

Chapter 8: Bahamas

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Population (1993): 266,000

Population Growth Rate (1960-93): 2.7% per annum

Land Area: 13,940 square kilometres

GNP per Capita (1994): US\$11,500

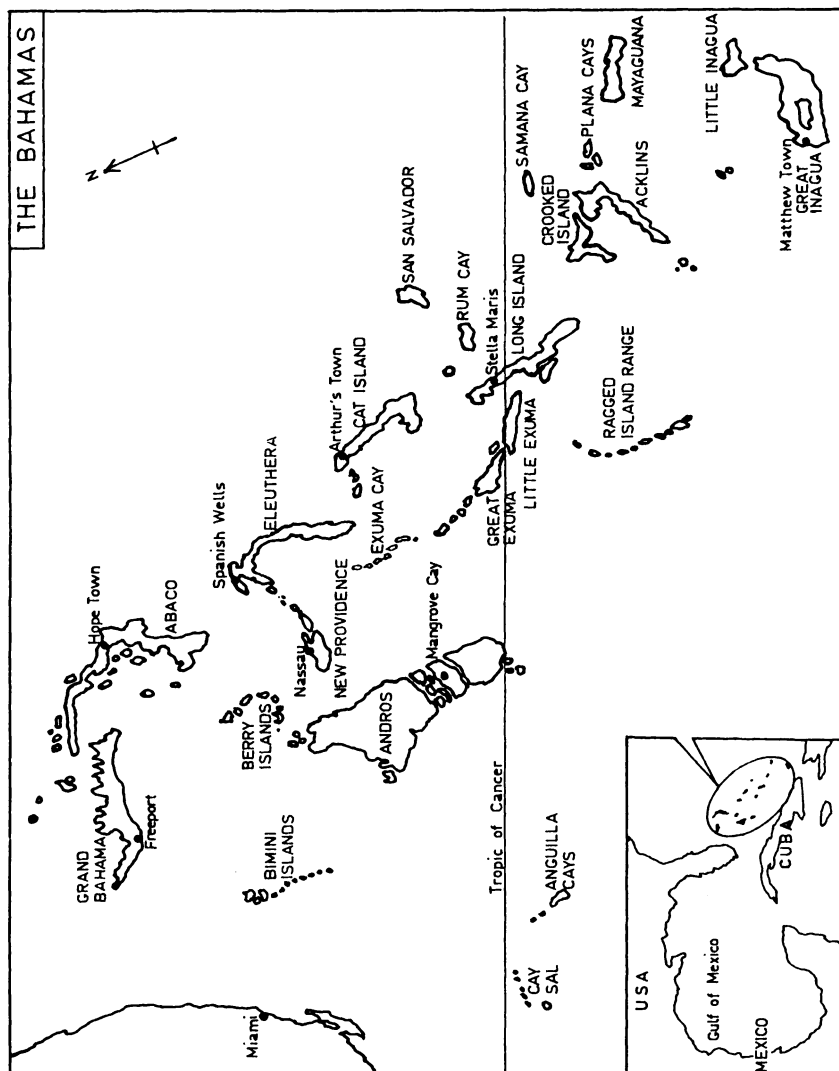
Year of Independence: 1973

UNDP Human Development Index (1994): 0.894

The islands which form the Bahamas are about 700 in number, of which 29 are inhabited. The islands stretch as an archipelago over 750 kilometres in the Western Atlantic Ocean, just south of Florida in the USA. Travel between them is mainly by air, but an inter-island mail boat also operates. The main island is New Providence, which is home to 60 per cent of the population and on which is situated Nassau, the capital. About 72 per cent of the population are black, 13 per cent are white, and 14 per cent are mixed.

The Bahamas became a British colony in the 18th century, but throughout the colonial period was also heavily influenced by its proximity to the USA and its place on the sea routes. A parliamentary system was created in 1729, though universal adult suffrage was not introduced until 1962. The country gained Independence in 1973, and is now a parliamentary democracy in which the UK monarch remains the constitutional Head of State but is represented by a Governor General. The country is officially known as the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. When applied in the national context, the word Commonwealth has a different meaning from that in the international context. In the sense that the Bahamas is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations (the Secretariat of which has published this book), it is a Commonwealth within a Commonwealth.

The per capita income in the Bahamas is the highest among independent Caribbean states. The economy is based mainly on tourism and off-shore banking. Tourism, especially from the USA, generates about half of total Gross National Product, and employs about half the total workforce. Some steps have been taken to encourage light industries, particularly production of salt, cement, pharmaceuticals, rum, and beer.



This chapter presents an overview of the system of examinations in the Bahamas, and places particular emphasis on the Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) examination. The BGCSE was launched in 1993 in collaboration with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). The endeavour illustrates one of the forms of partnership which small states can undertake to meet their needs.

The Education and Examination Systems

Education in the Bahamas is highly developed. It is compulsory between the ages of five and 14, and post-compulsory enrolment rates are high. The Bahamas has a 6+3+3 structure of schooling, i.e. six years of primary, three years of junior secondary, and three years of senior secondary schooling. Students who proceed to higher education go to institutions which include the College of the Bahamas, the Bahamas Hotel Training College, the Bahamas Baptist College, and the Bahamas Institute of Technology. The performance of primary students is formally assessed at the ends of Grades 3 and 6. At the end of Grade 9, junior secondary students take the Bahamas Junior Certificate examination. At the end of Grade 12, senior secondary students take the BGCSE examination.

The history of external examinations in the Bahamas dates back to the first half of the 20th century, when UCLES provided external examinations at three levels, namely preliminary, junior and senior. In 1945, the Board of Education introduced a Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination to replace the Cambridge Preliminary Examination. In 1953 the Bahamas Junior Certificate Examination replaced the Cambridge Junior Certificate Examination, and the Cambridge Senior Certificate became known as the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC). This examination catered for the small portion of the school-aged population which was academically ambitious.

Two major problems arose concerning the COSC. The first was that certificates were awarded on the basis of a group of subject passes, and failure in one paper meant failure in the entire examination. The second was that the timetable did not match the school calendar operated by the Ministry of Education. Because of these constraints, in the early 1960s several schools switched to the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary ('O') level examinations offered by the University of London. In addition, some students sat the examinations of the Royal Society of Arts, Pitmans, the City & Guilds of London Institute, and the Associated Examining Board; but others left school with no national or international record of achievement.

Within the United Kingdom (UK), the fact that the GCE was oriented

towards academically-able students led to development of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) for pupils with less academic orientations. In the 1970s, one school in the Bahamas entered students who had completed five years of secondary education for the UK CSE examinations. The school later abandoned this practice, though educators in the Bahamas continued to see the elitist nature of the GCE system as a problem.

Concern about these matters led the government in the mid-1970s to embark on reform. In 1975 the government announced intention to introduce a national secondary school certificate examination for secondary school leavers, and shortly thereafter established a Testing & Evaluation Unit in the Ministry of Education to oversee the changes.

In parallel, changes were occurring in the structure of examinations in the UK. The CSE had fallen out of favour because it seemed to label holders as lower achievers, and had become a second-class examination. The 1980s therefore brought moves in the UK to combine the GCE and the CSE into a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). The University of London Examinations & Assessment Council (ULEAC) informed the Bahamian government that its GCSE examination syllabuses would be developed with the UK context in mind, and that the content of some syllabuses might be unsuitable for students in other countries. Moreover, the government was informed, the scheme for assessment would be difficult or impossible to implement in centres which were not organised in consortia according to the UK pattern. Further, certain subjects would cease to be available in 1987, and more would cease to be available in 1988. This created considerable uncertainty about access by Bahamian students to the UK GCSE, though the GCE 'O' level continued to be offered for overseas students who wanted it.

The combination of dissatisfaction with existing arrangements and the change within the UK propelled the Bahamian government further along the road to reform. A new Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education was designed which, like the UK GCSE, embraced a wider span of subjects and abilities than the old GCE.

The Nature of the BGCSE Examination

The BGCSE caters for 80 to 85 per cent of the school population. When the BGCSE was launched in 1993, examinations were provided in 22 subjects, which included technical and vocational as well as academic areas. In 1996, the number of subjects stood at 26, with the possibility of further increase.

The BGCSE is intended to:

- promote curricula which are relevant to the culture of the Bahamas;

- encourage pursuit of a rounded education which encompasses the basic academic disciplines;
- serve as a reputable measure of attainment which can be used both for employment and for further study; and
- be applicable to the majority of school leavers.

The examination ensures proper differentiation so that candidates across a wide ability range are able to demonstrate knowledge, abilities and achievements.

Pupils' results in the GCE were graded on a five-point scale, A to E. The BGCSE retained equivalent points (so that, for example, a C in the GCE was equivalent to a C in the BGCSE), but added two further points so that the BGCSE was graded on a seven-point scale, A to G. Candidates whose performance does not merit a G grade do not receive a certificate. Some subjects, for example Literature, History, and Art, offer common papers and are graded on A to G scales according to the level of response or level of ability. Other subjects, such as the Sciences, Languages and Business Studies, offer a core or common paper for which Grades C to G only are applicable. Candidates seeking a high grade in these subjects must write extended papers designed to test performance at the A or B levels.

The examinations also make use of coursework in the form of projects, samples of written assignments, fieldwork, and practical work. The coursework component permits the assessment of skills not easily assessed under normal examination conditions. Not all subjects have coursework components; but where it is applicable, the coursework is mandatory and contributes 20 to 30 per cent of the final grades. Coursework is assessed by classroom teachers and subsequently moderated by external examiners.

The BGCSE is criterion-referenced. Instead of grades being awarded to pre-determined percentages of candidates, the examination syllabuses provide descriptions which state in detail the skills and mastery required in order to achieve each grade level.

Linkages with other Examining Boards

The above account shows that the Bahamas has long had linkages with several examining boards in the UK. At various points, the Bahamas has also had linkages with the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC).

Chapter 12 of this book explains that the CXC was formed in 1972, with its headquarters in Barbados, by agreement between 15 Commonwealth states and territories. While viewing itself as a Caribbean country, the Bahamas has always had a slightly distant relationship with other Caribbean countries. The Bahamas did join the University of the West Indies when it

was formed in 1948, but was not part of the 1958-62 Federation of the West Indies, and did not join the CXC. However, examination officers in the Bahamas do liaise with CXC officers in professional matters. During preparation for the BGCSE, for example, various Bahamian examination officers attended meetings of the CXC which helped to sensitise the Bahamians to the difficulties of developing and managing school examinations. Bahamian officers also benefitted from CXC experience in technical aspects of testing and teacher training.

The main linkages for the BGCSE, however, are with UCLES. The Bahamian government entered a contract through which UCLES agreed not only to provide training and consultancy services but also to underwrite the examination. Although the UCLES role is not recognised in the title of the qualification, it is recognised on the certificate itself. The BGCSE certificate shows the crests of both the Bahamian government and UCLES, and is headed with the words "Ministry of Education, The Commonwealth of the Bahamas in collaboration with University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate".

Local, Regional and International Recognition

The BGCSE attempts to ensure that assessment procedures reflect relevance to the Bahamian situation, and maintains standards that enable it to have both local and international currency. From an internal perspective, its standards are no less exacting than those of the overseas examinations which have been respected and relied upon for much of the 20th century. The BGCSE is recognised by the Public Service, and used for employment and for entry to local tertiary institutions.

For local recognition, but even more for regional and international recognition, the role of UCLES is very important. Each year, UCLES prepares a statement on equivalence. For example the words on the 1994 statement were that:

The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate has taken measures to ensure that the standards of achievement represented by Grades A-G in the BGCSE examination for 1994 in the subjects listed below are equivalent to those represented by the corresponding grades in the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and the UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

The Ministry of Education considers this assurance a very important element which underpins the status of the BGCSE. No formal articulation has been established with CXC awards, but the BGCSE is accepted by regional

institutions including the University of the West Indies. The certificate is also accepted by tertiary institutions in other parts of the world.

The Mechanics of Introducing the BGCSE

The preparatory phase prior to the first BGCSE examination lasted five years and required considerable planning. In order to strengthen capacity at the Ministry of Education, an intensive training programme for Curriculum & Test Development personnel was implemented. Between 1988 and 1991, 20 subject specialists attended a three-month training programme in Cambridge on the theory and practice of assessment organised by UCLES. In addition, two people attended a one-month course on the administration of examinations; and 24 workshops were conducted by UCLES between 1989 and 1993 in areas such as item writing, test construction, and the use of micro-computers in the administration of examinations. Training was also provided in the Bahamas on the production of syllabuses, question papers, marking schemes, and coursework booklets.

After this intensive training period, draft syllabuses and specimen papers were prepared in 22 subjects and distributed to education officials and staff of government and independent schools, tertiary institutions and businesses. The UCLES team of moderators agreed that revisions based on feedback provided desirable standards which were on par with those of similar examinations, and then gave approval for printing.

In preparation for the 1993 examinations, senior education officers continued to visit schools to facilitate the implementation of the syllabuses and the coursework procedures. Subject workshops were organised to focus on item writing and assessment guidelines. Examiners and markers were trained in the conduct of and preparation for coordination meetings, standardisation of marking procedures, and preparation of examination reports. After grading of examinations, general school reports outlining strengths and weaknesses inherent in candidates' responses were prepared and distributed. These reports include suggestions for improving performance of students.

In order to promote the examinations, the Public Information Unit of the Ministry of Education launched a comprehensive programme which included the distribution of pamphlets, posters and bumper-stickers for cars, preparation of newspaper articles, radio and television programmes, a community forum, an employers' forum, and PTA meetings and Town meetings. Opportunity was also taken to explain the examination at various exhibitions; and UCLES assisted in promoting the examinations at international levels.

Among the challenges for implementation was the archipelagic nature

of the country. Since some islands were not readily accessible to all subject officers, exposure to teaching strategies, coursework procedures and examination techniques was limited some remote areas. Moreover, in spite of the intensive media coverage during the five years preceding the first BGCSE sitting, the general public seemed to lack in-depth information about the composition and characteristics of the BGCSE. It was obvious to the Ministry that education of the public must be ongoing.

Review of the subject syllabuses also indicated a need for changes. Deletions and additions of subject content were necessary, and adjustments in time allocation for some question papers were needed. Schemes for assessment for certain subjects were unsuitable or inadequate; and some syllabuses did not fully reflect the philosophy of the BGCSE of being skills-based and catering for the large majority of school leavers. Syllabus revision must therefore involve representatives from all categories of end users. This will ensure that a sufficient body of knowledge and range of skills have been induced, the assessment procedures reflect the educational goals and that provisions are made for wide cultural and geographical diversity that exists even in a country with a population of just a quarter of a million.

Conclusions

Like most other colonies, the history of education in the Bahamas has included strong reliance on examining boards based in the metropolitan country. In the Bahamian case, Cambridge played a dominant role from the 1940s, was to a large extent replaced by London in the 1960s, but came back in the late 1980s. The return of UCLES was in a partnership with the Bahamian government in the construction of an examination specifically tailored to Bahamian needs.

The inputs from UCLES are not cheap, but they are of high quality and are especially important at this point in history. UCLES provides technical expertise which would not be obtainable domestically. Also of great importance is the fact that UCLES underwrites the BGCSE, thereby assuring the public of the quality of the credential.

Once the BGCSE has become established, it likely that the role of UCLES will change. As Bahamian officers and teachers gain more experience, the external inputs will become less necessary. However, it remains to be seen whether the inputs of UCLES will be phased out altogether. The education system of the Bahamas is small, and the country is currently unable to meet all its technical needs from local personnel. It seems probable that at least some external linkages will be retained.

The challenges facing the BGCSE have been considerable, for the archi-

pects and implementers have had to deal with an archipelagic country in which islands are separated by considerable distances and in which cultures are diverse. Also, the small size of the population has meant that personnel to run the system have had to be recruited from a very small pool. The fact that so much has been achieved despite these challenges makes the successes of the BGCSE all the more noteworthy.