

THE MAIN UK EXAMINING BODIES OPERATING IN THE COMMONWEALTH

134. The UK examining bodies with large numbers of overseas candidates are the City and Guilds of London Institute for technical subjects, and the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Royal Society of Arts and Pitmans Examination Institute for commercial subjects. The first three are autonomous educational charities, while Pitmans is a branch of a private company.

135. This autonomous charitable status is important in a number of ways. The examining bodies are not part of the British government structure. While they hope to work closely with government departments and local authorities, they value their independence and their ability to determine their own policies. Apart from minor government grants for specific purposes they are self-financing, largely from candidate fees. Because they are educational charities they cannot distribute profits and, apart from keeping a prudent level of reserves, they put any surplus into improving their services, or try to hold down their fee levels.

136. To stay in business, these independent examining bodies have to balance their budgets each year by keeping their development and operating costs within their fee and other income. Although they may use quite complex differential fee systems, the general practice is to average their costs over all subjects and base their differentials on the level of the subject and the number of question papers. In forward planning, however, they try to avoid developing examinations which will attract only a very few candidates, as these raise the total annual costs and, as explained in paragraph 82 lead to the small subjects being subsidised by the candidates from the larger subjects.

137. Conversely, because their fees for overseas candidates are based on their total candidate entry, the unit cost per candidate is much lower than it would have been if it had been based on the overseas candidates alone. This applies even to the special examinations for overseas offered by City and Guilds, as the development cost of these have been covered by a specific government grant.

138. Because of their need to be financially viable, until recently these examining bodies have tended to respond to outside initiatives rather than take major initiatives on their own to develop new schemes, although they have done so in the case of examination methodology (e.g. City and Guilds with multiple-choice testing).

139. Although Pitmans operates as a branch of a private, profit-making company and may have a different approach to capital and operating costs, the study investigators found that the company ethos was the same as that of the educational charities: to provide the best possible service at the lowest possible candidate fee. Pitmans has also made a special contribution to examination methodology by being able to provide examinations at short notice on request, and by reporting on the particular weakness of candidates who fail.

Other UK award-making bodies in the Commonwealth

140. A number of other UK award-making bodies operate in the developing Commonwealth or may do so in the future. This study is not concerned with professional institutions or school examining bodies, some of which

overlap into the commercial field. Indeed only a minor use of these bodies was reported in the questionnaire responses. Other bodies include:

- (a) the Union of Lancashire and Cheshire Institutes (North West Regional Advisory Council for Further Education) which has traditionally examined in parts of the Caribbean;
- (b) the Technician Education Council (TEC) which has extended its system of validation to Hong Kong, and which in the UK is replacing all City and Guilds technician examinations with its awards;
- (c) the Business Education Council (BEC) which in the UK is overlapping into the fields traditionally covered by the LCCI, RSA and Pitmans, and which now offers a service overseas.

141. The Union of Lancashire and Cheshire Institutes is now part of the North-West Regional Advisory Council, an association of local education authorities. Although its status is different, its examining function is similar to that already described.

142. The Technician Education Council (TEC) and the Business Education Council (BEC) were established by the UK government in 1973 and 1974. Their chairmen and members are appointed by the UK Secretary of State for Education and Science. TEC is still in receipt of a government deficiency grant, but BEC is now financially self-supporting. Both are educational charities and, despite their relationship with the Department of Education and Science, operate with complete freedom from government interference. Both originally contracted for administrative services from City and Guilds, but are completely independent of the Institute and follow their own educational policies.

143. TEC has established a modular system which will eventually cover all technician operations. The modules (called units) are designed as part of courses (called programmes) but can be taken individually. TEC operates, and maintains its standards, through a complex system of validation (see paragraphs 69-71). BEC's system, although modular in concept, has a greater emphasis than TEC's on the inter-relationship of the modules and is therefore less flexible. BEC operates on a combination of external examinations and validation.

Relationships of the Award-making Examining Bodies with Developing Countries

144. Apart from the involvement of City and Guilds and the RSA with the development of regional examining councils, and the more recent involvement of City and Guilds in helping to develop a national examinations system in one country, the relationship of the main UK examining bodies with the developing countries of the Commonwealth does not appear to have changed significantly since independence. There are probably three main reasons for this:

- (a) The examining bodies have traditionally examined in many countries, developing and developed, which are not part of the Commonwealth and which were never part of the British Empire. Their operating methods, and

often their statistics, classify examination centres as 'Home' and 'Overseas' and it makes no difference to their administrative procedures whether a centre is in a Commonwealth or a foreign country, or in a country which is independent or one subject to colonial rule. Their eventual clients are the individual candidates who take the examination and, if successful, receive their awards.

(b) Their involvement, at British government request, in the development of regional examining councils appears to have suggested that these might be models of eventual universal application, and may have diverted their attention from other possible relationships.

(c) The financial realities of examining as outlined in paragraphs 73-88 and 136-138 have inhibited them from taking initiatives which could become costly and have reinforced them as responsive rather than initiating bodies.

145. The City and Guilds has been under greater pressure to be responsive and has been able to prepare special schemes for minority requirements in a few Commonwealth countries. But its special arrangements outside the Commonwealth have been more radical, and its development of schemes specially designed for the requirements of 'overseas countries' (funded by the British government) was not specifically aimed at Commonwealth countries, although because of the use of English they provide the most candidates. Here again, the methodology was derived from that traditionally used for UK-based development work, and most schemes were not related to the needs of an individual country.

146. More recently, however, the examining bodies have been prepared to take new initiatives in the UK and to develop and adopt new ideas and approaches. In discussion all their senior officers expressed themselves willing to consider the development of new relationships with developing Commonwealth countries, although it would probably be appropriate that the initiative should come from the Commonwealth, or from individual countries. Possible approaches to new relationships are considered in paragraphs 224-237.

147. The position of BEC and TEC is rather different. Their first priority has been to rationalize their fields of responsibility in the UK. In doing so they have adopted systems which, in their different ways, have many attractive features. If their systems were to operate overseas in the same way as in the UK, then the overseas colleges would have to accept very rigorous systems of validation and monitoring. While this may be acceptable in a colonial situation, it may not be appropriate in an independent country. Possibly ways could be found to integrate the desirable features of the BEC and TEC systems with any new relationships developed by the traditional examining bodies.

Areas of Concern for the UK external examining bodies

148. Discussions with the senior officers of the UK external examining bodies revealed areas of concern, which are worth setting out as they may provide insights into the problems of the developing countries themselves and certainly need to be taken into account in any new relationships.

High failure rates

149. The most serious problem is that of high failure rates. The study analysed the City and Guilds, RSA and LCCI pass rates for 1977/78 by geographical region, and by level of course and subject groups as defined in the questionnaire. Even allowing for the distortions caused by amalgamating the results of individual examinations into subject groups and different centres into regional totals, the picture is not a happy one. Considering groups of 100 or more candidates (on the basis that there could be much greater distortions in smaller groups), then in the developing Commonwealth as a whole, the study identified 63 groups of over 100 candidates in technical subjects and 49 in mathematics and commercial subjects. An analysis of these results shows that less than 50% of the candidates passed in 28 of the technical groups, and 41 of the mathematics/commerce groups (i.e. in mathematics and commerce there were only 8 groups in which more than half of the candidates passed).

150. A further breakdown of these results into the three main levels of examinations revealed marked differences in success rates:

higher technician and stage III advanced level

(a) more than 50% of candidates passed in:

- (i) 2 technical groups
- (ii) 3 mathematics/commerce groups

(b) less than 50% of candidates passed in:

- (i) 5 technical groups
- (ii) 10 mathematics/commerce groups

technician and stage II intermediate level

(c) more than 50% of candidates passed in:

- (i) 11 technical groups
- (ii) 3 mathematics/commerce groups

(d) less than 50% of candidates passed in:

- (i) 13 technical groups
- (ii) 18 mathematics/commerce groups

craft and stage I elementary level

(e) more than 50% of candidates passed in:

- (i) 21 technical groups
- (ii) 2 mathematics/commerce groups

(f) less than 50% of candidates passed in:

- (i) 11 technical groups
- (ii) 13 mathematics/commerce groups.

151. One possible explanation of the differences between different levels is that in all the groups, except the craft group in technical subjects (which had the best results), it is generally possible for external candidates (i.e. those who did not attend a course) to enter for the examination, and that many did so who were insufficiently prepared. The extremely poor performance in commercial subjects may be partly due to their being more culture-dependant than technical subjects (see paragraphs 99-103). However, in the questionnaire responses, these subjects were normally rated as 'Syllabus completely matches employment requirements' or 'Syllabus matches employment requirements with a few exceptions'. It is unlikely that such ratings would have been given if the educational establishments had suffered enormous failure rates. So the inference is that the failures either come from colleges which did not return the questionnaire or were external students. There is more than a suspicion that in some countries many commercial candidates enter the examinations unprepared, and go on taking the examinations until they eventually pass. But this is still largely speculation and there is no completely authoritative explanation of these high failure rates.

152. In general, examining bodies do not like high failure rates. They do not help the reputation of the body and, far from being evidence that the standard is high they are more likely to be evidence that the examination is inappropriate. 'No hope' candidates waste the time and patience of busy examiners. It is sometimes alleged that examining bodies make money out of fees for candidates resitting the examinations, but the experience of City and Guilds in the 1950s and 1960s was that examinations with good pass rates attracted more candidates and those with very poor pass rates eventually deterred entrants.

153. This whole question of low pass rates is one which requires a greater depth of investigation than the resources of this study have permitted.

Appropriateness of Standards

154. Where UK examinations are also taken overseas the standard set is that appropriate to the UK candidates. Thus City and Guilds normally determines the pass mark of its examination papers following a statistical analysis of the UK results, both because this is the standard aimed at and because if the results from overseas had to be marked before the pass mark was established there would be a greater delay before results were issued. Other bodies, which may adopt different procedures, use the same principle.

155. Clearly this single standard helps enhance the international standing of the qualification, but the examining bodies are concerned whether a UK standard is always appropriate for a developing country; does it indeed contribute to the high failure rates? On the other hand, a differential standard, adopted for some countries by one of the UK schools examining boards, may be the wrong approach for work-related subjects; indeed unless very carefully applied it could have serious safety consequences both for the 'worker' and the ultimate user of, say, a repaired motor vehicle.

156. In some commercial subjects, and also in English language examinations, the structure of the qualifications and the careful gradations for each level of award, helps to overcome the problem by enabling candidates to take examinations at the level they have reached which may differ from subject to subject. In the technical field, the modular examinations in Telecommunications, and the step by step approach of the North West Regional Advisory Council, perhaps in combination with City and Guilds examinations in the same subject, also eases the problem.

157. Nevertheless, the issue as to whether there should be differential standards remains a fundamental one of policy, which the UK examining bodies may be able to help with by modular structures, but which they cannot (indeed do not feel that they should) solve unilaterally.

Appropriateness of Content

158. The UK examining bodies are well aware that the content of many of their syllabuses, and hence of their question papers, is not appropriate to the local climate, culture, stage of development or employment conditions of their overseas clients. They are concerned about the effect on the validity of the testing for their overseas candidates. Again they wonder how far inappropriate content may be contributing to the high failure rates.

159. This is a problem which the examining bodies have found easier to identify than to solve. The economics of development work and examinations and their own financial arrangements preclude a whole series of one-off special examinations unless they were to receive grants or subsidies for this work. Moreover, as City and Guilds has found, a scheme developed for all overseas countries may be no more appropriate in content for some of them than one developed for students in the UK.

160. In practice, there have been four lines of approach to this problem:

(a) In a few instances City and Guilds (with a grant from the UK Ministry of Overseas Development) has prepared special schemes for some personnel in the mining industries of Ghana and Uganda and map production officers in Sri Lanka. In some such cases, City and Guilds has moved from an external mode of examining to one involving simple validation of college-set papers.

(b) In another case Basic Cookery (Overseas) - the City and Guilds examination has three components: one centrally set and marked objective test, one locally set question paper on 'Local Practice', and a college-based Practical Work Assessment.

(c) City and Guilds has also developed joint approaches with a number of different organisations, the collaboration being recognised in the wording of the Certificate awarded. So far this approach has mostly been adopted with organisations in the UK, or as a stage in the developing relationship with the West African Examinations Council. Outside the Commonwealth, a joint venture with the Gulf Technical College, Bahrain, has led to the validation by City and Guilds of locally-devised Technician Diplomas in Building Management, in Civil Engineering and in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. Appendix IV illustrates the range of ways in which such collaboration between City and Guilds and another organisation is recognised in the Certificates awarded.

(d) An entirely different approach depends on the skill and sensitivity of examiners in setting and marking papers which they know will be taken by examinees in a large number of countries with widely varying local conditions. Very careful wording of questions is required, and the

examiner has to know when to accept (or reject) what to him may seem oddities of language or spelling, but which would be acceptable locally and which may have no bearing on the correctness of the answer.

161. The first three approaches so far affect only a small number of overseas candidates, and the fourth may be over-dependent on the experience and attitudes of individual examiners. Nevertheless all four are worth further study and possible systematic development.

Lack of Contact with Overseas Clients

162. In the UK difficulties between the examining body and a college can be solved rapidly by a telephone call, an exchange of letters or a visit. College staff and industrialists serve on committees or become examiners. The examining bodies promote, or contribute to, conferences of teachers. There is thus a constant interchange of views, ideas and information.

163. Officers of the UK examining bodies frequently tour overseas to discuss problems or developments with their clients. Their commitment to this time-consuming and expensive activity has been considerable. But the frequency of a visit from any one body to any particular country is not great, and it is not easy to find time to visit the smaller or more remote educational establishments. The examining bodies are also always ready to welcome visitors from overseas, but those who come are not always in a position to convey feedback concerning the UK examinations in their country or in a particular establishment.

164. The examining bodies supplement these face-to-face contacts with broadsheets, journals or other publications, but these are one way methods of communication. If the UK examining bodies are to continue to provide a service overseas, they need to receive more communications from their overseas clients.

165. The problem is the size of the world. However much they want to do so, the UK examining bodies will never be able to have the same face-to-face contacts overseas as they can in the UK. But perhaps modern developments in electronic communications could be used systematically to improve contacts.

Postal Problems

166. The UK examining bodies rely heavily on the postal services for contact with their overseas clients. There is a sequence:

- (a) Syllabus pamphlets and stationery from UK to overseas
- (b) Examination entries from overseas to UK
- (c) Question papers from UK to overseas
- (d) Scripts for marking from overseas to UK
- (e) Results and certificates from UK to overseas.

167. The withdrawal of many shipping services has led to a concentration on airmail - and in many cases air freight - with its consequent higher costs

for both the examining body and its clients. Air services and internal postal services appear to be less reliable now than some years ago (this is a world-wide phenomenon affecting developed and developing countries alike), and this has administrative implications where examinations are scheduled to be taken on a particular date.

Security

168. Examining bodies are always concerned about the security of their question papers and of candidates' scripts. They take precautions to ensure that no candidate is able to have access to the paper, or otherwise learn of its contents, before the examination; or can alter his script after the examination is over; or can cheat in the examination room; or can be impersonated by someone with a better knowledge of the subject; or can obtain a forged certificate. If it is known that people are able to gain awards through such illicit methods, not only is the credibility of the examining body itself damaged but the certificates gained by honest candidates are devalued.

169. In the UK the examining bodies are able to supervise and inspect whatever security measures they impose. Their ability to do so, and their close contact with the colleges, means that they seldom need to take any special action. They are not able to exercise this supervision overseas, and so rely on specially appointed agents, or ministries of education, or in some cases colleges with which they have made special arrangements. As in the UK, in examinations with long written answers, there is a subtle back up to security in that an experienced examiner can quickly detect answers from a batch of candidates that are so similar as to indicate possible collusion.

170. In general, therefore, the examining bodies are satisfied with existing arrangements, but their concern for security is an inhibiting factor for a number of developments:

- (a) modern techniques (e.g. multiple-choice) are less easy to keep secure than traditional examinations with a written answer
- (b) security becomes more important if the questions are to be banked for re-use
- (c) a greater assurance of security is required for college-based examinations, especially where these involve the local marking of practical work
- (d) the extension of the responsibility for security of examinations beyond the ministries of education, local agents and a few selected colleges would be difficult to monitor
- (e) possible future techniques, perhaps involving electronic data transmission, are not likely to be kept secure by traditional methods
- (f) similarly, more individualized and more rapid testing (e.g. by the use of college-based marking machines) would also need new approaches to security.

Uncertainty about the Future

171. Although the number of overseas candidates examined by the UK examining bodies has grown year by year over the past decade, they are becoming increasingly concerned about the future. A sudden change in educational policy in an overseas country, or an urgent need to preserve foreign exchange, may quite rapidly and with virtually no notice, end a long standing arrangement for providing examinations. Indeed, the entries may just cease without any prior warning.

172. This uncertainty inhibits forward planning and makes it dangerous (given their method of financing) for the UK external examining bodies to invest large sums of capital to match more closely the needs of overseas countries. In technician education in particular, this will become serious as City and Guilds systematically withdraws its 'home' examinations as they are replaced by TEC schemes. In some cases the residual overseas candidates will be too few to make it worthwhile (with the normal method of financing) to run the examinations for them alone. But even where the numbers are reasonably large, the updating of the examination syllabuses as technology changes will involve City and Guilds in risks which it has not previously had to face.

Summary

173. The UK examining bodies have served the developing world well, and deserve the sort of comments made about them in the extracts quoted in Appendix II. The use of UK examinations has enabled developing countries to work to known and respected standards at low candidate unit costs. However, changes in the developing countries of the Commonwealth and in the UK make it necessary that, if the UK examining bodies are to continue to serve their Commonwealth clients, there should also be changes in the traditional relationships. The independence of these bodies from government enhances their ability to make the necessary changes, but the initiatives may well have to come from the Commonwealth countries themselves. The UK examination bodies all expressed their willingness to consider new relationships.