

## **Chapter 13:**

### **South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment**

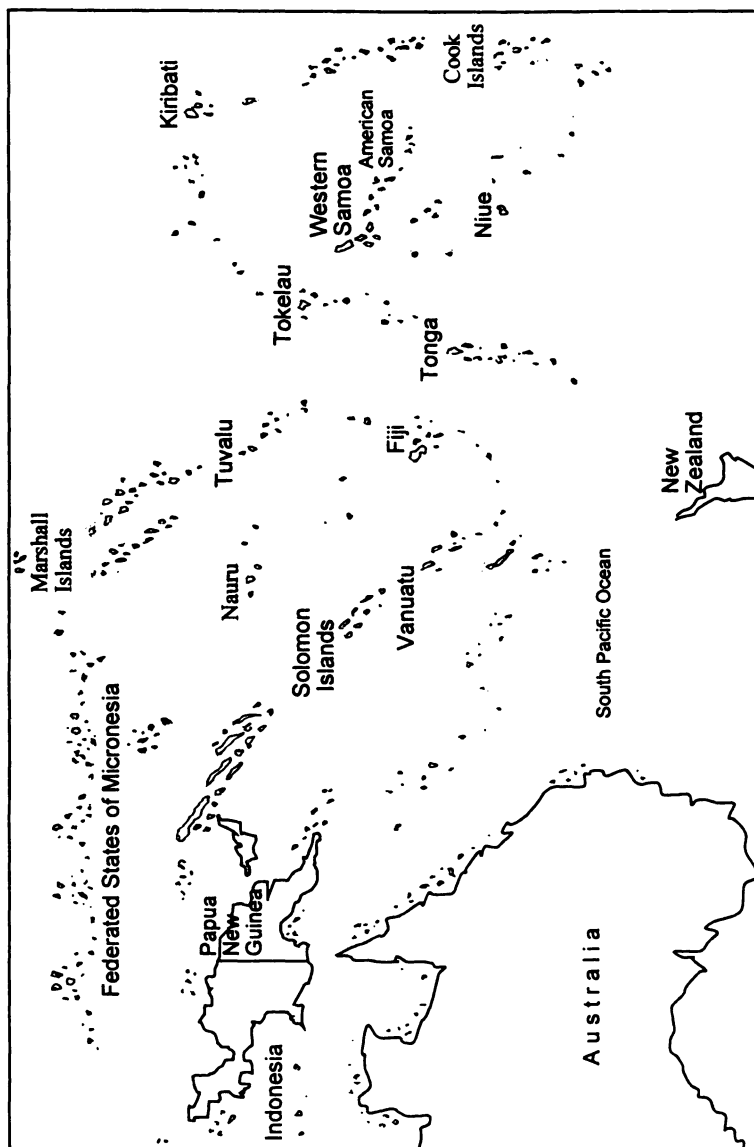
*Trevor Rees & Gurmit Singh*

This chapter documents the history and explains the mode of operation of the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA). It observes the complexity of the environment within which the Board works, and the ways in which the SPBEA has helped operate with a wide range of partners.

The constitution of the SPBEA distinguishes between members and observers. The Board has 11 members and one observer. Ten of the members are countries, namely Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Samoa. The eleventh member is institutional, namely the University of the South Pacific (USP). The observer is Niue.

The member countries are all small but are diverse in their population sizes and colonial histories (Table 13.1). The population range is from 2,000 in Tokelau to 750,000 in Fiji. The 10 countries include nine sovereign states and one dependency. Among the sovereign states, four were dependencies of the United Kingdom (UK), one was a dependency of New Zealand, one was a dependency of the USA, one was an Australian dependency, one was an Anglo-French condominium, and one was a monarchy over which the UK had control of foreign affairs. These colonial histories have left legacies in education as well as in other sectors. Influences from New Zealand remain strong in the educational affairs of many Pacific-island states, including ones which were never formal dependencies of New Zealand. Influences from Australia are also significant.

The SPBEA serves its members in different ways. For six of them — Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Samoa — it operates a regional examination leading to the Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (PSSC). In this respect the role of the SPBEA is similar to that of the Caribbean Examinations Council and West African Examinations Council. However, the SPBEA did not originally operate a regional examination. Rather, its principal role, which it still plays today, was to support the national examinations of its member states.



*Table 13.1: Populations, Constitutional Statuses and Colonial Histories of SPBEA Member States*

<i>Country/ Territory</i>	<i>Population mid-1990s</i>	<i>Present Constitu- tional Status</i>	<i>Outline Colonial History</i>
Fiji	796,000	Independent sovereign state	UK (1874-1970)
Kiribati	76,000	Independent sovereign state	UK (1892-1979)
Marshall Islands	45,000	Independent sovereign state	Germany (1886-1918); Japan (1918-47); USA (1947-86)
Nauru	10,000	Independent sovereign state	Germany (1888-1914); Australia (1914-68).
Samoa	163,000	Independent sovereign state	Germany (1899-1914); New Zealand (1914-62)
Solomon Islands	346,000	Independent sovereign state	UK (1893-1978)
Tokelau	2,000	Dependency of New Zealand	UK (1889-25); New Zealand (since 1925)
Tonga	93,000	Independent sovereign state	Treaty gave UK control over foreign affairs (1901-70)
Tuvalu	9,000	Independent sovereign state	UK (1892-1978)
Vanuatu	161,000	Independent sovereign state	Anglo-French Condominium (1906-80)

Note: The outline history excludes many details. For example, it also omits mention of Japanese occupation, e.g. of Solomon Islands 1942-44; and during the 19th and early 20th centuries many islands were affected by lesser treaties which are not mentioned here.

Sources: Commonwealth Secretariat (1995); Douglas & Douglas (1989).

## **Origins and History of the SPBEA**

### *The Pre-history of the Board*

Up to the 1970s, most island states in the South Pacific used metropolitan examinations. In the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (now Kiribati and Tuvalu), most students took the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) examination administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). In contrast, most candidates in Tonga, Niue and

Samoa took the New Zealand School Certificate (NZSC) examination. Many schools in Fiji presented candidates for the Cambridge examinations in the 1960s, but transferred later to the NZSC. One reason was that the school year was the same in both New Zealand and Fiji, and the examinations were therefore administered at a more convenient time (Tavola 1991, p.70).

During the late 1960s, a groundswell of opinion developed in favour of examinations oriented more closely to the circumstances of the island countries. The three main factors contributing to this groundswell were:

- an increase in the size of Form 5 populations, which meant that more students left school at that stage and the examinations could no longer be seen mainly as a selection device for further education;
- curriculum development activities in the region, which demonstrated the advantages of locally-relevant objectives and resources; and
- the movement towards, or attainment of, sovereignty in a number of countries, and a consequent desire for national aspirations to be reflected more clearly in education systems.

The South Pacific Commission (SPC), which had been founded in 1947 to give technical advice and to disseminate social, cultural and economic information throughout the region (Douglas & Douglas 1989, p.658), organised periodic regional seminars for Directors of Education. The second such seminar, in 1964, resolved (a) to set up a working party to investigate the possibility of establishing a regional examination board, and (b) to request the metropolitan examining boards to provide alternative papers for Pacific Island candidates. While the nature of UCLES activity did not change radically, by the time of the next SPC seminar in 1969, the authorities in New Zealand had indicated willingness to make special arrangements. However, the introduction of these arrangements was delayed in order to avoid interference with a regional curriculum development unit funded by UNDP/UNESCO. This unit was intended to produce a new and comprehensive curriculum for Forms 1 to 4 in a number of countries, and project planners were considering extension to Form 5. The unit was housed at the University of the South Pacific, which had been established in 1968 with membership of 11 countries and territories (Caston 1993; Crocombe & Meleisea 1988).

The possibility of a regional examination board was again considered in the early 1970s by John Deakin, who was a former Registrar of the West African Examinations Council and at that time was employed in London by the Centre for Educational Development Overseas. Deakin visited Fiji in 1971 as a consultant to the Fiji government, and was asked in addition to his

other duties to consider the desirability and feasibility of setting up a South Pacific Examination Board. After some consultation, he concluded that there was a need for a regional examination at the upper secondary level based on local prescriptions. He considered, with some reservations concerning costs and maintenance of standards, that operation of a regional board would be both desirable and feasible. Deakin returned in 1973 at the invitation of the USP Vice Chancellor. After further consultation and investigation, Deakin confirmed his original proposal, and made a formal recommendation that the Board be created under the aegis of the University of the South Pacific.

Deakin's 1973 report was discussed widely in the region. Some respondents favoured the idea, but others were opposed. Those in favour accepted the logic of Deakin's proposals. Opponents were concerned about possible university domination, the effect of regional awards on national education objectives, and the financial implications. No agreement was reached, and the proposal was shelved.

By this time, however, it was clear that the UNDP/UNESCO project was unlikely to extend to Form 5. In 1973, the New Zealand Minister of Education announced that alternative papers for the NZSC examination, designed to be more suitable for Islands candidates, would be prepared as a matter of priority. He acknowledged that the initiative was not an ideal long-term solution, but wished to show responsiveness to the regional request. The New Zealand government's Director-General of Education followed up the Minister's announcement by writing to the Directors of Education in the Pacific. He stated that the alternative papers would be optional and of equal standing with the New Zealand papers. He indicated further that the School Certificate facility would continue to be available to South Pacific students so long as it was useful, or until suitable alternative arrangements could be made.

These proposals were duly considered by Directors of Education at subsequent SPC regional seminars. In 1974 the Directors requested the New Zealand authorities to prepare papers tailored to the needs of the Island countries in English, Science, Mathematics and Social Science. Meanwhile, the Directors considered ways to enhance national capacity to support governments wishing to operate their own examination systems. A 1975 SPC sub-regional meeting recommended the formation of a South Pacific Board for Education Co-operation with this goal in mind. This body was expected to serve the 11 countries of the USP region rather than 27 countries served by the South Pacific Commission (which included French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, and various other places). An Institute of Education had been created at the USP, and was seen as the potential centre for some of the envisaged tasks.

In 1978, a meeting convened by the SPC in Fiji took the proposals to the next stage. The meeting decided that:

- a body should be created to assist countries to develop assessment procedures towards national education certificates, with this task being reflected clearly in the title South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment;
- the Board should be autonomous and located in Suva, Fiji;
- initial expenditure should be met by the South Pacific Commission;
- the SPC would approach the governments of Australia, New Zealand and the UK, seeking aid to meet 75 per cent of the recurrent budget;
- governments in the region would meet the remaining costs of the recurrent budget (initially shared on an equal basis, but revised in 1987 to reflect varying population sizes); and
- the programme of alternative papers being provided for South Pacific candidates in the NZSC examination would be investigated in relation to the functions of the Board within two years of the Board beginning operation.

The governments of Australia, New Zealand and the UK did agree to initial funding, and the government of Fiji provided a building. In 1979 an agreement to establish the Board was signed by representatives of the governments of Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, Niue and Samoa. With ratification by eight governments, the Board was finally established in 1980. The governments of Nauru and Niue decided not to participate at that time but to keep the question of involvement at a future date under review.

### *First Decade*

The Board got off to a good start, though soon encountered major problems of staffing, uncertainty of mission, and internal dissent (Rees 1991). One question concerned the boundaries in the roles of the SPBEA and of the Institute of Education at the USP, which was also mandated to undertake regional work in educational assessment. In 1981, the Board agreed with the Institute that the former would be concerned with national assessment while the latter would focus on the classroom level. While these boundaries overlapped, the formula was mutually acceptable and set the stage for continued cooperation between the two bodies.

In 1982, the Board was given further reason for existence by an announcement by the New Zealand government that the South Pacific Option papers in the NZSC examination would be withdrawn in 1985. Such

action effectively signalled the end of the NZSC in most of the Board countries, and raised serious questions about national examinations at that level. SPBEA visits to member countries had suggested that most members required specialist training in design and development of examinations. The intended withdrawal of the South Pacific Options accentuated the need for rapid and effective in-country training to enable credible alternatives to the NZSC to be in place by 1985. Some participants suggested at this time that the SPBEA might take on the role of an Examinations Board at the Form 5 level, though the idea was not in fact implemented.

In the event, the New Zealand authorities were persuaded to postpone the abolition of the South Pacific Options, first until 1987 and then until 1988. These postponements were made at the request of several member states through the Board. However, a separate decision in 1985 also to end the New Zealand University Entrance (NZUE) examination was implemented in 1986. This again arose chiefly because of developments within New Zealand itself. The authorities in New Zealand were conscious of responsibilities to South Pacific countries, and because of that did indicate that until 1988 they would provide separate interim examinations for the countries that had participated in the NZUE, i.e. Cook Islands, Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu. However, the authorities also stressed that they would not permit the needs of the South Pacific countries to delay reform in New Zealand itself.

Postponement of the abolition of the South Pacific Options and willingness to make interim arrangements following the dismantling of the NZUE was especially desirable because in 1984 the Board itself went through a crisis. Following allegations of serious breach of honesty and confidentiality, three members of the four-person secretariat, including the Director, were dismissed. In the same year, for unrelated reasons, the UK funding which had covered 25 per cent of the budget was terminated.

Because of these factors, the Board was in danger of collapse even before it had demonstrated its usefulness. However, the governments of Australia and New Zealand remained firm in their support, and the need for a Board to conduct regional work remained self-evident to most observers. Fortunately, 1985 brought replacement staff of high calibre, and a renewed sense of purpose and professionalism. A review of the Board which had been commissioned following the 1984 events gave unequivocal support and also set out a variety of assessment options (Elley 1985a). Some financial assistance was gained from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, and subsequently also from UNDP/UNESCO. Morale within the Board was also improved in 1985 by an indication from the government of Tokelau that it intended to apply for Board membership. In due course this

application was approved, and Tokelau joined the Board in 1986.

Among the recommendations of the Elley report was an emphasis on regional examining. While this received broad support, however, perspectives were not united. In 1985, the government of Fiji indicated that when the New Zealand papers ceased to be available, it intended to operate its own examinations. This was a blow to those who had hoped for a common Form 5 examination, especially because Fiji's non-participation seriously undermined the potential visibility, acceptability and financial viability of such an examination.

At the Form 5 level, therefore, the continuing role of the SPBEA was seen as support for national initiatives. The government of Tonga established its own School Certificate examination, and the SPBEA assisted the governments of Kiribati, Tuvalu and Samoa to find a set of existing New Zealand papers which could be combined with SPBEA ones in English, History and Geography to meet at least short term needs. Under this rather complex arrangement, the SPBEA also agreed to process results and issue certificates bearing the names of the countries concerned.

Meanwhile, discussion continued on the question of replacement for the NZUE examination. The eventual result of these negotiations was the Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate. The PSSC was launched in 1989 for candidates in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Samoa. In addition, the PSSC also now serves candidates in Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

### *The Second Decade*

The second decade commenced with further expansion of membership of the Board. Vanuatu joined in 1990, Marshall Islands joined in 1991, and Nauru joined in 1994. The addition of Vanuatu raised the question of language skills among SPBEA staff, for Vanuatu's colonial legacy included francophone as well as anglophone assessment systems. Marshall Islands was anglophone, but its inclusion in the membership was significant for different reasons. As a former dependency of the USA, Marshall Islands had a rather different colonial history and orientation in its education system (Relang 1992). Moreover, the location of Marshall Islands north of the equator indicated that the SPBEA was extending its influence beyond the narrowly-defined boundaries of the South Pacific.

In 1991, a major review of the SPBEA's work was commissioned in order to assess past achievements and weaknesses and act as a guide to the future. The review (Renwick & Evers 1991) applauded the role that the Board had played during the 1980s. Noting the ways that the patterns had evolved with the expansion of national education systems and the phasing out of the New Zealand examinations, the report underlined the value of the



SPBEA as a source of expertise. Indeed, the report added (p.11), "if SPBEA did not already exist it would by now have become necessary to invent it".

The review suggested (p.3) that the most significant development in the SPBEA's history had been the decision to become an examination authority. That comment certainly had some validity, for the PSSC examination added a major and highly visible dimension to the work of the Board. However, the PSSC examination serves only six of the Board's member countries, and the Board has continued to provide support and training for national examinations at primary as well as secondary levels for all its member countries.

The Renwick & Eysers review also commented on the role of externally-funded projects in the work of the board. The most important of these was a UNDP/UNESCO project launched in 1987 to support national school certificate examinations, establish the regional Form 6 examination, provide training in examination techniques, establish a regional item bank of examination questions, develop standardised test batteries, and improve the predictive value of selection examinations. These goals were clearly within the remit of the Board, and the project provided valuable funding and staff. Other projects were funded by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, the UK Overseas Development Administration, and various other bodies. Among misgivings expressed in the Renwick & Eysers review was that these and other externally-funded projects were not clearly separated in financial accounts, and that the supplementary activities sometimes led to the danger of distraction from the main goals.

The Board took this observation seriously, and since that time the accounts and other reporting mechanisms have been organised to show more clearly the nature of external inputs and the place of projects as opposed to core activities. At the same time, the SPBEA has continued to value the externally-funded project work, which it sees both as an expression of the sponsors' confidence in the Board and a source of both personnel and other resources for Board activities.

Another major development at the beginning of the SPBEA's second decade was the decision by the USP Council to cease teaching its Foundation Year course on the USP's main campus. When the USP had been founded in 1968, very little Form 6 teaching was being conducted in the region outside Fiji. Accordingly, the USP Council decided to teach its own courses on the main campus. The two-year course mirrored the academic standards of the New Zealand secondary school leaving qualifications. The first year, which came to be called Preliminary, was equivalent to the NZUE examination, and the second, Foundation, was equivalent to the New Zealand Universities Bursary & Scholarship Examinations year. The

Preliminary Year was phased out from the USP in the mid-1980s; and when the Fiji government expanded the operation of Form 7 classes in its own secondary schools, the viability of the Foundation Year at USP was called into question. The USP continued to offer the Foundation Year as an extension course, and while individuals in some member countries found that less satisfactory, they were ultimately given little choice. The SPBEA came into the picture in so far as its role was to assist member countries with their examination processes, and this included the new Fiji Form 7 Examination.

### **Mechanics of SPBEA Operation**

The major examinations set in SPBEA member countries during 1995 are summarised in Table 13.2. The table shows considerable diversity, and underlines the complexity of the task which the Board is mandated to undertake.

The Board's secretariat in the mid-1990s consisted of a director, five professional officers, and six support personnel. For specific tasks, the core officers may be complemented by recruitment of consultants. The SPBEA constitution stipulates that where qualifications and experience are comparable, preference in filling vacancies will be given to nationals of the region. The PSSC workload, especially that relating to setting examination papers in various subjects, conducting examinations, marking scripts, etc., is contracted out to selected examiners and other professionals. The actual administration of examinations in each location is also shared with user countries.

In common with similar examinations, the PSSC follows an annual cycle which includes periodic changes to subject prescriptions, test-paper writing, moderation, printing, and distribution. When the examination has been conducted, the scripts must be marked, results processed, and certificates issued. After item analyses and other computer-derived data have been consulted, a full report on performance is sent to all user countries.

The SPBEA has gradually increased its self-financing components, and funding specifically for the PSSC is mainly through candidates' fees (paid in some instances by the governments of participating countries). Close attention is given to curriculum developments in the region and further afield, including the growing role of teacher-supplied internal assessments, and pains are taken to keep the examination as up to date as possible.

National examinations around the region are the responsibility of examining units within ministries. These units rely heavily on a limited pool of local expertise that, as in other small states, is spread to cover a wide spectrum of other administrative functions. Training within such units

Table 13.2: Major Examinations in the 11 SPBEA Member States, 1995

<u>Country/Territory</u>	<u>Name of Examination</u>	<u>Year/ Grade</u>	<u>Number of Candidates</u>
Cook Islands	Cook Islands Year 6	6	331
	Cook Islands School Certificate	11	210
	New Zealand School Certificate	12	186
	New Zealand Form 6 Certificate	13	85
	New Zealand Bursary Examination	14	30
Fiji	Fiji Intermediate Examination	6	16,200
	Fiji Eighth Year Examination	8	13,500
	Fiji Junior Certificate	10	11,600
	Fiji School Leaving Certificate	12	9,000
	Fiji Form 7 Examination	13	2,000
Kiribati	Common Entrance Examination	7	2,000
	Kiribati Junior Certificate	10	600
	Kiribati National Certificate	12	400
	Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate	13	100
	Foundation Programme	14	30
Marshall Islands	High School Entrance Test	8	1,330
Nauru	Nauru Primary School Certificate	6	170
Solomon Islands	Solomon Islands Secondary Entrance	6	12,000
	Form 3 Examination	9	2,000
	Solomon Islands School Certificate	11	1,200
	Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate	12	150
	Foundation Programme	13	40
Tokelau	Tokelau Form 5 Examination	10	30
Tonga	Secondary Entrance Examination	8	3,500
	Tonga School Certificate	11	1,900
	Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate	12	820
	New Zealand Bursary Examination	13	120
Tuvalu	Tuvalu Year 8 Examination	8	190
	Fiji Junior Certificate	10	40
	Tuvalu School Certificate	11	40
	Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate	12	40
Vanuatu	Vanuatu Year 6 Examination	6	4,490
	Vanuatu Year 10 Examination	10	950
	Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate	12	160
	New Zealand Bursary Examination	13	80
Western Samoa	Western Samoa Year 8 Examination	8	2,330
	Western Samoa Junior Sec. Certificate	11	3,030
	Western Samoa School Certificate	12	2,350
	Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate	13	690
	University [of W.S.] Preliminary Year	14	n.a.

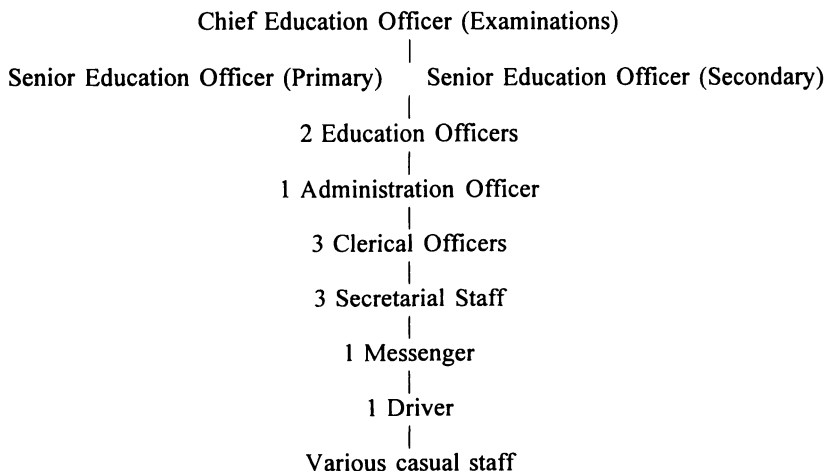
*Notes:* Data for Cook Islands are included because in 1995 it was still an SPBEA member. Cook Islands withdrew from SPBEA membership in 1996. Data for Vanuatu refer only to the anglophone system. In 1995, the country now officially called Samoa was officially called Western Samoa.

is generally on the job, unless a person has been previously identified for assessment work and has been sent overseas as a preparation. Training has also been provided by the University of the South Pacific and in workshops conducted by the SPBEA.

The national examination units in Pacific-island countries share several other features:

- They are small, and tend to concentrate on the administrative aspects of examining.
- They collaborate closely with curriculum developers and practising teachers in developing examination papers. This collaboration operates within either a panel system in which members meet in a group (for example in Fiji) or an examiner/moderator system in which draft examination papers are produced by examiners working alone and then passed to moderators (for example in Tonga).
- The units generally fall under the aegis of the national education system itself (though Vanuatu, where an Examinations Board operates, is an exception), and therefore have limited autonomy.

*Figure 13.1: Structure of the Examinations Unit in one SPBEA Member Country, 1996*



A typical national examination unit in the region would be made up of a number of education officers or teachers (designated as examination

officers) together with support staff and basic physical facilities and resources. One rather large unit, which runs five national examinations annually, is structured as shown in Figure 13.1.

One specific constraint arising from small scale concerns pre-testing. The general practice in the region is not to pre-test because in small societies security breaches are particularly liable to occur.

### **Local, Regional and International Recognition**

Recognition of the formal credentials awarded in the Pacific involves a number of inter-related factors. Within countries, the value of a certificate may be judged by its subsequent utility. In many respects this means whether or not the credential can be used for entry to further education or to obtain employment. In Kiribati, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Marshall Islands, where secondary education is not yet universally available, by far the most important certificate for the majority of candidates is the one which allows the holder to proceed to secondary schooling. Selection examinations in such countries are under constant scrutiny by parents, whose dominant concern is fairness.

In the past, selection exercises probably left much to be desired from the standpoint of technical inputs into test papers and in procedural matters like the standardisation of marks. The arcane nature of the work, especially in a close-knit environment, held out possibilities for cheating and nepotism. Currently, with the increasing existence of trained examinations officers operating from assessment units, many of them equipped with computers, the selection process is generally seen by the public as 'contentious but fair'. Where cheating and other unprofessional conduct has come to light, this has sometimes resulted in the officers responsible being dismissed from their posts and even prosecuted.

Typically it is at the School Certificate level that the recognition of national qualifications has had most attention. The Pacific, in common with other parts of the world, has experienced credential inflation. Thus for example the holder of a Fiji Junior Certificate (Form 4) could until recently have reasonably expected to enter paid employment of some kind on the basis of the award. Today, the certificate has virtually no value in this respect, since societal expectations and those of potential employers have risen considerably. Nowadays, a school leaver would need to possess a certificate at the Form 6 level to seek a comparable job. An often overlooked aspect of this is that any local credential below a given level is acceptable only if it meets the internal needs of the country. Hardly anyone except intending migrants would take an overseas Form 5 examination. Thus the external recognition and acceptability of qualifications outside a

country is of little, if any, consequence.

One partial exception, which is particularly worth noting in the context of analysis of small states, is the fact that some Tuvalu students take the Form 4 Fiji Junior Certificate (Table 13.2). This, however, is not in order to secure international recognition. Rather, it reflects the personnel constraints of a microstate. The Tuvalu government directs students to take the Fiji examination simply because it does not wish to operate its own credential at this level. The example highlights the relativism of scale: Fiji (population 750,000) is small compared to New Zealand (3,455,000) or Australia (17,300,000), but it is huge compared to Tuvalu (population 9,000). Yet even the government of Tuvalu insists on operating its own school certificate at the Form 5 level.

The main user of national certificates at the regional level is the University of the South Pacific. The University recognises the Fiji School Leaving Certificate (FSLC), the Fiji Form 7 Examination and the Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate. Such recognition in the case of the Fiji examinations derives from the perception that the country has the resources to operate a credible certification process at this level. For the PSSC, the recognition derives from the status of the SPBEA. Candidates seeking admission to universities outside the region are generally able to use their qualifications in the same way as they can within the region.

In summary, issues of recognition are not as complex as might be imagined. At the primary/secondary selection point (where selection occurs), all is well so long as the public has confidence in such selection. Similarly, when School Certificates are almost exclusively used for national purposes, the public in a sense takes what is offered — something like the value of a national currency. At tertiary entrance level, recognition in the region and internationally takes the form either of the PSSC regional certificate or of national Form 6 awards like the Fiji FSLC.

### **Costs**

The costs of examining in the region are difficult to estimate as a separate component of education budgets since practices vary considerably from country to country. In some states a block grant is given to an examination unit, out of which all costs of examining are to be met. Where shortfalls occur under this system, supplementary grants are sought but not always provided. Another arrangement, where examinations are not regarded as separate entities, is to consider the expenses of administering them to be part of normal annual education costs.

At the upper end of education systems, where examinations are considered to be of extra importance, candidate fees are charged. In some

cases these fees are paid by individual students, whilst in other systems such expenses are paid for by government. However, as noted by Renwick & Evers (1991, pp.50-1):

for as far ahead as anyone can see, activities such as the PSSC examination will cost vastly more to run than can be recouped from fees. Unit costs per candidate cannot avoid being very high compared with virtually every other examinations authority known to us.

Renwick & Evers added (p.51) that one of the SPBEA's main responsibilities is to be responsive to the needs of its member countries.

Given the very small size of the education administrations of its member countries and the problems they face setting up and running efficient assessment and data processing operations, the SPBEA Secretariat is likely to be called upon in unpredictable ways to provide 'fire fighting' services. In the spirit of co-operation to be found in the region, it is not an option to ignore such requests, but they add 'costs' to SPBEA which, in a world of perfect cost efficiency, would be passed on to the recipient administration.

Nevertheless, the SPBEA may be considered highly cost-effective in terms of the work done with a very small number of staff. The credit for this should chiefly go to the dedication and professionalism of the staff concerned. After the hiatus of 1984, the Board was fortunate to be able to recruit high calibre staff and to retain their services. One measure to ensure cost-effectiveness has been the policy to recruit personnel who have subject specialisms as well as substantial assessment experience and knowledge.

Through economies of scale, the SPBEA is able to deliver services at a much lower cost than would be incurred if national governments each tried to provide the services on their own. However, one ongoing problem has been to persuade governments of member countries to pay their annual dues in full and on time. Some governments do pay regularly, but others do not. In 1996, the government of Cook Islands withdrew from the SPBEA, citing the costs of membership, in the context of a domestic fiscal crisis and close ties to the New Zealand assessment system which meant that SPBEA inputs were relatively minor, as the main reasons. The Board has been able to secure inputs from donors of various kinds, and still receives two thirds of its income from the governments of Australia and New Zealand. However, the Board cannot rely on such assistance for the long term. Continuing effort is needed to show governments the value of the SPBEA, and to

persuade them to meet their financial obligations.

### **Political and Social Factors**

Though not always stated explicitly, national identity and status provoked by political, social and cultural considerations have permeated all educational matters. One sees the reflection of these factors in the labels adopted by Elley (1985b) to describe the examination options he considered to be available to Pacific countries at that time. He used the expressions "whole-hearted nationalism", "whole-hearted regionalism" and "partial regionalism".

South Pacific countries have responded to those options in different ways. The government of Fiji took an aggressive localisation approach at an early stage. The Fiji Junior Certificate Examination, taken by Form 4 students, was introduced in 1955 to replace the Cambridge Overseas Examination (Tavola 1991, p.67). However, higher levels remained dominated by Cambridge and later by New Zealand examinations. The phasing out of the NZSC South Pacific Options and the NZUE, combined with domestic political factors, provided impetus for change. In 1985 the Minister of Education (quoted in Singh 1985, pp.114-5) set out the dominant motivation as follows:

It is my view and that of Government, that the people of Fiji must have paramount say in the development of our curricula. Hence it is my intention to utilize all the skills available in this country. For the first time in 1989 all our examinations will be our own. And those who like to use fashionable terms, for them I might say, we would have been completely decolonised by that stage, in educational terms.

The Minister, presumably referring to Tuvalu in particular, recognised that Fiji played a service role for candidates from some other countries who took Fijian examinations. He indicated that he would still welcome external candidates, but that he intended to guard jealously the autonomy that he wanted for Fiji in its examination system. The Minister also recognised that assistance would be required with the process, and that part of this help might come from the SPBEA. However, he stressed, the SPBEA would not have any control over Fijian examinations. This sentiment was entirely acceptable to the SPBEA, which welcomed and supported the initiative (Rees 1985, p.75).

The government of Cook Islands also undertook early localisation of some examinations though, because the system is tied much more closely to New Zealand, did not follow this to higher levels. The Cook Islands School



Certificate (CISC) at Form 4 level was developed in the mid-1970s (Johnson 1985). At the outset, the certificate was ignored by students who were aiming for the New Zealand School Certificate at the end of Form 5, with the result that the CISC gained the reputation of being only a second-class qualification. Because of this, the government decided to require all students to sit the CISC, even if they later took the NZSC. Amongst other uses, the CISC was a vehicle for requiring students to study the Maori language. With the changes in the NZSC in the 1980s, policy makers in Cook Islands decided to retain ties with the New Zealand system from Form 5 onwards. Cook Islands now operates its Senior Secondary School qualifications through the New Zealand system administered by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and, as mentioned above, withdrew from SPBEA membership in 1996.

The government of Solomon Islands also made a relatively early move, this time at the Form 5 level. The Solomon Islands School Certificate was launched in 1978. The initiative was unusual in that the examination was created first and was only subsequently followed by curriculum reform to match the examination. While this does not seem a procedure to be recommended, in the Solomon Islands case it seems to have worked out quite well.

In contrast, Tonga followed a different path. With the phasing out of the NZSC and NZUE, the government of Tonga developed its own school certificate which was entirely based on Tongan curricula. However, whereas Fiji operated its own Form 7 Examination and other countries continued to use the USP Foundation Year curriculum through extension studies, Tonga entered into an arrangement with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to establish a seventh form which prepared students for the New Zealand Universities Bursary & Scholarship Examinations. Renwick & Evers (1991, p.28) reported that:

The Tongan Director of Education knows that, in an important respect, the seventh form award will be much more difficult than the fifth form award to 'Tonganise'. The numbers to be examined will be smaller and it will be more difficult to find enough local people to provide the full range of knowledge needed to set and moderate papers and mark examination scripts.

The government of Tonga therefore sought to balance efforts to localise its system with links both to New Zealand and the rest of the system through the PSSC.

Also under the heading of social factors are day-to-day aspects of the

operation of examinations. All Pacific-island teachers and educational administrators face pressures which arise from their social and cultural situations. One reads in the local newspapers of examination paper 'leakages' from the custody of appointed supervisors, and even of traditional gifts being offered to the staff of examination units to 'help' in their children's selection. Fortunately, the vast majority of examination personnel perform their work professionally and fairly in spite of these and similar pressures.

### **Conclusions**

Predictions are both difficult and dangerous to make: difficult because the gift of prophecy is not all that common, and dangerous because the possibility of error is always present. The situation is especially hazardous when looking at the variety of examination systems currently operating in the region. However, some generalisations are possible.

One can be fairly sure that the strong educational influence of New Zealand and Australia will continue for some time to come. The trend in both of these countries is towards criterion-referenced examinations and student profiling. This trend is almost unconsciously being transferred to the Pacific through the ongoing influence of externally-recruited curriculum developers working in the region. Internal assessments, which currently comprise 40 per cent of the total in the PSSC, are also being given more emphasis. This increases strain on teachers, who have to provide reliable figures and reports, and also on the SPBEA, which has to ensure inter-school and inter-country comparability of standards.

Given the slender economic resources of most island states in the Pacific, overseas aid is likely to be needed for the foreseeable future. Increasingly, the donors are looking hard at the results of aid provided. This has led to increased attention to standards and to the efficiency of education systems. Relating this to examinations, one might predict that instead of leaving standards in education to look after themselves in the belief that the general level of education is always rising, examiners will increasingly be asked to provide hard data on student achievements. This will mean much greater attention to establishing acceptable standards, both nationally and regionally, and devising reliable mechanisms for the monitoring of such standards. Some signs of this systems approach to examinations are already clearly discernable.

The SPBEA got off to an uncertain start during the 1980s, but has now clearly demonstrated its usefulness. It is a cost-effective organisation, which both supports national governments and delivers an important regional credential. The gradual expansion of membership has been an encourage-

ment, though the withdrawal of Cook Islands in 1996 was a disappointment to many. The application for membership by Marshall Islands, with its rather different colonial history and education system, was particularly significant.

However, 'regionalism' in the sense of educational co-operation, runs a very poor second to 'nationalism'. Over and over again, in spite of many arguments to the contrary (such as economics of scale, 'Pacific Way', and greater global impact), the governments of island states prefer to take a national stance in their assessment progress rather than a regional position. The creation of national certificates at Form Five level is but one example of this phenomenon. The regional PSSC should thus be seen as running against this general trend; but for that reason alone its future might seem tenuous. Were one of the larger countries to opt out of the PSSC, the economic viability of the operation would again be called into question. This situation has the positive effect of keeping the SPBEA operation efficient and sensitive to the needs of clients, because SPBEA officers know that they cannot afford to be complacent. However, it also creates tensions within the organisation. The SPBEA performs many functions in addition to the PSSC; but the PSSC is the most visible single product of regional cooperation.