

THE REGIONAL EXAMINING COUNCILS

174. The study included contact with two of the regional examining bodies: a visit was made by a staff member of the Commonwealth Secretariat to the East African Examinations Council office in Nairobi, and information was obtained from the London office of the West African Examinations Council, including access to the Annual Report for the year ending 31 March 1978, and to some of the technical syllabuses.

The West African Examinations Council

175. The West African Examinations Council was formed in 1952 to provide school examinations in The Gambia, Ghana (then the Gold Coast), Nigeria and Sierra Leone. In 1974 Liberia became a full member of the Council.

176. In 1964, following a 1960 report on Post-School Certificate and Higher Education in Nigeria, the Council began to take a serious interest in technical education. So far, however, its involvement in technical and commercial examinations for the other members of the Council has been confined to handling entries for City and Guilds and RSA examinations in The Gambia and Sierra Leone. Indeed in 1978 there were proposals that a newly formed National Board for Technical Examinations should take over from WAEC the conduct of technical and commercial examinations in Nigeria itself. However, early in 1980 it was decided by the Nigerian Government that the WAEC should retain examining functions and that the National Board should concentrate on the general development of technical and commercial education.

177. There are great differences in size between vocational and school examination entries. In 1977 in Nigeria there were 12700 candidates for technical examinations and 27700 for commercial examinations, while the total number of all candidates examined in all the member countries was one million two hundred thousand, the great majority from schools.

178. These large numbers of school candidates have made it possible, indeed essential, for the WAEC to develop very strong and highly trained teams of staff, backed up by data processing and optical mark reading equipment, at its main centres. The resources available certainly match up to those referred to in paragraphs 43, 64 and 68 of this report. The programme for test development and research could be the envy of many examining bodies world-wide. The 1977/78 Annual Report lists 180 senior staff by name. Even in 1977 its annual income was nearly £8.5 million (Sterling).

179. In 1966 WAEC decided to exercise its responsibility for technical and commercial examinations in Nigeria by taking over those offered by the UK awarding bodies. This decision was made with the consent, cooperation and goodwill of these bodies, following a meeting in 1965 in which they were represented. The transfer was planned to take place in four sequential stages:

1. Special Nigerian syllabuses were prepared in collaboration with City and Guilds and RSA, who for a time continued to approve them.
2. Nigerian chief and assistant examiners were trained by teams of examiners from the UK (this was funded by the British Government).

3. Examinations were conducted jointly by the WAEC and the UK bodies, with Certificates issued under their joint auspices.

4. Finally, it was intended that the WAEC would conduct its own examinations and award its own Certificates.

The plan envisaged all four stages being complete by 1978, but for various reasons the transfer was slowed down, and has not yet been completed.

180. As an example of the continuing collaboration, and of its scale, in 1980 13 UK Chief Examiners, 17 Nigerian Chief Examiners and 135 Assistant Examiners will attend a two weeks training course in Nigeria, under the joint auspices of the WAEC and City and Guilds. A similar training session involving the RSA was held in 1979.

181. The 1977/78 Annual Report of the WAEC, as well as recording the Council's continued growth and success, was also frank about some of the problems it had to overcome in the year under review. These problems, and the solutions adopted, although largely relating to school examinations, illustrate some of the difficulties which may be encountered in other countries, perhaps where there is a less powerful and experienced body than the WAEC to handle them.

182. The WAEC has reached the stage of development where there are pressures from the member countries to decentralize as far as possible the operations to national offices staffed by local nationals. It has also reached the size where a degree of decentralization helps efficiency. Nevertheless the 1977/78 report indicates that decentralization is not without its attendant problems, particularly in respect to staff matters.

183. The report also shows how an examining body has very special staff training problems which cannot readily be met by generalised management training courses, how (despite the highly specialized nature of its work) it can lose key staff to other organisations, and how it may have difficulty in recruiting at some levels, especially in data processing.

184. Other problems quoted included technical difficulties with imported equipment and with power supply, and arrangements for the security and printing of question papers.

185. Because the transfer of examinations from City and Guilds and RSA to the WAEC is not complete, it would be premature to do more than touch on the important question of whether the balance of advantage lies in associating technical and commercial examinations with school examinations or keeping them separate. Clearly the WAEC has at its command immense resources, a strong management and administration and considerable specialist skills in the techniques of testing. However, the method and phasing of the transfer seems to have led to administrative, rather than specialist, resources being applied to technical and commercial examinations; for example up to 1978 there was no research on them and the technical syllabuses seen during the study had not been altered very much from their UK originals to take account of local needs. Once the transfer is complete this may change, but the doubt remains whether, given the sort of imbalance in candidate populations described in paragraph 177, even the WAEC can afford to give much priority to the special needs of vocational examinations, which (as shown in paragraphs 116-122) are different from those of school examinations. In other, smaller, countries with less resources for a schools examining body than are available to the WAEC, the problem of priorities for scarce specialist resources could be even more acute.

The East African Examinations Council

186. The East African Examinations Council was formed, also as a schools examining body, in 1968. In 1972 it took over the technical and commercial examinations being offered in Kenya and Uganda by City and Guilds and the RSA. The head office of EAEC is in Kampala with a Regional Office in Nairobi. As with WAEC, national offices are manned by local nationals. Figures for school candidates are not readily available but there are about 6000 technical subject entries and 5000 commercial subject entries.

187. From May 1980, the Council will have an ICL computer in the Nairobi office; hitherto it has bought computer time from bureaus. In general its resources are on a smaller scale than the WAEC.

188. It is understood that the Kenya government may shortly establish a National Examinations Council to be responsible for the schools and vocational examinations in Kenya.

189. Although the examiner training was carried out in the early years in conjunction with City and Guilds and the RSA, it is now entirely carried out by the EAEC, and the transfer of examinations has been much more rapid than in Nigeria.

Conclusions

190. This brief survey of the WAEC and EAEC raises two important issues: do they provide models of interstate co-operation in vocational examining which should be encouraged elsewhere in the Commonwealth? And do the advantages of combining school and vocational examinations outweigh the disadvantages? It does appear that the difficulties of maintaining regional co-operation by a joint examining institution are very great. In East Africa the joint body seems about to be replaced by national ones, and in West Africa the regional body has never run vocational examinations in more than one of the member countries. The experience of these two bodies is therefore not encouraging in the vocational field at least. The resources available to the study and the stage reached in West Africa in particular make it difficult to reach a conclusion on the balance of advantage or disadvantage on combining school and vocational examinations. This is a matter which would merit further study; there might, for example, be half-way stages between complete integration and complete separation, and some of the other activities of the WAEC (not reported here) might provide a model of how this might be achieved.