

# National Self-determination and International Dependence: the organisation and control of secondary school examinations in the small states of the Commonwealth

MARK BRAY

*Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, China*

**ABSTRACT** *This paper contributes to the literatures on examinations, on self-determination and dependence, and on small states. It draws particularly on materials for a Commonwealth Secretariat project on examination systems in small states. For the purposes of this paper, small states are defined as ones with populations below 3 million. The Commonwealth has 32 such states, scattered in different parts of the world.*

*Review of systems for external secondary school examinations shows three basic models. Some small states operate their own examination systems, some participate in regional bodies, and some make use of examinations set in other countries. The paper notes the advantages and disadvantages of each model, and the reasons for variations.*

This paper draws on, and contributes to, three separate strands of literature—on examinations, self-determination/dependence, and small states. The paper addresses a topic which is arguably of considerable significance but which has so far received little academic attention.

The chief focus of the paper is on external examinations at the secondary school level. It draws especially on materials collected for a project which has highlighted aspects of diversity and commonality in the models for operating examination systems in the small states of the Commonwealth (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996; Bray & Steward, 1998) [1]. These states are widely scattered but are numerically significant. Small states are defined here as ones with populations below 3 million. The 32 Commonwealth states in this category (together with the 35 non-Commonwealth ones) all confront challenges arising from their small scale, but have responded to the challenges in different ways.

To set the analytical framework, the paper begins by outlining some thrusts in the three strands of literature on which the analysis draws. The paper then turns to the

major models for operation of external examinations in small states, outlining each model in turn and presenting examples. The next section comments specifically on the advantages and disadvantages of arrangements for examinations set by national agencies compared with arrangements by agencies in other countries; and the following section in turn compares each of these models with arrangements for examinations operated by regional bodies. The concluding section links this commentary back to the broader literatures outlined at the beginning. Throughout, secondary school examinations are chosen as the main focus since the tensions of nationalism, regionalism and internationalism are more obvious at that level than at the primary school level.

## Themes in Different Literatures

### *The Roles and Nature of Examination Systems*

Examination systems play major roles not only in assessment of learning but also in selection of candidates for subsequent stages of education and/or for employment. At the same time, examinations are strong determinants of curricula at the classroom level, and may be used by national governments as important instruments for reform. Because of these factors, the nature and control of examinations is often controversial. As noted by Eckstein & Noah (1993, p. 191), examinations can become 'footballs in the broader field of national politics, punted hither and yon in the course of ideological clashes'.

Cross-national comparative analysis shows some commonality but also considerable diversity in the nature of examination systems and in the agencies responsible for them (Eckstein & Noah, 1993; Macintosh, 1994; Greaney & Kellaghan, 1996). The majority of education systems addressed in this paper use examinations set by bodies which are external to the schools and which typically have a two to three hour format during which candidates have to work at speed to answer previously unseen questions. Most Commonwealth countries still operate within models inherited from the UK, with Ordinary (O) and Advanced (A) Level examinations, or with School Certificate (SC) and Higher School Certificate (HSC) examinations.

The format of assessments also varies. Authorities in Japan and the USA rely heavily on multiple-choice, whereas in England the emphasis is on essays (Eckstein, 1996, p. 236). In some systems, closed-book examinations are combined with school-based continuous assessments of various kinds. However, among Commonwealth countries, and particularly in the sample of countries covered by the present paper, the traditions of school-based assessment are not as strong as in some other parts of the world (Keeves, 1994; Gabršček, 1996).

Another important dimension is in the types of bodies responsible for examinations. The UK has a long history of independent examination boards, some associated with tertiary education institutions such as the Universities of Cambridge, London and Oxford. Other countries, such as Poland, Romania and Russia, have more centralised traditions with examination units under direct government control in their ministries of education. In Hong Kong, examinations are operated by a

statutory body which operates within the framework of government affairs but is distinct from the government's Education Department and is staffed by its own employees rather than by civil servants. In the US, by contrast, all external examinations with national currency are operated by completely private bodies, namely the College Entrance Examination Board, the Educational Testing Service, and the American College Testing Program.

Despite the diversity in the nature of arrangements, in most large countries the principal agencies responsible for external examinations are based in the countries concerned. This is less likely to be the case in small states. As will be shown below, in the majority of Commonwealth small states the principal examinations are operated either by regional bodies or by organisations headquartered in metropolitan countries. Particularly prominent in the latter category is the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), which is based in the UK. The ways in which the regional and metropolitan bodies operate, and the ways in which their clients respond, are varied. This underlines the complexities of the topic.

#### *National Self-determination and International Dependence*

Within the domains of economics, political science and development studies, a considerable literature focuses on national self-determination and international dependence (e.g. Lopez & Stohl, 1989; Spybey, 1992; Oman & Wignaraja, 1991). Particularly since the mid-1980s, much of this literature has been linked to perceptions of globalisation (e.g. Peet, 1991; Axford, 1995). Most analysts have noted both positive and negative sides of international linkages. The positive side includes beneficial transfer of technology and increased access to information, but the negative side includes loss of national control over economic policies, and forms of cultural imperialism which are fuelled by transnational forces.

The broadly-focused works have counterparts in the field of education (e.g. McLean, 1983; Watson, 1984a; Sweeting, 1996) including the domain of examinations (e.g. Lewin & Little, 1984). Particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, many people assumed that the advent of sovereignty for colonial territories would herald a new era of self-determination in which leaders would assert national identities in education as well as in other sectors. However, many colonial legacies remained in the post-colonial eras (Brock, 1982; Foster, 1982; Bray, 1993), and have been supplemented by links with other countries of a type which some observers have called neocolonialism (Avalos, 1982; Berman, 1991).

Reference to colonial legacies and to neocolonialism seems to carry a negative connotation. Porter (1984) was in this vein when expressing the view that:

While interdependence is dubbed as a source of mutual enrichment, receptivity, initiative and creativity, it also leads to frustrations and is accompanied by deterioration in the lot of some people, reduction in their scope for manoeuvre, increased unpredictability and greater vulnerability. (p. 15)

However, other writers have highlighted the constructive sides of international relationships. For example Watson (1984b) examined patterns in Malaysia and Thailand and suggested that, at least in these cases:

the internal political framework of a society can far outweigh any attempts at external control; and ... where external involvement is sought it is often done willingly and not necessarily on terms of subservience. (p. 83)

McLean (1983, p. 39) also warned about over-simplistic interpretations. He highlighted the need for researchers to identify the circumstances in which, and the extent to which, local governments accept dependency as being beneficial to their particular circumstances.

The tensions of self-determination and interdependence may be found in large countries as well as in small ones. For example, much of the literature of the 1960s which highlighted negative aspects of dependency focused on such countries as Brazil and India (Spybey, 1992, pp. 158–180). These countries were seen by some authors as weak partners in an unbalanced system of international relations. Moreover, even large countries that were prosperous faced some tensions. For example, Lincicome (1993, p. 124) analysed patterns in Japan and observed that the National Council on Educational Reform which was established in 1984 included among its goals ‘coping with internationalisation’. That tensions should exist in a country with over 100 million people and a strong economic and cultural identity is worth underlining. Smaller states have found themselves buffeted even more severely by international forces (Ramphal, 1984; Harden, 1985).

However, leaders in small states can make a virtue out of a weakness by ‘managing’ dependency. Warrington (1994, p. 114) made this point with the example of Malta, the government of which during the first decade of independence successfully used revenues from the resident British military forces on which the economy was dependent to promote domestic light manufacturing and tourism. Likewise, during the 1970s several microstates in the South Pacific made use of the inter-state rivalries of larger powers, including Australia, China, France, Taiwan, the US, and the USSR. The small states demanded favours from one or more of the larger powers in exchange for political recognition and economic dealings in a geopolitically significant region (Crocombe & Ali, 1985).

### *Small States and their Distinctive Features*

Smallness is of course a relative concept, and may be assessed on multiple dimensions. In the literature on small states, the most commonly-used indicator of smallness is population; though other indicators include gross national product and area (Raadschelders, 1992). The cut-off point of 3 million people used in the present paper is arbitrary, and other authors have used lower cut-off points for different purposes (e.g. Clarke & Payne, 1987; Connell, 1988). Three million is here used as the cut-off point in order to include Singapore and Jamaica in the discussion. As will become apparent, these states present instructive comparisons and contrasts with others in the group. At the same time, the relatively high cut-off point does not

TABLE I. Commonwealth sovereign states with populations below 3 million

Country	Population	Country	Population
Tuvalu	9,000	Bahamas	266,000
Nauru	10,000	Brunei Darussalam	281,000
St Kitts & Nevis	41,000	Solomon Islands	346,000
Antigua & Barbuda	67,000	Malta	391,000
Seychelles	70,000	Cyprus	718,000
Dominica	72,000	Fiji	775,000
Kiribati	76,000	Guyana	812,000
Grenada	91,000	Swaziland	888,000
Tonga	93,000	Gambia	1,019,000
St Vincent & Grenadines	110,000	Mauritius	1,111,000
St Lucia	158,000	Trinidad & Tobago	1,282,000
Vanuatu	161,000	Botswana	1,402,000
Western Samoa	163,000	Namibia	1,565,000
Belize	205,000	Lesotho	1,899,000
Maldives	236,000	Jamaica	2,415,000
Barbados	260,000	Singapore	2,890,000

*Note:* Figures mostly refer to the early or mid-1990s.

*Sources:* Commonwealth Secretariat (1995); various national sources.

preclude consideration of sub-groups. Among the Commonwealth's 54 sovereign member states, 32 have populations below 3 million, 24 have populations below 1 million, and 20 have populations below 500,000 (Table I). It is often more useful to identify scale on a continuum than to imply that states can only be considered small, medium-sized or large.

The literature on small states, like that on self-determination and dependence, includes analyses of broad economic and sociological features as well as more specific analyses of education. For present purposes, three particular features of small states are important. The first concerns economies of scale. In this sphere small states may be disadvantaged because of the indivisible nature of certain activities and functions. Each country requires a Head of State, for example, and may also have a national airline, central bank and legal system. In the domain of publishing, textbooks have to be written and typeset whether they have print runs of a few hundred or of many thousands. A similar principle applies in examinations, where, regardless of the numbers of candidates, the same amount of labour and expertise is required to devise and type-set papers.

The second feature concerns the societies of small states. Benedict (1967) described social relationships in small states as 'multiplex' in that 'nearly every social relationship serves many interests' (p. 47). This has implications for the operation of bureaucracies, including those of examination systems. Particularly in very small states, almost everybody seems to know almost everyone else. This means that systems are highly personalised and that, for example, it may be difficult to remove an inefficient employee on grounds of inefficiency alone because the employee may be attached to the employer by kinship and political ties (Lowenthal, 1987, p. 40;

Bray, 1991, p. 20). The close-knit nature of the societies of very small states can contribute to a form of transparency which is beneficial to the conduct of examination systems because the source of any leaks or other misdemeanours would immediately be widely known. However, the transparency factor can also operate negatively, making it impossible for people who set questions and grade papers to be anonymous, and exposing them to pressures to favour friends and relatives.

A third element concerns availability of expertise to perform specialised services. By definition, states with small populations have limited domestic pools of trained (and untrained) personnel. Governments which are prosperous can recruit specialists from abroad, but extensive external recruitment is not always politically acceptable. Moreover, the small scale of operations commonly requires administrators to be generalists rather than specialists (Farrugia & Attard, 1989). At the top end of the scale Singapore, which has a population of nearly 3 million, is large enough to provide and employ many specialists in both government and non-government sectors. But at the other end of the scale Tuvalu, which has a population of just 9000, has a multi-faceted Ministry of Social Services rather than a specialist Ministry of Education, and also has very limited infrastructures of other sorts. States with intermediate sizes have greater availability of expertise, but these states may still lack the types of specialists who would be unquestioningly considered essential in larger countries. Keeves (1994) presented a large-country viewpoint when suggesting that all examinations agencies need:

psychometricians and statisticians, ... survey research specialists, educational research workers, publishing experts, art and graphics designers, computer programmers, people who can communicate effectively with the wider public, and production and distribution managers, as well as cost accountants. (p. 99)

Even in Jamaica or Lesotho this would be a demanding list, and in such countries as Grenada and Seychelles, employment of such specialists is out of the question.

One strategy which is commonly recommended for small states to achieve economies of scale, to reduce the personalisation of operations, and to permit greater specialisation in functions, is participation in regional bodies. This option is not open to all states since some are either very isolated or lack partners who are interested in collaboration. Moreover, regional partnerships are much more difficult to operate successfully than outsiders commonly suppose (Bray & Packer, 1993, pp. 107–124; Crossley & Louisy, 1994). Nevertheless, regional cooperation can be a useful strategy in some circumstances. The following pages note one regional endeavour in the examination sector which collapsed, but others which have been maintained and have clearly demonstrated their usefulness.

### **Administration of Examination Systems in Small States: three models**

Table II shows the agencies responsible for the principal external examinations at secondary school level in the small sovereign states of the Commonwealth. In most countries, candidates have access to additional examinations set by other agencies,

TABLE II. Bodies responsible for principal external examinations for secondary school students in small commonwealth sovereign states

<i>Africa</i>	
Botswana	Ministry of Education phasing in; UCLES phasing out
Gambia	West African Examinations Council
Lesotho	Examinations Council of Lesotho phasing in; UCLES phasing out
Mauritius	UCLES
Namibia	UCLES
Seychelles	Ministry of Education for some; UCLES for others
Swaziland	Swaziland Examinations Council phasing in; UCLES phasing out
<i>Asia</i>	
Brunei Darussalam	UCLES
Maldives	University of London Examinations & Assessment Council
Singapore	UCLES
<i>Caribbean</i>	
Antigua & Barbuda	Caribbean Examinations Council
Bahamas	Ministry of Education, with monitoring and underwriting by UCLES
Barbados	Caribbean Examinations Council
Belize	Caribbean Examinations Council
Dominica	Caribbean Examinations Council
Grenada	Caribbean Examinations Council
Guyana	Caribbean Examinations Council
Jamaica	Caribbean Examinations Council for most; some UCLES
St Kitts & Nevis	Caribbean Examinations Council
St Lucia	Caribbean Examinations Council
St Vincent & Grenadines	Caribbean Examinations Council
Trinidad & Tobago	Caribbean Examinations Council for most; some UCLES
<i>Europe</i>	
Cyprus	Examinations set and graded by schools, on criteria set by Ministry of Education. Separate entrance examination set by University of Cyprus.
Malta	Matriculation & Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board (University of Malta)
<i>South Pacific</i>	
Fiji	Ministry of Education
Kiribati	Ministry of Education, South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment
Nauru	Ministry of Education
Solomon Islands	Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development; South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment
Tonga	Ministry of Education; South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment; New Zealand Qualifications Authority
Tuvalu	Fiji government examinations unit; Tuvalu Ministry of Social Services; South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment
Vanuatu	Ministry of Education; South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment; New Zealand Qualifications Authority
Western Samoa	Ministry of Education; South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment

UCLES = University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate.

and may find this access especially valuable for specialist subjects. In Mauritius, for example, candidates can sit the examinations of the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Pitman Examinations Institute, the UK Royal Society of Arts, and many other bodies (Bissoondoyal, 1996). However, details of these examinations have been omitted from this paper in order to permit concentration on the main features.

From Table II, three basic models are apparent. Some countries have national examinations, in most cases operated by the Ministry of Education or by quasi-government bodies. Other countries participate in regional enterprises; and those in the third group use examinations set by bodies in metropolitan countries. Each of these models is described here and commented upon.

### *National Examinations*

Despite the administrative and economic burden entailed, some small states operate their own national examination systems. Among the countries covered in Table II, most of the South Pacific states have examinations organised by their ministries of education. Lesotho and Swaziland have quasi-government examination bodies; and Malta has an examinations board which is based in the national university. In some countries, national examinations operate side by side with examinations set by external bodies. In the Seychelles, for example, national examinations are set for all secondary Form 4 and Form 5 students, but some Form 5 students also take UCLES examinations. In several South Pacific countries, students at Form 5 level sit national examinations while students proceeding to Form 6 sit examinations set by the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment.

The chief rationale for operating national examinations is to give the education authorities in the countries concerned more control over curricula than they would otherwise have. The creation of national examination agencies is thus an expression of self-determination. Policymakers are aware that where the official curriculum does not match the examination curriculum, the latter will always dominate (Greaney & Kellaghan, 1996, pp. 37–38). The perspectives of the Botswana National Commission on Education (Kedikilwe, 1993), which recommended localisation of the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate, are in many respects similar to sentiments in other countries. The Commission reported that:

The main concerns raised on the continued dependence on Cambridge include the limitations imposed on the education system such as the limited ability in influencing curriculum development in line with the aspirations of the nation.... It is argued that the localization of examinations will open up the potential for local curriculum development. (p. 188)

Also worth noting about this statement is the fact that it was made in 1993—over a quarter of a century after Botswana gained independence in 1966. The nationalistic processes which led to independence were not accompanied by demands for localisation of secondary school examinations. A similar comment applies to Lesotho and Swaziland, which gained independence in 1966 and 1968 respectively



but only commenced localisation from Cambridge in 1989 (Ralise, 1992, p. 1). Likewise, although Malta achieved independence in 1964, British examinations remained dominant for the next 25 years, and the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) examination board was only established in 1989 (Sultana, 1996, p. 7). Similar comments apply to the South Pacific, where the majority of states gained independence in the 1970s. Rees & Singh (1996) pointed out that:

With the coming of political independence, complete with new passports, currencies and flags, there was no corresponding rush to make examinations reflect the new political status. Even with increasing enrolments as populations grew and more schools were opened, countries were reluctant to set up their own national examinations.... (p. 5)

Rees & Singh (1996) presented two main reasons for this pattern which to some extent also apply to other countries. First, they observed, establishment of a new examination system raised problems of appropriate technical skills and security in operation. Second was the perceived problem of credibility:

A national currency could be 'tied' to that of a larger country; a passport is merely an identity card; and a flag is simply a piece of cloth. Education credentials which could be used for career advancement were of a different order altogether and could not easily be organised. Even if national certificates were created, they still faced problems of acceptability. (p. 5)

This statement perhaps oversimplified the issues surrounding currencies, passports and flags, but correctly pointed out that public sentiment attached considerable importance to the perceived respectability and international portability of metropolitan credentials. International recognition was particularly important to small states because many had high emigration rates. Also, few small states had universities of their own, and even the ones which did have local universities had only small institutions which could not provide the full range of specialisms needed. Recognised credentials were therefore needed in order to secure admission to universities abroad. Such matters made the education authorities reluctant to tamper with existing arrangements for examinations, despite the pressure to localise school curricula.

One question then arising was why these small states ever moved to localisation. Part of the answer lies in the growing size of the populations, particularly in African countries, which was coupled with maturation and enlargement of the education systems. This in turn meant first that the countries had greater technical expertise for operating examination systems, and second that domestic institutions of higher education could be established and enlarged.

Perhaps even more important were reforms in the metropolitan countries. Thus the chief push for change in Malta was that authorities in England and Wales merged the General Certificate of Education (GCE) with the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) to create a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). The CSE had been developed in England and Wales to cater for students

with low academic ability. However, the CSE had never been adopted in Malta, and the GCSE was predicated on a set of criteria which did not match educational policies and practices in Malta. Among the GCSE reforms that were considered inappropriate were the shift from norm- to criterion-referencing, the introduction of course-work and teacher assessment as part of the examination system, and the reform of syllabuses and curricula to make them more responsive to perceived UK needs (Sultana, 1996) [2].

The situation in the South Pacific was a little different but had some parallels. In 1973 the New Zealand government set up special alternative papers in the New Zealand School Certificate (NZSC) examination to serve candidates from the smaller South Pacific countries. Even at that time, however, the New Zealand authorities recognised the dangers of fostering dependency. As noted by Renwick & Evers (1991):

the New Zealand government was aware that, by making alternative papers available, it was, at least in the short-term, increasing the dependency of Pacific Islands education systems on examinations administered by New Zealand. It therefore emphasised that the alternative papers were to be seen as an interim arrangement. New Zealand would want to cease providing them when the countries of the region, separately or collectively, were in a position to handle their own examinations at fifth and sixth form level. (pp. 9–10)

In 1982, partly because the New Zealand authorities wished to reform their own examination system, they announced that the South Pacific Option papers in the NZSC examination would be withdrawn in 1985. This caused considerable consternation in some parts of the region, and the deadline was subsequently postponed to 1987 and then again to 1988. The New Zealand government did recognise the difficulties that could be caused by the change, and assisted the governments of the smaller states with training and other support. Ultimately the goal of localising the examinations was achieved; but it was more a case of the small-state governments being pushed to operate their own assessments than of the small-state governments themselves demanding autonomy from New Zealand.

### *Regional Examinations*

Some governments which have been anxious to detach their education systems from metropolitan agencies but which have had misgivings about embarking on national arrangements have instead joined regional bodies. Three regional examination bodies are named in Table II. They are the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA). Each of these bodies has a rather different history and mode of operation, and they are therefore worth comparing with each other as well as with the other models for operating examinations.

WAEC is the oldest of the three bodies. It was formed in 1952 to serve the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia (Esezobor,

TABLE III. Populations of member states of the West African Examinations Council

Country	Population
Gambia	1,000,000
Ghana	16,400,000
Liberia	2,800,000
Nigeria	105,300,000
Sierra Leone	4,300,000

*Note:* Figures refer to the year 1993.

*Source:* United Nations Development Programme (1996), p. 179.

1992, p. 16). Liberia became the fifth member in 1974. At first, WAEC acted as the local agency for UCLES and for the University of London School Examinations Matriculation Council; but in 1966 it launched its own West African School Certificate, and in 1973 it launched a Higher School Certificate. While the Gambia and Liberia are small states and Sierra Leone is fairly small, Ghana is medium-sized and Nigeria is large (Table III). The headquarters of WAEC are in Ghana, though the Council has offices in each member state.

The Caribbean Examinations Council is the second oldest of the three regional bodies. It was formed in 1972 by agreement between 15 Commonwealth Caribbean states and territories. Eleven of these are listed in Table II, and the other four were British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Montserrat, and Turks & Caicos Islands [3]. The main initial goal for the CXC was a Caribbean examination to replace the UK O Level. The CXC offered its first examination in 1979 in five subjects, and by 1995 was offering 35 subjects (Bailey, 1990; CXC, 1995). The headquarters of the CXC are in Barbados, but it also has an office in Jamaica.

Unlike the other two bodies, the SPBEA was not originally established to operate as an examination board. Rather, it was created to support national examination units. It was established in 1980 i.e. two years before the announcement of the specific date on which the NZSC South Pacific Options would be withdrawn, but was given a further reason for existence by that announcement. The SPBEA was also given considerable support by the New Zealand government (and also by the Australian and UK governments), which saw it as an important instrument for easing the transition. At the outset, the SPBEA was created following agreement by the governments of the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, Niue and Western Samoa [4]. Nauru subsequently withdrew, and Niue stated its intention not to participate at that time but to keep the question of involvement at a future date under review. Tokelau joined the Board in 1986, Vanuatu joined in 1990, and Marshall Islands joined in 1991 [5]. The SPBEA headquarters are in Fiji.

In line with its initial mandate to assist national units with their own examinations, the SPBEA provided important support to the Solomon Islands government for its Solomon Islands School Certificate examination. It also helped the governments of

Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu and Western Samoa to create their own School Certificate examinations, which in those countries replaced the NZSC examination.

In 1985, however, a separate decision was made in New Zealand to end the New Zealand University Entrance (NZUE) examination (Livingstone, 1985). This decision, which was implemented in 1986, again arose chiefly because of developments in New Zealand itself. The authorities in New Zealand were conscious of responsibilities to South Pacific countries, and did indicate that until 1988 they would provide separate interim examinations for the countries which had participated in the NZUE examination, i.e. Cook Islands, Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa. However, the authorities also stressed that they would not permit the needs of South Pacific countries to delay reform in New Zealand itself. Responding to this challenge, in 1989 the SPBEA launched a regional examination leading to the Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (PSSC) to act as a replacement for the NZUE. The PSSC examination is now taken in Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa.

### *Metropolitan Examinations*

While some governments have decided to operate national examinations or join regional bodies, others have preferred to retain links with metropolitan agencies. In the small states considered here, the most prominent of these agencies is UCLES. Table II shows that UCLES plays a significant role in 11 of the 32 small sovereign Commonwealth states. In Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland the UCLES input is being phased out, but in Namibia the UCLES work has only recently commenced and in other states it appears to be a fixture for the foreseeable future.

UCLES' role in providing examinations for small states has a long history. The Syndicate was itself established in 1858 to operate within the UK, but its first external offering, in 1863, happened to be in an island which is now part of a small state, namely Trinidad (Stockwell, 1990, p. 206). Today the work of the Syndicate is divided into three main parts: school examinations in the UK, school examinations internationally, and examinations in English as a foreign language for adults and younger students. In 1995, UCLES served nearly 1.5 million candidates in over 150 countries (UCLES, 1996, p. 32).

UCLES has also played a major role in assisting local capacity-building. The Syndicate was a formal partner in the early years of WAEC, and provided consultancy advice during the creation of the CXC. UCLES has also provided technical support to the emergent examination agencies in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

In the initial period after World War II, it seemed that the various localisation initiatives would greatly curtail the role of UCLES. As noted by Smith (1995), however:

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. (p. 92)

Although this remark focuses on relatively large states, the general sentiment is also applicable to small ones. In Namibia, for example, UCLES began to play a major role after the country's Independence from South Africa in 1990 (Erasmus, 1996). Prior to that date, Namibia had followed the South African system, but the post-independence government restructured the school system and asked UCLES to examine candidates for the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and the Higher International General Certificate of Secondary Education (HIGCSE).

Also mentioned in Table II are several other external agencies. The University of London Examinations and Assessment Council (ULEAC) provides O and A Level examinations for candidates in Maldives (Ibrahim, 1996), and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) provides the New Zealand University Entrance, Bursaries and Scholarships (NZUEBS) examinations for candidates in Tonga and Vanuatu. The NZQA also moderates some parts of the Tongan School Certificate examination, and has provided papers for clothing, and for French and Japanese. Even Fiji is a centre of expertise from the perspective of smaller neighbours, as evidenced by the fact that Grade 10 students in Tuvalu sit the Fiji Junior Certificate examination (Rees & Singh, 1996).

### **National versus Metropolitan Qualifications: advantages and disadvantages**

The chief advantage to be gained from the operation of national examinations is in control for national governments who wish examinations to be tailored to match local goals and curricula. Although Grade 10 students in Tuvalu sit Fijian examinations, Grade 11 students sit examinations for the Tuvalu School Certificate. The fact that states as small as Tuvalu do have their own qualifications deserves emphasis. This is a major achievement for the Tuvaluan authorities, though it only becomes possible because of the technical support from the SPBEA. Also, some papers for the Tuvalu School Certificate are purchased from Western Samoa, which suggests that the extent of national self-reliance is less than it appears at first sight.

Other states have stronger domestic capacity. Lesotho, Swaziland and Malta are in this category. In each case the localisation arrangements date only from the late 1980s, and have naturally encountered hurdles. However, the agencies in these countries have many accomplishments to their credit. With reference to Malta, for example, Sultana (1996) observed that:

Despite the constraints that size imposes, ... Malta has succeeded, beyond the hopes and expectations of many on the islands, to set up a promising

and independent examination structure which has set into motion synergies affecting various aspects of the local education system.... [The] new examinations have given the Maltese policy-makers the opportunity to be more autonomous in establishing an organic and holistic vision for educational practice on the islands; they have encouraged the development of curricula and textbooks that take local culture and realities into account; they have expanded the professional roles of teachers, who are partners in the assessment of their own students; and they are likely to modify the traditional and deeply engrained pedagogical culture of magisterial lesson delivery. (p. 25)

Given that positive evaluations might also be made in other contexts, the question then becomes why governments of so many other small states have not established their own examination systems. The answer to this lies partly in expertise and cost, but it also lies in public perceptions of standards and in the value of international recognition. Rees & Singh (1996, p. 6) pointed out with reference to the South Pacific that 'academic inflation' has reduced the importance of secondary Form 5 (Grade 11) qualifications for employment, and that increased availability of domestic and regional higher education has reduced the importance of the qualifications for access to foreign institutions. These points are also applicable to other parts of the world. However, the fact remains that some societies still take very seriously the standards and portability of qualifications. Standards are widely assumed to be assured when the qualifications are awarded by metropolitan and or regional bodies, and international recognition may still be highly valued. For example, Bissoondoyal (1996, p. 7) has noted with reference to Mauritius that:

Although in principle there is a case for the secondary education system to be Mauritianized, there are also compelling reasons not to sever links with international bodies.... It is true that countries smaller than Mauritius have developed their own educational and examination systems. However, Mauritian society is very democratic but also conservative. Mauritians would prefer to obtain a certificate from Cambridge or London rather than a local one. (p. 7)

A related sentiment was expressed by Sultana (1996) concerning Malta, where, prior to 1989:

the setting and marking of papers in far away England gave GCE examinations a legitimacy which local examinations could not have, not only because of a prevalent colonial mentality, but also because it assuaged fears regarding the leakage of papers prior to exam sessions, or to preferential marking in a context where everybody seems to know everybody else, and most people seem to be related to each other. (p. 5)

The perceived value of external recognition is perhaps demonstrated most clearly by the fact that the Singapore government adheres to UCLES. This is not because of necessity, because Singapore is a highly sophisticated society which is

certainly capable of operating its own examination system. In Singapore, the problem of security is less pressing, and being a larger society it does not face the same tensions arising from personal relationships. However, Singaporeans still greatly value the international portability and the prestige attached to UCLES examinations.

A further factor concerns costs. One might assume that metropolitan examinations would be more expensive than local ones because of the costs of air transportation of examiners, question papers and scripts, and because of the fees charged by the metropolitan agencies. Whether localisation does reduce costs, however, depends very much on the specific circumstances of the arrangements in question. Metropolitan agencies have the advantage of economies of scale, and may be able more easily to recruit technical specialists at moderate cost. Creation and operation of small national examination agencies can be a very expensive activity.

Moreover, a further result of the fact that metropolitan agencies can achieve economic viability by offering a single examination to many countries is that individual customers have greater choice. Table IV shows the very wide range of subjects taken by school certificate candidates in Mauritius. Some of these subjects have fewer than 10 candidates, and it would certainly not be economically possible to provide examinations in those subjects if the whole operation were run domestically in Mauritius.

The size of the UCLES operation also facilitates quality-control in the setting of papers. Persons not familiar with the processes of setting examinations commonly underestimate the difficulty of preparing questions which require pupils to think about what they know, rather than simply to reproduce it in unmodified form. Even in large organisations, 'examination-setting burn-out' is a problem, for individual examiners begin to run short of ideas after a while, and need a rest or at least renewal. In medium-sized organisations this is a greater problem, and it is an even more serious issue in small examination agencies which draw on limited pools of expertise and have restricted scope for in-service training.

Finally, it should not be assumed that metropolitan examinations are necessarily of limited relevance to national conditions. During the last few decades the metropolitan agencies have become much more flexible, and UCLES in particular has demonstrated considerable willingness to tailor examinations to local needs. One major example is the HIGCSE examination in Namibia, which was created solely to meet Namibia's needs for access to tertiary institutions particularly in South Africa (Erasmus, 1996, p. 9). Also, at the IGCSE level, papers are offered in seven African languages in addition to three European languages [6]. For Singapore, UCLES created a Normal ('N') Level examination which fits Singapore's system of academic streaming (Chong, 1996); and for many countries UCLES has introduced papers to cover local history and geography. As noted above, the New Zealand authorities also had a record of making special adaptations for South Pacific countries; and though Maltese clients were ultimately critical of the perceived irrelevance of UK examinations, that was partly because they did not take full advantage of the flexibility that would undoubtedly have been permitted had it been requested (Sultana, 1996, p. 5).

TABLE IV. Numbers of candidates, by subject, in UCLES School Certificate Examinations, Mauritius, 1993-1995

Subject	1993	1994	1995	Subject	1993	1994	1995
Additional Maths (code 4031)	6,576	6,547	6,814	Hinduism	910	905	890
Additional Maths (code 4030)	3	2	4	World Affairs	4	4	3
Agricultural Science	17	0	0	History of Mauritius	43	23	39
Agriculture	247	369	437	Human & Social Biology	208	158	126
Arabic	28	28	33	Islamic Religion & Culture	262	209	225
Art	2,590	2,767	3,206	Law	25	24	1
Biology	2,648	3,015	3,635	Literature in English	121	118	148
Chemistry	3,310	3,730	4,385	Marathi	8	9	6
Commerce	3,621	3,115	2,836	Maths A (code 4021)	485	421	480
Commercial Studies	236	237	268	Maths D (code 4009)	1	0	0
Computer Studies	632	653	709	Maths D (code 4029)	13,043	12,808	13,608
Design & Communication	156	329	475	Modern Chinese	14	15	18
Design & Technology	119	205	236	Physics	2,193	2,363	2,848
Economics	7,023	6,030	5,910	Principles of Accounts	9,858	9,184	9,176
Electronics	53	53	40	Religious Studies	2	16	16
English Language	13,787	13,485	11,440	Religious Studies (2041)	21	40	51
English Literature	3,258	3,117	3,401	Science	40	27	43
Fashion and Fabrics	215	213	246	Sociology	260	220	283
Food Studies	301	312	377	Spanish	1	1	3
French	13,512	13,220	14,081	Statistics	218	234	251
French Literature	2,734	2,957	3,402	Tamil	34	19	22
Geography	269	288	294	Telugu	23	11	14
Geometrical & Mech. Drawing	534	341	179	Urdu	192	183	72
German	33	35	29	Woodwork	11	0	0
Hindi	2,110	1,991	2,080				

Source: Mauritius Examinations Syndicate Statistical Handbooks.



### **Regional Examinations: the best of both worlds?**

Given the advantages and disadvantages of national compared with metropolitan examinations, the next question is whether regional examinations can offer the best of both worlds. The answer seems in some circumstances to be affirmative, but in others to be negative.

The Caribbean Examinations Council and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment have, on balance, been highly successful forms of regional collaboration. Like other regional bodies, however, both agencies have a history of tensions. During the formation of the CXC, Jamaican leaders opposed siting the headquarters in Barbados, and were only placated by the creation of a Western Zone Office in Jamaica even when that office had almost nothing to do for the initial years (Augier, 1996). Leaders of some other member states also wanted offices in their countries, and were disappointed when this was refused. Initial siting of the SPBEA headquarters was less controversial since Fiji was a recognised centre and already hosted headquarters of other regional bodies. Also, the Fiji government granted land to the headquarters and subsidised their operation. However, questions were raised whether the headquarters should be moved, particularly after Fiji's 1987 military coup d'état (Rees, 1991, p. 64). Although the headquarters ultimately remained in Fiji, the discussion underlined the fragility of the regional framework.

Jamaica's case for being the CXC headquarters partly rested on the fact that it was the largest member country. In this respect, the situation paralleled that in the SPBEA. Moreover, both organisations have suffered tensions arising from the fact that, because of their relatively large sizes, neither Jamaica nor Fiji needs a regional agency as much as do the smaller countries. In the South Pacific this came to a head when leaders in Fiji decided to operate their own Grade 12 examinations rather than join the SPBEA's Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (PSSC) initiative. This did not prevent the PSSC from going ahead, but it cast a serious blow against the endeavour. Fiji's weight and numbers would have greatly improved both the prestige and the finances of the PSSC.

The CXC and SPBEA have also encountered other complexities. The fact that the regional bodies have had to pay close attention to national balance in staffing has hampered their operation; and in the South Pacific tension arose from the question of whether Fiji citizens working for the SPBEA, as an international body, should receive salaries free of Fiji taxes. Also, in the Caribbean the need to rotate the venue of meetings among the member states has greatly increased costs [7]. It is far from certain that regional examinations are cheaper to the end users than either national or metropolitan examinations would be. Moreover, the curricula devised for the regional examinations still do not satisfy all participants. Partly because of this, in 1996 the CXC began moves towards operation and/or accreditation of national examinations in the region, on a model which to some extent resembled that in the South Pacific.

Also worth noting is the fact that despite the apparent advantages of regional examination bodies, some governments have refused to join them at all. Thus the Bahamas decided to retain its independence outside the CXC, and the Cayman

Islands withdrew from the CXC at one point though did subsequently rejoin. Likewise, Nauru withdrew from SPBEA membership at an early stage, and Niue also decided to opt for observer status. The other side of this coin is that the work of the CXC has expanded beyond the traditional confines of the Commonwealth Caribbean to include as external members the Dutch-speaking territories of Saba and St Maarten, and membership of the SPBEA has expanded beyond the Commonwealth to include Marshall Islands. These features of contracting and enlarging membership are further illustration of the ambivalence with which small states may view regional bodies.

Turning to the rather different model in West Africa, the Gambia has greatly benefited from WAEC's technical expertise and the international recognition of qualifications. However, the Gambia has sometimes suffered from dominance by the larger partners. One aspect has been pressure to adopt a 6-3-3-4 structure for the school system (i.e. six years of primary schooling, three of junior secondary, three of senior secondary and four of university education), to fit the model first adopted in Nigeria. Further, the turmoil of domestic politics in the various member states has greatly obstructed the smooth running of the regional body.

Also important to place next to these three regional bodies is a fourth which is now defunct. In 1961 the Directors of Education in the countries now called Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland formed a joint body which in due course came under the umbrella of the regional university and was named the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland Schools Examinations Council (Cieutat & Snyder, 1975). Like the regional university itself, however, the examinations body did not survive the political forces of separatism and the demand for stronger national control over curriculum. Whatever the technical and professional arguments, political factors caused the governments of the three countries to decide to work independently. This example emphasises that regional bodies may not be the perfect solution, even in parts of the world which have several small states clustered together.

## Conclusions

This paper has illuminated some of the complexities of self-determination and dependence in the education systems of small states. Almost all the states addressed by this paper are members of the Commonwealth, and most have commonalities arising from British colonial legacies as well because of their small size. Nevertheless, it seems likely that at least some of the factors identified in this paper also operate in non-Commonwealth small states.

The paper has shown that despite various commonalities, different models are used in the operation of examination systems. To some extent the variations reflect different priorities within the countries concerned, but the paper also shows that most arrangements are ambivalent in their implications.

The importance of national examination systems lies in the fact that they give national education authorities greater control, particularly of curricula but also of the shape and size of education systems. Admittedly, sometimes the actual content

of national examinations deserves scrutiny. Rees (1991) records that the School Certificates issued by the governments of Kiribati and Tuvalu in the late 1980s relied heavily not only on the SPBEA but also on the New Zealand authorities:

Kiribati and Tuvalu had ... a complicated arrangement for their new national certificates. The [SPBEA] Board *itself* would produce F5 [Form 5] level papers in English, History and Geography and negotiate with New Zealand over the provision of additional subjects. Finally the Board would process all results and issue certificates bearing the names of the countries concerned. [emphasis original] (p. 69)

A similar arrangement was requested by Western Samoa in 1988. Nevertheless, the fact that the education authorities in the countries concerned had requested the help of the SPBEA was itself a reflection of their increased control of examinations and curricula. The authorities in the Solomon Islands, Malta, Lesotho and Swaziland have also made major strides along the path of self-determination.

Returning to an earlier point, it is instructive to note that the national arrangements were in all cases made some time after independence. This seems to reflect a separation of examination and certification systems from the nationalistic fervour which characterised many colonial transitions. Moreover, in the South Pacific and in Malta the localisation movement was impelled more by changes in the metropolises than in the small states themselves. Nevertheless, it may also reflect a maturation in professional expertise and self-confidence within the small states concerned.

Regional bodies appear to be an intermediate type of arrangement, and have certainly been a vehicle for movement away from metropolitan boards which were perceived to carry colonial links. However, regional bodies tend to be unwieldy, and sometimes the members find that they have less control over examination processes than they had expected. Moreover, as noted by Taufe'ulungaki (1993), regional activities and the sharing of regional personnel do not always guarantee better understanding of the problems of individual members. Indeed while on the surface examinations set by metropolitan agencies in culturally distant countries might appear irrelevant to local conditions, metropolitan boards are usually willing to tailor examinations to the needs of their clients and may in fact secure better understanding of individual national needs than would be achieved through regional bodies. Metropolitan examinations may also bring benefits of international recognition, cost-effectiveness, technical quality, and choice in the range of subjects. They also have stronger neutrality and perhaps greater security, which is especially important in the highly personalised societies of small states.

Moreover, the fact that some countries still use metropolitan examinations should not be interpreted simplistically to mean that these countries are powerless and dependent. This is most convincingly illustrated by the example of Singapore, which certainly has the capacity to operate its own examinations, but the government of which has actively decided to retain the services of UCLES. As observed by Gopinathan (1996), Singapore is certainly dependent on other parts of the world in so far as it lacks natural resources and has a highly open economy, but the Singapore

government is also noted for its assertiveness on matters of identity and public policy. As such, Singapore certainly cannot be described as merely a small boat tossed in the high seas of global economics and interdependence.

Also to be stressed is that while some ties are colonial legacies in the sense that the examining boards are based in the country of the former colonial power, this is not the case in all instances. Thus New Zealand was not the former colonial power in Tonga or Vanuatu, and the fact that education authorities in those countries make use of services available from New Zealand reflects a pragmatic choice made in the light of available options rather than a simple form of dependency. This could be seen as another way in which small states have 'managed dependency' along the lines commented upon by Warrington (1994).

Moreover, returning to the observation made at the outset about gradations of scale, the fact that Tuvalu uses some Fijian examinations is also worth noting. Fiji (population 775,000) is small compared to New Zealand (3,455,000) or Australia (17,300,000), but it is huge compared to Tuvalu (population 9000). Most observers would describe Fiji as a peripheral country in the international arena; but to Tuvalu it is a centre. Another centre is Western Samoa (population 163,000), from which the Tuvalu government purchases some papers for its school certificate examination.

Among the benefits to be gained from detailed study of education systems in small states, therefore, is enhanced understanding of the dynamics of dependence and interdependence. Watson's (1984b) remarks about Malaysia and Thailand, in which he pointed out that 'where external involvement is sought it is often done willingly and not necessarily on terms of subservience' (p. 83) may also be applicable even to the smallest states in the world. The variety of strategies employed by small states reflects the variety of ecological niches which can be found to fit the circumstances facing states of different sizes, in different parts of the world, with different historical legacies, and with different partners for collaboration.

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### Notes

- [1] The Commonwealth was founded in 1949, and chiefly embraces the United Kingdom plus a group of former British dependencies. However, not all former British dependencies are members of the Commonwealth, and not all Commonwealth members are former British dependencies. In 1998, the Commonwealth had 54 members. Among the recently-admitted members with non-British colonial heritages are Cameroon and Mozambique.
- [2] Ironically, Malta's new examination system contained several features which paralleled ones in the UK reforms—even though the justification for establishing the system was partly based on rejection of those features.
- [3] These four are not included in Tables I or II because although they operate with a strong degree of self-government, they are not sovereign states. Anguilla, which is also a UK dependency, joined the CXC in 1989.

- [4] the Cook Islands and Niue are not included in Tables I and II because they are not sovereign states. The Cook Islands withdrew from SPBEA membership in 1996.
- [5] Tokelau is not included in Tables I and II because it is not a sovereign state. Marshall Islands is not included because it is not a member of the Commonwealth.
- [6] The African languages are Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Otjiherero, Rukwangali, Setswana, Silozi and Afrikaans. The European languages are English, French and German.
- [7] At various points in history the suggestion has been made that the venue of SPBEA meetings should also rotate among member states. However, this has always been abandoned on the grounds of costs. Also many members from other countries like coming to Fiji for the meetings.

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