

BOOK REVIEWS

Mark Bray and Lucy Steward (eds.), *Examination Systems in Small States: Comparative Perspectives on Policies, Models and Operations* (Part of the Educational Development in the Small States of the Commonwealth book series), London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 292 pp., 1998, ISBN 0-85092-529-0 (paperback).

The majority of the Commonwealth members, regardless of the unit (and rigidity) of smallness used (e.g., population, area or Gross National Product), classify as small countries. In the introduction to the book Mark Bray refers to a Commonwealth Secretariat publication which stresses the uniqueness of small states (in this publication statehood is taken to include independent sovereign countries as well as semi-autonomous dependencies). The Secretariat recognises that small states have an ecology of their own. In other words they are not simply a down-scale version of larger countries. Consequently the Commonwealth Secretariat pays special attention to the multiple concerns of small states, among which is education. This concern on the implications of size in relation to educational issues is evidenced by the Educational Development in the Small States of the Commonwealth book series being published by the Human Resource Development Division of the Secretariat. And this book on examination systems in small states (meant for ministries of education, institutions, researchers and international organisations) is the series' latest addition.

Examination Systems in Small States is a follow-up of the 1996 pan-Commonwealth workshop held in Barbados that was also attended by a substantial number of small states representatives with particular interest in examination systems. The papers discussed during the workshop (in addition to other papers specifically commissioned afterwards to provide a more comprehensive view) form the basis of this book. The field of examinations, as can be readily appreciated, is indeed extensive. This fact and the desire to give the book a stamp of its own necessitated the editors to adopt a more focused approach to the project. In particular a 'universally applicable material non-inclusive policy' was adopted. The end result is that generally speaking the contributors have concentrated on broad policy choices, sidelining technicalities (generally not size-dependent) except for some issues directly affected by the size of the system concerned. The examinations directly under consideration are the external ones at the end-of-secondary level (even if primary and pre-university examinations are also included). This particular focus was chosen because 'it is at this level that tensions

between national, regional and international forces, which are the major theme of this book, are most clear' (Bray, p. 4).

The book is structured in five distinct sections. In section one Mark Bray lays down the analytical framework of the book which should help the reader focus on the more important parameters developed in later sections when particular realities (national, regional or international) are discussed. Section two tackles a number of national perspectives. The examination systems of ten countries from four geographical areas (Africa [Botswana, Mauritius, and Namibia], Asia & Pacific [Bhutan, Maldives, and Samoa], Caribbean [Bahamas, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago] and Europe [Malta]) are explored by native authors. Three regional examination bodies are the focus of section three. These are the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA), and the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). Then, in section four, is the turn of metropolitan examination boards, namely the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) and the New Zealand's examining bodies. Finally, in section five Bray's concluding comments and analysis (what he terms as 'lessons for conceptual understanding, policy and practice') based on the contributions in sections two to four bring the collection of papers to an end.

While each paper in sections two to four can stand on its own, I feel that Bray's introductory and concluding sections in reality give this publication that extra edge. For it is mostly through Bray's writings that the reader can rise from the particular and mostly descriptive dimension to the more generic and comparative one. Furthermore readers who are venturing for the first time in this field (i.e., examination systems and small states) stand to gain a lot of from Bray's concise though comprehensive review and analysis of the main underlying issues. I am however less convinced with Bray as the co-editor. Suffice to mention that Bray (p.6) salutes the book's country-contributions by native authors as a guarantee of 'authenticity.' But while all these authors surely have an excellent understanding of the underlying national policies, models and operations, they may not have been as free in their writings as one would have preferred. The question of possible vested interests and the understandable uneasiness of reporting on meet-daily-basis colleagues and structures cannot be underestimated. As a result the reader can never really be sure about the real 'authenticity' of these reports. Another disturbing feature is that the level of the national contributions is rather uneven. Papers vary along an extensive continuum from the highly comprehensive and analytical pieces on Botswana and Malta to the brief and largely descriptive pieces on Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. This discrepancy is, I feel, one the weaknesses of the book. And had the editors ensured a better overall standard, the more academically oriented reader would have surely found this recent publication more rewarding.

The book has a special appeal to those intrigued by comparative studies, particularly if keen on the examination systems of small states with an anglophile educational background. More than just the small Commonwealth states, the countries actually targeted in this Commonwealth Secretariat publication are those small ones (arbitrarily taken here to imply a population of two million and less) with an educational system modeled on the British one. The chapter on Bhutan (not a Commonwealth country, but with an educational system biased towards the British model due to its strong education ties with Commonwealth member India) amply demonstrates this point. The book's two million population size cut off point has permitted the inclusion of countries (e.g., Namibia, population 1.6 million) which in comparison to the very small of the small countries (e.g., Tuvalu, population 9000) are relatively large. The resulting diversity in sizes has provided some interesting contrasts. For instance the numerical strength of Namibia has made it relatively easy for the UCLES, because of the economy of scales, to prepare special syllabi and papers for Namibian students. On the other hand Tuvalu, even though member of the SPBEA which primarily seeks to help member countries run national examinations, is too small to localise its examination system. Consequently Tuvalu has to buy ready prepared examination papers from another SPBEA member, neighbouring Samoa, in order to retain some relevance to its cultural heritage.

One striking feature that emerges from this collection of papers (pointed out by Bray, p. 237) is that 'the education systems of the majority of countries covered in this book, particularly at the senior secondary level, remain dominated by formal examinations'. This is against the growing international trend of moving towards giving real weighting to continuous and school based assessment. One may consider this 'traditional approach' as one of the unifying features of the examination systems considered in this book. By and large three basic models of operations of examinations in small states emerge: Examinations are held through national (e.g., Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate [MATSEC] in Malta), regional (e.g., the SPBEA in the South Pacific region) and metropolitan bodies (e.g., the UCLES). These three models are however not mutually exclusive. Instead they may all operate side by side as is evidenced by the Trinidad & Tobago reality. Again parallel bodies operate differently from one country to the other. In spite of its many problems, including negligible staff, MATSEC in Malta is responsible for all external examinations at 16+ and 18+ levels. On the other hand the relatively over-staffed Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (MES) only operates primary level examinations moderated by the University of London Examinations & Assessment Council (ULEAC). At the secondary level Mauritius adheres to an examination system operated by the UCLES.

Some small states move away from metropolitan agencies (usually in ex-colonial powers) towards national or regional bodies in order, amongst other things, to enhance self-identity and ascertain control over their curriculum, but others are forced along this path by their metropolitan agency itself. In New Zealand educational authorities were so worried that the needs of the South Pacific countries (which their examinations were serving) were delaying the necessary reforms in New Zealand itself, that New Zealand actively sought to distance these countries from its national examinations by practically obliging them to set up the regional SPBEA. After postponing the inevitable for a number of years the South Pacific states had to put on a brave face to bad fortune. Consequently most of them established national examination bodies under the umbrella of the SPBEA even if moving towards a credible national system is indeed be an uphill task. The chapter on Bahamas (a country currently distancing itself very cautiously away from metropolitan dominance to local responsibility) is a good example of the multiple difficulties characterising such an endeavour.

The number of issues tackled in this collection of papers is rather comprehensive. But I still feel that there are some areas (perhaps not central enough) which fall within the parameters established by the editors which could have been further explored. The issue of control over the curriculum is one of them. Control is often cited as one of the more pressing reasons for the localisation (or regionalisation) of examination systems. It would indeed have been interesting to consider to what extent can small states truly gain control on their curricula through localisation when: (i) these states are plagued by their self-proclaimed lack of resources and expertise; and (ii) the majority of primary sources in their schools (i.e., books, teaching aids, media programmes, curricular models etc.) are still being imported from their ex-colonial masters or neo-colonial powers (e.g., the USA). Under such circumstances can national (or to a lesser extent regional) bodies ever think of becoming truly independent and in control? It may well be that it is the knowledge that this can hardly ever materialise that keeps metropolitan agencies rather hopeful about future prospects (see chapter 15 on the UCLES) in spite of the growing desire amongst small states to go national or regional. In reality localisation can actually mean new clients for the traditional examination bodies.

Metropolitan bodies may now have acquired another prospective role – perhaps more ‘supportive’ than ‘administrative.’ Already a number of national bodies have some form of contact with metropolitan counterparts and some national examinations are also underwritten by these. But while this emerging role of the metropolitan bodies is evident enough in this publication, in my opinion it has not been properly dealt with. The chapters specifically dedicated to metropolitan bodies could have been more illuminating in this respect. On a

different level Bray, when discussing the characteristics of small states, may have neglected one important aspect, namely the states' level of educational preparation and tradition. Malta, just to give one example, with a centuries-old university, strong educational services and traditions, and compulsory education up to 16 years long established is a completely different reality in comparison to other small states which are still struggling to implement universal primary education. And what about costs? The question of losing out on precious foreign currency is frequently listed as one of the reasons for localisation. The issue of what this money saving really implies in terms of examinations' 'quality' as opposed to 'recognition' could have been better addressed in the book. Because while such a decision can be economically correct and desirable its possibly harmful educational implications call for thorough evaluation.

My less positive comments should not detract from the multiple merits which mark this book that has to a large extent lived up to its promises. It is an extremely readable, informative and fairly comprehensive and analytical text within the realm of comparative literature on examinations. This recent publication by the Commonwealth Secretariat contributes towards an increased awareness and better understanding of the diversities and commonalities characterising examination systems in small states. Because while most of these examination systems do share some over-riding features (such as the urge to protect national identity, stingy educational budgets, lack of expertise and resources, and worries about international recognition), at the same time they form part of distinct realities. The book is a clear signal against unyielding over-simplifications, and the interdisciplinary approach adopted throughout reflects the often complex and multifaceted realities underlining the pertinent issues. Finally, I have no hesitation to recommend this book to anyone interested in the political, sociological and economical aspects of examinations. This book should help readers from small states to view their examination system within wider international perspectives, while readers from larger countries have here an opportunity to start coming to terms with some of the real issues facing small states.

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