

Part IV: Metropolitan Examinations Boards

Chapter 15:

University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate

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The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) was established in 1858. It was then called the Cambridge Local Examinations and Lectures Syndicate. The Syndicate had been formed at the request of a group of applicants in newly-prosperous industrial cities, including Bristol, Birmingham and Liverpool, who wished to have a yardstick by which to measure the performance of scholars in their ancient but previously neglected grammar schools. A similar approach was made to the University of Oxford, which responded by creating the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations (UODLE). As explained by Smith (1995, p.90):

The term 'Local' in the title of both UCLES and UODLE was intended to explain that the examinations were to be taken 'locally' in the schools and not 'centrally' in Cambridge or Oxford — an explanation which Syndicate officers have long tired of repeating ... in attempts to distinguish between this sense of the word and the use of 'local' to mean parochial.

The United Kingdom (UK) work of UCLES has continued to develop, but over 60 per cent of the Syndicate's work today is overseas. As such, the scope of UCLES activities is certainly anything but local in the sense of parochial.

The work of the syndicate is now divided into three approximately equal parts: school examinations in the UK, school examinations internationally (often in partnership with the governments of the countries concerned), and examinations in English as a Foreign Language for adults and younger students. This chapter mainly focuses on the second of these two categories. As a not-for-profit charitable body, the Syndicate ploughs back any financial

surplus into education and research, wherever possible in the less affluent of its client countries.

Expansion

The beginnings of UCLES were small: the first examinations in 1858 had only 370 candidates (Bradbury 1983, p.33). The marking was carried out only by the Syndics, that is the committee of 13 members of the university appointed to carry out examinations for schools. These people met and decided which candidates were to receive grades. In the early days, the examination was run from two small rooms in Cambridge. Examiners were paid in part according to the weight of scripts, rather than by number.

The first overseas examination was taken in what happens now to be part of a small state, namely the island of Trinidad. The arrangement for this examination was made very soon after the establishment of the Syndicate. The record of a meeting held on 11 December 1862 (quoted by Stockwell 1990, p.206) states that "the Vice-Chancellor read a letter begging for some extension of University action to schools in the Colonies: the Syndicate seemed to consider that the difficulties in the way of such extension were insurmountable". However, in 1863 10 candidates in Trinidad did sit the examination. This was largely because permission was obtained for the examinations to be sent in sealed parcels to the Governor through the Colonial Office.

At first, reflecting the spirit of the times, only boys were permitted to become candidates for the examination. In 1865, however, girls were allowed to take the examinations on the condition that the names of the girls who were successful were not published (Bradbury 1983, p.34). By 1877, 6,435 candidates sat the examinations in 80 boys' centres and 70 girls' centres. By 1959 the number of candidates had risen to 120,000, and today it is over 1,200,000.

After 1869, a steady trickle of applications from overseas locations was approved year after year. These included Natal (South Africa) in 1870, Mauritius in 1873, Wellington (New Zealand) in 1874, Georgetown (present-day Guyana) in 1874, Jamaica in 1882, and the Straits Settlements (present-day Singapore) in 1891. A particular surge of overseas interest came during the 1890s. In 1898, 1,220 candidates at 36 overseas centres wrote Cambridge examinations. In addition to the various parts of the British empire, there were requests from other countries. Examination centres were first requested for China and Argentina in 1917, and for Turkey in 1923.

As well as its own examinations, UCLES serviced other examinations such as the Barbados Scholarship, the Jamaica Scholarship, and the Queen's Scholarships of Malaya. All these scholarships were tenable at British

Universities. In more recent times, UCLES has been involved in many parts of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, as well as with such countries as Brazil, Spain and Vietnam.

UCLES uses over 16,000 people to mark its examinations, over 75 per cent of them being practising school teachers. UCLES relies on a complex computer system to total marks and to present information for senior examiners to use in making decisions about the grades awarded to over a million candidates.

Crises

During the period 1875 to 1930, the overseas operations suffered crisis after crisis. Some crises arose because the countries taking the examinations were very distant, and others because of turbulent weather conditions. In 1875 the New Zealand scripts were delayed by several months, with the result that the examiners were not paid until late 1876. In 1897 it was reported that candidates had taken the examination in the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), but by March 1898 these scripts had not reached Cambridge. The reason given was that two of the people put in charge of the examination had died within a few months of each other, and the key to the box that held the scripts had been lost! The key was not found until 18 months later, whereupon the scripts were marked and the results issued to the Gold Coast (Stockwell 1990, p.207).

In 1915 the examination papers from Jamaica were lost when the steamer (by chance aptly named 'Candidate') was torpedoed. Scripts from West Africa were also lost in the same year, when the ship carrying the papers was captured by the Germans. UCLES decided to be generous and resolved to repay candidates their fees if the scripts did not reach Cambridge. Amongst other calamities was a delay in examinations in Jamaica in 1926 because of an earthquake, and a hurricane in Nassau in 1928.

Continuity and Innovation

One feature of the examination system has been the continuation of examinations overseas that are no longer available in the UK. Three examples illustrate this observation. In 1920 the Preliminary examination was discontinued in the UK, but it survived in the colonies until 1939. The Junior, which ended in England in 1939, lasted overseas until 1953. And the School Certificate, which ended in the UK in 1953, is still being offered overseas.

UCLES has become increasingly aware of the special needs of overseas candidates, and has reacted positively to most requests for modification.

This matter was first raised in 1902, when a body in Malaya observed that many people "favoured dropping the Cambridge connection because it had led to the cramming of number of useless subjects by boys who should rather have been preparing themselves for a Malayan career" (Stockwell 1990, p.211). On this occasion, the commission concluded that these examinations had led to improvements in English-language education in Malaya, and that internal certification would not carry the same weight as a Cambridge qualification. Nevertheless, the Syndicate did include Malay as a language of examination in 1920. The precedent for local languages had been set in 1906, when papers were prepared in Tamil and Sinhalese for Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). Four years later the Syndicate agreed to add Arabic and Sanskrit in response to requests from Shanghai centres in China; and in 1919, Hindi and Urdu were made available for candidates in India.

In addition to academic examinations, in 1916 UCLES accepted a proposal from Ceylon for a special needlework examination. Also, in 1933 it approved an art syllabus for West Africa. By the end of the 1930s UCLES had introduced agricultural sciences and four African languages for the Gold Coast. Candidates also wrote special botany papers mentioning only local plants. UCLES prided itself on the fact that "the adaptation of the Syndicate's examinations to local needs now tends to be as much due to stimulus given on the initiative of the Syndicate as to pressure that might be brought to bear upon the Syndicate by local authorities" (archival correspondence 1935, quoted in Stockwell 1990, p.212). At the same time, the Colonial Secretary's Advisory Committee on Education professed itself "well satisfied with the special efforts made by the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate to adapt their requirements and syllabuses to local overseas needs and conditions".

A more recent innovation, which is of particular use to small states, is a computer programme developed by UCLES and called the Small Examinations Processing System. It provides a complete examination administration system for use on personal computers. It became operational in 1995, and has so far been installed in The Bahamas, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

UCLES also provides training in the techniques of educational assessment and innovation. Such training may be either in the countries concerned or at Cambridge. In 1993, for example, participation in Cambridge-based training included personnel from Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Estonia, The Gambia, India, Latvia, Lesotho, Malaysia, Maldives, Namibia, Romania, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovenia, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

UCLES claims to treat all states in the same way, so that, for example,

Ascension Island is treated the same as Zimbabwe. UCLES also tries to give as fair a service as possible to all the candidates who take our examinations. It is able to trace the work of any candidate up to six months after the candidate has taken the examination. It also looks at the results of individual countries, in addition to making an overall appraisal, and gives regular reports to ministries of education. UCLES boasts of its professional manner and ability to meet the highest standards of validity, reliability and integrity.

Since UCLES is a part of the University and bears its name, it effectively exports the name of Cambridge. UCLES is the first contact many people overseas have with the University, and it is vital that UCLES maintains high standards in all its activities. As a result of its international experience and success with examining world wide, in 1992 UCLES was awarded the Queen's Award. It is the most prestigious award that a British enterprise can win, and UCLES is the only UK examining board to have received this honour.

Localisation

The first hint of localisation, that is of countries running their own examinations instead of the examinations being run by UCLES, is recorded in 1919. The practical problems of administering an UCLES examination at some 6,000 miles distance were felt to warrant a reconsideration of UCLES' role in India. However, it was not until the early 1970s that India finally ran its own examination systems in place of UCLES. The transfer of responsibility for examining to an overseas country usually involves the training of administrators from these countries in Cambridge, the seconding of UCLES staff for duties overseas, and the training of examiners both in the overseas country and at Cambridge.

The Indian initiative was followed by similar steps in other parts of the world. From the 1940s onwards, many British colonies gained independence. Many of the politicians and administrators in the new countries had been educated in the Cambridge curriculum. The new states naturally provided secondary education for a wider range of their citizens, and thus extended the Cambridge system. Later these countries started to found their own examination systems, in many cases basing their models on the UCLES system and engaging the help of UCLES in the process.

Examples of this pattern of events are numerous. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) was inaugurated in Accra in 1953 and it held its first examinations in cooperation with UCLES in 1955. In 1957 the Federation of Malaya's Certificate of Education was launched, again with the help of UCLES. To assist with the administration of such ventures at

headquarters, four area committees were set up in 1955 to cover the affairs of India & Pakistan, the Caribbean, Malaya, and East & Central Africa. Other localisations that took place after the creation of WAEC include the East African Examinations Council, the Indian Examinations Council, the Caribbean Examinations Council, the Zambian Council, and the Malaysian Examinations Council. Zimbabwe localised its examinations in 1995, and Chapters 2 and 8 in the present book document processes of localisation in Botswana and The Bahamas. However, Zimbabwe and The Bahamas take advantage of the accreditation system offered by UCLES. The Syndicate offers various forms of accreditation including monitoring syllabuses, moderating question papers, and helping examiners to grade their examinations.

Even after countries have localised, UCLES commonly works very closely with those countries to ensure that the examination process works smoothly. In some cases, countries that have localised have had neither the resources nor the expertise to produce certain question papers. In these cases, UCLES has maintained some assistance.

Moreover, in parts of the world localisation has still left an overt parallel role for UCLES. In the Caribbean, for example, students in some islands still take UCLES examinations rather than, or together with, those of the Caribbean Examinations Council.

GCSE, IGCSE and AICE

As a result of the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) into the UK in 1986, UCLES decided to introduce an international version called the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). The examination was aimed at 16 year old students in international schools throughout the world. The examination soon became very popular, and is accepted by universities as being equivalent to the GCSE. It is taken in schools in over 100 countries and territories, including Ascension Island, Bahrain, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Cuba, Cyprus, Eire, Falkland Islands, Fiji, Indonesia, Japan, Malta, Mauritius, Netherlands Antilles, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Seychelles, Singapore, St. Helena, Tristan & Cunha, and Vanuatu.

More recently UCLES helped The Bahamas to introduce a new examination based on the IGCSE. The Bahamian General Certificate of Secondary Education was introduced in 1993 to replace the University of London Schools Examination Board examinations.

As indicated in Chapter 4 of this book, Namibia decided to use the IGCSE as its national scheme. The history of this decision is interesting. The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), which was the

political group fighting for freedom in Namibia, had a school in the Congo in a village called Loudima. The school was set up by Nahas Angula, the Minister for Education in Exile. Members of UCLES staff visited Loudima and introduced the IGCSE to the staff. After a pilot scheme through which it was confirmed that the youngsters could cope with this examination, SWAPO decided to run the examination nationally once the party took over the government.

Still more recently, UCLES has introduced the Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) designed for 18 year olds in international schools. Much interest has been shown in this examination world wide, and already it is gaining a reputation as being an excellent preparation for either university or the world of work. At the outset in 1996, candidates for the AICE were based in nine countries including one small state, namely Cyprus.

Costs and Financing

The costs of running an examination board are considerable. They include the costs of setting and printing papers, marking scripts, moderating grades, and administration of the whole process. In the UCLES budget, approximate proportions of expenditure of income from fees are as follows:

- 30 per cent for payment of examiners and moderators,
- 8 per cent for expenses for examiners and moderators,
- 16 per cent for stationery (including printing) and despatch, and
- 56 per cent for overheads including staff salaries, heating, lighting, building maintenance, investment in new equipment, and research and development.

Many countries which are worried about security decide to have their question papers printed in the UK rather than in their own localities. Some countries also prefer their candidates' answers to be marked overseas, to ensure that there is no favouritism or bias towards race, culture or gender.

The break-even point for an examination (i.e. outgoings minus income) seems to be in the region of 4,000 candidates with five subjects per candidate. Obviously, the more subjects an examination board offers, the greater the cost. The advantage of a large, international examination board is that it can offer a diverse array of examinations and assessment techniques at reasonable cost.

The cost of printing certificates can also be high, because such printing must be done securely. Any certificates bearing the name of UCLES are printed by the Syndicate itself. UCLES does not permit certificates for

examinations that it has helped to prepare to be printed outside the UK. This raises costs, but that factor is minor when compared with the security risks. For the accreditation service, the cost of this printing is about 3 per cent of the total cost. However, countries are encouraged to print non-secure materials locally. This includes handbooks for centres, instructions to candidates, and synopses of syllabuses.

Liaison with clients also creates considerable costs. Senior staff from UCLES make many overseas visits, and meet a full spectrum of people from Ministers to classroom students. They listen carefully, and try to ensure that local wishes are implemented. We make biennial visits to the Caribbean, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, and annual visits to Malaysia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia and Botswana. During these visits, and by regular contact with ministries, they sort out problems such as the specimens that are suitable for biology practicals, the availability of chemicals and apparatus, and whether the experiments will work under the conditions of each particular country. To ensure a backup system, UCLES prepares alternative papers in case practicals are impossible to conduct.

Conclusions

UCLES has a long history, and has helped meet the needs of small states from its earliest days. The operation is of course concerned with large states as well as small ones; and to some extent the small states benefit from that since they are able to reap economies of scale and international recognition.

UCLES has evolved substantially during its history. One feature of the present era has been willingness to tailor products to meet the demands of clients. This results in great flexibility in the nature of the awards and in the design of syllabuses. The fact that UCLES has supported efforts to localise examinations has not in fact led to a collapse of the UCLES market. Indeed, rather to the contrary, UCLES' willingness to meet the needs of the countries concerned has enhanced its reputation and ensured an ongoing role in training and in back-up support. In the initial period after World War II, it seemed that with the various localisation initiatives, the days of the overseas operations of UCLES were numbered. However, as noted by Smith (1995, p.92):

Nothing could have been further from the truth. As one door closed, another opened. With the loss of work from West Africa, entries from East Africa increased. As the East African Examinations Council became independent, new work came in from Malaysia. When Malaysia changed to a Malay-medium education system, entries from South Africa increased. A new lower level examination was developed for Singapore.

An international version of the GCSE was taken up by International Schools throughout the world. Also, with the independence of Commonwealth countries came an increase in availability of secondary education. When Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, there were 15,000 O-level candidates. Now there are 250,000.

While much of Smith's account focused on large states, UCLES has continued to play a strong, albeit evolving, role in small states. Of particular importance is the fact that UCLES can offer widely-recognised qualifications at a reasonable cost. Through the international operation, UCLES is able to achieve economies of scale which would not be achieved by the small states themselves. And since UCLES has a huge pool of technical expertise, the small states are able to gain specialised advice which permits tailoring to their particular circumstances. UCLES is proud of its record, and looks forward to continued cooperation with a wide range of states, both large and small, and both within and outside the Commonwealth.