

Students Library of Education

A New Examination of Examinations

Robert Montgomery



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Historical background

THE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Examinations have come to play a small but very significant part in determining the structure of English society, as a brief outline of the evolving social scene will indicate. It is one of the minor pleasures of English life that earlier forms of organization persist, very often diminished in importance, but recognizable still. The distribution of power, the control of important events, lay at one stage in feudal hands. Close friends were needed in violent times, and loyalty was to be found among relatives, if anywhere. It was helpful to be born into a powerful family; care was taken that one should marry well and that the line be continued. One allied oneself to a feudal overlord for employment and protection. This is not to say that members of the nobility were all-powerful for Robin Hood lurked in the Greenwood, and financial difficulties could weigh heavily on the unworldly; but an aristocracy remains to this day. The House of Lords prospers and the names of those with hereditary titles appear in public life more frequently than they would by chance.

Tradesmen in more recent times began to develop substantial businesses and the riches of commerce came to count in the world. Financial empires were developed by merchants that could rival those of the nobles and, for an ambitious young man, money came to be as important as noble birth. The less affluent sought the patronage of the rich if they were to be secure or develop their talents. It became necessary to purchase commissions in the Army in the eighteenth century; livings in the Church were often in the gift of the great landowners; lucrative posts in the East India Company were available for those with the right contacts. Thus by patronage

did the wealthy class perpetuate itself and its members exercise their influence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It still helps to have money today!

The nineteenth century may be viewed pessimistically as an era of poverty amidst industrial wealth, of hidden vice beneath outward respectability or of aggression against undeveloped nations. It can be viewed more optimistically as a period of progress and good order. The Church found a sense of purpose, the franchise was extended, canals and then railways proliferated, drains and sewers were laid down, the rule of law was extended and Great Britain flourished at the centre of a mighty empire. Large social organizations of a new order were developed to cope with responsibilities at home and abroad, and these required competent officials if they were to operate smoothly. There was pressure in the middle of the nineteenth century for the introduction of tests of efficiency or even for open competition for recruits to important public posts. Sentiment was swayed by the success of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in raising the standards of their abler graduates by means of competitive examinations. Many of these graduates entered their political or administrative careers with an enthusiasm for examinations, which were swiftly reproduced for the public services.

Entry to the Indian Civil Service came to depend upon open competition by public examination after the India Bill of 1853. A small number of Englishmen governed a vast foreign country and it was vital that each should be very able. Similar principles were gradually extended in the Home Civil Service after the 1853 'Report on the Organization of the Civil Service'. Entry was to depend upon competitive examinations, and promotion was to be the result of ability and industry rather than seniority and influence. The Civil Service Commissioners arranged for examinations with 'limited competition' within their departments, and took over the Indian Civil Service, Army and other examinations from 1858 onwards. Full competitive examinations for almost all entrants could be introduced in 1870.

The transfer of power from the wealthy to the able was viewed with apprehension by many in the heavily stratified society of the day. Queen Victoria herself was reported to have feared that examinations would fill public offices with 'low people without the breeding or feelings of a gentleman'. The effect of the considerable change of emphasis was cushioned by the fact that the men who were initially to do so well in competitive examinations proved to be the very ones

sufficiently wealthy to have had an Oxford or Cambridge education or, at least, a public school background. Public schools and universities geared themselves to provide the training needed for changed circumstances. New classes or 'sides' were started in public schools to cope with Army entrance candidates, for example. It was possible to hire the services of tutors or 'crammers' who would help to ensure success in the now vital public examinations. The earlier transfer of power from the noble to the wealthy had been equally smooth as rich men acquired titles and the aristocracy married for money.

These changes in society were mirrored in those matters considered worthy of public display. In feudal times it was the family which counted, and heraldic 'achievements' in castle hall and family chapel reflected the importance of the aristocracy. As wealth came to count for more than blue blood, so ostentatious houses were erected as the architectural achievements of wealthy men. More recently, academic and professional qualifications came into prominence and, for many purposes, these are now of greater use than good connections or a large bank balance. The modern 'achievements' may be observed at their most luxuriant on the headed notepaper and in the prospectuses of colleges of technology, with impressive arrays of degrees and professional qualifications embellishing the names of members of the establishment.

THE EXTENDED USE OF EXAMINATIONS

The middle of the nineteenth century saw a vast extension of examining. This was an era of free trade, when it was hoped that competition would keep down prices. Charles Darwin published his 'Origin of Species' in 1859, with its notions of the survival of the fittest. In the same year Samuel Smiles published 'Self Help', which was immensely popular in its time. Examinations suited the spirit of the age and certificates came to be produced for candidates in their thousands and tens of thousands, both by government and independent organizations.

Government money was used from 1846 onwards to support training colleges for teachers and to encourage individuals to train and qualify. Characteristically, examinations played a key part in the scheme which enabled central grants to support denominational colleges and schools at a time when religious opinions were divided and firmly held. Able persons were thus recruited

to the teaching profession at a time when government colleges would have been viewed with distrust. Briefly, the better qualified a teacher, the greater the central grant he attracted. Inspectors also examined young 'pupil-teachers', some of whom obtained 'Queen's Scholarships' to the denominational training colleges.

The central Department of Science and Art was formed in 1853, after the 1851 Great Exhibition had revealed deficiencies in technical and artistic education. Financial incentives were used from 1859 onwards to promote a system which was ultimately comprehensive enough to cover most of what would later be described as secondary and technical education. The 'Revised Code' of 1862 placed a similar system of 'payment by results' on the elementary schools. Inspectors travelled the country and withdrew government grants with respect to those children deficient in the '3Rs' - Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. The system's cheapness and efficiency were appealing at first sight, but the long-term effects were harmful as teachers found themselves training pupils to satisfy the minimum conditions of the grant regulations. Elementary education was developed upon lines that later appeared mechanical and limited.

Other organizations evolved independently of the government. The Royal Society of Arts, founded in 1754, began by awarding prizes and medals, but embarked upon a system of examinations to help promote its ideas in the 1850s; its examination candidates were to be found in the mechanics' institutes that were the forerunners of later technical colleges. The government's Science and Art Department steered clear of anything that might be viewed as discrimination in favour of any one commercial or industrial concern. The RSA and, later, the City and Guilds of London Institute encouraged by public examinations the practical, vocational forms of education; both continue to play important roles in further education.

Again, the College of Preceptors was founded in 1846, mainly for teachers working in schools for children of the middle classes. These private schools were often considered superior to the elementary schools and more progressive than the great public schools. The College of Preceptors operated examinations from 1854 onwards to test pupils and provide standards of comparison for parents and teachers.

Secondary education came to be stimulated by examinations emanating from yet more substantial sources. The original 'Oxford University Local Examination' was held in 1858. 'School certificates' and 'higher school

certificates' were developed as the examinations of this and other boards took root. Backed by the prestige of the universities which guarded academic standards, yet free from government control, such examinations could assess the efficiency of pupils and schools in a way which was acceptable to all. The local examining boards and university matriculation boards developed later into the General Certificate of Education examining boards that set the Ordinary and Advanced level examinations of modern times, the GCE O and A levels familiar to all.

THE AGE OF THE EXPERT

Duplicated entries make it difficult to assess the numbers of pupils involved in public examining in the early days. Suffice it to say that the numbers of candidates increased from the beginning and with only minor discontinuities during world wars or at major administrative changes. The increase was at times almost exponential, with numbers doubling within each decade at both 16+ and 18+ age levels. So great was the development of public examining that by 1975 some 80.5 per cent of the 691,800 school leavers in England and Wales had acquired public examination qualifications. 106,140 achieved at least one A level pass, 235,060 obtained the high O level grades A, B or C that were originally described as 'passes'. (These high grades retained their practical importance for purposes of professional qualification even when the formal pass/fail barrier was dismantled.)

So all-embracing was the whole apparatus of examinations, and such was the demand for qualified persons that the very nature of society shifted. It was apparent by 1958 that a revolution had taken place clearly described by Michael Young in 'The Rise of the Meritocracy'.

Every system has its disadvantages. In a feudal age there were able, ambitious and very bitter men who had the misfortune to be low-born and unwilling to make a career in the Church. In an age when money mattered there were those unfortunates who had few means of obtaining any except by theft or acts of desperation. When appointments and promotions came to depend upon merit, how frustrating could be the lot of the unqualified! Opportunities for obtaining qualifications multiplied during the twentieth century, but those with learning difficulties still felt themselves at an unfair disadvantage, whether the difficulties had been brought about by poor social circumstances or a relative lack

of native intelligence. No wonder that the repetitive assembly-line job and the monotony of television viewing came to be relieved by unofficial strikes or juvenile delinquency as those with least of the conventional advantages expressed their dissatisfaction.

The initial screening process in such a society is provided by public examinations but adults continue to be promoted by ability also, long after the stage of formal education. Most societies in recent years have become increasingly managerial in nature, whether democratic, fascist or communist. The machinery of democracy with its councils and committees appointing chief officers and assistants, its governing bodies appointing head teachers and junior colleagues has its parallel in the business world where boards of directors appoint chief executives, managers and assistants.

In a democratic society the chief executive, a competent and well-paid official, has to serve but also to lead, instruct or persuade the committee of elected men and women that employs him. He acquires powers by virtue of his office, business is delegated by him to his assistants and he is responsible to his committee. The well-qualified officials who run the government departments, industrial enterprises and other large organizations dominate the operations of these institutions by their expertise and specialised knowledge. The increasing participation by officials and employees in the processes of decision-making reinforce the impression that the reins of power have come to lie in the hands of the experts. Only highly controversial matters or issues of principle need to be brought to the notice of the democratically elected or nominated councillors, committee members, shareholders or directors, and these might be swayed by the informed advice of the chief executive.

The development of influential professions was particularly rapid in the second half of the nineteenth century although such institutions had existed in some form for hundreds of years. Students of theology, law or medicine in the higher faculties of medieval universities later pursued their 'professions' in Church or State. The Church, Army and Navy provided professional careers in the eighteenth century for the able, industrious and intrepid. A widening range of organizations describing themselves as professions could be observed by the twentieth century. The Institution of Mechanical Engineers, for example, opening its membership to suitable persons after its foundation in 1847, began to set examinations for certain grades of membership in

1913. In some cases government departments arranged for examinations, but the more powerful professions were self-regulating. Thus the 1858 Medical Act brought the General Medical Council into being: doctors, representatives of universities and of bodies such as the Royal College of Physicians sat on the Council and governed the registration of entrants to the medical profession.

The multiplicity of examinations arising from their use by each of many professions was one of the reasons for a unified secondary school examination system. A consultative committee in 1911 had revealed the way in which school leavers were taking one examination after another, and its recommendations led to the formation of the Secondary School Examinations Council in 1917. The SSEC was to advise the government's Board of Education and sanction the school examining work of the prestigious and independent university examining boards. Every encouragement was given to professional bodies to accept the standard secondary school examinations. 'Exemptions' were generally granted from parts of their special examinations by universities or professions to those candidates who had secured suitable results in the public examinations.

RESPECTABILITY

An aim of those introducing the School Certificate system was to achieve an examination that would be generally recognized. There was a genuine fear that important bodies might ignore these examinations and insist on setting their own, separately. The early years of the SSEC saw the issue of reassuring circulars listing the professional and other institutions that had agreed to acknowledge the new examinations. The success of the new system depended upon the confidence in which it was held by existing institutions. The acceptability, or perhaps the respectability of the examination was a matter of moment.

This concern is repeated with the introduction of any new examination system. The regional CSE organizations set their first examinations in 1965 for pupils in secondary modern schools, but in the 1970s they were still nervously listing professions acknowledging their results for purposes of qualification. Most large firms and public bodies were aware of the respectability of the CSE examination results, but some private individuals were not, whether from ignorance or innate conservatism.

Occasionally an employer still dropped a hint that he was 'looking for a boy with O levels', the equivalent CSE grade 1 result being brushed aside. Occasionally pupils or parents still clamoured for entry to a more difficult GCE course when a less abstract CSE course would have been more appropriate.

Again, the Diploma in Technology courses started in 1956-7 for students in the newly designated Colleges of Advanced Technology were soon broadened and re-named 'degree' courses, such was the prestige of the very word. At the same time these colleges became universities with the right to grant their own degrees, but a Council for National Academic Awards was founded by Royal Charter in 1964 to award its own (CNAA) degrees in colleges outside the universities. Great care was taken to ensure that the new, non-university, degree awarding institution had the standing and prestige necessary for its degrees to be acceptable. External as well as college examiners and representatives were appointed to ensure that standards were maintained nationally as colleges promoted their own individually tailored courses of study.

Degree and other qualifications are used, amongst other purposes, for determining salaries, so that an increased importance is attached to examination results. Thus, a teacher's initial salary is more for a graduate than for a non-graduate, and a person with a 'good honours' degree receives the most. The respectability of the new Bachelor of Education degrees first awarded in 1971 was of particular concern in the teaching profession. Any lack of confidence in the value of such a degree course could affect sixth-form pupils and their parents, just as they came to a moment of decision about a young man's future career.

Public examination certificates are issued with care, and examination boards go to great lengths to preserve standards. The boards are highly sensitive to criticisms of their standards or of their efficiency because their members are aware of the importance of these to the great superstructure of social organization erected upon them. The elaborate processes developed to monitor and moderate standards of the large-scale examination boards will be indicated later.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXAMINATIONS

Examination, then, play an important part in modern society. Tales of despair in an earlier age made better reading as noble young men were deprived of their rightful

inheritances, or amiable young girls were married to irritable but wealthy old men. Modern tales of despair are less dramatic, though real enough to the participants. Figures from the highly selective universities suggest that between 12 and 15 per cent of entrants fail to graduate. Medical and other counselling advice is sought most desperately at examination time (Miller, 1970). Agitation of parents and schoolchildren at 11+ or GCE examination time reflects their awareness of the importance of examination results in society.

Financial costs may indicate the value placed upon examinations. A school with 1,160 pupils aged 13 to 18 in 1976-7 spent £6,527 on public examinations in that academic year. The amount of 'capitation' money available for running costs in the financial year 1976-7 was about £5,387 for all fifth- and upper-sixth-formers. In other words, the cost of a few weeks' examinations exceeded the entire sum available for textbooks, paper and all incidental running expenses for teaching the examinees in that year. While these amounts were small relative to the sums spent on the teachers' salaries it should be noted that a significant proportion of the teachers' time was devoted to supervising and administering the public examinations. The position differed little for younger pupils since teachers themselves provided comparable practice examinations which were carefully set and marked within the school, taking time and resources that might otherwise have been allotted to teaching. On the other hand it should be mentioned that public examinations serve purposes useful to the school and its teachers. The sudden removal of public examinations would leave teachers seeking alternative methods of assessing their pupils' progress, and their own effectiveness, and these methods would have their expenses.

Entire pages of 'The Times' are devoted to listing the names and schools of students securing first-class degrees. 'The Times Educational Supplement' in due season lists the names of successful Oxford and Cambridge open award winners, with full details of subjects, schools and colleges. Local papers fill many columns with the attainments of secondary school pupils. Whether this is done to encourage the able or to enable one to dwell mournfully upon the suspected shortcomings of a neighbour's child, it cannot be denied that, as a nation, the English take examinations seriously.

The functions of examinations

QUALIFYING EXAMINATIONS

Living organisms flourish if they are versatile and can adapt to changes in environment. Examinations have flourished because they, too, have qualities of versatility: they frequently serve several purposes and, if one becomes outdated or irrelevant, they may survive for the other reasons. In this chapter some of the purposes of examinations will be identified and isolated. In real life their use was not always so clear for many were used for several purposes, and even envisaged differently by different groups of people. In years gone by it was customary to draw a very clear line between qualifying and competitive examinations.

Medieval universities were usually, in effect, bands of masters who instructed students and admitted the acceptable and suitably qualified ones to their number in the course of time. In this the universities differed little from guilds of craftsmen, though here the master craftsmen, journeymen and apprentices were described as masters, bachelors and students. Tests of competence were required of students or apprentices; further tests or 'masterpieces' were required of bachelors or journeymen before they were admitted to the full brotherhood. One suspects that something more than mere technical competence may have been necessary: acceptability or even orthodoxy may have been the price of becoming an insider. University men proceeded by degrees and emphasis was laid as much upon attendance at courses as upon successful testing. The system had lost much of its earlier purpose at Oxford and Cambridge by the eighteenth century, when the 'exercises' of the scholastic age could be excused by 'graces', and orthodoxy and acceptability came to be all. The ancient universities remained as static,

inward-looking institutions of the Church of England for centuries. At Oxford and Cambridge, at least, there remained students with few academic pretensions as late as 1939. University life was expensive, grants and scholarships were few and pressure for entry was light. A wealthy young man could afford an education in polite company without needing a final certificate to start him on a career. Some of the atmosphere between the wars can be recaptured in John Betjeman's 'Summoned by Bells'. Basic, qualifying examinations secured entry. A degree of sorts could be obtained by three years' residence at Oxford or Cambridge. 'Pass degree' men sat final examinations of little academic significance. There may have been real social advantages in attending university, and not everybody troubled to take a degree. All this was to be brushed away in time by the advance of competitive examinations.

It must not be supposed that qualifying examinations, of themselves, resulted in such a lack of sharpness. It has been shown how the professions developed their own entrance tests in the last century, necessary tests of competence of young people intending to become doctors, apothecaries, engineers or other specialists, and it is always a comfort to know, when you need their services, that such professional men have at least reached certain minimum standards. Certain levels of incompetence are unacceptable for entrance to the teaching or medical professions: the test for a driving licence attempts to ensure that road users have at least minimum standards of skill and knowledge.

COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS

Young people enjoy competition where they have some reasonable prospect of success. Puppies fight, colts race and young men and women compete naturally at athletics, tests of French verbs, darts, or whatever else comes their way. Many examination developments from the eighteenth century onwards have relied heavily upon such feelings. There have been understandable attempts to preserve the less able from repeated disappointment but, for the education of the whole man, it is as important that he should have felt his pulse race in a contest as that he should have savoured the pangs of jealousy, the depths of despair, the heights of love or the satisfaction of achievement. Such feelings may well be best experienced and then outgrown, but they do need to be experienced if a person is to understand his own nature.

It was at Cambridge university that an examination system of medieval origin was first stimulated by an injection of competition. The so-called Mathematical Tripos was developed between 1747 and 1750 and candidates were named in 'honours lists'. Three classes were designated in 1752 and the 'wranglers', 'senior optimes' and 'junior optimes' had all sat common, printed question papers which were clearly the precursors of the modern honours degree apparatus. 'Chancellor's medals' for prowess in Classics were awarded in the same spirit from 1751 onwards to encourage the intellectual.

It should be emphasized again that, whereas nowadays university students are highly selected and most take 'honours degrees', this was not the case in the early nineteenth century. Some students competed at rowing, others in piety, others doubtless developed expertise in horse racing, wenching or drinking, for the ancient universities embraced the hearty, the theological and many other categories of student. Three years' residence would secure a degree; extra effort and rigorous training could enable a man to achieve renown in his chosen field: a good position in the honours lists or in the university or college boat or team. A man could seek his own area of achievement, taste success and make his reputation, whereas nowadays everyone tends to be thoroughly assessed willy nilly, and every shortcoming exposed.

The emphasis at Cambridge was upon Mathematics but at Oxford upon Classics. The examination statute of 1800 resulted in salaried examiners being appointed at Oxford; distinctions were granted and a list of the twelve best candidates was published in order of merit. The Oxford 'honours schools' multiplied in the years to follow, and fresh triposes were introduced at Cambridge. At first, however, it was competition and not subject matter that counted as young men strove to make their mark in the society of their contemporaries.

The honours system could be described in 1839 as 'a thoroughly efficient means of discriminating merit at the least cost of labour and time' (Latham, 1877). The colleges were in those days powerful and independent but the examination machinery was that of each relatively weak university. Indeed, when London University was established in 1836 it, too, was little more than an examining body, attempting to raise the academic standards of students in its constituent colleges, initially King's and University Colleges. Already one may sense a drifting away from the idea of competitive examinations in which it was an honour to compete and a glory to succeed, towards the business of mass examining. The