

The importance of an *education dawn 9.3.05* examining board

By Sami Mustafa

DURING the late seventies and early eighties as the standards of the local and intermediate examination boards deteriorated, an increasing number of schools sought affiliation with the Cambridge University and University of London O-level Overseas Examination boards. While the Cambridge University and University of London boards (through the British Council) took a liberal view of giving affiliation to local schools, the standard of the local secondary (SSC) and higher secondary (HSC) examination boards continued to deteriorate with a vengeance. In fact, to use a cliché, their certificates were not worth the paper they were printed on.

The examination board of an educational system plays a very important role in determining the quality of education imparted in schools. If the examination system is reduced to simply testing how well children reproduce a given set of information, then rote learning becomes the dominant culture of schools. Unimaginative textbooks and unimaginative teaching methods become the norm, and schooling becomes a chore. As, indeed, has been the case with our public sector schools. Teachers teach students how to learn by heart and education becomes not an intellectually rewarding experience but a set of motions to go through to pass an examination.

In that sense, the examination board is not simply an instrument for testing students, but more importantly, it determines the larger framework of quality and context of learning.

While the role of the O-level overseas examinations has been most positive, in the larger national context it meant that the children of the rich would get a foreign certified qualification, while the children of the poor, sitting for local examinations would be condemned to a worthless matric certificate. As a result, rather than becoming an integrating factor, education would serve to further alienate children of the large majority of mainstream schools taking matric examinations from the minority of students taking O-level examinations from elite schools.

In the backdrop of this deepening crisis, a committee of concerned educationists, headed by Nasra Wazir Ali, was formed in 1995. It met at the Nasra School in April of that year and drafted a proposal for the establishment of an Independent Examination Board (IEB). Dr Shaikh Abul Kasim of the Aga Khan Education Services (AKES) prepared the final draft of the proposal, which was signed by 16 schools of Karachi. After long deliberations, the proposal was sent to the Aga Khan University

(AKU). The AKU responded positively. A task force, headed by Dr Camar Vellani, was created to work out the details of this proposal so that it could be sent to the federal ministry of education for approval.

In very broad terms the four-page proposal started with the premise that "questions set in the exam paper demand rote-learning... [that] emphasis on rote learning dictates the styles of teaching in the classrooms... [that] the undesirable style of exam papers has led to widespread cheating and malpractices... [and that] consequently, the public examination system suffers a total loss of integrity and credibility."

It then went on to propose: "In order to address the problem and to remedy the situation, it is proposed that an independent examination board be created to design and to offer examinations at the SSC (matric) level. The board should be established under the management of a private and non-government organization - The Aga Khan University. The board would ensure a professionally managed organization of the exams and high quality content of the exam papers - to test higher intellectual skills rather than rote learning. The new exams would be available to both government and private schools and will continue in parallel with the present government boards' exams."

It further said: "The creation of the independent examination board would:

- * Improve the quality of education in the schools and raise the standard of secondary education.

- * Restore the credibility of the grades and certificates at the SSC level.

- * Make high quality exams available and affordable to the general mass of students — as against those offered by UK boards.

- * Under pressure of competition, the existing (government) examination boards would be compelled to reform their own modes and methods.

- * Improved quality of exams will, in the long run, result in improving the overall quality of education for the large mass of students, enabling them to compete for a better future and a better quality of life, consequently narrowing the gap in opportunities available to the advantaged and the deprived.

In 1999, the Aga Khan University formalized the proposal and sent it to the education ministry for review and approval. With full professional clout behind the proposal, the AKU officials met with the education officers at the highest level, including the Minister for Education, Zohaida Jalal. Given the deep vested interest of the government examination boards, the establishment of a separate examination board had

seemed quite impossible. But, according to Dr Camar Villani, it was the single-handed effort of the education minister that kept the proposal alive and finally got approval. In December 2002, the government notified the Aga Khan University Examination Board Ordinance 2002, taking a major step forward by way of reforming the education sector.

The ordinance stipulates: Establishment of the examination board:

- 1) The Aga Khan University examination board shall be established by the university from such date and in such manner, as the university shall, in its sole discretion, prescribe.

- 2) The examination board shall be fully autonomous and self-regulatory with the freedom to achieve the objectives for which it is established.

- 3) The university may, at its sole discretion, direct the examination board to offer the examinations to all private candidates, non-government schools and their students throughout Pakistan and abroad, in such manner, by such times and on such terms and conditions as shall be prescribed.

- 4) Government schools and their students which are under the control of the federal government including Islamabad Capital Territory, Federally Administered Territorial Areas, Federally Administered Northern Areas and cantonments areas can opt for examinations offered by the examination board, in such manner, by such times and on such terms and conditions as shall be prescribed.

- 5) The examination board is authorized to administer examinations at all academic levels of education up to the higher secondary level or its equivalent.

- 6) The university may, in connection with the provisions of the examination board collaborate with inter-board committee of chairmen (IBCC) or its equivalent.

- 7) The examination board is authorized to expand the provision and scope of its examinations in such manner, by such time and on such terms and conditions as shall be prescribed by the university and subject to authorization by the federal government or the relevant provincial governments for their respective government schools and institutions.

While the ordinance has been passed it has yet to be issued in the official gazette in order to become law. It is hoped that this will happen soon, so that work on the AKU examination board may start soon. It is estimated that the AKU requires approximately US\$ 7 million to get the project off the ground. While it is looking for external funding, it is still hoping to be able to allow students taking their matric examinations through the board by the summer of 2005. ■