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Transforming Education Policy: From National Assessment to National Exam and its Impact on Learning Quality in Indonesia

Syahril Chaniago*, Imam Ibnu Hazar, Lia Mahwaty
Education Management Study Program
Postgraduate School, Universitas Pakuan Bogor, Indonesia
*syahril@unpak.ac.id

Abstract

Education policy in Indonesia has undergone a significant shift from the National Assessment (AN) back to the National Examination (UN). This transition reflects concerns about infrastructure readiness, assessment effectiveness, and policy continuity. Using a qualitative approach, this study compares AN and UN, evaluating their implications for learning quality, equity, and systemic readiness. The findings highlight that while AN promotes holistic education by assessing literacy, numeracy, and character development, its implementation is hindered by technological and resource disparities. Conversely, the UN provides clear benchmarks and familiarity but risks prioritizing rote memorization over critical thinking. The study underscores the need for a balanced education evaluation framework that integrates the strengths of both assessments. A hybrid model combining standardized evaluation with competency-based assessments could enhance educational outcomes. Policymakers must consider sustainable education reforms that align with Indonesia's development goals while ensuring equitable access to quality education.

Keywords: Education policy, National Examination, National Assessment, learning quality, education evaluation.

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**Corresponding Author*

1. Introduction

The education evaluation system in Indonesia plays a crucial role in shaping national education policies and ensuring quality learning outcomes. For many years, the National Exam (Ujian Nasional – UN) was the primary instrument for measuring student performance and standardizing academic achievements. Introduced in 2003, the UN aimed to assess students' competency levels and establish educational benchmarks (Handayani, 2021). However, it faced growing criticism for its heavy reliance on test results, prioritizing rote memorization over critical thinking, creativity, and character development (Umroh et al., 2025).

In response to these concerns, the Indonesian government introduced the National

Assessment (Asesmen Nasional – AN) in 2021. Unlike the UN, the AN adopted a broader approach, focusing on literacy, numeracy, and character development (Indahri, 2021). This transition followed global trends that advocate for a comprehensive approach to education, prioritizing holistic learning and cultivating essential 21st-century skills (Tariq, 2024). Unlike its predecessor, the AN assessed the overall education system rather than determining individual student outcomes, aiming to reduce pressure on students and teachers while fostering meaningful learning experiences (Gofur, 2023; Novita et al., 2021).

Despite its progressive goals, the AN faced significant implementation challenges. Many schools, particularly in remote areas, lacked the necessary infrastructure and technology to administer the assessment effectively. A 2022 report by the Ministry of Education found that over 40% of schools in Indonesia experienced unstable internet connections, a critical barrier to AN implementation (Putra et al., 2024). Additionally, educators struggled with inadequate training and resources, leaving them unprepared to adapt to the new framework (Ekawati, 2024). These challenges created inconsistencies in applying the AN, leading to regional disparities in education assessment.

The government decided to revert to the UN format in response to these difficulties. While this decision addressed logistical concerns, it sparked widespread debate among educators, policymakers, and the public. Supporters of the UN argue that it provides clear benchmarks and familiarity, ensuring consistency across schools (Syafar et al., 2024). However, critics warn that reinstating the UN risks returning to a rigid, test-oriented approach that neglects broader competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and character development (Fadhil & Ramadhan, 2024).

This policy shift highlights the complexity of balancing tradition with innovation in education evaluation. The urgency of this research lies in understanding the immediate and long-term implications of these transitions. Rapid policy changes without thorough evaluation risk perpetuating systemic inequities and failing to meet students' holistic needs. Evaluation Theory emphasizes needing an assessment system that measures learning outcomes and promotes equity and systemic efficiency (Barrenechea et al., 2023). Furthermore, Indonesia's shifting education policies relate to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education, which prioritizes inclusive, equitable, and high-quality learning opportunities for all (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022). The potential misalignment between national education policies and global priorities underscores the need for rigorous policy analysis.

The frequent shifts in education policy reflect broader governance challenges in Indonesia's education sector, particularly in ensuring policy continuity, resource allocation, and long-term strategic planning. Countries that have successfully reformed their education systems, such as Finland and Singapore, have demonstrated the importance of gradual implementation, teacher training, and evidence-based policymaking (Schleicher, 2021). Indonesia's rapid transition between the UN and AN, without sufficient time for evaluation and adaptation, raises concerns about educational instability and the effectiveness of such policy shifts. Moreover, this inconsistency affects students, teachers, and school administrators, who must repeatedly adjust to changing assessment models. To ensure a sustainable and equitable education system, it is crucial to develop a well-structured, research-based evaluation framework that considers both academic performance and broader student competencies (Evenstein Sigalov et al., 2024).

Despite ongoing discussions, limited research has directly compared the impact of AN and UN on learning quality, equity, and systemic readiness. The practical

implications of reverting to the UN—particularly its effects on critical thinking, character development, and educators' capacity—remain largely unexplored. This study addresses these gaps by providing evidence-based insights to inform future education policies.

This research examines the transition from the AN to the UN, analyzing its historical context, policy rationale, and potential impacts on Indonesia's education system. It evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of both assessment models and explores how Indonesia can design an evaluation framework that balances academic performance with holistic student development. This study offers practical recommendations for creating a more balanced and effective education evaluation system by assessing policy objectives, implementation challenges, and learning quality impacts.

2. Method

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the transition from the National Assessment (AN) to the National Exam (UN) in Indonesia. The study compares these two systems and their potential impacts on education quality. Data collection, analysis, and theoretical interpretation are conducted systematically to achieve these objectives.

1. Research Design

The study uses a descriptive qualitative design to provide an in-depth understanding of the policy shift and its implications. The research examines the strengths, weaknesses, and potential impacts of the AN and UN systems within the context of Indonesia's education policies.

2. Data Sources

The research relies on secondary data sources, which include Policy documents, Government regulations, guidelines, and evaluation frameworks related to the AN and UN. Official reports: Publications from the Ministry of Education and other relevant agencies. Scientific articles: Peer-reviewed studies and academic literature on education evaluation in Indonesia. Expert opinions: Insights from educational experts drawn from existing studies and public commentary.

3. Data Analysis

Comparative analysis evaluates the differences and similarities between the AN and UN, focusing on their objectives, implementation, and outcomes. Content analysis identifies recurring themes, patterns, and insights from policy documents, reports, and academic literature. The analysis assesses key aspects such as infrastructure readiness, educator preparedness, and the broader impacts on students and the education system.

4. Theoretical Framework

The research employs the following theoretical frameworks: Evaluation Theory to assess the effectiveness of the AN and UN in achieving education policy objectives. Student-Centered Learning Theory will analyze how the AN promotes holistic education compared to the UN's emphasis on standardized results. Social Systems Theory to understand how societal needs and systemic challenges influence shifts in education policy.

5. Ethical Considerations

All secondary data sources are correctly cited to maintain academic integrity and avoid plagiarism. The study involves no primary data collection from human subjects, ensuring minimal ethical risks (Karunarathna et al., 2024). The research flow appears in the following figure.

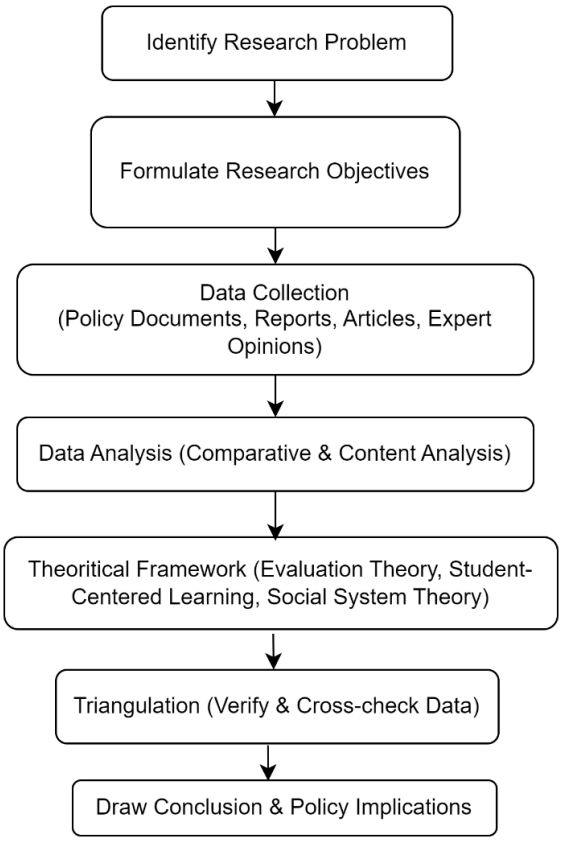

Figure 1. Flowchart Research

3. Result and Discussion

A. Reasons for AN's Return to the UN

The findings reveal that the return from the National Assessment (AN) to the National Exam (UN) stems from practical challenges in implementing AN. Analysis of policy documents and expert opinions highlights gaps in access to technology, inadequate teacher training, and difficulties in collecting data from the Character and Learning Environment Survey (Wardana et al., 2023). These issues disproportionately affect remote regions, leading to disparities in implementation. While AN aims to promote holistic education—encompassing academic, emotional, and practical skills—its narrow focus on literacy and numeracy risks neglecting other learning areas (Nugraha, 2024). Conversely, the UN is more practical, leveraging its long history and familiarity with stakeholders, which reduces resistance and simplifies implementation with existing infrastructure.

B. Comparison Between AN and UN

Using comparative analysis of data from policy documents and official reports, key differences between AN and UN emerge. The AN adopts a holistic framework,

emphasizing literacy, numeracy, student character, and learning environment quality. Its results inform systemic improvements rather than determining individual student outcomes. In contrast, the UN focuses on subject-based tests aligned with the national curriculum, serving as a determinant for graduation and a benchmark for education quality. This analysis reflects the evaluation theory, which shows that AN emphasizes systemic quality while UN targets individual achievement. However, both systems serve distinct but complementary purposes in evaluating education. The table below compares the National Assessment (AN) and National Exam (UN).

Table 1. Comparison of National Assessment (AN) and National Exam (UN)

Aspect	**National Assessment (AN)**	**National Exam (UN)**
Focus	Literacy, numeracy, student character, and learning environment (holistic approach.	Subject-based tests aligned with the national curriculum.
Purpose	System-level evaluation to improve education policies.	Individual assessment to determine graduation and measure education quality.
Strengths	- Evaluate literacy and numeracy, which are critical for advanced learning. - Considers character and learning environment, offering holistic insights. - Informs systemic improvements.	- Provides clear benchmarks for regional comparisons. - Familiarity with and ease of implementation with existing infrastructure. - Motivates students through high-stakes evaluation.
Weaknesses	- Requires advanced infrastructure and teacher training, which is challenging for remote areas. - Results can be complex and complicated for the public to interpret. - Limited by technological and resource gaps.	- High-stakes nature induces student stress. - Focuses on rote memorization, neglecting critical thinking and creativity. - Narrowly assesses cognitive skills, overlooking character and collaboration.
Implementation	It is challenging due to disparities in infrastructure and educator preparedness.	It is more straightforward to implement with well-established processes.
Impact	Promotes systemic improvement but faces challenges in scalability and equity.	Standardized outcomes but risks overshadowing holistic development goals.
Policy Implication	It promotes long-term holistic education that aligns with 21st-century skills.	Provides practical and immediate measures for education

C. Strengths and Weaknesses of AN and UN

Insights from scientific articles and expert opinions were analyzed through content analysis to identify recurring themes regarding the strengths and weaknesses of both systems. The National Examination (UN) provides explicit, standardized benchmarks for regional comparisons, fostering ease of implementation and ensuring a common educational standard across Indonesia (Ikbal et al., 2024; Solekha et al., 2024). Standardized assessments such as the UN have been widely adopted globally due to their ability to measure student achievement objectively and facilitate nationwide

comparisons. However, critics argue that its heavy reliance on test scores prioritizes rote memorization over deeper learning, often neglecting essential skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. Moreover, the high-stakes nature of the UN has been linked to increased student anxiety and a narrow curriculum focus, as teachers tend to "teach to the test" rather than foster comprehensive learning (Hasibuan & Yahya, 2022).

On the other hand, the National Assessment (AN) represents a paradigm shift towards a more holistic evaluation of literacy, numeracy, and character development, aligning with contemporary educational goals emphasizing competency-based learning. Unlike the UN, AN assesses students' fundamental skills and school quality rather than individual academic rankings, providing actionable insights to inform policy improvements (Schleicher, 2021). It aligns with formative assessment, emphasizing continuous feedback and learning rather than a single high-stakes test (Wiliyanti et al., 2025).

However, despite its advantages, the successful implementation of AN faces significant barriers. Its reliance on digital infrastructure, including computer-based testing, poses challenges for schools in rural and underprivileged areas with limited access to technology (Shafira et al., 2025). Furthermore, effective use of AN results requires specialized training for educators, which may not be uniformly available, exacerbating disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced schools. Some researchers highlight that while AN provides a more comprehensive educational assessment, its effectiveness depends on government investment in training and infrastructure development to ensure equitable implementation across regions (Wang et al., 2023).

These findings align with Social Systems Theory, emphasizing the interplay between societal structures and policy outcomes. The systemic inequities in Indonesia's education system directly influence the feasibility of policy implementation, highlighting the need for an integrated approach that balances standardized assessment with equitable resource distribution (Komariah et al., 2024). Policymakers must address these disparities by strengthening digital infrastructure, providing adequate teacher training, and ensuring that AN and UN approaches align with long-term educational objectives. A hybrid model incorporating the strengths of both assessments could be a potential solution for addressing these challenges in the Indonesian education landscape. The hybrid model combines standardized evaluation for accountability with formative assessments for holistic learning (Huang, 2022).

D. Potential Impacts of the Policy Change

Based on secondary data sources and theoretical frameworks, the policy shift back to the National Examination (UN) has notable implications for the Indonesian education system. One of the primary concerns is that the high-stakes nature of the UN may narrow the curriculum, as schools and educators prioritize test-oriented teaching over broader educational objectives (Felicia, Nisa; Matakupan, Stien Johanna; Bismo, Pandu Ario; Pratama, Stephen; & Hakim, 2024). Research indicates that standardized assessments often result in a "teaching to the test" phenomenon, where instructional focus is limited to subjects and competencies directly assessed, potentially neglecting essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration (Schleicher, 2021). This outcome reflects Student-Centered Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of holistic student development over rote memorization and

test-based performance.

A significant concern with the return to the UN is its potential to exacerbate educational inequities, particularly in underserved and rural areas. Schools with limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient access to digital learning tools face more significant challenges in meeting standardized expectations, widening the achievement gap between urban and rural students. This concern is supported by the Social Reproduction Theory, which argues that education systems often reinforce existing social inequalities rather than mitigate them (Lee et al., 2024). If students from well-funded schools consistently perform better on UN, their educational and career prospects are enhanced, while those from marginalized communities are disproportionately disadvantaged.

Moreover, international studies suggest that standardized testing disproportionately affects students from low-income backgrounds, as they may lack access to private tutoring, supplementary educational materials, and stable learning environments (Alam & Mohanty, 2023). Thus, reverting to a one-size-fits-all assessment model without addressing structural inequities could limit educational opportunities for disadvantaged students and contradict the broader goals of equitable education reform (Amouri, 2025). While standardized testing provides measurable benchmarks, a heavy reliance on the UN could limit the flexibility needed for meaningful education reform. Comparative studies from countries such as Finland and Canada indicate that reducing emphasis on high-stakes testing in favor of formative, competency-based assessments leads to better learning outcomes and student well-being. In contrast, nations that emphasize standardized testing, such as the United States and China, have faced criticism for fostering high-pressure learning environments that may not translate to real-world competencies.

Thus, policymakers must consider a balanced approach that integrates both summative (high-stakes) and formative (continuous) assessments. One potential solution is a hybrid evaluation system that retains the accountability of the UN while incorporating elements of National Assesment (AN), such as literacy, numeracy, and character assessment, to ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of student capabilities. Additionally, investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and digital infrastructure will ensure that all schools—regardless of location—can adequately prepare students for standardized assessments and lifelong learning.

5. Implications for Policy Development

Analyzing policy documents and expert opinions provides actionable recommendations for developing a balanced evaluation system that integrates the strengths of both National Assesment and National Examination. Instead of reverting entirely to the UN's high-stakes standardized testing model, a hybrid system that evaluates cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of learning could offer a more comprehensive and equitable approach to student assessment (Wu et al., 2024).

The successful implementation of a balanced evaluation model requires substantial investments in teacher training and infrastructure development. Studies have shown that standardized assessments disproportionately disadvantage rural and under-resourced schools due to disparities in access to technology, learning materials, and professional development (Golden et al., 2023; Peer, 2024). Without addressing these systemic gaps, any evaluation policy risks reinforcing educational inequities rather than reducing them. Therefore, targeted investments in teacher professional development, digital learning

tools, and school infrastructure are crucial to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds receive equitable educational opportunities (Hennessy et al., 2022).

An overreliance on high-stakes, one-time standardized exams can lead to rote memorization rather than meaningful learning. To address this, integrating formative assessments, project-based learning, and portfolio evaluations can enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and creativity. Research suggests that alternative assessment methods, such as student portfolios and project-based evaluations, accurately represent students' competencies, problem-solving abilities, and collaboration skills (Devaki, 2024). These methods align with Student-Centered Learning Theory, which emphasizes active learning, personalized instruction, and the development of higher-order thinking skills (Martinez & Gomez, 2025).

Policy effectiveness should not be assumed to be static; instead, it should be continuously evaluated and adjusted based on real-world educational outcomes. Using AN-style holistic insights to assess the impact of evaluation policies periodically can help identify areas for improvement and adaptation. Evaluation Theory highlights that education policies should be flexible, data-driven, and responsive to evolving societal and educational needs (Strielkowski et al., 2024). Regular policy reviews and impact assessments can ensure that evaluation models remain relevant, equitable, and effective in fostering long-term educational development.

5. Conclusion

The return from the National Assessment (AN) to the National Exam (UN) highlights the complexities of balancing practicality with holistic education goals in Indonesia. While the UN provides clear benchmarks and ease of implementation, it risks neglecting critical thinking and broader learning outcomes emphasized by the AN. Addressing these challenges requires innovative solutions to create an equitable and adequate education evaluation system. A hybrid evaluation model combining the systemic insights of AN with the practicality of UN should be developed to assess cognitive and non-cognitive skills. The government must invest in infrastructure, teacher training, and capacity building to ensure equitable implementation across regions. Regular policy evaluations are essential to refine and align the system with Indonesia's educational aspirations and global standards.

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