

EXAMS TAKE THE LEAD WHERE ARE WE GOING?

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This article attempts to do the following:

1. to show exactly how different the eight Matriculation¹ History papers were in November 1976. in terms of
 - a) their system of setting papers;
 - b) the style of their questions;
2. to consider whether the advantages of having Higher Grade and Standard Grade papers have become apparent;
3. to consider whether the "non-essay" questions have added anything to the system;
4. to indicate where the new system seems to be leading us.

Introduction

Changes in education are seldom quick. In Britain as early as 1899 H.C. Malden wrote: "very often when a candidate regurgitates abundant and superfluous information it is primarily the fault of the examiner for asking unsuitable questions";² but only in the 1960s did a genuine change begin to take place in the examination questions. And some very cogent proponents of improvements, like F.T. Happold, had seen years of work on "the question" apparently being totally ignored in those sixty years.³

In South Africa there was great alarm about the falling interest in History in schools about 15 years ago. In 1966 a giant survey investigated teachers' and pupils' opinions and Professor Boyce wrote his thesis urging the use of a different kind of question.⁴ When Dr. Liebenberg finished an analysis of the survey he suggested a different type of syllabus and up-dated evaluation.⁵ Gradually these changes have come about, for we now have contemporary history, a mushrooming of "projects", and two Grades of History.

Overseas the great argument about "questions" has usually turned around the value of "multiple choice" batteries. These are objective, and are easy to administer to huge groups, and *can be demonstrated to measure more than pupils' memories, but may tend to destroy the narrative abilities and enthusiasm of the young historian.*

1. These examinations are set by the Boards of the four Provinces; by the National Education Department (mainly technical schools); by the Bantu and Indian Education Boards; and by the Joint Matriculation Board (mainly private schools).
2. As quoted by John Roach, "History Teaching and Examining in Secondary Schools 1850—1900", in *History of Education 1976*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p.140.
3. Cf. William Lamont, "The Uses and Abuses of Examinations", in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*, Martin Ballard (ed.), Temple Smith, London (1970).
4. A.N. Boyce, *The Teaching of History in South African High Schools*, unpublished M.Ed. dissertation (Wits) 1966; cf. A.N. Boyce, *Teaching History in South African Schools*, Juta and Co. (1968), especially Chapters 26—30.
5. C.R. Liebenberg, *The Teaching of History at South African Secondary Schools — a condensed version of a survey in the year 1966*, Report No. 0—11, S.A. Human Sciences Research Council (1972).

If South African Matric teachers did not teach mainly for examination results,⁶ — if exams were, so to speak, a visit to the doctor to have your pressure tested by a single unquestionable instrument — the type of question would be irrelevant. But as our teachers do teach for the examinations, and spend a good deal of time wondering how they can fool the pressure gauge, the type of question is very relevant. Some Boards who are responsible for the Matriculation examination, including those which have the largest numbers of candidates, have shown some interest in multiple choice batteries; others won't touch them, — with varying degrees of disdain.

The Higher Grade/Standard Grade system has opened the door to careful trial and error, and hence to changes. As there are at present 8 Boards, setting 16 papers per year (December and March) at *each* Grade, we have never had more people trying — and erring?

a The different systems

The tables summarize these differences. Where two papers are set, one South African and one World History, the essay choice column gives the total of both papers. The term "single topic non-essay" question means that a (say) 50 mark question centres around a single topic, eg. Germany 1919—1933. Some Boards however, who use the "multiple choice" battery approach, spread their questions across many topics, and use one-word answers, sentences, paragraphs and short essays besides the multiple choice technique.

Higher Grade Board sets	essays in exam		non-essays	
	choice	counting	(choice 2 from 4)	counting + project
A 2 -2-hour	4	14 75%	2 single topics	25%
B 2 -2-hour	4	12 70%	2 single topics	30%
C 1 -3-hour	3	8 75%	2 mixed topics	25%
D 1 -3-hour	3	8 60%	2 single topics	20% 20%
E 1 -3-hour	3	8 60%	2 single topics	20% 20%
F 1 -3-hour	3	8 75%	2 mixed topics	25%
G 2 -2-hour	6	24 54%	6 related topics	21% 25%
H 1 -3-hour	4	8 80%	2 mixed topics	20%
Standard Grade				
A 1 -3-hour	3	8 70%	2 single topics	30%
B 2 -2-hour	4	12 66½%	2 mixed topics	33½%
C 1 -3-hour	3	8 64%	2 mixed topics	36%
D 1 -3-hour	3	8 60%	2 single topics	20% 20%
E 1 -3-hour	3	8 60%	2 single topics	20% 20%
F 1 -3-hour	3	8 70%	2 mixed topics	30%
G 1 -3-hour	4	24 44%	4 related topics	23% 33%
H 1 -3-hour	4	8 80%	2 mixed topics	20%

This conclusion was drawn by Prof. Birley while he was visiting Professor of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand; see Boyce's dissertation, page 1.

Board G is visibly very different from the other Boards. This will become clearer later, but it must be explained that the choice of 24 essays is in 12 pairs, and the “non-essay” questions are described as *related* because they are on the same topic as the chosen essay, which is never the case in any of the other Boards.

1.b The different styles

Board A’s papers use many types of essay question, with a clear preference for ones based on quotations or sometimes maps or cartoons, and not only in Higher Grade. The examiner asks for “orderly, neat, presentation” and certainly presents a neat and orderly paper himself, including a short bibliography at the end.

Board B presents a most generous choice of questions, and organises the non-essay questions under headings, like “map” “picture” (actually a cartoon), “cartoon”, “multiple choice” and “definitions”. Their questions were similar to some set by Board C, but the Board C examiner certainly has a distinct style too: his paper probably had the most interesting cartoons. The essay questions set by C seemed to be slightly simpler in language than the B questions: eg.:

B (Higher Grade)

“Explain how the Great Depression affected South Africa economically and how it was combatted.”

C (Higher Grade)

“Explain how the Great Depression in South Africa influenced the country's economy and how this situation was brought under control.”

D and E’s papers are apparently modelled on each other. They are short and clearly laid out, use quotations very frequently, and give the immediate impression of being of a higher standard than all the other papers. Many of their questions would look quite at home in a University paper. Here is an example without a quotation:

D (Higher Grade)

“In a review of Government policy towards the Bantu of South Africa discuss whether the year 1948 can be regarded as a watershed.”

Board F presents its papers in “book” form (as do B and C) and spaces it very generously: the 45 one-word-answer questions used 5½ pages. It was a particularly straight forward format and paper, which made little use of quotations, and used no cartoons, but expected maps to be recognised by candidates.

G’s paper gave the immediate impression of being crowded and wordy. This was partly because it had no maps, cartoons or diagrams. Considering the choice given it was not remarkably long: 8 pages, in English, for each 2-hour paper, 16 pages for the 3-hour Standard Grade. Its unique system is shown in the extracts from a complete question given below:

”PART A (4 multiple choice questions: 4 marks) eg:

(1) Which three bodies were established with a view to the industrial development of South Africa?

(IDC, CSIR, ESCOM./CSIR, ESCOM, SASOL./IDC, CSIR, SABS.)

PART B (choose 2 topics from 3 given: write 10 lines on each; 2 x 5 marks)

(1) Explain the counter-measures adopted by the South African government to protect agriculture against the economic depression of 1929–1933.”

(2) was on the function of the Dept. of Bantu Administration.)

(3) was on the distribution of the Indians in South Africa.

”PART C (choose 1 topic from 2 given: write a 3 page essay: 36 marks.)

(1) Describe in outline only the development of manufacturing industry in South Africa since the beginning of this century.

(2) Explain how a poor white problem arose in South Africa and what counter-measures were taken to combat it.”

It can be seen how each question is a package deal on some topic, in the example “Social and Economic Development”, which is a very broad topic. On the whole, if one could choose which paper one wanted to do this one seems the obvious choice. But the “Project” carries a good percentage of the marks, and this may make it difficult to get very high marks. Commentators like Macintosh on the English C.S.E. projects have shown how their marks tend to bunch high on the scale: this makes it easy to pass but hard to be recognised as outstanding.⁷

Board H presented a long paper (15 pages including a whole page map), and required four essay answers from only eight options. The essay questions were careful to explain exactly what was wanted, and the non-essay questions were full of imaginatively chosen sources, like tables, maps, cartoons and quite lengthy extracts.

2. The value of having two Grades?

It is not easy to decide this by looking at the papers alone. Teachers will probably be the best judges, when they have enough examples to judge by. It is a pity that the candidate’s decision to take one Grade or the other is based on other factors than the relative merits of the History course. If one Grade or the other becomes unpopular it may be for a reason unrelated to the examination itself. And it is still very early to judge. Examiners may have decided to make changes in the light of their experience.

However, it is evident that what is Higher Grade for one Board is Standard

H.G. Macintosh, “Assessment at Sixteen-plus in History”, in *Practical Approaches to the New History*, R. Ben Jones (ed.) Hutchinson Educational (1973), p.182 ff.

Grade for another. Board C asked the following question at Higher Grade, while Board B put it in their Standard Grade paper:

“Write an essay on General Smuts’ first term of office as Prime Minister (1919–1924) and explain why he lost the 1924 election.”

Board D, which makes such an impression as setting a high standard, set this topic in both its papers, as follows:

“Discuss the following aspects of General Smuts’ government between 1922 and 1924:

- a) The causes of the 1922 Miners’ Strike on the Witwatersrand (15)
- b) The course of the 1922 Miners’ Strike on the Witwatersrand, and General Smuts’ handling of it. (20)
- c) The general aspects of General Smuts’ administration after the Strike, indicating also the consequences of the Strike for the 1924 Election. (25)”

“Discuss the Prime Ministership of Smuts between 1919 and 1924 and assess the extent to which it is correct to say that he fell from office in 1924 because he was out of touch with the national aspirations of his own people.”

One wonders how many teachers could correctly identify which of these is Higher Grade. And how do these two compare with the one set by Boards B and C? And which would the Standard Grade candidate choose himself?

The following “Guide to Judging Difficulty” is tentatively suggested:-

Questions set in parts, or under headings, are generally easier than those set without any internal guidance for the candidate;

2. “Discussions” and “comparisons” are generally more difficult than “explanations”, “descriptions” or “outlines”.
3. Some work is central to the syllabus; some is peripheral: some obviously requires detailed study; some seems only to require an outline: peripheral questions are more difficult for most candidates — detailed questions in peripheral areas are the most difficult for them.
4. Questions which follow the approach used in the textbooks are easier than questions which are twisted round, or have to be related to a quotation.

Using these criteria, unless the Strike question is judged to be “difficult peripheral” (and despite its “Discuss”) it seems to be Standard Grade. And the “national aspirations” question is clearly higher than the “Write an essay” question, which may be Standard Grade because it follows the text books so closely.

Judging a question to be peripheral or detailed peripheral is subjective to a considerable degree. Not many would be identified as such in the 174 essays set in December 1976, but these two are possible examples:-

E (Standard Grade)

“Discuss the factors that promoted African nationalism in the Belgian Congo after the Second World War. (15)

Explain how the Congo Republic (Republic of Zaire) gained its independence. (45)”

B (Higher Grade)

“Discuss the attempts made by those in favour of republicanism to restore republican independence in South Africa during and immediately after the First World War.”

After a fairly careful look at the essays overall, the writer believes there are three styles. Firstly there is a Standard Grade proper: eg.:-

A (Standard Grade)

“Explain and link together each of these five parts of Hitler’s foreign policy

- a) Rearmament
- b) The Rhineland
- c) Austria
- d) Czechoslovakia
- e) Poland”

Secondly there is a middle grade, which can vary greatly so three examples are given:-

H (Standard Grade)

“Describe in broad outline how Hitler’s aggressive foreign policy from 1938 (Der Anschluss) led to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.”

H (Higher Grade)

- “(a) What were the ‘Shackles of Versailles’ to which Hitler referred with regard to (i) Germany’s western border; (ii) Germany’s relations with Austria, and (iii) Germany’s frontier with Poland. (20)
- (b) Explain how Hitler set Germany free from the above-mentioned ‘shackles’. (60)”

C (Higher Grade)

“Explain how Hitler, through the expansion of the German Empire from March 1936, created a climate for war in Europe.”

And thirdly there is a high grade; for example:

D (Higher Grade)

“In discussing the events leading to the outbreak of the Second World War, Ulrich von Hassell maintains that the decisive turning-point toward war was the occupation of Prague. All preceding actions .. the world had accepted.” Do you agree? Discuss.”

A (Higher Grade)

“Describe the reactions of Britain, France and Italy to Hitler’s foreign policy in the period 1933 – 1939.”

Unless the nettle is grasped and Higher Grade is declared to be aiming at these latter high grade questions the distinction between Standard and Higher Grade seems to be undefined and undefinable. But can candidates answer the high grade questions on such a wide syllabus after one year of study?

3. The value of having Non-essay Questions?

What is the value of questions like:

Explain the following concepts: Poor Whites; migratory labour; industrialisation; apital; constitution.”

(Board H: Higher: 5 marks)

The (–) links Zambia with Tanzania.

(Board C: Higher & Standard)

By which name is S.W.A. (sic) called by the U.N.O.?

(Board G: Standard)

“Which country originally repudiated the League of Nations but later sought protection from the League?

A Germany

B U.S.A.

C Russia

D Italy”

(Board B: Higher: 1 mark)

Apparently Boards A, D and E considered them to be of no value: they didn't use them at all. Perhaps they are still considering whether they should use them in some of the advanced forms which have been developed by people like Educational Testing Services in America.

One of the most important things is to develop questions which are not bound to textbooks. The following is an example which shows how text-bound examiners can become:-

B (Higher Grade)

“Laws affecting the Bantu in certain Bantu territories are not made by Parliament, but by means of proclamation. Briefly discuss the advantages connected with this system.”

Only 4 marks were allotted for this discussion, which prompted a look into the most likely text book.⁸ It said:

“This system of legislation for the Bantu by means of proclamations has certain advantages:

- it speeds up the process;
- it enables the authorities to make laws that are in the interests of the Bantu only;
- in unforeseen circumstances a law may become immediately operative;
- it creates the opportunity to make laws that apply to only one Bantu area.”

One hopes that this remarkable preambulation has been discussed in our classrooms, and compared with some other facts given such as: “a proclamation has to appear in the Government Gazette a month before it becomes operative”. But why were just 4 marks allotted?

Another important thing is to get pupils used to the idea of interpreting authors. Writing “one sentence on the Suez Canal” (Board C: Higher Grade: 3 marks) is a fatuous exercise; fortunately not all questions were like that:

8. C.J. Joubert, *History for Std. 10*, Perskor Publishers (1975), p.227. This book was “most likely” because it is “recognised” by the Board concerned.

D (Standard Grade)

“Study the attached cartoon, which comments on Smuts’ views concerning the constitutional status of the Union in 1921, and answer the following questions:

1. Describe the constitutional issue referred to in the cartoon. (8)
2. Explain the purpose of the cartoon and the cartoonist’s comment. (4)
3. Is the comment valid? Support your answer with historical evidence. (8)”

It appears that non-essays are still in their infancy: all the Boards “non-essays” will be growing, but to what shape and size one cannot tell at this stage.

4. Where are we going?

In South Africa the change of examination style has not been accompanied by as much debate on changes as in Britain, nor has the rash of new textbooks been so full of experiment. “Contemporary” history is mainly political, and there is no talk of planned “class research” in text books — such as Margaret Bryant lays out in “World Outlook 1900—1965”.⁹ Textbooks have been updated with some cartoons but very seldom with source material. If there has been any effort to co-ordinate the development of the examination, and the text books, and class methods it has been done behind the scenes. It seems that the examination has been expected to backwash into the schools and provide a stimulus for “methods which inspire” in place of those which have been condemned as “techniques which tend to deaden” (Booth: in *History Betrayed?*)¹⁰ It is doubtful whether this will work.

One of the first things that is necessary is a clearer statement of objectives. One Board limits itself in its instructions on the paper to only these words: “credit will be given for neat work and appropriate sketch maps”.

Presumably they mean extra credit, and they intend to give credit, like most of the other Boards, to:

“factual information and especially relevant information”.

Board H was the only one to indicate the difference between Higher and Standard Grades: the former awards “more or less equal marks to *content* and to *presentation* (insight, understanding, logicity)”: while the latter gives “more” marks for content.

Coltham and Fines’ taxonomy¹¹ indicates that an examination should give a pupil a chance to show —

that he has a body of knowledge;

2. that he can handle (comprehend) and interpret evidence, given in the form of extracts, etc.;

M. Bryant and G. Ecclestone, *World Outlook 1900—1965*, Faber and Faber (1968). Chapter 1 in particular.

10. M.B. Booth, *History Betrayed?*, Longmans (1969), p.122.

11. J.B. Coltham & J. Fines, *Educational Objectives for the Study of History*, Historical Association pamphlet TH 35, 1971.

3. that he can analyse points of view and links and causes, and find inconsistencies and gaps, and imagine things as they were;
4. that he can form judgements about evidence, and synthesise new evidence with known or given evidence.

The skills of 2, 3 and 4 are not of course unique to History and some of them may be more suitable before or after the 17+ age group, but unless someone has worked out which of them are to be presented by History pupils in their final school year are not blind examiners leading blindfolded teachers? How can History ever become popular?

The writer does not believe that examiners are blind; and taxonomies of objectives do not hold all the answers. But teachers must not be blindfolded. They must be brought into the responsibility for examining, and exposed to cross-pollination. In 1893 A. Sidgewick told an Oxford Conference that "if the methods of examinations are to be sound ... the help and criticism of the teacher is wanted all the way along the line".¹² This is probably where we should be going.

The one great advantage of having many Boards examining is that many people will be made to feel responsible. But new examinations per se will not lead anywhere: they must be linked up with a new attitude to evaluation.¹³

J. Roach, "History Teaching and Examining in Secondary Schools 1850–1900", in *History of Education* 1976, Vol. 5, No. 2, p.138.

H.G. Macintosh, "Moderation of a school-based assessment in Integrated Studies by means of a monitoring test", in J. Cromby, *Contemporary Issues in Educational Testing*, (Mouton), 1974. He comments about the new C.S.E. examinations:- "(The Mode 3 examination) requires (teachers) to acquire and develop an expertise in relation to assessment which has not hitherto been thought necessary, and it requires the (examining Boards) to rethink the nature and extent of the services which they ought to provide," p.148.