

Introduction

The Fifth Commonwealth Education Conference, meeting in Canberra in February, 1971, took note of the increasing concern of member countries about the development and administration of public examinations. Since that time a number of developments have taken place and individual countries have increasingly sought advice from the Commonwealth Secretariat on various aspects of examining. The time seemed ripe for a pooling of information and a definition of future strategies and action programmes.

The West African Examinations Council, the oldest and largest international examining body in the developing Commonwealth, took the initiative by suggesting that a meeting be held in conjunction with their twenty-first anniversary celebrations and offered to act as hosts. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation agreed to provide the necessary funds and responsibility for the meeting was assumed jointly by the West African Examinations Council and the Commonwealth Secretariat. Thirty-eight specialists working in nineteen Commonwealth countries subsequently met in Accra, Ghana, from 12 to 16 March, 1973, to consider mutual problems and needs in the field of public examinations.

The conference planners hoped that the outcomes would include not only a comprehensive report and useful documentation but also a statement of priority needs in terms of training programmes for teachers, examiners and examination administrators, the development of exchanges of information and personnel, and increased co-operation in improving administrative structures and techniques of selection, measurement, assessment and guidance. Participants considered problems pertaining to school tests and examinations, including the effect of examinations on school curricula and methods, and also reviewed other types of public examination, such as those at tertiary level and those used by industry, commerce, the professions and the public services.

The rapid changes in education and the massive increase in numbers entering for public examinations at all levels mean that a fresh assessment must be made of the role, functions and organisation of the examining bodies themselves. The problem of reconciling educational and social desirability on the one hand with administrative practicality and economic reality on the other lay at the centre of all the deliberations.

This publication is the result of those deliberations. The first part contains a report of the main points made in the meetings by the participants as they discussed each of the session topics. Although every effort has been made to include all of the important observations brought out in the discussions it would be unrealistic to claim complete success. The second part of this publication contains background papers and materials prepared for the conference as well as other papers previously published by the Commonwealth Secretariat in a booklet titled Examinations at Secondary Level. The wide interest in these materials precipitated the decision to produce them together in a single publication. The papers have been divided into three sections and a summary of each paper precedes each section. The first section contains the papers which treat the aims and effects of examinations. The next section covers the organization, function and some experiences of various examination boards in the Commonwealth, and focuses mainly upon examining in the developing countries of the

Commonwealth. The last section contains reports and studies of specific problems in examining and helps to shed light on a number of problems that are common in examining. The authors were not immune to the effects of time and distance and some overlap of coverage may be noted.

Although some readers may distinguish between the word "test", to denote a measure of aptitude, typically in multiple choice form, and the word "examination", to denote a measure of achievement, typically in essay form, the report uses the words interchangeably. What matters most in education and examinations is not the form of questions employed in an assessment or the words used to denote it, but much wider issues. It is hoped that the report and supporting material will together provide a source of information and inspiration for all those concerned with the development, organisation and use of public examinations.