

EXAMINATION BOARDS: REGULATORY OVERKILL OR PATTERN FOR THE FUTURE?

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The Examination Boards that award A-levels and GCSEs began in the nineteenth century as university committees dedicated to ensuring high, and trusted, standards in education. Progressive government intervention has led to a decline in the credibility of the exams. How this happened and what can be done in future to maintain standards is the subject of this paper.

How did the proudly independent mid-nineteenth-century examination boards become an arm of the state? Originally devised to verify talent for the new meritocratic age, the boards are now subject to legislation that mirrors the high days of statist command and control. What prompted so great a change? What impact has it had on examinations and the esteem in which they are held?

This paper focuses on those moments during the past 150 years when power over secondary school examinations can be seen to move from the private to the public sector. It concludes with some outline recommendations on how an element of freedom might be restored to the system.

It matters because:

'With examinations largely determining the shape of society and affecting the distribution of power in the land, it seems more essential that their control be studied carefully than that the time be devoted to improving the technique of testing, important though this is.'¹

The development of widespread schooling was fed by the Industrial Revolution and rapid population growth; means to measure its effectiveness grew from the rise of rationalism and utilitarianism, which together made 'efficiency' a new social force. Complex structures appeared in both the public and private spheres requiring a quality of management which the old patronage system was incapable of delivering. A meritocratic ideal developed, driven by a concern for the efficient use of manpower, faith in competition as an instrument of social reform and the liberal challenge to entrenched oligarchies.

First to face the challenge were Oxford and Cambridge universities: 'Descriptions of the universities in the 18th and 19th centuries suggest a period of somnolence, of complacency, of lack of academic purpose.'² Introducing competitive exams between 1800 and 1850 enabled them to retain their place as producers of the British elite. Jeremy Bentham, a 'new' Oxford system graduate, introduced the idea of competitive entry exams for the Civil Service in 1827. A decade or so later, another Oxonian, Benjamin Jowett, argued that: '... examination at a lower level would exercise the happiest influence on the education of the lowest classes throughout England, acting by the surest of all motives: the desire that man has of bettering himself.'³

By 1847, James Booth (Vice-Principal, Liverpool Collegiate Institution) was able to envisage that, after an agreed date, no man would be eligible for public office without an honours degree, a certificate from the 'government Board of examiners'⁴ or attendance at a military college. The 'new' Oxford circle pressed Jowett's arguments for public examinations, their efforts culminating in the post-1853 Northcote Trevelyan reforms, establishing a competitive-entry-based Civil Service essentially as it stands today.

The campaign for schoolchildren's examinations, particularly in secondary education, was part of this drive to raise standards throughout national life. In 1833 the House of Commons was asked to consider a national education system. Though nothing came of this prematurely ambitious scheme, it encouraged the government to commit £20,000 for buildings to be run by local school boards. This was followed in

1839 by the Whig promulgation of the first state body to intervene in the conduct of education, the Privy Council Committee on Education, mandated to ensure 'value for money' in the use of public funds.

The mid-nineteenth century saw growing recognition of the need for a large white-collar workforce to fill the clerical jobs created by industrialisation. But most English schools could not meet this demand. Public schools for the rich/upper class underwent marked improvements between 1833 and 1860, while elementary schools – funded via charities, churches and limited state aid – served a substantial section of the lower classes. Only the *middle* classes were neglected. Lacking the wealth, or connections, to send their children to public school, they resolutely refused to allow their children to rub shoulders with workers' offspring. The ancient grammar schools had become inefficient and incompetent. The House of Commons returned to the subject time and again but the mores of the time prohibited direct state action. So the education debate focused on the 'Middle-Class Schools' problem.

A Local Examinations movement, dedicated to ensuring that exams could be taken near to local (middle-class) schools began to plug the gap:

'It is evident that, in the absence of some public test, the parents, a body of men habitually engaged in manufacturing, buying and selling, are not, as a class, good judges of the merit or demerit of the education they pay for, till (too late) they judge by the result in after life: they require professional help.'⁵

The writer of these words, and a founder of the movement, Sir Thomas Dyke Acland, turned to Oxford and Cambridge Universities as 'consideration had shown the great inconveniences which might result . . . [from state action].'⁶ The universities were convinced by a proposal to 'bring down the honours of the universities to bear upon what is called a middle-class education.'⁷ Other factors in their decision included the desirability of finding talented boys for university entry in what would now be classed as a public relations exercise: 'We want something that will make Oxford and Cambridge more than mere names in the minds of these classes and prevent them also from being regarded as merely clerical seminaries . . .'⁸ Thus, in 1858, Oxford created

the Delegacy for Local Examinations, and Cambridge the Local Examinations Syndicate. These certifying organisations conducted exams in special centres under their own control.

These efforts were supported by the newly formed Headmasters' Conference, which made external examinations one of its first items of business. Once again, the question of state assistance was raised but public confidence in university standards led the headmasters to call on Oxbridge and the subsequent creation of the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board. In 1870 the Endowed (secondary) Schools Commissioners insisted that annual examinations by an external authority were included in any scheme it aided.

Examinations became ubiquitous. From the armed forces and musicians, to chemists and lawyers – entrance and/or exit exams prevailed. London University, the London Chamber of Commerce and the northern universities all created their own secondary school examining boards.

From providing evidence of administrative ability and personal character, exams were also becoming used to diffuse a prescribed idea of liberal culture. Indeed, when fears for the nation's competitiveness failed to prompt state intervention the liberal ethos moved Whitehall to action. The ultimate results, however, were to prove far from liberal.

In 1911 the Board of Education (the heir of the Privy Council Committee) set up a 'Consultative Committee on Examinations in Secondary Schools.' Its *raison d'être* is depressingly familiar:

' . . . public opinion in England was disposed to put quite an excessive reliance upon the system of competitive examinations as a panacea for educational delinquencies or defects. Examinations as ends in themselves, have occupied too much of the thoughts of parents and teachers. Their very convenience and success led to their undue multiplication and to their occupying too large a place in the system of national education.'⁹

Secondary schools had become more efficient and formed collective organisations. Local authorities and teacher associations had come into existence. The curriculum had expanded dramatically. There was now a well-developed secondary Inspectorate: 'The State is now so organised as to be able to supply both motive power and unifying influence.'¹⁰

The Committee identified a number of problems:

- a multiplicity of systems and a consequent lack of equivalency (i.e. 'mutual recognition');
- an absence of accepted common standards;
- little effort expended on those pupils not entered for certificates.

In fact, as the Committee recognised, the equivalency problem was on its way to a solution as both the Schools Inspectorate and school boards were beginning to exchange data and ideas. But, even here, the process was believed to be too slow.

The Committee's recommendations laid the groundwork for the system until after the Second World War: external examination of whole classes at 16 and 18, in a wide variety of subjects, with written, practical and oral sections, resulting in a certificate counter-signed by the Board of Education. The standard of the exam should be of 'such a kind that success in it might be regarded as a guarantee of a good general education' to the age of 16.¹¹

The Board rejected government examinations:

'the dangers involved in any highly centralised control of English secondary education . . . would involve no inconsiderable risk of substituting a too mechanical uniformity of test for the freedom which the best schools may justly claim, and which in some degree is permitted to them by the current arrangements.'¹²

Yet the Board was still wedded to a degree of centralisation. It recommended the establishment of a Secondary Schools Examinations Council (SSEC) – with a membership representing teachers, local councils, the universities (examining boards), businessmen and the Board of Education itself. Despite grand designs to, ' . . . lay down regulations as to the scope, time and method . . . control their organisation, fix the fees to be charged for admission to them, and approve the examiners . . . no external examinations would be permitted except those held under [its] authority',¹³ the SSEC was constituted merely as an advisory body.

The rationale for the SSEC is familiar to those who study the relationship between market and state:

'The establishment . . . would bring order to the present confusion. It would replace a multiplicity of standards by unity of control. It would set up . . . a clear and progressive series . . . under the supervision of

a body, which would be authorised by the State. It would bring the knowledge and the influence of the [State] into the planning and administration of a reformed . . . system . . . From the new arrangement, the [regulator and the regulated] alike would gain much in practical convenience and in unity of . . . purpose.'¹⁴

The philosophical and administrative bases of state control had now been established. During the First World War, 'patriots' fought against the 'Prussianisation' of the Committee. Anti-statists objected to inspection and control. LEAs objected to the growing transfer of power to the Board. Yet these were rear-guard actions; the pass had been lost – or perhaps sold. In 1915 the *Times Educational Supplement* accused the examining bodies of striking a bargain with the state: 'We, the Board of Education, must supervise you and check your autonomy, but we will stop competition and thus increase your business.'¹⁵

The new system was a hybrid. On one hand it exerted immense, and probably malign, influence over secondary schools, the academic poor relation of the grammar schools. Since the latter were the pinnacle of the system their syllabuses (both School Certificate and Higher) dictated the shape of education in the secondary school. Complaints over the effect of this were being heard even before 1939. But the SSEC also failed to ensure the timely modernisation of school examinations. It 'never called together a meeting of the specialists concerned in arranging and carrying through the examinations in any given subject'¹⁶ instead producing a series of investigative reports and hoping that reform would follow. Persuasion worked only intermittently in changing syllabuses. Calls for further state direction began to grow.

Progress was blocked by a classic English refusal to define the purpose of a public good, thereby making it difficult to deliver the desired outcome. The Board of Education stated: 'it is a cardinal principle that the Examination should follow the curriculum and not determine it.'¹⁷ But the reality is always that examination syllabuses are one of the main instruments determining what is and is not taught.

By the late 1930s the, by now traditional, complaint was again heard that syllabuses were not 'fully alive to the progress of educational thought and opinion on matters affecting the content of school

work.¹⁸ Additional problems arose from their use as both school leaving certificates and passports to further/higher education; from a pass/fail approach that made no distinction between candidates in those categories; the existence of separate university entrance exams; and from the relationship of exams to the curriculum.

In 1940 the SSEC decided to appoint a committee to 'initiate a long-term policy involving fundamental changes,' the Norwood Report on *Examinations in Secondary Schools*. The manner of its adoption was described as 'chicanery.'¹⁹ To put it another way, the growth of the state's ability to impose control during the Second World War now enabled it to follow the logic to its conclusion. The Report by-passed the SSEC, going directly to the President of the Board of Education who published it without reference to the body which had commissioned it. When finally discussed by the SSEC in November 1943 the scene was described thus: 'On assembly the members were bluntly informed that their part was to receive and not to question; when it began to appear that considerable comment was likely, the Chairman unceremoniously dismissed them after only two hours.'²⁰ In 1946 the Minister removed the troublesome examining boards from the SSEC. In August 1947 the reconstituted SSEC adopted the Report unanimously.

Norwood tackled two related areas. It suggested that Secondary Education be divided into three – Secondary Grammar, Secondary Technical and Secondary Modern – of equal worth, but catering for the different needs of their children, and with easy transferability between each sector.

The Report argued that the examination system, although undoubtedly beneficial in certain respects, had exhausted its usefulness. It had supported mass education in its infancy but, since the structure was now secure, the scaffolding could be removed. More specifically the aim was to reduce the influence of external examining boards and enable teachers, who theoretically knew more about their pupils, to set their own tests. Perhaps more validly, the Committee felt that parity of esteem between the three types of schools could not sustain a unitary examination (based essentially on the Grammar Schools syllabus) that would impose unattainable academic standards.

The new Secondary Examinations Council (SEC), set up to oversee the system, had no examining board

members. There remained, however, a reluctance in Whitehall to interfere in the actual operation of the examination boards. The Council laid out only the most general guidelines about what should be taught, leaving the boards great freedom to produce syllabuses of maximum appeal.

It is generally accepted that '... the Norwood Report was concerned not with evidence but with assertion ...'²¹ Among mainstream educationalists '... the aims of the Norwood Committee were perceived as two-fold – to abolish examinations and to certificate in individual subjects. The Ministry only conceded the latter point.'²² The 1944 'Butler' Education Act set the nature of the school system for 40 years. Examinations became subject examinations. The General Certificate in Education (GCE) 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' Levels came into being. O-levels were available for the top 20% of the school population. By 1976 LEAs had developed a similar examination, the Certificate of Secondary Education, for a further 40%.

The next major change occurred in the 1980s as two political streams met – rising dedication to egalitarianism on the left and the stress on equality of opportunity by the right. Sir Keith Joseph, then Secretary of State for Education, wrote to the Boards:

'I announced in the House of Commons ... that ... I had decided ... a single system of examinations at 16+ ... should be introduced as soon as is practicable. The new system is to take the place of the existing 'O' level, CSE and joint 16+ examinations ... and will be known as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). The GCSE would be administered by 5 groups of GCSE and CSE Boards ...'²³

The boards were fully consulted and, like the vast bulk of the educational establishment, were sympathetic to reform. They went willingly into the new era, oblivious to the fact that the Joseph proposals marked the initiation of the final phase in the state's conquest of the examination system.

The main features of the new system were, and are:

- A single examination available to all 16-year-olds (though requiring differentiated exam papers targeted at different levels).
- Courses reflecting National Criteria.
- Greater emphasis on the practical application of knowledge rather than the acquisition of facts.

- Certification based partly on teacher-assessed coursework, rather than totally on examination results.

Perhaps the most important change was:

- Criterion-referencing of results – grading candidates by individual performance rather than the norm-referencing used in O-levels where candidates were graded in relation to how *others* performed.

The SEC mutated into a shadow regulator of exams – SCAA, followed by SEAC – and from thence into a fully-fledged regulator (QCA).²⁴ The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 gave an even greater boost to government power. At each stage, the regulator's 'advice' became more prescriptive.

By 1991 (a pre-election year) ministers were claiming that GCSE results demonstrated that the new exam was producing higher standards. However, shortly after the publication of the summer 1992 GCSE results (post-election), the Secretary of State used the increase in A–C grades to cast doubt on the quality of the GCSE and announce an urgent enquiry.

A genuine market response would have been to encourage competition between boards. In fact, the eventual result was the publication, in 1993, of a Mandatory Code of Practice for GCSE, which laid down in detail the lines of accountability for examination procedures and standards; the processes by which examination papers and coursework assignments were set; and how examination boundaries were to be set and aggregated to a subject grade. Most boards were already using such methods but the voluntary element was now removed. The state was, to all intents and purposes, running an entire level of public examination.

This was becoming politically necessary in that the exam was becoming more important to more people. GCSEs rapidly came to be taken by virtually the entire student population at 16. More children felt they could attempt A-levels and did. More parents had experience of Higher Education and expectations that their children would follow in their footsteps. A rapidly changing economy heightened the need for higher order skills. Thatcherism produced the parent as consumer. As a result, schools demanded higher levels of service delivery of the boards.

The nine assorted GCSE, GNVQ and A-level providers needed to invest ever greater resources in sophisticated information technology (IT). Some boards were not up to the job and mergers took place, some willingly, others partially state-directed. But, as in 1911, Whitehall believed the pace to be too slow.

Such was the government's input that many thought that one central, state-run Board would be more logical and do the job better. In 1996 the Conservative government consulted on the formation of a single Board. A strenuous campaign against the idea highlighted that government would be burdened with responsibility for problems as well as credit for improvement. Intensive IT up-grade would be needed when a series of costly IT disasters already hung over Whitehall.

In 1997, the Labour government confirmed there would be no central organisation but demanded that the English boards merge to form three major 'one-stop shops' incorporating A-levels, GCSEs and the General National Vocational Qualifications. No public target date was set but it was understood that ministers expected serious progress within a year. The boards were already engaged in marketing alliances and discussing partnership arrangements or mergers. They found themselves under pressure to telescope the delicate process of blending corporate cultures and merging distinct IT systems. The three examination boards, Edexcel, AQA and OCR, emerged. In Scotland, the Vocational Examinations Council found itself forcibly merged with the Examinations Board to become the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

Despite the intense structural changes taking place throughout 1998 and 1999, over 97% of millions of GCSE and A-level results were delivered correctly and on time – if often by the narrowest margins. But in 2000, the SQA failed to squeak by its deadline. Over 147,000 exam results were rechecked and 120,000 appeals were received whilst UCAS warned that 5,000 university places were at risk. Newspaper headlines told of 'Scottish exam chaos.' The most interesting of these was 'Galbraith accused over exam powers' as the Scottish Executive sought, when it could not deliver, to distance itself from the machine it had forcibly made.

It is worth quoting one national newspaper education correspondent as he sought to answer his own question:

'why did it happen? . . . The answer has its origins in one of the most ambitious educational reforms undertaken . . . It was supposed to herald a revolution in opportunity. But it resulted in a series of management failings and problems within an exam Board under political pressure to implement change at a breakneck pace.'²⁵

The last point could have been applied to *any* British examining board at any time in the previous three years.

Although the Scottish example allows one to see the impact of the state in a sector in an unusually clear way, there are other considerations.

Unusually, the QCA has powers to set the prices of exams. This is not a relic of socialism but a Conservative initiative of the 1990s.²⁶ Although unused, the mere threat holds prices down. But, as the prices' policies of the 1960s/70s demonstrated, producers respond by creating new goods unaffected by price restraints. A case can be made that, even allowing for educational/cultural trends, the growth of more expensive modular exams has been stimulated by the *de facto* cap on exam pricing.

Does the 'heavy touch' regulator, laying down detailed specifications, stifle innovation? One of the most popular exams is that for Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT). This was independently devised by a forerunner of the oldest Board, OCR, and launched as an own-brand product to meet market need. It eventually attracted government funding but, crucially, was not originally within the QCA's remit. So innovation flourishes – but outside the regulated sphere.

One needs to ask why GCSEs are widely perceived to be of less and less value? The hostility that greets results, year on year, cannot all be due to a misunderstanding of the difference between O-levels and GCSEs. On what does the reputation of GCSEs stand?

The universities were asked to create public exams because their reputation was synonymous with high educational standards. Oxford and Cambridge took great pains to preserve that reputation as they faced an enormous expansion of the numbers sitting their exams. There followed a period in which state control was assumed to guarantee standards. Boards still had extensive university input but remained quasi-autonomous with their own reputations to protect. The system therefore had two watchdogs.

As the state took more control, standards became politicised with boards in the unenviable position of 'piggy-in-the-middle.' It became easy to accuse government of shifting standards in order to fulfil short-term political promises. The very concept of 'the Government guarantee' has taken severe blows over the past decade. It is clear that trust in examination standards has declined amongst key political and business audiences (though not amongst schools and colleges) despite there being no indisputable evidence that standards are falling – or rising. Left unchecked, cynicism over GCSEs will spread to A-levels, which are already coming under attack.

Thus it is clearly well past the time to re-examine the industry's regulation. In the short term the QCA needs to be reconfigured as a 'light touch' regulator, government must accept the Boards as expert partners and an alternative guarantor of standards must be sought.

A 'light touch' regulator would not, for instance, design the Key Skills and new GNVQs as 'perfect' test-bed qualifications that have turned out to be incredibly difficult to scale up to volume. It would not step in at the last minute in its role as accreditor of syllabuses to assign alternative percentage marks to GCSE assessment objectives after the Boards had designed syllabuses to a particular purpose, the result of which is to make it difficult to get the standard right. It would not lay down such specific criteria for the design of Vocational GCSEs such that the Boards' design experts find it difficult to create meaningful qualifications.

In short, a 'light touch' regulator would cease to second-guess those who design and create syllabuses and exams and get on with its main job of policing the standards. This ought to lead to the Boards' raising their game to enhance quality and creativity, choice and flexibility. Genuine acceptance by government that the Boards are expert in their field and in touch with their market should lead to better decisions on public exams being taken both by government and Boards. The creation of an independent guarantor of standards, containing representatives of different sectors, would underpin credibility. The body might look like the pre-war SSEC with the addition of further and higher education institutes, parents and pupils.

In the longer term a mechanism needs to be found that forces standards up in the face of pressures that

could be said to encourage their decline. One radical new way of guaranteeing standards might involve building on the concept of league tables already applied to schools. A regulator (whether public or private) could evaluate each syllabus and its accompanying exam, year by year, placing it on a scale measured against the preferred standard.

For example, Mathematics A-level from OCR might score 105, from Edexcel 107 and from AQA 98. Businesses and universities that were recruiting would know how seriously to take each A-level from each Board in each year. Schools would be very clear as to the strengths at each Board. They would have the option of signing up to a 'weak' Board for greater successful throughput or a 'tough' Board, the reputation of which would be expected to gain greater employability and better university access.

Whether the bureaucracy associated with such a radical approach would outweigh the bureaucracy used in the current approach is a moot point. There may be other ways of preserving standards in public examinations. All methods need to be examined – before the entire system loses all credibility.

1. R. Montgomery (1965) *Examinations: An Account of their Evolution as Administrative Devices in England*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., p. xi.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. Cmnd 1713 (1845) HMSO, London, p. 20.
4. J. Booth (1847) *Examination the Province of the State*, John W. Parker, p. 22.
5. T. D. Acland (1858) *Some Account of the Origin and Objects of the New Oxford Examinations for the Title of Associates in Arts and for Certificates*, London: Ridgeway.
6. Report of the Consultative Committee on Examinations in Secondary School, Cmnd 6004 (1911) HMSO, London, p. 11.
7. Acland, *op. cit.*

8. *Ibid.*
9. Report of the Consultative Committee on Examinations in Secondary School, Cmnd 6004 (1911) HMSO, London, p. 28.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
15. Unsigned article, *Times Educational Supplement*, 6 April 1915.
16. J. L. Brereton (1944) *The Case for Examinations*, London: Cambridge University Press.
17. Board of Education, Circular 849, HMSO, London.
18. J. Lawson and H. Silver (1973) *A Social History of Education in England*, London: Methuen, p. 422.
19. J. A. Petch (1953) *Fifty Years of Examining: Joint Matriculation Board 1903–1953*, London: George C. Harrap & Co.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Lawson and Silver, *op. cit.*, p. 422.
22. Stephen Wiseman (1961) *Examinations and English Education*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
23. *Hansard*, 20 June 1984, Col. 303.
24. SCAA (Schools Curriculum & Assessment Authority); SEAC (Schools Examinations & Assessment Authority); QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority).
25. Ben Russell, *The Independent*, 18 September 2000.
26. Education Act 1997, Part V, Section 26(3) and (4)a:

- (3) Where in carrying out any of their functions under this Part the Authority accredit or approve any qualification, they may do so on such terms (including terms as to payment) and subject to such conditions as they may determine
- (4) Those conditions may in particular include conditions –
 - (a) placing a limit on the amount of the fee that can be demanded in respect of any award or authentication of the qualification in question.'

See also: Peter Gordon and Dennis Lawton (1978) *Curriculum Change in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, London: Hodder & Stoughton; J. P. C. Roach (1971) *Public Examinations in England 1850–1900*, London: Cambridge University Press.

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