Thoughts on exams

As the regular term's lesson time ends, it's the time when most of us in UST would feel stressed or panick - Exams. Grades. GPA. On one hand, we realize that there are many more other things outside of exams and work (interviews are sorts of exam too - but on your general competence and ability in tackling unexpected situations) - but given the competitive behaviour and culture of 'striving for the best' under relative grading here, it seems the only proper option we have is to focus on the exams. Quite ironic huh? Although I'm probably one of the more lucky survivors in these strings of exams - performing acceptably in DSE and securing a GPA-based full scholarship last year in one of the most competitive subjects here in UST, I don't really like exams.
I mean yes, I might have an advantage in this very field considering that I'm relatively good at finding the patterns and requirements - the ways I'm supposed to answer the questions. But do I really like being immersed in very environment?

Nope. Not really... But before any discussion, let's have a look at the general purposes and pros/cons of exams first. Exams, in general, serve the following purposes:

a) Benchmarking purpose
• To compare and assess the performance of a batch of students fairly with the same materials; this is essential in elitist education systems - choose the best/ brightest people for the top-notch universities.
• Students know what parts they have done well, and what parts that they could do (even) better
• To (indirectly) gauge teachers' teaching ability as reflected by exam results of different classes; mostly used in class of students of equal capabilities on average

b) normalization and organization of the learning process
• To let students and teachers know what to be examined *explicitly* - makes exam results more or less linear with the amount of efforts (e.g. teaching notes made based on that topic covered/ students' pre-learning) made
• Given exams' generally summative processes, students would need to make use of (and enhance) their summarizing and comparison skills to maximize their efficiency/ depth of knowledge they process to do well. Those traits could be quite important in the research field.

c) Incentive purpose
• Examinations force students to study hard: they are held accountable to their studying quality and effort paid - they will be penalised if they don't do well
• Teachers' (especially in secondary schools) gauges of performance => upward mobility (有心/教得好... get promoted)
• Promote (healthy) mutual competition among peers: strive the whole batch to do better; exam takers of the same subject could exchange their ideas and potentially consolidate each others' learning (a common topic => incentivizes cross-learning with peer influence) under the same goal
Despite exams' effectiveness in achieving the above objectives, it intrinsically contains many downsides that make me ponder a lot, very often. Makes me… not wanting to take exams, actually.

One of the key mottos to do well in exams is to strictly "follow the rules" to get that one single answer. But in real life, how many rules are there? Must the rules be stated explicitly? Is there only one answer to everything? When the textbook teachings are mostly just too theoretical and (somewhat) outdated, are the rules worth preaching in real life? If "Rules" in real life just turns out to be arbitrary, do we still follow through the "Exams" and the rules? Hong Kong students are implicitly instilled with the value of "following the convention and rules", but what if one day the rules are hidden or non-existent? We are encouraged to "follow the norm" instead of making our own rules and initiatives, but one day we all are going to grow differently and venture into different interests or areas. Who are we to follow? How can we bring difference to the world when we ourselves are accustomed to not being different, and reciting that particular question-answering structure?

Another point is that, in such a result-oriented society, have we been placing just a bit too much focus on the exam outcomes and personal "achievements", instead of concerning our well-being and inner fulfillments? Personally though, I know I must achieve some extents of financial and career success before I can afford not caring about them anymore - but I would still wonder, how could I balance my well-being with the workload?