

The South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment and National Fifth Form Certificates*

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The subject of likely developments in formal examinations in the South Western Pacific region is complex. Not the least factor contributing to this complexity is that we have to make predictions and, as we all know, predictions often end up very wide of the mark. In spite of this difficulty, the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) is in a position to hazard guesses about the future of such examinations, especially at the Form 5 level.

The South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment

The SPBEA was set up in 1981 as a result of several years' work by the South Pacific Commission and the South Pacific Forum. If the Board has a father and mother they are in the South Pacific Commission. However, like all good children, the Board is now standing on its own feet, and continues to enjoy very good relations with its parents.

To understand the reason for the Board's establishment, we have to go back into the early 1970s when the notion of a Board, or similar organisation, was first mooted. In those days some countries in the region had already achieved political independence from former colonial governments, and others were considering it. The South Pacific Forum was well ahead of its time in thinking about a body which would somehow fill an educational need far beyond the immediate days of independence. It was assumed that there would be very little need for any metropolitan examinations in independent countries. The development of a nation's own education certificates was seen to be as proper as hoisting a new flag or issuing a new national passport. But now, long after independence, we are still faced with the problem, in some people's eyes, of metropolitan examinations being used in independent nation states in this region.

The SPBEA was born out of a wish to help each country develop its own

* Based on an address to the Suva Institute for Educational Research, 9 July 1985.

national certificates. It was felt that the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate and New Zealand examinations would disappear very rapidly after independence was achieved. This didn't happen, and we are faced with certain dilemmas as a result. Our prime task was to give assistance and training to individuals and groups in the preparation of their own nationally based examinations, at all levels. It was also believed that eventually an organisation like the Board might become a certifying body. It was thought that Pacific countries might come together and develop a 'South Pacific School Certificate' which would reflect not only the needs and aspirations of each country but regional characteristics as well. In fact, if anyone looks at our Board's constitution, it can be seen that it has five overall objectives, four of which are concerned with the training of personnel and the giving of advice to governments on national examinations, but the fifth is concerned with the provision of prescriptions for examinations. Or, to put it another way, the Board's fifth objective was regarded as the initial stage in setting up a South Pacific Examinations Board. That was five or six years ago. Today, it can be safely said that this last objective has been laid aside. Each Board member country has expressed, in one way or another, that this is not what they wish to happen. Most of them have said that they want to develop their own national certificates, at least to the Form 5 level. The idea of an umbrella body like the Board actually developing prescriptions, printing examination papers, marking them and then issuing certificates, is probably shelved, at least in its original form.

Perhaps it is appropriate at this point to say therefore what the Board is. We are not directly involved with curriculum development. However, almost by definition, any organisation which offers advice in the preparation of examination papers, is concerned with an aspect of examinations called Content Validity. If a paper is invalid, from a content standpoint, it is necessary to go back to the specification, or blueprint, for that particular examination. That in turn is governed by the syllabus of the subject being examined, which likewise is specified by the overall curriculum followed by the school. So in a sense, we are concerned with curriculum development, but not directly. To regard us as a curriculum development body, or an organisation which holds courses in curriculum development is quite erroneous. Nor are we a certification authority.

People have asked us about our relationship with the University of the South Pacific and whether or not any duplication of work is done. The short answer to the last part of that question is 'no'. The University, particularly the Institute of Education, does have an important assessment

function. But the Institute and the Board have reached firm agreement that we would not trespass on each other's territory. The arrangement is that the University Institute of Education concerns itself with assessment at classroom level whilst the Board concentrates on assessment at the national certificate level. This may be thought to be a very fine distinction. It is a fine distinction, but it is one which works in practice. I cannot think of a single instance in the last three and a half years where any duplication of assessment effort has occurred: we have been meticulous in keeping our two kinds of work apart. However, that is not to say that we do not come together from time to time when it is to our mutual benefit. For example, this year we have worked together in Western Samoa and Tonga and are very shortly to work in Tonga again on a Regional Examiners' Course. The Institute helps the Board, and the Board helps the Institute in large projects, and this is how it should be.*

The only area where overlapping has appeared, or is likely to appear, is that of standardised test development, but that is outside the scope of this paper. It should be mentioned though that there is a growing interest in the South Pacific region in the development of nationally produced standardised tests for diagnostic and/or national monitoring purposes. Such tests already exist in Fiji and the Cook Islands. Western Samoa has expressed interest in developing them, as has Solomon Islands and Kiribati. If such tests are used for diagnostic purposes, then they properly fall under the aegis of the IOE. But if, as in the Cook Islands, they are used largely as monitoring devices to check on subject standards from island to island, then they are being used for a national assessment purpose. And that is where the Board comes in. It is the only area I can think of where the Institute and the Board might overlap, but there is plenty of opportunity in this field for several Boards and Institutes to do their work.

The area of the Board's operation is virtually the same as that of the University and it is a huge expanse to cover. People often talk about the size of Australia, and the great distance from Sydney to Perth. Well, our parish is bigger than that. I think the distance from Rarotonga to Honiara is in excess of that from Sydney to Perth. It is a distance we travel as often as possible. What do we do in these countries in terms of national certificate? Indeed what is a national certificate? The number of places that are available to secondary and tertiary students in the South Pacific region is often restricted due to economic constraints. Some countries operate a

* See pp. 78-81 for the USP's role in the establishment of the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment.

very severe selection mechanism at the end of the primary and secondary systems. When governments issue certificates recording the results of such tests, these, for our purposes, may be defined as national certificates. The Board visits a particular country to moderate the papers used to select the students. We subject them to very close scrutiny. We look at the marking which is undertaken. We also look at any statistical analysis which is done. After this is all over, we are able to pass judgement as to the fairness (as we understand it) of that selection. If we think the selection is somehow faulty, we say so; we have no axes to grind. We can state quite plainly in our reports that we think that a Mathematics paper wasn't doing its job properly or that an English paper was a little too easy this year or maybe some marginally unsuitable students did get through the screen.

Regional Fifth Form Certificates

Moving on the School Certificates at Form 5 level, what is happening? The following represents an overview of Board member countries. The opinions expressed are, of course, neither those of the respective countries nor the Board, but my own.

Cook Islands

The Cook Islands already have a National Certificate operating at Form 4 level. Since Cook Islanders are also New Zealand citizens they have very close links with the latter country. I believe that there are more Cook Islanders living in New Zealand than in the Cook Islands. Consequently, the pressure on the Cook Islands to establish a School Certificate at Form 5 level is not as great perhaps as elsewhere in the region. As far as it is possible to judge, Cook Islands people would be prepared to go along with whatever new arrangements may materialise in New Zealand. The external examination situation in New Zealand is at present a very fluid one. It is being subjected to a lot of scrutiny and it is not entirely clear what the position will become over the next four or five years. I think it is true to say that, whatever happens in New Zealand, the Cook Islands will probably follow suit, even to the extent of using standard internal New Zealand School Certificate papers if that becomes necessary. They tend to regard their own Form 4 School Certificate as trial run for what is seen as the 'big' thing, the New Zealand School Certificate itself at Form 5.

Fiji

Fiji is the largest of our Board countries and perhaps has the greatest interest in the continuation of metropolitan examinations. They presently take the New Zealand School Certificate at Form 5. As most of us know, the provision of New Zealand 'South Pacific Option' papers to the region is to be discontinued in 1988. That is not to say that there will be no New Zealand School Certificate after 1988. That will depend upon what happens in New Zealand. If the government there decides to opt for a completely internal system of assessment then it is quite likely that there will be no New Zealand School Certificate of any description available to the South Pacific. But, as I understand it, even though the South Pacific Options are disappearing in 1988, countries of the Pacific will still be able to make arrangements with New Zealand to use internal New Zealand papers after that date. It is very hard, however, to see the relevance for Fiji of studying subject matter of a specific New Zealand character.

It seems that the Fiji government will shortly announce the setting up of its own Fiji School Certificate. I hope that is what will transpire. It might take the form of upgrading the present Fiji Junior Certificate which is held in Form 4. We have had the opportunity over the last three and a half years to look closely at examinations in Fiji and there are many competent examiners in the nation who are quite capable of setting a high quality School Certificate at Form 5 level. I cannot understand the past reluctance of people in Fiji to establish their own certificates. There seems to be a constant looking over the shoulder at what Australia, New Zealand or the United Kingdom are doing at the School Certificate level, as if it had anything to do with Fiji! Let's stop a moment and ask, "To what use is the present School Certificate put?" It surely has two main uses. It is first of all a terminal award for certain pupils whose school careers have come to an end. They take that certificate and they look for jobs. They go to the banks and offices and government departments. They present this certificate and they're judged, together with other things, on the basis of their results. For others it is used as a selection device. It will help the more academically able to go on to Form 6 and upwards. Therefore the use to which a School Certificate is put at present, is almost entirely internal to the country. Consequently, it doesn't particularly matter what New Zealand is doing at that level. As long as the Fijian people are satisfied that it fulfills those two functions adequately, i.e. that it provides a young person with the possibility of employment and that it selects the more academically able students, then it is doing its job. Whether it is comparable with other countries is of little importance.

Kiribati

At the moment Kiribati uses the New Zealand School Certificate in most subjects, but in some practical areas the country still utilises the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate. It is not yet clear what is going to happen after 1988 in Kiribati. The authorities are fully aware of the problem and I'm sure that shortly they will decide upon a suitable course of action. On a recent visit to Tarawa, several interesting notions were mooted unofficially, including the possibility of a full scale return to Cambridge for the entire range of Form 5 subjects. My hope is that they will develop their own Kiribati School Certificate with assistance from a body like SPBEA.

Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands is special because it is the only country in our Board membership which has already a fully fledged School Certificate operating at Form 5 level. It has been running now for several years and in our judgement is a very good certificate. The story is told of a young Solomon Islander who some years ago took his new SISC to a bank interview for a vacant position there. The bank interviewer frowned and asked, "Is this certificate the same as Cambridge?" The young man of course had no idea of international comparability and could only reply, "I don't know." The interviewer then rang the Ministry of Education with the same question. The reply was a very short one. "No, it is not the same as Cambridge." "Oh!" said the banker, "Is it the same as the New Zealand School Certificate then?" Again came the brief answer. "No, it is not the same." "Well," said the banker, "I don't know what to do with this certificate. We're not used to this sort of thing at the bank." The Ministry spokesman answered very politely, "I think you should begin to learn what the document represents because there is nothing else. It is our National School Certificate and you may as well get used to it because that's all you're going to see in the future."

I don't know if the young man obtained the job or not, (I hope so), or even if the story is entirely historical, but it does illustrate the sort of initial difficulties which might arise over acceptability. Since then, as far as I'm aware there hasn't been any serious complaint about that Certificate. Today young people take it and obtain jobs with government, the banks and elsewhere. Unfortunately some of them don't get jobs, but that is not the fault of the Certificate. So the School Certificate in Solomon Islands stands; it is part of their educational life. They're not comparing it with

anything else because it is incomparable. It is theirs. Now there may be some technical aspects where there is room for improvement. But at least they're driving their own vehicle along their own road. And even if the occasional pothole is encountered, it is a pothole of their own making. Such progress merits unequivocal support.

Tonga

In 1984 the Kingdom of Tonga announced plans to establish its own School Certificate by 1988. At the moment discussions are taking place between the government, New Zealand education officials and our Board regarding the roles that each might play in the planned development of such a Tongan School Certificate. There is little doubt that Tonga will establish this School Certificate by 1988. Again it may be asked, "What value will be Tongan Certificate have?" Provided it fulfills the national needs of Tonga, and expresses the educational aspirations of the Tongan people, its existence is justified. A large amount of work has already gone into the planning of it and it seems that over the next three years the plans will work themselves into reality.

Tuvalu

Tuvalu is a small country which hitherto has tended to use the education certificates of Fiji. Tuvalu has very few resources at its disposal to develop its own School Certificate. It does have a national examination in that it has a selection test which regulates the flow of children into secondary education. It is likely that Tuvalu will follow the example of Fiji. If Fiji sets up its own School Certificate, then it is a fair assumption that Tuvalu will apply to use it and that such permission will in all probability be given.

Western Samoa

This country also has plans to establish its own School Certificate by 1988 or thereabouts. Although the Samoan plans are not yet wholly defined, a great amount of thinking has already been done. Western Samoa already has a Form 5 National Certificate. In that country they have a double Form 5 year, the National Certificate comes in the lower Fifth to be followed by the New Zealand School Certificate in the Upper Fifth. Whether they are going to abolish the two-year Form 5 and call it one-year,

is not yet clear. It appears likely that the existing National Form 5 qualification will be upgraded into a Western Samoa School Certificate.

Conclusion

I will conclude with a forecast, (not a prophecy). I think that by 1988 most of the countries served by the Board and by the University will either have their own National School Certificates or they will be very close to it. As far as our Board is concerned, I envisage us over the next three or four years continuing to visit countries early each year, looking at draft papers and in consultation with local examiners and administrators, suggesting changes here and there if necessary. At the end of each year we might help with the allocation of grades. Finally we might produce a report on each examination saying as objectively as we can that the overall exercise was fair and had achieved what it set out to do or otherwise.

Editorial Note

For those readers who are interested in USP-related early developments in the history of the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment the following extracts are of some significance:

Extract 1: Directors Meet on Evaluation and Assessment

During the past week, September 1-4, 1978, Directors of Education within the University Region held a special meeting to discuss evaluation and assessment. The draft summary of their meeting is presented below:

1. The Meeting reaffirmed the belief that it is the right of every country to develop its own curricula based upon its national needs, and agreed that each country has the right to establish and maintain its own assessment procedures.
2. The Meeting accepted that there was an immediate need to have access to an appropriate central organisation for the following purposes:
 - (a) To assist each country to develop its assessment procedures.
 - (b) To train personnel in the region in the development and use of assessment and evaluation procedures.
 - (c) To assist in the moderation of assessment procedures used in the region.
 - (d) To facilitate co-operation on educational matters affecting the region.

3. The meeting established itself as the South Pacific Board for Educational Co-operation and recommended that Governments of the USP Region ratify its decision by writing to the Secretary General of the South Pacific Commission. The Board's main purpose is to cooperate on educational matters affecting the USP Region, with initial emphasis on evaluation and assessment, and that the membership of the Board comprise the Regional Directors of Education (or their representatives), two representatives of the University of the South Pacific, one representative from the South Pacific Commission, and such other persons as the Board may wish to co-opt.
4. After much debate, the Meeting felt that the specific purpose mentioned in para. 2(a), (b) and (c) above could be fulfilled by expanding the University's Psychological Assessment Unit, as envisaged in the Report on *Future Role of the Psychological Assessment Unit*. Accordingly the Meeting decided to recommend to the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific that the Psychological Assessment Unit be expanded as conceived in the report. It recommended that the following be the order of priorities:
 - (a) the appointment of the Director and the basic support services;
 - (b) curriculum evaluation and examination moderation;
 - (c) educational selection;
 - (d) vocational selection for school leavers;
 - (e) personnel selection for industry;
 - (f) special education.
5. The Meeting recommended that in so far as the performance of the service functions outlined above are concerned, the Psychological Assessment Unit be guided by priorities determined by the Board.
6. The Meeting strongly recommended that Governments in the Region assist the University in attracting funds to provide the services specified above, and that overseas aid be sought initially for a five-year period, and that the future involvement of the Psychological Assessment Unit be reviewed at the end of that period.
7. The Meeting acknowledged with gratitude the assistance being offered by the New Zealand Government to countries of the South Pacific Region in the preparation of alternative prescriptions and papers and in particular the collaborative manner in which such assistance was offered. It recommended that the New Zealand Government continue to offer such help to countries in the Region on a national or on a sub-regional basis as the case might be.
8. The Meeting also accepted the Ramage Report and noted with approval the measures to be taken and the timetable proposed for the extension of the range of alternative papers and prescriptions.

9. The Meeting also considered that it would be immensely useful to the Region to continue to have the co-operation and support of the New Zealand Government in its activities, in particular to facilitate the USP's Psychological Assessment Unit, to provide the services in respect of assessment and evaluation specified in paragraph 2, and to revise the nature of their assistance in conjunction with the proposed review of the involvement of the Psychological Assessment Unit after five years.
10. The Meeting expressed its gratitude to the South Pacific Commission for convening the meeting, to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation for funding it, and to the New Zealand Government, the Papua New Guinea Government, the University of the South Pacific, and the countries in the South Pacific, for their participation in what the Meeting considered was a significant conference.
11. The Meeting requested the South Pacific Commission to convene subsequent meetings of the Board.

Reference: *Talanoa*, Extension Services, USP, 5 September, 1975.

Extract 2: Proposal for the Establishment of the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment

At the Institute of Education's (USP) Third Regional Advisory Seminar/ Workshop, 4-7 December, 1978, one of the stated Aims of the Seminar mentioned in the IOE Report of that year was:

- (vii) To enable the South Pacific Commission to continue its discussions with members countries towards the development of a South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment.

On the afternoon of the first day of the Seminar the IOE meeting was adjourned and the rest of the time was taken up with an SPC session on formalizing proposals for the establishment of a South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment.

The outcome of the SPC session is recorded in the IOE Report as an Appendix (p. 76) as follows:

South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment

1. During the Seminar, time was set aside for the South Pacific Commission to organize a meeting of Permanent Heads of Education

to formalize the proposals on the establishment of a South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment agreed to at the 18th South Pacific Conference in October 1978. The meeting was opened by Mr. Sione Kite (SPC) and chaired by Mr. Perefoti Tamati (Western Samoa). Observers included members of the New Zealand, Australian and British High Commissions; USP, and Mr. Peter Beveridge of the New Zealand Education Department.

2. The Vice-Chancellor of the USP explained the University's position; that it supported the establishment of the Board; that it did not wish to dominate the Board as space was very limited; that it would like to assist the Board professionally, but that resources would be needed to enable the University to do this.
3. Australian, New Zealand and British representatives supported the establishment of the Board, but only the latter two were in a position to commit the amount of funds recommended in the SPC report.
4. The meeting agreed to accept the SPC offer to lease space for the Board in the SPC Education Training Centre in Samabula.
5. An Interim Executive Committee was established, comprising representatives from Fiji, Nauru, Tuvalu and SPC.
6. The Interim Executive Committee was asked to see that the instruments of accession are ratified as soon as possible, and that an interim Executive Officer is appointed.

Reference: Report of the University of the South Pacific Institute of Education, Third Regional Advisory Seminar/Workshop, 4-7 December, 1978.