

MATRICULABILITY

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'MATRICULATION' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'admission to privileges of University.' (The word is derived from Latin *matricula*, a diminutive of *matrix* and meaning 'a register'). Matriculation examinations were held originally to be used in determining who should be admitted to the University.

The concept of 'matriculability' became more complex for two reasons:

(a) the relevant examination came also to be used to ascertain the successful termination of pre-university schooling and, indeed, to influence the pattern of studies at the secondary school level;

(b) the period of transition from secondary to tertiary education gradually expanded and now amounts to a two or even three year layer sandwiched between the school and the university, with its own peculiar problems.

In the spate of recent changes in the whole educational system in Malta, this crucial interface in the educational process may not have been given adequate importance. Yet it is vital that changes which now appear to be in the offing be made only as the result of reasoned dialogue between those involved both at the intermediate level itself and also at the secondary and tertiary levels, since all are seriously conditioned in their work by decisions about criteria for matriculability. Contemplated changes should be studied by an expert work-group given whatever political directives are deemed to be desirable on grounds of public policy as long as they are compatible with pedagogical possibilities.

From a University point of view, matriculability involves three elements on the candidate's side:

(a) the attainment of a satisfactory level of general education, including the required mastery of linguistic tools (which may be both verbal and mathematical) and a rudimentary acquaintance with the basics of human knowledge;

(b) a somewhat more advanced knowledge of the areas relevant to the specific courses to be followed at the University;

(c) an adequate development of the personality, including the ability to make value-judgements.

The crux of educational planning, at this stage, is to integrate the three elements, without distortions. (I am ignoring such conditions which may occur on the university's side, such as availability of places. In my view, such conditions should be explicitly stated and not fulfilled by hidden manipulations of standards at examinations and similar devices).

Recently, in Malta, there has been a tendency to identify: element (a) with the certification obtained at the end of the fifth form of secondary school (with some candidates attempting to obtain it even a year earlier);

element (b) with three 'A' levels passes at certain grades;

element (c) with a minimum age limit and, possibly, the examination in religion.

This amounted to a grossly imperfect imitation of the U.K. system. The imitation is apparent in the fact that the special requirements (b) come to be more important than the general requirements (a), since the immediately preparatory years are devoted almost exclusively to (b); this is the contrary of the system on the Continent. The gross imperfection of the imitation appears in the fact that it was the usual practice for U.K. universities, in deciding upon admissions, to rely heavily also on reports of Headmasters in order to take (c) into account. Nothing corresponding was done in Malta.

The result was clearly distorted. It is true that attempts began to be made belatedly, at the (then) Junior College to raise the general educational level and ensure personality growth, with the progressive adoption of the style of study and critical evaluation appropriate to the tertiary as compared to the secondary level of education (instead of coaching exclusively for three A levels). But, once again, these attempts appear to have met with unfavourable circumstances, when they should have been further encouraged. At any rate, no serious testing of achievement in other areas than the A level requirements was carried out for purposes of assessing matriculability.

In my view, matriculability should not even be assessed on the basis of a conjunction of certificates relating to different phases of the educational process, but there should be one assessment relating to the total performance at the Upper Secondary level. This assessment should relate to the level of all three of the elements attained at the time of testing. The second element (b) is being adequately tested and can continue to be tested on the present lines. The other elements (a) and (c) are not. I suggest that the requirements should be in this respect:

1. Skill at linguistic tools. Those should include (i) the two official languages (English and Maltese), without a literature component; (ii) mathematics (which I think should be regarded not as one of the empirical sciences as the present Matriculation regulations treat it, but as the 'language' of all empirical sciences).

2. Knowledge of (i) a foreign culture (including language, literature and other components of the culture) and students could be encouraged to select preferably Italian or Arabic culture, as the two most closely connected with Malta, but they should not be forced to do so to the exclusion of, say, Latin or French, or any other major culture; (ii) an empirical science as a necessary element of a contemporary education (in addition to mathematics required as above for the given reason).

3. A subject which shows the ability to make value-judgements about human life in society, such as philosophy, (or any of its branches, such as psychology, theory of knowledge, ethics, politics) or allied subjects (such as religion or anthropology), but not history (unless inclusive of meta-history) or geography (unless treated from the human angle and in such a way that man-environment-development problems are tackled).

These could be assessed in a variety of ways, not necessarily on hitherto accepted examination lines, e.g. by evaluating portfolios of work done throughout the previous year supplemented by interviews or some other of the many types of testing which have been evolved over the recent years.

Even if this pattern were to be accepted on theoretical grounds, the question of its practicability arises. Practical alternatives have to be considered and weighted respectively. There are basically three: (i) the U.K. G.C.E. exams, with supplementation by local tests; (ii) new European-wide examinations, such as the International Baccalaureate, the organisers of which allow considerable room for local adaptations and experimental curricula; (iii) purely local examinations. The three alternatives should be looked at carefully in turn. (The considerations offered here are only intended to bring a number of issues into the open and evidently not as a conclusive discussion of the whole thorny question).

(i) There are several advantages in taking the U.K. G.C.E. exams: (a) they have a world-wide recognition, which is important especially for emigrants and study abroad;

(b) they ensure a general acceptance of fairness and competence in the setting and correcting of papers;

(c) they are well-known and the local system is already geared for them.

Against this there are: (a) the issue of fees going abroad which seems to worry our present Govt. a lot; (b) the more important question of their suitability to our needs; already a special paper is set by Oxford in English for Maltese students; and local exams with different syllabi are set in Maltese, Maltese History, Italian, Philosophy and Religion; in many other subjects, adaptations of the British syllabi are desired by local teachers; however, it should also be kept in mind that syllabi and text-books go hand in hand, and, in most cases, especially with science, we are dependent on English textbooks almost irremediably, since it is not an easy and hardly a worthwhile task to produce our own in many subjects; (c) Moreover, September sessions have been held in practically all subjects in order to provide supplementary examinations. This is, of course, a vexed question. Is it possible that someone who failed in early summer can have improved sufficiently to pass by the late summer? In practice, experience has already shown that this does not usually happen. The September session only gives a second chance to a student who failed through ill-luck. But this second chance seems to be wanted.

(ii) Ideally of course, as we move towards European integration, an International European examination would appear to be the best solution. A move in this direction was the institution of the 'International Baccalaureate' Examination, with its centre in Geneva. Moreover, it seemed to be excellently conceived in terms of structure and adaptability to local needs.

Against this: (a) the impression has grown that the I.B. has so far failed to obtain the widespread acceptance which alone would have enabled its sponsors to get a really efficient administrative machinery functioning; (b) it also differs enough from the British G.C.E. to require preparations for it to begin fairly early and hence it would not be wise to merely introduce it as the final examination without altering the curriculum of the lower classes. With all the changes that have occurred lately in the secondary schools, there may well be considerable reluctance to add to the sense of insecurity already generated by these many changes by further substantial curricular changes unless these are a rigorous necessity. Teachers have also to become accustomed to a different curriculum and style.

(iii) A local examination would have several advantages:

(a) It could be tailor-made for our needs. Here special care

would have to be taken to ensure that there would be no lowering of standards in order to ensure a substantial number of successes even if the level of achievement of the secondary schools happens to fall low. Moreover, it would also be necessary not to depart too much from the patterns accepted abroad. It is important that Malta should not be too special and peculiar, if its school results are to be acceptable abroad. We must not over-accentuate our isolation.

(b) It would keep a certain amount of money in Malta, but it should not be imagined that the examination could be run without expenses or without a considerable administrative machinery. The examination should be run by the University, with the collaboration of the Department of Education, as is usual. This should not now be difficult, since the Government is now very closely involved in the organs of the University.

From the point of view of the Secondary School, since a divergence of ways occurs at the end, with the large majority of students moving into the world of work and a small minority (about 6% of the age-group in Malta at present) continuing with further and various studies, differences should be made.

The idea was indeed suggested, and it ought to have been given more serious consideration, that there should be two types of Upper Secondary School: one geared to the transition from school to a job, the other to that from secondary to tertiary education (in the functioning of which those responsible for tertiary education could be involved). The idea was unfortunately not taken up.