four hours and fifteen minutes.

However, it would be a mistake to simply classify the open-book exams taken in these years as being "easier" than the closed-book ones in the years prior. Indeed, the average marks scored by students have remained consistent with those in examinations conducted in closed-book conditions. The reason for this could be that the students' works have been held against a higher standard and that cases of plagiarism were swiftly detected and severely punished.

With students not required to memorise a great number of cases to tackle problem questions, the focus of assessment entirely shifted to how well students could understand the question, how fast they could locate the relevant information, and how critically they could apply the information to the facts. On the other hand, with students not being encumbered by the memorisation of a great deal of information in order to write essays, the skill of the student was instead judged based on the clarity and coherence of arguments, the depth of research, and whether the work was properly referenced or not.

However, with closed-book examinations making a return, the pendulum has once again swung in the direction of information retention and memorisation.

Additionally, while the exams will remain typed and continue to be held on laptops and computers, the exam durations have been revised back to three hours and thirty minutes. To compensate for these tremendous changes, many students and teachers believe that examiners are going to be less harsh with how they mark candidates' scripts. Nonetheless, a transition like this is bound to cause some anxiety for students.

Thus, there are plenty of students who are critical of this shift. They argue that in a world where the internet puts every piece of information right at our fingertips, information retention has become far less important in comparison to skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking, which they feel are better judged through open-book examinations. Meftahul Jannat Mehek, a second-year student of LCLS (South), agrees with this idea. Sharing her views regarding closed-book examinations, she says, "Closed book exams often seem to prioritise memorisation over actual understanding, which can limit their effectiveness as a gauge for measuring

On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are also those students who stand in favour of the change to closed book examinations despite the challenges it poses to them. Najif Al Abdullah, a student of BSL, is one of them. He argues that open-book exams, by allowing students to depend on essays they have prepared at home, have hampered the development of quick-thinking skills in students.

He says, "I personally believe that the common practice of pre-writing your essays is more damaging than good. It is a way of closing your brain and confining it to a box. I think that closed-book exams, where you can only rely on your own mind, possess better attributes to encourage on-the-spot thinking, a skill that is quite on brand for the legal career."

Yet, regardless of the benefits and drawbacks that closed-book examinations may have, and irrespective of whether they prefer it or not, retaining copious amounts of information and memorising many tons of case names are challenges every student must face from now onwards.

Dr Khaled Hamid Chowdhury, FCI Arb, Advocate, Appellate Division, Supreme Court of Bangladesh and the Head of Laws, LCLS (South), however, feels that students have absolutely nothing to worry about. On how LCLS (SOUTH) aims to prepare its students, he says, "We intend to arrange for more class tests, assignments, and practice works to prepare students and reduce their dependence on looking at materials while sitting for the exam.

Teaching will be more in-depth, comprehensive, and practice-oriented. The greatest challenge would be to convince everyone to get rid of their fears and to remind them that with practice and proper guidance, the upcoming exams will not be hurdles to pass but rather achievements we can all be proud of."

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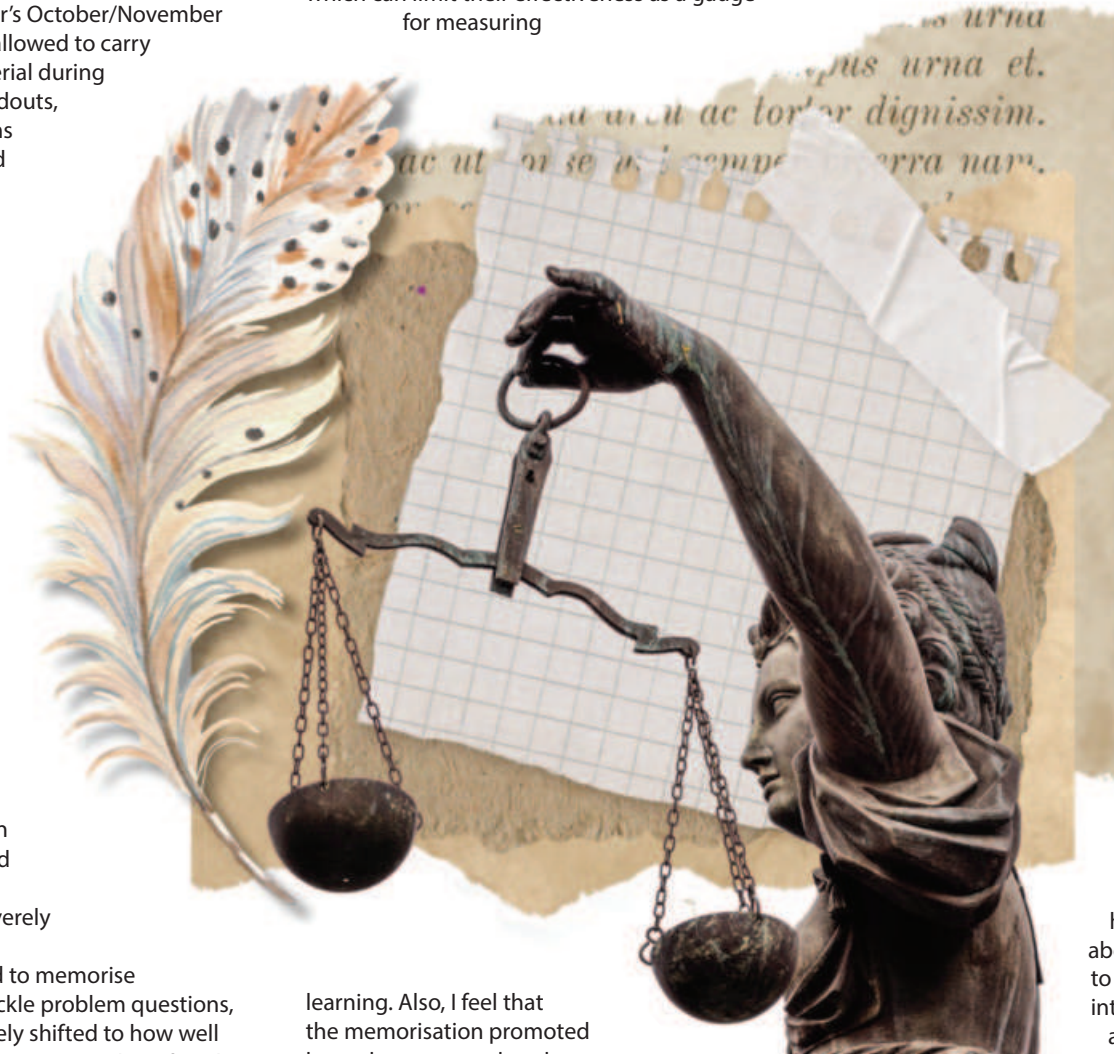


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learning. Also, I feel that the memorisation promoted by such exams tends to be short-term, not necessarily translating into long-term retention of knowledge."

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