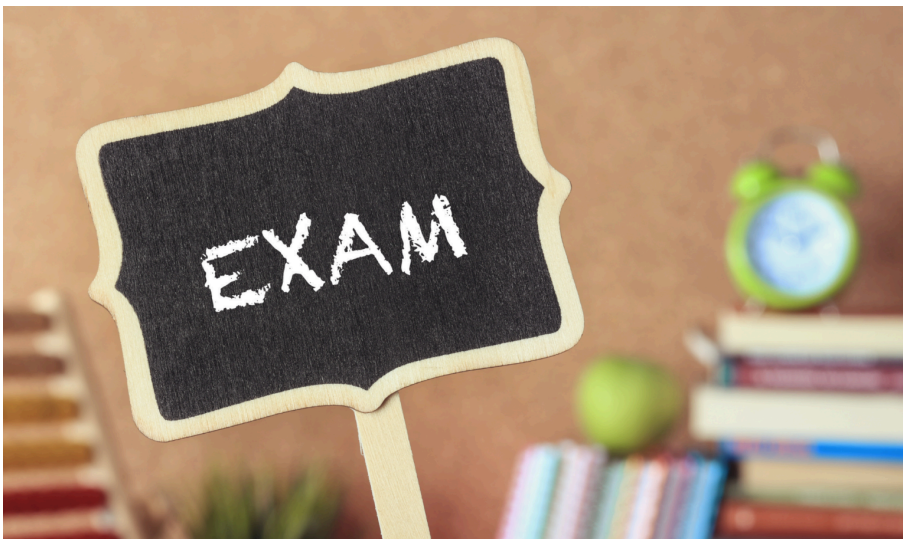


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Islamic perspective of exams

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A Parallel Between Exams and Life's Trials: An Islamic Perspective

□ Guest Submission □ March 4, 2025

By, *Rabiah Tul Adawiyah Mohamed Salleh*

It's the exam period at IIUM, a time filled with anticipation, anxiety, and long hours of study. As I stood in the exam hall, invigilating students I had taught this semester, I couldn't help but observe the mixed emotions etched on their faces. Some were visibly nervous, biting their pens as they pondered the questions. Others scribbled away furiously, racing against the clock to complete their answers. A few sat still, staring into nothingness—perhaps trying to recall something I had taught them, searching for that one piece of knowledge they could use in

their answers. The silence in the room was palpable, broken only by the occasional rustling of papers or the squeak of a chair.

This scene struck me as a profound metaphor for life itself. The intense atmosphere in the exam hall—a mix of quiet determination, visible struggle, and focused effort—felt like a microcosm of the trials we face in this *dunya* (world). Each student worked through their own challenges, striving to give their best. Similarly, in this *dunya*, we too are tested—through hardships and blessings—each trial presenting an opportunity to grow, learn, and get closer to our Creator.

However, unlike exams in the *dunya*, where silence is enforced and asking for help is unthinkable, Allah, Al-Mujeeb (The One Who Responds), invites us to seek His help during life's tests. In fact, in contrast to exams where students cannot approach their teachers for assistance, Allah loves when we call upon Him. This beyond-our-comprehension level of mercy turns life's trials into opportunities to draw closer to Him.

The Exam Hall and the World: A Striking Parallel

The parallels between the exam hall and this world become very clear when we take a moment to reflect. In an exam, students face questions that test their preparation and understanding of the subject. Similarly, Allah tests us in this life, as He repeatedly mentions in the Quran:

“And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits but give good tidings to the patient.”
(Surah Al-Baqarah 2:155)

In another verse, Allah reminds us of the purpose behind these trials:

“Do the people think that they will be left to say, ‘We believe’ and they will not be tested?” ***(Surah Al-Ankabut 29:2)***

This verse from Surah Al-Ankabut always struck me as a warning to us heedless human beings. Simply uttering that we have *iman* is insufficient—just like students at university who cannot simply enrol in a subject and expect to graduate or achieve success. How would we differentiate between those who genuinely made the effort to learn and those who were just breezing through

university life? In this way, exams act as a filter to identify good and bad students, just as life's trials unmask the sincerity of our faith and dedication to Allah.

Both exams and life are time-bound. Just as students have a limited period to complete their answers, our time in this world is also finite.

In the exam hall, some students might complete their answers and leave before the allotted time is up. Similarly, in life, some people complete their tests earlier than others and transition to the next realm, the *barzakh*. Their purpose, known only to Allah, has been fulfilled in this world, and they return to Him. Reflecting on this reminded me of the verse:

“Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as trial; and to Us you will (all) be returned.” (Surah Al-Anbiya 21:35)

This parallel also highlights the reality that life's duration is not the same for everyone—some pass away young, some in middle age, and others after reaching old age. The length of our lives is solely in the hands of Allah.

However, how long we live should not be the focus. What truly matters is how well we answer the “questions” posed to us during our time in the dunya. For a *mu'min* (believer), it is not the length of life that matters, but the manner in which we exit this world—that is, we hope for Allah to accept all our deeds and grant us the best ending, *husnul khotimah*.

The Nature of Life's Tests

Life's tests are diverse—ranging from wealth to poverty, health to sickness, and success to failure. Both hardship and ease are challenges custom-designed to our unique circumstances and abilities. Allah assures us in the Quran:

“Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear.” (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:286)

One thing we need to remember about life's trials is that they are a sign of Allah's love. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said:

“The greatest reward comes with the greatest trial. When Allah loves a people, He tests them” (Ibn Majah 4031)

To many, this hadith may seem paradoxical. We often associate ease and comfort with love. By human nature, we dislike difficulties and struggle. However, the wisdom behind the connection between tests and Allah’s love becomes evident if we ponder it deeply.

Consider a toddler learning to walk. The child falls countless times before finally taking the first steps and eventually learning to run. By the time the toddler acquires this ability, they have learned to recognise the things that cause them to stumble. Each fall becomes a lesson, helping the child grow stronger and more capable.

Similarly, Allah’s tests are not meant to punish us but to develop our character and, in the process, strengthen our *iman*. The prophets, who were the most beloved by Allah, were also the most severely tested. When we read their stories, we see that they endured unimaginable hardships, displaying a level of *sabr* that was truly superhuman—possible only with Allah’s assistance.

A person who is never tested becomes weak, complacent, and unprepared for life’s challenges. However, those who endure hardship emerge stronger and more resilient, much like how fire refines gold. This idea is beautifully captured in the saying: ***“What does not kill you makes you stronger.”*** Every test we face is, therefore, an opportunity to grow—not only as individuals but also in our connection to Allah. Through these challenges, we learn to trust Him completely, knowing that He knows what is best for us and loves us more than we could ever love ourselves.

Seeking Help in Life’s Tests

In the exam hall, students are expected to work silently and independently. The rules are strict—there is no option to ask for assistance, let alone request that the questions be made easier. Each student must rely solely on their preparation and ability to complete the test.

But life’s tests, as designed by Allah, are completely different. Out of His infinite mercy, Allah not only allows us to seek His help but *commands* us to do so. In fact, we can even ask for ease in the

tests we face—a concept unimaginable in worldly exams. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) would make dua for ease, and one of his most beautiful supplications is:

اللَّهُمَّ لَا سَهْلَ إِلَّا مَا جَعَلْتَهُ سَهْلًا، وَأَنْتَ تَجْعَلُ الْحَزْنَ إِذَا شِئْتَ سَهْلًا

“O Allah, there is no ease except what You make easy. And You make the difficult easy, if You will.” (Ibn Hibban 2427)

No matter how difficult a situation may seem, Allah keeps reminding us that He alone has the power to lighten our burdens. Unlike exam invigilators, who will not entertain students' requests—be it for extra time or a hint to clarify a question—Allah is always near, ready to respond to our calls:

“Call upon Me; I will respond to you.” (Surah Ghafir 40:60)

Lessons Drawn from The Exam Hall

From pondering the parallels between exams and life's trials, we derive several important lessons:

1. Preparation and Tawakkul (Reliance on Allah)

Success requires both effort and trust. Just as students prepare for exams while relying on their preparation, believers are called to strive in good deeds while placing their ultimate trust in Allah. True success lies in the balance between doing our part and having complete submission in Allah's plan.

2. Mistakes as Teachers

Mistakes should not be feared—they are often our greatest teachers. In exams, students will make mistakes and learn from them. Similarly, life's errors provide us with opportunities for repentance. Allah's mercy is ever-present for those who turn to Him in humility: ***“Say, O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.” (Surah Az-Zumar 39:53)***

3. Time Management and Priorities

Time is a precious resource, both in exams and in life. Just as students must carefully manage their limited exam time, life's trials require us to focus on what truly matters. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: ***"Take advantage of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your illness, your wealth before your poverty, your free time before your work, and your life before your death."*** (Sahih according to Al-Albani).

Life, like an exam, is a series of questions that, as long as we breathe, test our *iman*, character, and perseverance. Yet, unlike worldly exams, the tests of life are accompanied by Allah's ever-present guidance and mercy. The Quran and Sunnah are our study guides, *dua* is our direct line of communication to Him, and *sabr* (patience) and *salah* (prayer) are the tools that carry us through.

Approaching life's challenges with the mindset of a student—diligent, hopeful, and reliant on the Teacher—allows us to face life's trials with strength and purpose. Ultimately, the goal is not merely to pass the tests of this world but to achieve the eternal success of the Hereafter. As Allah clearly states in the Quran:

"So He may admit the believing men and believing women into Gardens beneath which rivers flow, where they will abide forever, and remove from them their misdeeds. And ever is that, in the sight of Allah, a supreme achievement." (Surah Al-Fath 48:5)

What greater success could there be than this?***

(These are views of Dr. Rabiah Tul Adawiyah Mohamed Salleh who is affiliated with the Department of English Language and Literature, Kulliyah of AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, which do not represent IIUMToday's.)

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