

# Schools Exams And Certification

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A new Commonwealth body to rationalise secondary school examination procedures in member countries and to encourage the development of a Commonwealth standard of certification is being established with assistance from the Commonwealth Secretariat in London.

One of its aims is to facilitate the movement of Commonwealth students within member nations and mutual recognition of qualifications gained in each other's countries.

The Association of Commonwealth Examination and Accreditation Bodies (ACEAB) will bring together metropolitan, national and regional institutions concerned with examinations and accreditation.

Organisations responsible for producing and operating materials and systems used in examinations and accreditation can join as associate members.

ACEAB will provide a forum for an exchange of views and information between members through a regular newsletter, meetings and networking arrangements.

It will promote ethical standards in systems of examinations and accreditation and the training and professional development of personnel engaged in this field. It will also promote research in assessment and examination procedures to encourage excellent practice.

The decision to create ACEAB was taken by a Commonwealth workshop on examination systems in small states, held recently in the Caribbean island of Barbados.

The meeting was arranged by the Secretariat in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture, Barbados, and the Caribbean Examinations Council.

More than half the Common-

wealth's 53 members are small states. Most of these countries are in Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.

The workshop dealt with issues and concerns in the provision of examinations, focusing on the special situation of small states and the challenges they face in providing educational services with limited human, financial and other resources.

These countries use one or a combination of three models for examinations, particularly at secondary school level: national and regional examinations and those prepared by examination boards in advanced members such as Britain.

This means that there are variations in standards and that qualifications gained in one country are not necessarily recognised in another. This restricts student mobility.

The small structure of ministries and costs involved do not allow them to provide a full range of services for administering examinations.

Small states often lack trained people who have to combine their examination duties with other functions.

Security is another concern in a small state where everybody knows everyone else or, in many cases, is related to one another. Setting and keeping examination papers secret is not always easy in such circumstances.

These and other related issues were discussed by the Barbados workshop, the first of its kind. The week-long event attracted more than 60 participants from 25 countries. Several regional and international organisations concerned with education also took part.

The Commonwealth Secretariat

was represented by Professor Stephen Matlin of Britain, director of its Human Resource Development Division, and Dr. Lucy Steward from Trinidad and Tobago, a chief programme officer in the Education Department of the division.

Small states, pointed out Prof. Matlin, faced the challenge of not only providing quality education but also of ensuring that the graduates of the school system were appropriately certified and that their qualifications were recognised both locally and internationally.

Mia Amor Motley, Barbados Minister of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture, said recognition had to go beyond those doing well in the academic field.

"You cannot talk about human development in any region without understanding that unless the system finds a way of being able to assess the levels of persons within the system, there is going to be a wastage of resources," she said.

Ms Motley said present examinations only catered for the top 30 or 40 per cent of the student population. "The problem of what the other students could do after leaving school with no certification is becoming critical in a highly competitive environment."

Various forms of testing were necessary since some students did not perform well in written tests.

The challenge before the participants was therefore to identify mechanisms capable of testing a wide range of abilities that could also be used in out of school situations, including adult literacy and extra-curricular programmes.

Dr. Steward said some young people may not do well academically,

but may have talents in other fields such as music, sport and arts and crafts.

"They deserve recognition, too, so that they feel they are valued members of society and are not considered useless," she said.

"Such recognition will give them self-esteem. We just cannot wash our hands of those who fail to get traditional qualifications."

The workshop recommended the preparation of a code of practice for Commonwealth countries and the publication of a directory of examination boards.

It suggested work attachments for persons to learn about examination systems in other Commonwealth countries, including the use of information technology in such systems. Assessment training and review of national examination systems were among its other recommendations.

The meeting chose Dr. Steward as honorary secretary of an interim executive committee of ACEAB, to be based temporarily at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Ms Irene Walter, registrar, Caribbean Examinations Council, Barbados, Mr. John Saddler from the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate in Britain and Mr. Surendra Bissoondoyal of Mauritius became members of the interim committee to guide ACEAB's work.

The association will be formally launched at a follow-up workshop in New Zealand early in 1998. That meeting is expected to decide on a full-time secretariat and a permanent location of ACEAB.

— Commonwealth Feature