

**PART I**

**THE REPORT OF THE SEMINAR**

## 1. EXAMINATIONS AND THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

### The Social Context of Examinations

The origins of public examining in English-speaking countries lie in contemporary progressive and liberal attitudes. More than a century ago when university examinations were reformed and entry to government service was made subject to competitive examination rather than by patronage, a contribution seemed to have been made to social justice. When the School Certificate replaced a plethora of specialised examinations about half a century ago it was anticipated that the burden on pupils would be lessened and schools freed to introduce more flexible and locally relevant curricula. The fact that the best hopes were not fully realised is often blamed on the examination system: the truth probably lies in a complicated set of variables of which the examination system is but one. The importance of examinations in the lives of everybody seeking to qualify educationally and professionally underlies the persistent criticism of their fallibility and injustice. Were they less important they would be less criticised.

Examinations have become a political and social issue as much as an educational one. For in most Commonwealth countries today they provide the essential means by which educational staff and institutions are judged, national manpower selected and directed, social mobility promoted and individual merit publicly recognised and rewarded.

Among certain bodies of educational opinion examinations tend to be cast in the role of constraints on the educational process, at best a necessary evil, at worst a restricting and deadening force acting against the best interests of candidate and teacher. Yet in the present context of social, economic and educational structures selection is necessary and selection processes have a long history; only the scale of operation has expanded over the last fifty years until today examinations touch directly on the bulk of many populations. In large measure public examinations are accepted as the least offensive means of selecting those who will advance to positions of privilege and prestige within their society. There is undoubted truth, however, in the assertion that insufficient attention has been paid to the consequence of failure in competitive examinations, for, by the nature of the selective process, failure rather than success is not infrequently the norm. It has been suggested, too, that even success in examinations may reward conformity of a kind which rarely characterises dynamic leaders and enterprising managers. In terms of the direct contribution of examinations to socio-economic development, doubts are now current about the use of traditional examinations to predict academic success and the relationship between test performance and subsequent work performance. In defence of examinations it is argued that all too often they are used for purposes for which they were not designed and for which they are unsuited: if tests of attainment are used to determine potential or if a single test is employed as an index of standard, then it might give cause for concern but not surprise if forecasts are inaccurate. In the misuse of examinations lies the origin of much of the criticism levelled against them.

Despite objections and criticism which are more or less well founded and based on arguments ranging from question of principle to points of detail, public examinations are today more influential than ever and are likely to remain so for some years. This being so, the problems which

must be resolved relate to the development of the best examination techniques and the most efficient examining bodies, serving both the demands of the educational system and the needs of society.

Much of the burden of selection has been thrown on to the schools and colleges. In many countries, where increasing number of young people are seeking entry to a limited number of jobs and education places, it is in the schools that there occurs much of the initial sifting process. It may well be questioned whether the school is the appropriate institution to carry this major social responsibility. It can be argued that greater freedom of educational development might result from greater separation of the school from the selection process. In some countries at present schools carry the responsibility for implementing the selection procedure while exercising limited influence over the actions of the examining authorities. Some educationists believe that only a radical restructuring of examinations systems can provide a solution to the problems: more internal accreditation by teachers and the development of improved tests of ability and aptitude rather than factual recall are areas now being investigated and tried in a number of countries. Less conventional suggestions for examination reform include "examination weeks", with tests following upon one-week intensive courses; selection by lottery from among all qualified candidates for limited opportunities; and selection by quota from among specified groups who might otherwise not compete on equal terms. The fact that these radical suggestions have been put forward made serves to highlight present deficiencies in examining and may indicate approaches which could lead to practical supplements and alternatives to the existing system. While these suggestions relate primarily to the school system, reconsideration could also be of value in other areas. For example, the procedures for selection and qualification in the professions of high prestige might be restructured in order to allow for an individual to progress from one level to the next; the concept of the "all-through" profession can only be implemented with the aid of revised selection and testing methods.

Although they may exert some influence on the reform of educational practice and may be used consciously to expedite the implementation of new educational policies, the prime functions of public examinations are to select and to qualify. Selection procedures of every kind imply competition and it can be argued that the adjustment of its students to the competitive society is a legitimate function of the schools. The premium on success and the penalty for failure in most countries, however, are such that the pressures of competition can easily distort the educative functions of schools and higher institutions. Where examinations are designed to qualify, to certify that a certain standard has been reached, the pressures are somewhat reduced, the competition approaching more nearly that of Alice's caucus race where "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes."

Sight should not be lost of other functions of examining. Examinations may be used as a basis for individual guidance; they may qualify rather than exclude; they may provide motivation and stimulus; they frequently serve as a neutral and unbiased arbiter acceptable to public opinion where other means would be open to misgiving; they may be a means for implementing official educational policy; and they act as a link between existing systems of education and the pupils' likely future needs. It behoves the responsible authorities, therefore, to ensure that the tests and examinations which they develop and administer are as appropriate, valid, just, reliable and effective as the current knowledge of techniques will allow. While developments and

improvements in examinations are always desirable to keep abreast of dynamic educational, social and economic circumstances, it is also essential that the pace of examination change should not be so rapid as to prejudice the level of efficiency and acceptance which has been achieved. As Burke observed, all innovation is not necessarily progress. On the other hand, if examination techniques lag behind educational thought and practice, an undesirable restraint will be forced upon teachers and pupils with a consequent widening of the gap between the declared objectives of education and the examination syllabus.

### Examinations and the Curriculum

At school level, teaching is frequently geared to examination syllabuses, the objectives of which are not always explained by those responsible for them. Nor is the situation made any easier by the terms in which the educational authorities couch the objectives of the curriculum. Examiners receive little help in designing syllabuses and tests related to curriculum objectives when these are given in forms such as: "To prepare students for democratic citizenship", "To train the young generation for effective participation in social and political activities," or "To inculcate a sense of the dignity of labour." Here again, examinations may suffer criticism which might be directed more justly at those who make difficult the construction of appropriate examinations. Given the choice between teaching towards general, and possibly ambiguous, objectives and precise examination syllabuses it is not surprising that most teachers, and especially inexperienced and poorly qualified teachers, use the examination syllabus as a teaching syllabus. Their employers and the pupils' parents demand results; the teacher attempts to meet this requirement.

The assumption that education authorities, teachers, parents and pupils have the same educational objectives has often proved false. Herein lies one source of the disillusion when the schools and other institutions fail to lead their pupils to the varying goals assumed to be desirable by the different groups; the good citizen expected by the Government, the fully-developed individual hoped for by the teacher, the trainable manpower unit desired by the employer, the respectful yet better-educated and prosperous offspring desired by the parent, and the successful job-seeker demanded by the pupil himself. While the very real difficulties should not be minimised, the need seems to be established for educational objectives to take into account more realistically the varied hopes and expectations of controlling authorities, parents and students. On this basis could be built improved forms of examination, oriented towards an interpretation of each individual's capacity rather than a measurement of certain attributes predominantly in the cognitive domain. While educational objectives spread widely across all three domains, cognitive, affective and psychomotor, examinations tend to concentrate on what is examinable and easily measured; hence the dominance of the cognitive domain in examinations; hence in large measure the concentration of teachers on teaching for factual recall.

The locus of responsibility for the development of curricula and associated examination syllabuses varies among countries. A common pattern is for government authorities to prepare curricula, frequently seeking some measure of participation by teachers, while one or more other government departments or external bodies assume responsibility for the examinations. In some cases the same office performs both functions. A time lag is inevitable between the publication of a new course and its

implementation in the schools: suitable materials have to be prepared and distributed, teachers introduced to the new course and appropriate tests devised. Where other agencies do not produce curricula, this task may devolve on the examining body, which must advise its clients about the coverage and nature of its proposed examinations.

Teachers and teachers' organisations often express concern at the continuing constraints on curriculum change imposed by traditional examining systems. As a body of experience and responsibility builds up, it has been found desirable in some countries to locate the ultimate control of school examinations with the teachers. Teachers' organisations often appear to be an obvious point of reference to this end. This said, however, a wide range of consequential problems arise. Alternatives to large-scale systems of external examining are not without their disadvantages. Innovations such as continuous assessment, cumulative records, student profiles, dissertations and other possibilities have shown in recent years that teacher-controlled assessment may not free the school and the curriculum to the extent anticipated. Adverse effects on teacher-student relationships have been noted, while teachers may also be exposed to accusations of making unjustified subjective decisions. Nevertheless, it is incontrovertible that since teachers prepare pupils for examinations and frequently act as administering agents for the examining authorities, they should play a major role in curriculum development and examination construction. University teachers, too, have a contribution to make, over and above their traditional function as teachers of pupils who have completed the second major stage of the educational process.

Examining provides some measure of evaluation of the curriculum and the quality of the teaching. This information is useful both to complete an accurate assessment of each candidate and to form the basis of further improvements in curricula and teaching standards. Little work, however, appears to have been carried out in this area in order to ensure that this is done most efficiently. Many examinations take place at the end of the course, so limiting the possibilities of feed-back to pupils or teachers. Few countries have yet linked their examinations to guidance and counselling. All too little is known of the effect on a candidate's performance of extraneous factors such as environment, motivation, anxiety or teaching quality.

If examinations are to be related more closely to the aims of education and accepted generally as reliable and valid indicators, several areas seem to require extensive investigation in depth. These include means by which the public at large may be better informed of the functions and possibilities of examinations; the devising of a wider range of more accurate examining instruments for specific purposes without increasing unduly the burden on candidates; and the adaptation of examinations to meet the needs of new educational developments (for example, in the context of lifelong education) and new types of students (for example, mature persons following in-service or correspondence courses).

Illogical thinking can easily lead to the assumption that education is necessarily good and examinations necessarily bad. Each, however, may be good or bad. Examinations and the teaching-learning process are intimately related as parts of the educational system, so that in many ways each is a function of the other. The social aims of education in most Commonwealth countries today are likely to be served best by a continuing and discriminating search for the most equitable, accurate and acceptable combination of tests and examinations necessary to identify the few destined for further educational advancement and at the same time reinforce the self-esteem of the many for whom the course is terminal, by providing useful information about their achievements and capabilities.