

Examining the Exams

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Being regarded as a producer of 'world-class tests' is the aim of many examination boards. Not so many come as near to achieving it as the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA).

While I was in Hong Kong, it did not take me long to see that HKEAA's examination processes are conducted meticulously and to very high standards. Particular attention is given to the security aspects of the assessment process, but it is also true that question papers and mark schemes are produced with great attention to the assessment objectives, and that in the marking process more extensive steps are in place to ensure the reliability of marking than are to be found in other systems.

For example, in the UK we do not routinely use double marking (marking by two different markers independently) for essay papers, as HKEAA does. In the UK (where candidates would expect to take their examinations in their own school) we would usually allocate all candidates from the same school to one marker for that paper. In Hong Kong, in contrast, scripts are allocated randomly to markers, which means that no school is likely to suffer the brunt of any unreliability on the part of a marker, and moreover that such unreliability is easier to detect by statistical methods.

Statistics are, indeed, used very well both for this purpose and for the annual task of deciding how many marks are necessary for each grade in each subject so that the level of difficulty of the examination is maintained. This is easier for HKEAA because its examinations are taken by a far more stable population than, say, those of Cambridge International Examinations, taken in 150 different countries. Hong Kong's small geographic area facilitates high levels of security compared with the logistics that must be in place to achieve the same end in some countries where question papers and candidates' completed scripts have to be transported over many miles, a major logistical operation when fairness and security must be maintained.

HKEAA's other strengths include:

- a large professional staff with expertise in assessment and education
- the availability in most subjects of a large pool of potential markers
- well-documented procedures devised to cut back on error
- close supervision of markers during the marking process
- close and supportive interest by the Authority's senior committees and members of the education community

There are a lot of challenges ahead because so much is new, but I was very impressed with the planning for so many changes – wider use of school-based assessment (SBA), the new Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) exam, on-screen marking (meaning that markers mark images of scripts on computer, instead of having the paper scripts) – and all this while the business of the current (and next) year's examinations goes on as usual.

The long lead-in time for the HKDSE compares favourably with hasty change made elsewhere, and will help to ensure maintenance of quality during a time of change. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to ensure that everyone understands the new grading system, including universities outside Hong Kong.

On-screen marking is a particular area of opportunity. It will permit more monitoring of the reliability of marking throughout the process, which will be even better if it can be combined with a reduction in the number of markers being supervised by any one senior examiner, a figure that has been rather higher in Hong Kong than we are used to elsewhere. On-screen marking can generate much extra data about candidates' answers, and one of the challenges will be deciding what use to make of it in order to improve the quality of assessment and feedback to schools.

Procedures for reviewing and revising draft question papers are very thorough. In England, there is something of a movement back towards the long answer type of question as it may provide better evidence of some of the skills being assessed than highly structured questions can do. It would be

appropriate to ensure that assessment frameworks in Hong Kong provide a good balance of different types of questions.

It is excellent that HKEAA has a rule that marking schemes must allow reasonable room for markers to exercise their own judgement and discretion, thus acknowledging their professional status and the fact that for some types of question there may be valid but unexpected answers. There certainly needs to be an effort to ensure that marks are awarded not only for knowledge or elementary understanding (still less for reading the examiner's mind) but for the full range of skills that are being tested, such as applying knowledge, or considering both sides of a case and reaching a reasoned conclusion.

However good the mechanisms for producing examinations, candidates are likely to continue to want to question their results, and it is important that the appeals mechanism can cope and that any errors are put right promptly. You are quite lenient in your appeals procedures in Hong Kong, allowing an independent re-marking of the script in circumstances where others would merely review the script to see if the marking was incontrovertibly in error; grades can go down on appeal in some countries, such as Ireland, but not here. In some jurisdictions, schools putting forward appeals are expected to demonstrate that the candidate performed worse than expected.

Those who pass judgement on others sometimes invite judgement on themselves. In studying international best practice, HKEAA can be judged to be diligent in pursuit of its aim of producing valid, reliable and fair examination results.

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