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EXPERIMENTING *with* MATRICULATION

Editorial

EARLIER this year it was proposed that, as an experiment, a number of Transvaal students should be admitted to universities without having to complete a public examination. For South Africa this is a revolutionary proposal, for the 'Matric.', or its equivalent as controlled by the Joint Matriculation Board, has become firmly established by both tradition and legislation, in University charters, as the sole gateway to higher education.

For many a boy and girl it is the culminating point of their twelve years' schooling and often in itself a goal beyond which they do not aspire to go. For pupil and parent alike, the matriculation year is one that makes stern mental, physical and emotional demands, which leave both family and offspring exhausted by the time the results are published. The uncertainties are shared by the teachers concerned, for not only are they anxious for the success of their pupils but also their professional reputations are involved.

The matriculation examination appears, then, to be a burden which few can carry with gladness and from which most would welcome relief. In this desire there is nothing new. The early examinations conducted by a panel composed mainly of laymen, often inadequate to perform their task, disappeared when the growth of school populations rendered them impracticable. In their place appeared the written examination, which throughout the years has taken various forms, ranging from the long, sustained answer, regarded by some as unreliably subjective, to the 'objective' test, which others suspect as producing mere snippets of learning. One answer to the alleged inadequacy of the examination was the addition of the cumulative individual record, based on the history and achievement of the pupil over a long period and reducing the unreliability of assessment on a single performance.

The Transvaal employs a compromise between the two: a single external examination, the result of which may be modified by a school record mark contributing about one-third of the candidate's total marks. The examination at the end of Standard X is the only survivor of a series of external examinations which at various times have been held at the levels of Standards V, VI, VIII and IX, represented by High School Entrance, School Leaving, Junior Certificate and Junior Matriculation. Their place has been taken by automatic progress from primary to high school and by the issue on the school's recommendation of certified statements of attainment.

The position is not the same in all the provinces of South Africa and Natal, which this year embarked on a two-stream system of differentiated education retains a controlled Standard VI examination and an external Junior Certificate examination at 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' levels.

Now it is the University Entrance examination which is under revision. The universities have often said that too many candidates successful in a matriculation examination have entered their gates inadequately equipped for the demands of higher education. Their high school teaching has been too narrowly confined by a rigid and limited syllabus and the needs of an examination based closely and unimaginatively on it. Released from these bonds, it is believed, good teachers will be stimulated and encouraged to provide more liberally for the requirements of future university students, instead of funnelling into their minds the uniform study material which all must absorb. It is not the intention that they should not be examined; but the examinations they write will be set and marked in the schools in which they are taught.

The greatest difficulty in this innovation lies in the maintenance of standards. Always provided that a satisfactory uniform standard of merit is possible within a public examinations system, candidates from all schools, town and country, provincial and private, English and Afrikaans medium, secular and denominational, White and Black, are measured by the same standards. But it is obvious that general performance does vary from one school to another and from type to type. School records may in any one year, or in one subject, correlate poorly with actual examination attainment. Sometimes the cause is the difference between the examiner's choice of questions and the anticipations of the teacher preparing the candidates, or of the candidate himself. It is one of the examiner's problems to ring the changes from year to year and to match the wits of the seasoned 'spotter' among teachers. There are some teachers of language, we fear, who even try to predict essay topics, and their candidates vainly offer the most outrageous irrelevancies in the exam-

ination. The causes of inconsistencies in results, however, are many. Reorganisation and changes in examination requirements may have adverse effects. Unhappy teacher-pupil relations are disastrous. And in times of teacher shortage a group of candidates may well have several changes of subject-teacher in the course of one year.

Apart from teachers who see their main task as trying to outwit the examiner, there are those who, after years in the same school or environment, are completely unaware of their own standards as compared with those of other centres. Given the responsibility of assessing their own candidates, they quite innocently and unwittingly give too much credit, rarely too little. Their weakness is revealed only by the public examination.

A problem similar to the elimination of the external matriculation examination arose at the time of the abolition of the Junior Certificate examination in those Transvaal schools which were thought to merit accreditation. There the problem was solved by a review of the school records submitted and the examination results attained over a period of years, and only those that had maintained a regular correlation were exempted from the examination.

The reliability of assessment in the proposed experiment can be established only by the accumulation of statistics over the next few years. The experiment requires an initial period of at least five years: two in which the school prepares candidates for its own examinations on its own carefully planned syllabus and at the same time enjoys less circumscribed teaching methods; and another three years in which to follow and record the individual careers of students admitted to the ordinary degree course. Simultaneously comparison must be made with other control groups continuing with the existing system. Such is the immediate nature of the experiment as we see it.

The responsibility placed upon schools and teachers selected for the new plan is a heavy one. Programmes must be devised with, we believe the assistance of university departments. Teaching will have to be enthusiastic, enlightened, thorough and conscientious, always looking forward to the needs of the pupils. The highest integrity is demanded of the teacher, who is at the same time his pupils' examiner. There must be no tendency to make the requirements of entrance easier in order to step up artificially the numbers of the elite. There must be a raising of standards.

The main results of the reform would be, as we see it, to narrow the gap between high school and university; to reduce the disturbing wastage of university failure; to add variety and character to education and the schools that furnish it, loosening the shackles of a uniform system.

If, in spite of the difficulties we have touched on, these results are likely, we commend the experiment to both schools and universities, to the teaching staffs who will shoulder the responsibilities and, not, least, to the young people whose interests are most keenly at heart.

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Professor of Education in the University of Birmingham, Director of the University of Birmingham Institute of Education is the author of the following books published by PITMANS

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