

### III. THE ROLE, FUNCTION AND ORGANISATION OF EXAMING BODIES

#### Review of Developments to Date

Although certain elements of nationalism underlay the formulation of examinations councils in newly independent countries, the main reasons for their establishment could be said with justice to derive from clear educational considerations. Examinations exercise a considerable influence on the form and content of school curricula and teaching methods, so that if countries are effectively to control their educational systems it seems inevitable that the control of examination syllabuses and examinations themselves must rest firmly in the hands of locally-based authorities. Some countries have decided that the importance of examinations is such that responsibility for examinations is best vested in a department of the government, either the Ministry of Education or a fully-controlled Examinations Syndicate. As a further consideration, where examinations are used by universities for initial selection of entrants, the universities not infrequently consider it undesirable if this selection has to be made on the basis of results obtained in examinations controlled extra-territorially.

The establishment of new national or regional examinations councils, however, creates problems of a different kind. Public opinion and pressures have to be taken into consideration when constituting the controlling authority so that the eventual membership is such as to allay fears and ensure acceptance and credibility for the new body. Within the new organisation, professional skills for the administration and processing of examinations are likely to be in short supply, so that a controlled rate of takeover from the existing external authority should be agreed and accepted as necessary to the continuing efficiency of the system.

In the earlier "takeover" stages the local examination board might arrive at a bilateral agreement with overseas bodies whereby local examiners and senior officers could be sent abroad for further training. In the same light, experienced expatriate examiners could also be invited to train local staff. In this respect the need should be recognised to plan for the training of middle level personnel - supporting staff - to assist senior officers. This aspect of training in general has not received adequate attention in planning. Local authorities, too, should take over full responsibility for the printing of question papers and provide adequate accommodation facilities for the security nature of their work. Conditions of service and professional resources, including reference libraries for administrative staff and supporting staff, should be such as to build up a calibre of employees dedicated to the work. Within such an organisation, examining techniques should be adopted that would produce the desired effects of the curriculum.

Public confidence can all too easily be lost, bringing about subsequent problems for the examining body and the schools. One relatively newly formed examinations council, for example, displayed inefficiency and poor public relations in such a manner as to prejudice its future existence. As a result largely of the small scale of its operations and the wide geographical spread of its responsibilities the council had suffered failures in its basic administrative processes. Its failings, however, were also apparent in other areas where over the years security had been breached; results had been published late or inaccurately; teachers had not been involved at the policy-making level; subject panels had been allowed to fall into disuse while at the same time examination syllabuses had

been changed frequently, apparently at the whim of the universities; principal examiners had been appointed from outside the council's area; and inadequate administrative staff had been employed. The deficiencies which have been overcome by the older councils serve to highlight the many problems which have to be anticipated or met when new examining bodies are to be established.

In the case of new examining bodies in developing Commonwealth countries, it cannot be anticipated that the help which has been provided in the past by British boards on a bilateral basis will necessarily continue to be available on the same scale for an indefinite time. A number of the British boards have indicated that while in principle they will contribute to the development of new examining authorities in other Commonwealth countries, they find themselves increasingly overburdened as a result of developments at home and requests from abroad. They might well not be able to meet all future requests. For this, and for other reasons, mutual assistance should be further encouraged among examining bodies in developing countries and a rationally structured programme drawn up in which all can join.

New regional examinations councils continue to be conceived and brought into existence. The Commonwealth Caribbean has recently formed such a council while the South Pacific has been the subject of a recent report, commissioned by the University of the South Pacific, which was discussed by Directors of Education from the area at their meeting in May, 1973. The reasons underlying these developments have much in common, including a lack of relevance to local needs of examination syllabuses devised by overseas authorities and the growing feeling that an operation of such vital concern to the future of these nations should be in their own hands. Delay in assuming full local responsibility is necessary in order to ensure a smooth transition of control. An early start to the process, therefore, appears highly desirable so that each area may become fully responsible for its examination system in the shortest possible time. The fact that a small scale of operations makes a financial deficit inevitable for an extended period seems unimportant in the light of the need to exert local control; in any case, the likely deficit would represent a small fraction of the total expenditure on education.

Not all countries agree on the need for autonomous examining bodies, national or regional. One recently independent country has decided to establish the aims of its school curriculum and complete its programme of curriculum reconstruction before deciding on the form and structure of the appropriate examining body. In other countries the control of examinations falls within the purview of the Ministry of Education. In some cases Ministry control is envisaged as desirable during the period of takeover from overseas examining bodies, after which the formulation of a national examinations council could be reconsidered.

The pattern of institutional development of examining authorities in newly-independent countries reveals the close interplay of political, social and educational factors. The longer-established national and regional councils serving these countries have largely completed their takeover from overseas bodies and are now encountering second order problems. Not least of these is whether the localisation of the content of tests and examinations is enough to give them a genuine relevance to the local situation, or whether a more radical review of their structure and form is necessary. This question is particularly acute where the aims of education have been redirected away from those ends which established examination forms have been developed to meet.

## The Role and Organisation of an Examinations Council

No single pattern of examination administration or control has emerged in the Commonwealth. National, regional and international bodies exist and co-exist, operate and cooperate. Control lies variously with Ministries of Education or with separately constituted bodies enjoying different degrees of autonomy and status. The structure and control of examinations councils reflects the political and social context of the area which they serve, so that close comparisons and generalised concepts are equally difficult to achieve when considering possible lines of development. The only features common to all examining bodies would appear to be that they conduct examinations and communicate the results, frequently in the form of individual certificates. No common approach, however, can be determined with regard to the inclusion within the functions of an examinations council of the monitoring and revision of curricula and syllabuses; the review and prescription or recommendation of text books and other material; stipulations regarding the teachers who prepare candidates; or the provision of inservice training for teachers to keep them informed of the examination syllabuses, the aims and objectives of the examinations and developments in examination techniques.

Considerable diversity exists, too, with regard to the range of examinations which an examinations council administers. At one end of the scale are those bodies which are responsible only for certain examinations within the formal sector of education; among these there may be cited the boards which organise the examinations for the General Certificate of Education or the Certificate of Secondary Education in England and Wales. At the other end of the scale stands a body such as the West African Examinations Council which not only administers a wide range of examinations at different levels within the formal educational sector (including both academic and technical examinations) but also organises tests on behalf of the Public Service Commission, other government departments, professional bodies and commercial and industrial organisations. In circumstances where expertise is in short supply, the concentration in one place of responsibility for a large number of public examinations may have advantages which override the very real objections to excessive institutionalising of the examinations process.

Where examinations councils operate throughout a region, specific problems are likely to occur. Changes in governmental fiscal policies affect the funding of the council's operations and the salaries of staff serving in that country, so that careful safeguards must be designed to protect the interests of the council and its international staff. Communications can present difficulties and may occasion high expenditure.

Whatever the difficulties inherent in operating an examinations council, it is crucial for its success that public confidence be maintained in its activities. For this reason the undertaking of effective public relations activities becomes increasingly important. No examinations council can expect to remain immune from criticism when its work relates so closely to the aspirations and self-esteem of so many of the population. The appointment of official public relations officers in order to explain the work of the examining body and educate the public shows a realistic appreciation of current needs. At the same time the senior officers of the council may discover that one of their major functions may consist of enlightening national and public leaders about the functions of their council, and especially about the unavoidable limitations to its operations.

## The Administration and Logistics of an Examinations Council

Certain problems of administration have been sketched very briefly above. Regional or international bodies, it has been noted, tend to encounter an additional range of difficulties inherent in their nature. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC), for example, recently celebrated its twenty-first year of operation. One of the oldest regional examinations boards established in developing countries, it is regarded as a model by many other countries or groups of countries now starting their own boards. The WAEC has done a commendable job under difficult circumstances with flexibility and competence. This cannot be taken as implying, however, that new examining boards now coming into operation, can model themselves closely on the WAEC or any other board, seeking to organize on the same lines along which the WAEC has evolved, or assuming that it will be required to carry out a similar range of examinations that make up the current, substantial programme of the WAEC. The administrative structure of the WAEC may not necessarily be the best for other Councils, particularly those which are relatively small or are likely to cater for the needs of a very small number of candidates.

While a region may wish to maintain and expand cooperation with its neighbours, the most effective way to carry out the tasks of examining and certificating achievement and competence may be for a group of countries to establish national councils and link these in some loose form of federation with neighbouring councils. The aim should be to devise the most effective structure to accomplish the task on hand.

New councils might well decide to focus upon a limited number of examinations that they can handle effectively and efficiently, rather than disperse their energies in an attempt to deal with a wide range of activities. External bodies which have traditionally provided examinations to various nations are likely to be able to continue, particularly in the vocational and technical subjects where the content of the subject and the examination are to a large extent free of environmental factors. Resort to such papers might be necessary for new councils. When financial and manpower resources have been built up, experience accumulated and the inevitable early mistakes corrected, then a solid foundation will have been created from which the programme of expansion can be launched.

Staffing is always a problem. When political independence has coincided with the establishment of a new examining council, the most able staff have often been absorbed by government and commerce. In such circumstances, new councils might be well advised to begin with a small staff. Then, as the number of graduates increases and as the most senior government and commercial posts are filled, the councils can reasonably expect to be able to recruit and retain talented men and women. At these initial stages, advisory staff from the Ministries, universities, schools and businesses should be used to the fullest extent. New permanent staff should be recruited in anticipation of calculated needs so that they may be properly trained before they have to work under pressure. It should be borne in mind, however, that as the permanent staff increases more supporting staff are required, and they too need supporting staff. This can lead to a situation where Parkinson's Law can impose an expensive toll upon a new Council with limited resources. The balance between efficiency and overstaffing requires constant vigilance.

The problem of security of examination papers, questions, marking and issue of results will tax the resources of all examination councils to their limits and newer councils would be well advised to bear in mind that security starts from the time an individual is commissioned to produce question papers right through the entire examination process and at least six months after, when perhaps the scripts may be destroyed. Temporary staff, who may be a greater risk than the permanent professional staff, should be isolated from all aspects of the examination process where security is required. The final examination results are often not considered a security problem, but it has occurred on more than one occasion that a member of staff has gained access to official, final results which were completed but not yet released.

Working space is a problem mainly to the extent that adequate room is needed for sorting, handling and storing the great volume of materials that passes through the Council's offices during the year and is retained, pending appeals concerning the results, for perhaps six months or more after the award and publication of results.

The organizational structure of an examination council is a function of many factors and whereas the WAEC was for a very long time organized on a vertical basis, it has since converted to a horizontal arrangement. With the original vertical structure one senior officer would be responsible for the entire process of a particular examination from commissioning of questions, printing, distribution and collection of papers, arranging for the marking of scripts to issue of results. With the current horizontal arrangement, one senior officer is now responsible, for example, for registration of candidates for all examinations, another for the conduct of the examination and another for issue of results. Even though this horizontal structure was expected to reduce costs and to improve efficiency, there is some evidence that it has led to an increase in cost. It is, however, too early yet to say whether or not it has significantly improved efficiency. Furthermore, although the advantages of specialization were also held out as the major benefits of this arrangement, enlightened management practices have necessitated the rotation of officers to different jobs from time to time so that broad experience is gained and so that highly trained staff are not discouraged by a monotonous repetition of the same operation.

Data processing for a small council is probably best done by an outside bureau, either government or commercial, since most councils are otherwise likely to pay a high price for under-using the computer time of their own expensive installation. It should not be overlooked that the council's research staff can benefit greatly by having access to data-processing machinery.

Space for conducting examinations for the non-institutional or private candidate is a problem in West Africa although this may not be so in other regions where schools and assembly halls might be able to accommodate all candidates. In countries like Nigeria, however, where the numbers of non-institutional or private candidates at the GCE 'O-Level' by far exceed school candidates, accommodation and related problems are particularly acute. The West African Examinations Council accepts its obligation to allow such candidates who have not had the opportunity of formal secondary education to try to gain certification outside the school system. Though this problem may not arise in their areas at present, new examinations councils might well anticipate it.

If some of the proposed supplementary methods of assessment, such as course work, self assessment or peer assessment, are adopted, other problems of security and public confidence might arise. In some countries the collective judgment of peers and others may be acceptable for describing the accomplishments of individuals. In one country, however, it has been found necessary to call out the army to help deliver the examination papers, lock the papers in the police station overnight and station a policeman at the examination hall in order to avoid possible breaches of security. The need for such rigid precautions arises from the high premium that is placed on a school certificate, particularly in countries where such certification is the only means by which the gateway to future progress and prosperity might be attained. Public and governmental expectations of what should constitute security and what is expected of examinations all go to play a very important role in what form security precautions should take. Since selection by merit is generally considered to be preferable to patronage, some system of security seems to be one of the prices that must be paid to ensure the objectivity of a programme by which an external agency undertakes to measure achievement and certify its results.

### Staffing and training

Public examining demands expertise and professionalism on the part of the administrators, examiners and examination board staff. These qualities may come in part as a result of experience - which is, in effect, informal in-service training - but should also be inculcated by carefully compiled programmes of training. The permanent staff of an examinations council, for example, need to be trained in the techniques of educational measurement, curriculum development and business management. Temporary staff, and in particular chief examiners and markers, also need training, despite the undoubtedly high costs involved in training these groups which have a considerable wastage rate. Among other temporary staff, the needs of supervisors and invigilators should not be neglected; councils rely on them for the efficient conduct of their examinations yet appoint them frequently on minimal evidence of competence, with uneven results.

A newly established examinations council can usefully look to longer established bodies for its initial key personnel through a series of secondments. Concurrently its own staff, professional and executive, should undertake attachments and study tours to the older bodies. The seconded staff can supplement these arrangements by conducting in-service training programmes. In this way expertise can be developed quickly using the comparative experience of one or more existing councils. Many aid agencies in the past have shown their willingness to assist with such training programmes. Both governments and foundations have been of material help, while international agencies such as Unesco have also participated in a more limited manner. The recently established Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation could provide an additional useful source of assistance, particularly in those circumstances where examining bodies in developing countries wished to benefit by each others' experience.

The duties and responsibilities of examinations councils compare with those of major business and industrial concerns, yet their staff and salary structure rarely reflects this. Rather are their terms conditioned by those pertaining in the public service (and not every country has adopted the system of one Commonwealth member where the senior civil servant within a Ministry draws a salary three times that of the Minister!). If top quality staff at all levels are to be attracted and retained they should be rewarded in terms

of salary, training opportunities, a promotional structure and, upon occasion, public recognition of their service to the nation.

A matter of particular concern is the training of examiners. These are not permanent employees of examining boards yet upon them depends much of a board's reputation. No criteria exist by which potentially good examiners can be identified, so that training for this group is indispensable if the best interests of the candidates and the education system are to be served. Chief examiners and setters of examination questions, too, require specific training. The fact that an individual has served efficiently at the level of examiner should not be assumed to imply that he will necessarily perform as effectively in the higher posts which call for a different range of attributes and abilities.

The whole area of training offers expanding opportunities for mutual assistance among examining authorities. The first need, therefore, is for information to be collected, collated and distributed indicating the range of training facilities available in each examinations council. Regional meetings and workshops make it possible for more staff to benefit from comparative experience. Study and Research Fellowships could give form to attachments and exchange. Consideration might usefully be given to the concept of a Commonwealth standing conference on public examinations meeting at intervals to discuss matters of general concern and to devise solutions to specific problems and serviced by a small continuation group. Without seeking to impose conformity to a single pattern on all member countries, such a permanent point of reference could provide very valuable assistance.

#### The Contribution of a Research Unit to the Effective Operation of an Examinations Council

The essential purpose of a research unit is to help to improve the efficiency of the organisation which sponsors its activities. Experience in a number of countries has demonstrated that this objective is usually best achieved when the research unit is constituted as an integral part of the examinations council.

The primary function of a research unit, then, is to provide the examining body with sufficient information to make it possible for decisions to be taken with regard to amending and improving existing practices. Research with short-term implications is likely to include ongoing assessments of the reliability and validity of current examinations and the devising and trials of better tests. The research unit should also act as a centre for consultation and advice for those engaged in the administrative and other departments of the council as well as to the committees and working parties through which the council functions. In addition, the research unit should devote some of its resources to activities related to the longer term operations of the council. A research unit should be able to take the initiative in defining the need for some projects and should not merely respond to requests and instructions. Its work, however, should be undertaken always as a service to its parent body. The research unit should not seek to have any policy-making function, this remaining the prerogative of the controlling authority of the examining body.

The research unit can make a particular contribution by conducting continuing evaluations of the effectiveness of the council's operation and of the curricula on which the examinations are based. In England, for example, where a number of examining bodies offer similar examinations, a marked drop

in the number of candidates applying to one board and a corresponding rise in applications to another may provide a crude indication of a fault or inconsistency, or of public disenchantment. Where only one examining body exists such evidence does not appear, which reinforces the need for the council to keep abreast of public opinion and make positive efforts to provide full information about its activities.

Not all examining councils at present have set up research units although the establishment and maintenance of an effective research unit need not be an unduly expensive proposition. As a proportion of the total expenditure of an examinations council it may indeed be very modest, perhaps in the region of one or two per cent. This is a small price to pay for an operation which can affect directly the level of efficiency of the examinations system, and, through that system, the education system at large. The effectiveness of a research unit however, depends on an intelligent and flexible deployment of staff so that the projects upon which they are engaged are those of most practical relevance to the functioning of the council.

### Future Developments and Examinations Councils

Patterns of education and employment are changing more rapidly today than ever before. Less formal and less institutionalised education appears to be the trend for the coming decade. With this there will be coupled the concept of lifelong learning, recurrent education, retraining and upgrading. Increased mobility of labour is likely to call for internationally recognisable qualifications and standards. Examinations councils cannot stand aside from the mainstream of development. Realism requires that they should accept that their role is likely to alter very considerably, involving basic reorganisation and restructuring to meet the evolving needs.

The essential question for the future seems to be whether there will be more examinations or fewer, carrying greater prestige or less. It may be that the question is answered differently in different areas, although the increasing interchange of people among countries and the increasing interdependence of groups of countries point in the direction of agreements between countries on the means of recording academic and technical proficiency and of assessing potential.

Examinations exist essentially to serve the needs of the public. With all their imperfections, externally-controlled examinations still provide at present the most generally acceptable means of assessment and of determining the selection for a limited number of available opportunities. While they continue to serve these purposes it is essential that they develop examination techniques and administrative structures suited to current needs and that they remain responsive to the need for change.

Among the areas of future activity, that of establishing equivalences among examinations appears likely to assume increasing importance. Although the percentage of those qualifying in any examination who will need to use it internationally is likely to decrease, the absolute numbers will certainly increase. Political factors, professional self-defence and other considerations introduce an undoubted sensitivity into the whole question of equivalences but the issue cannot be avoided. Perhaps new tests or methods of assuring comparability will have to be developed by the examinations councils. It may be that a separate examination will have to be designed, possibly using the International Baccalaureate as a model, for those individuals requiring an internationally valid qualification.



On the other hand, unnecessary standardisation among examinations, especially on an international level, can lead to an academic imperialism which could easily prove more stultifying and deleterious than the better known political and economic imperialisms. While examinations and examinations councils continue to exist - and the realities of the situation seem to indicate that little decrease can be anticipated in many countries in the foreseeable future - their major function will consist in achieving a recognised currency for their products while limiting to a minimum any undesirable constraints on programmes of education and training.