

COMPARISON BETWEEN ACADEMIC
AND VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

116. One of the options open to a developing country (which has been followed in a number of cases) is to establish a local organisation for academic qualifications and examinations, and to give it responsibility for vocational ones as well. While the advantages or disadvantages of this course of action in any country will depend on local circumstances, it is possible to make some general observations on the differences between academic and vocational qualifications and examinations which may help illuminate the issues to be faced.

117. The starting point is that made in paragraph 31 of this part of the report: that vocational qualifications and examinations have to meet the needs of employment, and that such needs provide a reference point external to any educational system. Although academic qualifications may also have a relationship to employment opportunities, they provide evidence of a more general standard of educational achievement rather than being related to a specific job or trade, so the external reference point is weaker.

118. Industrial and commercial requirements put additional emphasis on the acceptability of, and accountability for, standards of qualification, on the validity of syllabuses and the avoidance of harmful side effects (which could, for example, affect industrial performance) without reducing the need for validity and reliability of testing, fairness and comparability when awarding qualifications, or efficiency of operation. As a result vocational qualifications and examinations need a higher level of resources as the staff not only have to operate the system but also have constantly to keep in touch with developments in commerce and industry to ensure that the qualifications and examinations continue to meet the needs of employment.

119. At the same time academic examinations generally attract a large number of candidates in a comparatively small number of subjects, the content of which seldom changes very greatly and is not much affected by factors related to development, so syllabuses can have a long shelf-life. The capital costs need not be high, the operating costs tend to be low, and a low unit cost per candidate can be achieved. By contrast, technical examinations generally attract a few candidates in a large number of subjects, the content of which needs frequent updating to match changes in technology and in the country's developing economy. Capital costs, operating costs and the unit cost per candidate can all be high.

120. Making both academic and vocational examinations the responsibility of one organisation may enable the (numerically weaker) vocational side to share facilities and resources provided for the stronger academic side. However the greater demands, the higher cost and the comparatively few students on the vocational side may create conflicts of priorities, especially if there is any pressure on the facilities and resources of the organisation.

121. Moreover, the savings available by sharing resources are not necessarily as great as might be supposed. As noted in paragraph 82, operational costs not only include fixed overheads and general operating costs (both of which would be reduced if facilities were shared) but also specific operating costs for individual examinations and the recovery of development costs for specific subjects (both of which would remain constant whether

facilities were shared or not); in many cases the specific costs will be higher than the shared costs.

122. Finally, while academic examinations can be matched to the local school curriculum, in any but the largest developing country there is likely to be a residue of vocational subjects which cannot be taught or examined locally. In many specialisms the annual employment requirement is likely to be too few to support a course, and specialist teachers and examiners may not be available. Students of such specialisations may have to go abroad to study, or to work on their own through some form of distance learning. If any qualification is to be awarded, it has to be an outside one, and this may make it necessary for the country to retain some links with an outside examining body.