

Introduction

Examinations, testing and measurement, assessment and evaluation, play an essential role in education. They also attract more emotion on the general public than any other aspect of education. This is understandable, for the parent sees his own adequacy under scrutiny as his child is tested and measured, selected and allocated. For their part, the testers, from classroom teacher to regional examining board, are concerned with the construction of valid, reliable and appropriate instruments from which conclusions can be drawn with a fair degree of certainty.

The road to the examination hall is paved with good intentions, and some consolation for the inadequacy of examination techniques developed so far may be drawn from an objective consideration of the consequences which could arise were they ever perfected: "That will be a sorry day for human initiative and personal aspiration on which there is announced the examination which shall be completely valid, the perfect predictor of each individual's ineluctable future."

The first two articles published here, by McIntosh and Matys, approach the general question of examining from two distinct directions: the first anxious that examinations should not seek to exceed their rightful function, the second outlining methods and techniques suitable for different purposes.

Because in many countries the demand for particular forms of education exceeds the supply, competition for the available places results in a distortion of the teaching-learning situation in the period prior to the selection examination. The great majority who are not selected thus suffer for the benefit of the few who are. From the administrative viewpoint, of course, the smaller the percentage of successful candidates to be selected the less efficient the selection process need be: "It is sometimes urged that, while errors in selection may be inevitable, few of them are serious. The good candidate, the argument runs, would be selected by almost any method. In that more critical region where there seems to be nothing to choose between candidates, and where they are most numerous, no grave errors can be committed whatever decision is made."

Criticisms are increasingly levelled at the discriminatory effect of many examinations. "'O' levels might be described as the epitome of bourgeois activity throughout history. They are the rewards for clerkly diligence." Pilliner's article shows how difficult it is to construct tests which are "culture fair", affording a real equality of opportunity for all the students taking them. This is an immediate problem in many developing countries where the rural child tends to have less success than the urban child in the formal school situation. This widespread problem is taken up again by Taylor, drawing on his experience in the Pacific region.

The procedures for test construction described by Elley represent an encouraging step towards the use with small groups in the classroom of objective-type tests designed and produced by the teachers themselves.

Hitchman's review of the examining of Spoken English, probably the most subjective form of examining, explains means by which an acceptable degree of standardisation can be achieved among examiners, each of whom will usually be working on his own. The practical examining of science raises problems of a different kind, as Dave and Patwardhan indicate. The development of valid and reliable practical examinations is attracting much attention as educationists attempt to identify means by which the knowledge and skills of large numbers of examinees can be suitably tested. In particular, the provision of adequate supplies of equipment for this purpose is impossible for many schools in developing countries.

Two articles outline the administration of examinations over extended geographical areas, the South Pacific and East Africa. The Fourth Commonwealth Education Conference, meeting at Lagos, Nigeria, in February 1968, noted the successful operation of co-operative arrangements for examining existing among certain regional groups of the Commonwealth, and it would seem that there is scope for more activities on these lines. Certain examinations can be administered economically and efficiently on a very large scale, although Kiwanuka's description of the establishment of a new regional examining body indicates the many obstacles which have to be overcome if the organisation is to run smoothly.

Guidance and counselling are relative newcomers to Commonwealth secondary schools; Iyer's account of Malaysia's pioneering effort in this field may provide a timely stimulus to other countries to consider the introduction into their schools of a similar service.

Secondary school examinations have long been used for two distinct purposes: to assess attainment at the end of a course of secondary education, and to determine the potential of an applicant for third-level courses. Recent researches confirm the low correlation between final secondary school examination results and success at the university: "Since the performance at A-level in the subject of the Honours School has little or no prognostic value, considerably less weight should be attached to it in the future." Interviewing adds little of value to the selection procedures. In these circumstances educationists are turning to tests specially designed for candidates wishing to proceed to third-level courses; Traub and Elliott explain the operation of one of these, the Canadian Scholastic Aptitude Test.

The last two articles deal with factors affecting candidates' performances. Mackay's investigations indicate that in essay-type examinations with a choice of questions, the poorer candidates tend to choose the more difficult questions, thus minimising their achievement. The inclusion wherever possible in an examination of a compulsory section, possibly comprising questions of an objective type, would make possible direct comparisons between candidates. It would also provide useful indicators of a candidate's not doing himself justice in the optional sections of the examination because of an unwise choice.

Anxiety and stress are commonly believed to exert a powerful influence on examination performance. Sinclair's investigation among Australian High School students of above-average ability show that in some cases a degree of stress may serve to raise the performance of some individuals, although means must be found to reduce the adverse effects on "high anxious" candidates.

These articles provide only a brief survey of some of the problems of examinations at secondary level common to wide areas of the Commonwealth. No mention has been made of the many valuable experiments in new methods of examining, such as "open book" examinations, the use of continuous assessment, or the compilation of student profiles. Nor has the inter-relationship of curriculum and examination been adequately covered. A list of research projects on examinations is, however, reprinted from "Education in the Developing Countries of the Commonwealth: Abstracts of Current Research 1969", published by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

This small collection, produced by a dozen contributors in ten Commonwealth countries in five continents, is published in the hope that it will stimulate exchanges of experience and information among those working in this field. So often does it prove that the activities of researchers overlap. If this Paper encourages interchange, by direct correspondence or through the Commonwealth Secretariat, it will have achieved its purpose of helping to save time, money and expertise, all of which are scarce commodities.