

Alternative Futures For School Leaving Awards*

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As many people know, examinations in the South Pacific, and indeed in many other parts of the world, are in a state of flux. Some would say they are in a state of chaos. After years of pressure from New Zealand teachers, the New Zealand University Entrance Examination, which is used by most South Pacific countries, is being abolished after this year, and the Minister of Education in New Zealand, Mr. Marshall, is marshalling his resources to phase out the New Zealand School Certificate as soon as he can. Last month the New Zealand School Certificate Examination Board in Wellington proposed its self-destruction and recommended that School Certificate be replaced with an internally assessed Fifth Form Certificate without grades, without pass/fail distinctions, and without inter-subject comparability. It is clearly intended to be quite a different sort of award. I think this change will probably occur in the near future, and even if it takes five years, the New Zealand Government has already announced that the South Pacific School Certificate Special Option papers are to cease from 1988. So the writing is on the wall and the die is cast. Very soon, I believe, the South Pacific examination authorities will be on their own and many people are pleased about this prospect.

Thirteen years ago, at an international seminar on educational priorities held here at USP, I was invited to speak on the topic "Examinations at the Crossroads", along with your Secretary Gurmit Singh. We talked about the possible abolition of examinations — we thought it was in the air — and I had collected a number of comments that South Pacific educators were making then about the evils of examinations, especially New Zealand ones. Amongst the comments I collected from various files and minutes and reports were:

Examinations are irrelevant;
they're restricting;
they're discouraging and deadening;
they're dampening;
they're deplorable;
they're invalid;

* Based on an address to the Suva Institute for Education Research, September, 1985.

they're distorting;
they're an obstacle to progress;
they're cruel.

One seminar speaker described external examinations as 'fire extinguishers' — putting out fires lit by teachers in the children's minds. Now, if even half of these criticisms of examinations have any truth in them, then it is incredible that we have clung to them for so long. After all, Canada abolished them in the early 70s; most Australian states did likewise, about the same time, and the abolition movement still seems to be spreading there. New Zealand has experimented with a variety of procedures for internal assessment, for school-based assessment by teachers, but a very conservative Minister of Education resisted the campaign to abolish examinations for an incredible nine years.

However, as in all contentious issues, there is another side to the story. The debate over examinations has been fought out in a variety of ways for several generations, but I believe it is really a debate between those who wish to centralise educational decision-making and those who would rather decentralise. The centralists say we must have common standards, we must have justice for all, we must have international credibility. An examination is impartial, it is equally fair for all students, it is sat under identical conditions for all and it ensures that certain topics are studied and mastered. When there is selection for scarce places, it is a fair and just system, regardless of race, sex, religion or economic circumstances, and it is acceptable to employers and to tertiary institutions. That, briefly put, I think is the main case for centralising examinations for school-leaving awards.

The decentralisation case, by contrast, is based on the view that assessments are best made at the local level, by the teachers who know the students best; the ones who work with them day in and day out throughout the year. If I teach a group of academically-inclined youngsters in a large city school, then I should be able to give them a course that is suited to their needs and aspirations, and assess them on what we have studied. If you teach a rural group with different needs, and ability levels, then you should adapt the curriculum to suit them, and assess them according to that course. The distant anonymous examiner can make no allowances for these differences. Everyone is expected to cover the same ground, at more or less the same pace, or the examination will not be valid. Furthermore, it is argued, that big three-hour, one-shot examination, that all-your-eggs-in-one-basket assessment is often an unfair and panicky experience, resulting

in a much blunter instrument than say a series of tests, essays and assignments, field reports, oral presentations or whatever else is part and parcel of a good course. I can show you evidence that two assessments made on two separate days are more reliable than one, and that three are more reliable than two, and so on.

So, following this line of argument, the New Zealand examination authorities have followed the Canadians and the Australians and they have opted for internal assessment for school-leaving awards at Form 5 and Form 6 levels. However, before you say, why not follow their example, and climb aboard the abolition bandwagon, I think we have to note some differences between these metropolitan countries and the South Pacific. Remember that selection is not normally a problem in these metropolitan countries; all or nearly all children can find places at the next level of education. This reduces greatly the pressure on teachers to favour certain students. Remember too that education has been free and compulsory in most of these places for generations, whereas most Pacific Islanders still have to make sacrifices and to pay for the privilege. This inevitably puts pressures on teachers who make internal assessments. Remember too that many teachers in Australia and New Zealand have received more training and qualifications, and that most have had several years of experience of internal assessment under their present accrediting system for University Entrance. Moreover, there are racial and kinship pressures to consider; pressures for favouritism; and they are probably less in evidence in metropolitan countries than they are in the South Pacific.

So, much as I like the ideals of internal assessment, I suspect that in the Pacific Islands we are not ready for it in 1986. The pendulum is not poised to swing that far yet. I think it is worth remembering too that at the one point in the system where there is some selection in metropolitan countries (i.e. at entrance to university), there is usually an examination. New Zealand examiners look as though they are going to retain their Form 7 bursary examination; in Australia, most of the States have kept one examination that counts for 50% at Grade 12 level, the last year of high school, and in Canada, (I was in Canada looking at their system last year), they have had internal assessment for more than a decade but three provinces (British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario) have recently reintroduced an examination at Grade 12 level (i.e. at the point of entrance to university) — an examination that counts for 50%. So there is still an examination at the point where there is a need for a just and reliable selection mechanism.

As New Zealand is phasing out of the South Pacific examination scene, this is the time for reconsideration. It seems to me that it is time now to give the pendulum a definite push towards the decentralisation end of continuum. After all, there has been a huge distance between the examiners and the pupils for our School Certificate and University Entrance. It is a long way from distant Wellington to Suva, to Tarawa, to Vila, to Apia and to Nuku'alofa. Most of us would agree on the weakness of a centralised New Zealand external examination that has standardised all Pacific syllabuses in the one inflexible mould. We have a golden opportunity to do some decentralising, to develop more locally relevant prescriptions and to give local examiners more freedom and more responsibility.

What do the Ministers of Education around the region feel about this opportunity? I have visited seven countries in the region in the past six weeks and discussed the issue with senior officials in Ministries of Education and a number of teachers and principals. Some leaders regard the challenge with smiling confidence and joyous optimism. Regrettably, these positive emotions do not always seem to be shared by their subordinates, in particular by classroom teachers. They worry about examination policies, the standards of examinations and international credibility; they worry about nepotism in high places, the scaling procedures that are going to be used and about mistakes in reporting. These anxieties will be lessened, I believe, with the training and back-up support that are being offered by the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment. The Board's reputation in the islands I have visited is high, and is improving now that the Ministries of Education can see what the Board can do. Indeed, the requests for their services over the next year or two are increasing rapidly.

So, assuming that New Zealand is finally withdrawing its examinations, and assuming that full internal assessment is not realistic at the moment, what are the options for the nine countries that have used these examinations for the past three decades? Before I spell out a few possible scenarios and get your opinions, I should raise one or two more basic principles for your consideration. Just what are the desirable criteria, the desirable qualities of examinations for school-leaving awards? What do we have to aim at? What criteria should we keep in mind?

First, it seems to me that local examinations should reflect the curricula of country and the cultural aspirations, as far as possible. Examinations for those who are staying in the islands should reflect local culture, local

language, local history, local geography — not to the exclusion of the rest of the world, but the emphasis should become less Eurocentric. Of course, this is more important in some subjects and at some levels than others. There is no way you can adapt Archimedes' principle to fit Fijian circumstances, and as far as I know there is no Samoan version of Pythagoras. The case for local input is greater in arts than in science.

Furthermore, I believe it is more important to have local content at Form 5 level than at Form 6 level. In most countries in the region Form 6 students, the academically motivated minority, have their sights set on further studies, usually overseas, so they prefer the kind of course that will best help them to prepare for university, whether in Suva, New Zealand, Australia, PNG or wherever they intend to study.

Another important criterion to keep in mind is that the examinations have to be competently constructed, marked, scaled and reported. The resources available to achieve this in most of the islands outside Fiji are still rather limited. Many of the students who took ED 354 under Subhas Chandra, Gurmit Singh, myself and others, are in key places, but many more have moved to higher posts, to responsible positions outside the education sector. In this context the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment is helping with the training of local markers, the analysis of results and so on. But the Board has an establishment of only two professional officers, so they cannot be in all places at once. There is clearly a problem in this respect. However, if this important criterion, quality, can be demonstrated to be present, then I think the other principle, international credibility, is more likely to be attained. The University Entrance credential from New Zealand is accepted in Fiji, Australia, UK, indeed almost anywhere. Who is going to accept a UE qualification from Tonga or Tuvalu or Vanuatu? USP, as you know, has been accepting school graduates from Solomons, Kiribati and Vanuatu without NZUE. The outcome of this policy has not always been satisfactory, judging by figures I have seen. Students are arriving here without adequate preparation for certain courses. Furthermore, I have been told discouraging stories about Pacific Islanders who go to Australia and fail in large numbers, and some who go to New Zealand and do the same. I think metropolitan countries generally are wary of accepting underqualified applicants, for reasons of their own, as well as for the students' self-esteem. So this international portability criterion cannot be ignored.

Bearing these criteria in mind, what would be a sensible policy for the future? I would like to outline three main models for the 1990s plus a few

minor variations on each, and seek your reactions.

Before I do so, it would be instructive to study Model I showing the present system of external examinations so you can see where we are moving from. At the moment each country in the region sets its own examinations below the School Certificate level. Sometimes it is at Lower Form 5; sometimes at Form 4 and sometimes at Form 3, Solomon Islands presents an exception, as it sets its own national examination at Form 5 level.

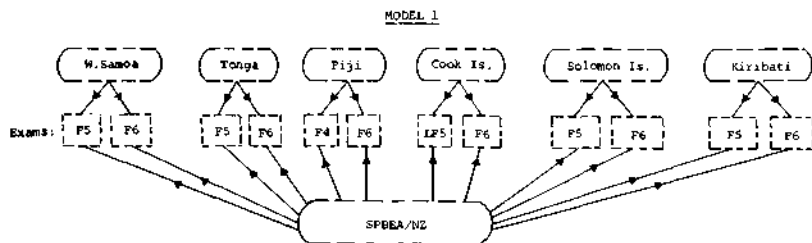


Figure 1

At present, the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA), is giving support to examiners in most of these countries in moderating their standards and improving the quality of their examinations. This support is indicated by arrows in the diagram. Meanwhile, there is a regional Form 5 School Certificate and a regional Form 6 University Entrance and those are set from New Zealand. (See the bottom of Figure 1).

Let us now turn to the options for the future. These are still figments of our imagination but I think they should help the purpose of the discussion. It looks to me, with the announcement of the withdrawal of Form 5 and Form 6 examinations from New Zealand, that we are drifting towards a policy of "whole-hearted nationalism" for examinations at this level — Form 5 and Form 6. I am referring to this as Model 1. Thus, Western Samoa is planning to set both Form 5 and Form 6 examinations to replace SC and UE; Tonga is proposing to do the same. Fiji is planning to have a Form 4 examination. Fiji Junior will continue, and they have announced their intention to develop their own Form 6 examination. The Cook Islands is thinking of keeping its lower fifth form examination and developing a Form 6 examination, and so on. It appears as though we are

producing a large series of independent examinations with very limited resources, and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment is expected to help service each one. With a staff of two it will be very hard for them to do this. Assistance could be provided by New Zealand in some cases, but the policy switch would be too abrupt in my view to meet the criteria spelled out above. However, unless a strong initiative is taken in the near future, I believe that this model will emerge as the examination system of the future. It has the obvious advantage that it would encourage the development of nationally relevant curricula and enable each country to set standards that are within the reach of a large proportion of school leavers. These are desirable criteria.

However, Model 1 suffers from several real disadvantages. It would put an enormous strain on the trained manpower resources of most countries, especially at Form 6 level, as well as on SPBEA staff who would be expected to be in 14 places at the same time, while still supervising attachments at home. It would result in a huge range of new examinations set each year, with slightly different emphases, different standards and different levels of reliability, and most of them would be unlikely to attract international recognition at the level where most countries want it — Form 6.

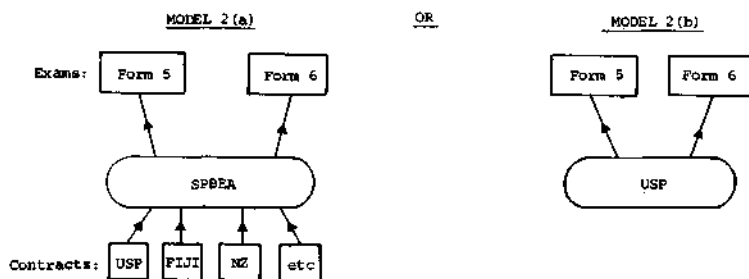


Figure 2

Model 2 is at the opposite extreme, what we could call "whole-hearted regionalism". Under this model we would replace the New Zealand Form 5 and Form 6 examinations with examinations prepared regionally by a unit — perhaps the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment or USP. There would be one regional examination for Form 5 and one regional examination for Form 6, each including the whole range of subjects. Perhaps the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment could become the examining authority. It is independent, it has expertise and

experience in the region, but it does not have the staff to prepare separate examinations in English, Mathematics, History, Chemistry, Physics and so on. If the Board were to take on this responsibility it would need to be transformed into an examining authority, and would probably contract out to others the task of setting the examinations in those subjects for which it had no suitable people on the staff. Thus, examiners might be drawn from USP, Fiji schools or Ministry, or from other parts of the region, including New Zealand or Australia.

The main advantage of a whole-hearted regional model are that it would encourage the development of regional curricula and examinations at Form 5 and Form 6 level, it would ensure a common standard at each level which would probably gain international acceptance where required, and it would put less strain on the resources of each country. However, it now seems too late for such a model to gain acceptance. It might have worked five years ago, but it is not viable today. Several countries have made a public commitment to set national examinations, at least at Form 5 level, examination units are being established to undertake this task. Solomon Islands already has such an examination based on local syllabi; Tonga and Samoa have planned national examinations for Form 5, and Fiji has announced its intention to do without one. It seems that Model 2 is unlikely then to gain widespread support at present, whether controlled by SPBEA or USP.

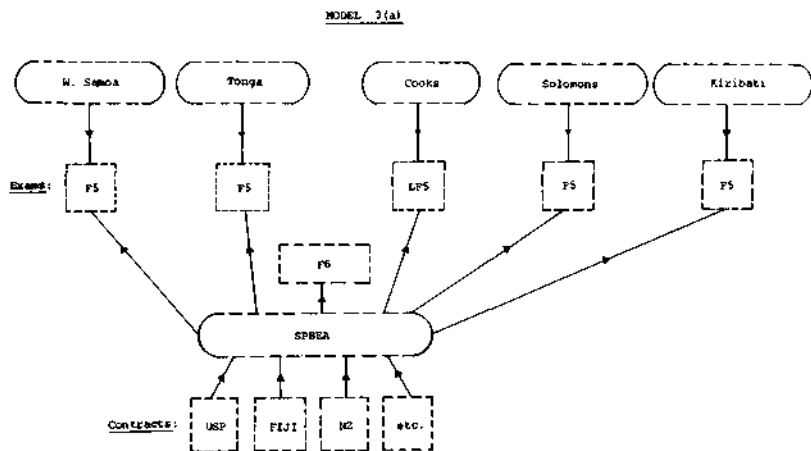


Figure 3

MODEL 3 (b)

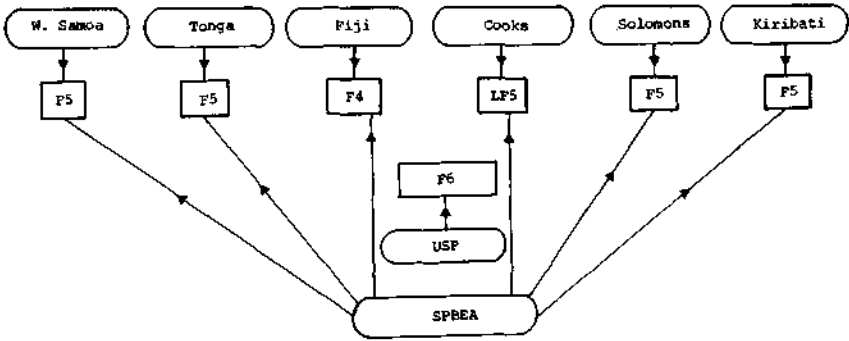


Figure 4

MODEL 3(c)

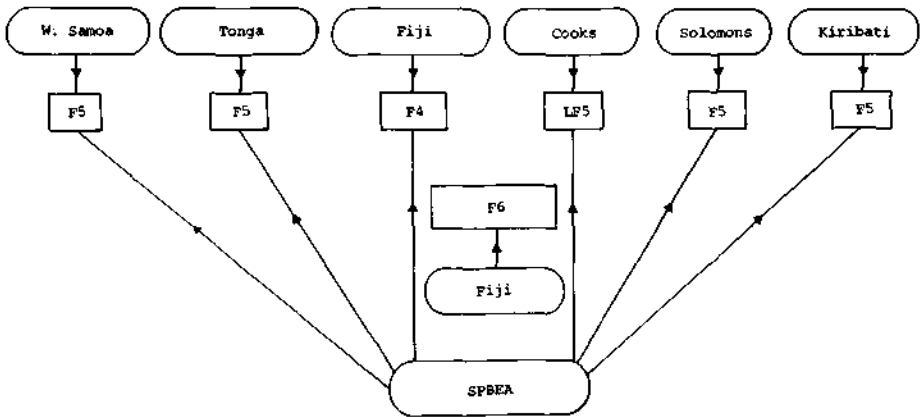


Figure 5

A third option, is what I refer to as partial regionalism. This model calls for national examinations at Form 5 level (or below), supported by the Board, and regional examinations at Form 6 level, under the auspices of a central organisation, such as the SPBEA (model 3a). Other possible candidates for such a central examining unit are USP (Model 3b) or a Fiji Examinations Board (Model 3c).

From my discussions with many Pacific Islands' educators, I found considerable support for Model 3(a). The main advantages for such a model seems to be:

1. The national examination at Form 5 (or below in some cases) could still reflect local curricula, and provide a realistic goal for large numbers of students.
2. SPBEA could still train examiners and moderate standards for the Form 5 examinations.
3. International recognition is not as important at Form 5 as it is at Form 6.
4. The regional examination at Form 6 represents a more efficient use of scarce manpower resources in the region.
5. Most countries are planning Form 6 courses similar to those offered now for New Zealand University Entrance. There may be some changes in the prescriptions for History, Geography, Biology, and a few other subjects, but these are unlikely to vary much from country to country, as most are aiming to prepare students for further education. What variations there are can probably be accommodated by a system of optional questions in the examinations.
6. The standard of the Form 6 examinations would be the same from one country to another.
7. The Board is an independent, autonomous body without vested interests in any kind of programme, or any particular institution. Therefore, its examinations are more likely to gain international respect than are those of small island nations.
8. The costs and workloads should be less than the provisions of Model 1.
9. The coverage of important prerequisites for university courses is more likely to be assured under the model than under Model 1. This matter is currently of much concern in USP Foundation Science and Mathematics courses, as a result of high failure rates amongst some island groups.
10. A regional body like the Board is more likely to attract funding from aid agencies for a co-operative endeavour than are each of the individual countries working separately.

The main disadvantages of this model is that the Fiji Government has announced its intention to work towards a national Fiji Form 6 Leaving Examination by 1988. If this plan is pursued, then the unit cost per student for the Board to run examinations for the remaining countries in the region would be considerably greater than if Fiji participated.

The two main options which have had some minority support are 3(b) and 3(c), in which the central authorities for the regional examinations at Form 6 are USP and Fiji respectively.

If USP were invited by enough countries of the region to develop Form 6 examinations, I am assured by senior USP officials that they would respond appropriately, but they would not wish to exercise an initiative in the matter. Some educators, outside Fiji, thought that the USP Preliminary Examinations, now offered through its Extension Studies Programme, might be adapted to suit the needs of member countries, and serve the function now performed by the New Zealand University Entrance Examinations Board. After following up the implications of this option, I believe that it is less viable than Model 3(a).

The main advantages are similar to those of Model 3(a). In addition, it must be said that USP has ready access to specialist staff in the major subjects. There are, however, several serious disadvantages.

1. There are still many people in the region, inside and outside USP, who contend that the University should avoid any role in setting examinations at Form 6 level. Some object as a matter of principle, in case of restricting influences on curricula; others on the ground that university lecturers without experience of school teaching are unsuitable examiners for Form 6 students. I believe these arguments do carry weight.
2. While some of the USP Preliminary courses are similar to those of the New Zealand University Entrance prescriptions (e.g. Mathematics), there are others which are quite different and are unlikely to prove acceptable in their present form for obtaining the recognition of school and university authorities outside the region. The English and History papers, for instance, are considerably different in content and level of intellectual demand.
3. The standard of the Preliminary Examinations, according to information I received, is lower than that of New Zealand University Entrance examinations in several subjects. This is not surprising. Extension Studies courses represent only 14 weeks' work at Form 6 level, generally without face-to-face contact; UE courses represent a whole school year, with 50-60 minutes teacher contact each day.

There may be other ways in which the University might participate in Form 6 examinations, but I doubt the wisdom of promoting Model 3(b) as it stands.

Model 3(c) allows for Fiji to set regional examinations at Form 6 level. As the Fiji Minister of Education has publicly invited regional countries to take the planned Fiji examinations (under an independent Fiji Examination Board), the model must be given some consideration. There is a precedent in the case of Tuvalu, which uses the Fiji Junior Examination at Form 4 level. I canvassed opinion for this model in several countries, but found no support for it. If there had been regional consultation before the public announcement, it is possible that a Fiji Examination, with regional representation on its Board, might have attracted some support. Present political realities, however, seem to pose an insuperable obstacle to Fiji-controlled regional examinations at Form 6 level.

So, there you have several models. There are others and some of you may see a better solution than any of those, but I hope that what I have said will provide the basis for some serious thought and discussion.