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The dialectic of the international and the national: secondary school examinations in Maldives

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Abstract

This article is framed within the context of literatures on small states, examination systems, and international dependence and independence. It focuses on a country with a population of just 260,000, and analyses tensions concerning the nature and operations of external examinations for secondary school students. Maldives has long had links with a UK-based examination board. Although in the past these links have served Maldives well, they came under increasing scrutiny during the 1990s. The article analyses issues and tensions with particular reference to the potentially competing desires for international recognition of qualifications and national control of curriculum. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

This article, included in a special issue of the journal which focuses on education in small states, addresses a tension commonly felt by small states even more strongly than medium-sized and large states. This tension is between the demands for international linkages and membership of the wider community on the other hand, and for self-determination and national identity on the other hand. The comparative education textbook edited by Arnové and Torres (1999) takes as its sub-title ‘the dialectic of the global and the local’. This paper takes

as its main title a variation of that theme, namely the dialectic of the international and the national.

The paper focuses on one of the world’s smallest states: the Republic of Maldives. Although Maldives has a vast area of sea, covering about 100,000 square kilometres, it has only 300 square kilometres of land and a population of just 260,000. The article is contextualised in the framework of literature on education in small states (e.g. Bacchus and Brock, 1993; Bray and Packer, 1993; Crossley and Holmes, 1999), as well as the literature on globalisation, dependency and national self-determination (e.g. Watson, 1984; Lopez and Stohl, 1989; Ilon, 1997). Within the education sector, the paper focuses on the examinations taken by students in secondary schools, which have also been the focus for previous comparative study (e.g. Eckstein and Noah, 1993; Bray and Steward, 1998). The paper is only concerned with examin-

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ations which are set by external bodies, i.e. outside individual secondary schools, rather than with internal school examinations.

The article begins by outlining issues identified in the existing literature on education in small states, including the sub-section of the literature which has explicitly focused on examinations. The discussion then moves to background information on Maldives, before turning specifically to the issues which the Maldivian government and general public have faced in the matter of secondary school examinations. The article highlights tensions between demands for local control of curriculum on the one hand, and for international portability of educational qualifications on the other. It also notes personnel constraints and other factors which affect operation of an examination system in a small country, and comments on ways in which an examination board located in a European country does and does not meet the needs of a client in a very different part of the world. In so doing, the paper explores a strand which has implications for wider understanding of dependency and national self-determination, and of the dialectic of internationalism and nationalism in settings of particular types.

2. Education and examination systems in small states

A cross-national survey shows a range of models for secondary school examination systems in small states. Particularly pertinent to the present paper are the models used in Commonwealth countries, of which Maldives is one, since these countries have commonalities derived from British colonial legacies (Bray, 1998a).

The Commonwealth Secretariat has a particular concern for small states since 28 of the 54 members of the Commonwealth have populations below 1.5 million. Since 1985, the Commonwealth Secretariat has sponsored a number of meetings to focus on educational issues in the member states which have small populations (Crossley and Holmes, 1999). Two of these meetings have focused on examination systems. One was held in Barbados in 1996 (Commonwealth Secretariat,

1996), and included a paper specifically on Maldives (Waheed, 1996). The other meeting was held in New Zealand two years later (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1998). Some of the issues addressed, for example about techniques of testing, norm versus criterion referencing, and backwash effects of examination systems on lower levels of education, were common to states of all sizes. Other issues, however, were either distinctive to small states or at least assumed a greater significance in small states than in medium-sized or large states. For example:

- States with small populations are, by definition, limited in the pool of national personnel from which to draw specialist expertise. This affects all spheres of life, including examinations.
- Small states tend to be highly personalised societies in which everyone seems to know everyone else, and in which bureaucracies may be less neutral than in larger states. This may have implications for security of examinations, and for arrangements for the grading of scripts.
- Small states may not be able to secure economies of scale in the operation of examination systems, and may thus encounter high unit costs.
- Allied to the previous points, small states are unlikely to have sufficient human or financial resources to undertake research into the impact of examinations, into alternative modes of testing, or into other important dimensions of examination processes.

Of particular relevance to the present paper was discussion during the Commonwealth meetings on the tension between national self-determination and international portability of qualifications. The smallest states have no national universities, and secondary school leavers who wish to proceed to university study must therefore go abroad. This may be considered one form of dependency. Even the states which do have national universities have only small institutions which cannot cater for a full range of specialisms. Some states also send large numbers of workers abroad, and rely on the workers' remittances for significant proportions of national income. These states are anxious for school-leaving qualifications to be recognised in

the destination countries, but sometimes the desire for external recognition conflicts with a desire for national self-determination. External examination boards may not be sensitive to the curricular emphases desired by the authorities in small states; and even if they are sensitive, the fact remains that decision-making power on an important lever for shaping education systems lies outside the respective countries rather than within them.

Survey of the arrangements for secondary school-leaving examination systems in the small states of the Commonwealth reveals three main models. The models are not necessarily exclusive, and in some settings all three operate side by side. The models are as follows:

- *National examinations.* In this model, the examinations are set locally. In Fiji and Nauru, for example, the examinations are set by units in the Ministries of Education. Lesotho and Swaziland have quasi-government examination councils; and in Malta, secondary school examinations are set by the national university.
- *Regional examinations.* Some states have grouped together to operate regional examinations. The three main regional bodies are the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA), and the West African Examinations Council (WAEC).
- *Metropolitan examinations.* Some small states are clients of examination boards in larger countries. In small Commonwealth states, the most prominent such boards are based in the United Kingdom, which in most cases was the former colonial country. The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) is among the most visible of the metropolitan boards. The University of London has also long played a comparable role. Until the mid-1990s it did this through a body called the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council (ULEAC). In 1996 ULEAC merged with the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) to form the Edexcel Foundation.

Study of the operation of these alternative models reveals many complexities. It cannot be assumed

that states which operate national examination boards necessarily have stronger powers of self-determination than states which rely on regional or metropolitan boards. On the one hand, small boards which suffer the constraints of limited expertise and restricted budgets may not have all the technical competence needed to tailor examinations effectively to meet national needs; and on the other hand, some metropolitan boards are very responsive to the needs of their clients, and have demonstrated willingness to work in partnership with national authorities. One example of responsiveness is in Namibia, where UCLES operates an International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) examination which includes papers in seven African languages. UCLES also operates a Higher International General Certificate of Secondary Education (HIGCSE) examination created especially for Namibia and not offered elsewhere in the world (Erasmus, 1998; van der Merwe, 1998). However, some states which use the services of metropolitan examination boards have less positive experiences. They may find that the curriculum has been less closely tailored to their needs, and that the services consume large quantities of valuable foreign exchange.

In some settings, regional bodies may seem to provide the best of both worlds. Where they work well, regional bodies can tailor examinations to the needs of the societies in which they operate, can enlarge the pool of expertise on which the small states can draw, can reduce unit costs through economies of scale, and can strengthen international recognition through carefully managed public relations and other strategies. In other cases, however, regional bodies may seem to provide the worst of both worlds. While the CXC, SPBEA and WAEC have all matured into strong organisations, other regional examination bodies have been unable to withstand centrifugal forces and other tensions, and have collapsed (Bray, 1998b). These matters do not need further exploration here, since Maldives has not been a partner in a regional examination board and seems unlikely to become one because it does not have close neighbours with sufficiently similar needs.

3. Maldives and its education system

The links between Maldives and the Commonwealth arise from the country's historical status as a British protectorate. This history also explains a strong place held by the English language in the society and the education system. Maldives moved to independence in 1965.

Within the Maldivian economy, tourism is the most dynamic sector and accounted in 1997 for over 19 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and more than half of total foreign exchange earnings (World Bank, 1999: 1). Fishing is also important, earning 10 per cent of GDP in 1997. Significant economic inputs are also derived from foreign aid. The per capita Gross National Product (GNP) was estimated at US\$1200 in 1997.

The population of Maldives is not only small but also scattered. The country consists of over a thousand islands, of which about 200 are inhabited, spread over a large area of the Indian Ocean. However, a quarter of the population lives in the capital, Male. Two factors which unify the population are religion and language. Almost everyone in Maldives is a Muslim; and almost everyone speaks and writes the national language, Dhivehi.

The school system has a 5+2+3+2 structure, i.e. five years of primary, two years of middle, three years of lower secondary, and two years of upper secondary education. The primary school enrolment rate is in the region of 90 per cent (Maldives, 1996: 6). Enrolment rates are lower at subsequent levels of education, but substantial expansion of provision was achieved during the 1990s. For example, between 1995 and 1998, middle school enrolments increased by 48.5 per cent, from 16,579 in 1995 to 24,624 in 1998 (Maldives, 1998: 3). Over the same period, lower secondary enrolments increased by 69.3 per cent, from 6,993 to 11,845; and upper secondary enrolments increased by 33.3 per cent, from 327 to 436.

Upper secondary and post-secondary education is provided only in Male. Of the two government upper secondary schools, one is primarily oriented to the Islamic education system. The other, the Science Education Centre, provides Western-style education and is more relevant to the present paper. Despite its name, the Science Education Centre

offers courses in arts, business and other subjects as well as science. At the post-secondary level, until 1997 separate institutions provided training in teacher education, management and administration, and health sciences. These institutions have now been merged into the Maldives College of Higher Education. However, the country has no national university. This means that most Maldivians who wish to undertake degree studies travel abroad, though some study at home through distance education.

4. Secondary school examinations in Maldives

4.1. Types of examinations and scale of operation

The majority of Maldivian pupils sit their first external examinations in Grade 10, i.e. at the end of lower secondary school. At this point, they take General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary (O) Level examinations administered by Edexcel in London, plus national examinations administered by the Department of Public Examinations (DPE) of the Maldivian Ministry of Education and leading to the Senior Secondary Certificate (SSC). Students who proceed to upper secondary school take further external examinations at the end of Grade 12. These are the Advanced (A) Level examinations administered by Edexcel, and national examinations administered by the DPE and leading to the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). The numbers of candidates sitting these examinations in 1998/99 are shown in Table 1.

At the time Maldives embarked on the link with the London-based examination board, the strategy seemed very appropriate. Numbers of candidates were small, the country had practically no domestic expertise to operate examinations of this type, and international recognition of qualifications was even more important because domestic post-secondary education was even more limited. Use of an examination board in the United Kingdom (UK) was logical given the country's status as a UK colony and the dominance of the English language in Maldivian secondary education.

The SSC and HSC examinations are a later inno-

Table 1

International and national examinations taken by secondary students, Maldives, 1998/99^a

	No. of candidates	No. of subject-entries	Date
<i>International</i>			
Edexcel GCE O Level	297	320	June 1998
Edexcel GCE O Level	2735	10 758	Jan. 1999
Edexcel GCE A Level	344	605	June 1998
UCLES First Certificate in English	274		Dec. 1998
London Chamber of Commerce and Industry	262		Dec. 1998
<i>National</i>			
Senior Secondary Certificate	2450	4677	Dec. 1998
Higher Secondary Certificate	209	418	March 1999

^a Source: Department of Public Examinations, Male.

vation. Both the SSC and the HSC require examination in two subjects considered essential by the Maldivian authorities and not offered by the London board. These subjects are Dhivehi and Islamic Studies. The SSC and HSC examinations were introduced in 1987.

In addition to these examinations, a few candidates take other external assessments. One school in Male presents pupils for the UCLES First Certificate in English examination, which is also taken by some private candidates. Also, a few students sit for the examinations in accounting and allied subjects set by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI).

4.2. The Edexcel O and A Level examinations

The Edexcel examinations are very academic in orientation. The O Level examination, for example, was originally designed in the UK and launched in 1951 to select the top students who were capable of proceeding for further academic studies in senior secondary education and beyond. Within the UK, O Level examinations are no longer generally taken by secondary school students. Critics felt that society and the education system were being too strongly stratified when the academically high achievers took O Levels and the academically low achievers took Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) examinations. UK schools have now moved to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination, which covers a broader spread of ability and talents (Gipps, 1992). The O

Level examinations taken in Maldives are a relic from the past UK practice, and were phased out in the UK itself after the GCSE examination was launched in 1988.

Before the O Level examinations were phased out in the UK, the various UK examination boards which had overseas clients provided information on the change. ULEAC indicated to Maldives and other clients that they would continue to offer O Level examinations for them if they wished. In Maldives, a decision was made, either actively or by default, to continue with the arrangement which seemed to be serving society well and which was known and generally understood by the administrators and other actors in the system. However, by the late 1990s times had changed, and many participants in Maldives felt a need to review the situation (Johnston, 1998; Bray, 1999). They were particularly concerned about issues of cost and relevance, though anxious also to retain international recognition.

Edexcel offers O Level examinations in what it calls Mode 1 and Mode 2 formats. Syllabuses for Mode 1 examinations are devised in London, and the examinations are offered to all clients on a standardised basis. Mode 2 examinations are tailored to the circumstances of particular clients. In Maldives only one Mode 2 examination is offered, namely Fisheries Science. The syllabus was developed in Maldives (with Canadian and UNESCO assistance), but the question papers are set and marked by Edexcel examiners.

The range of subjects offered by Edexcel at O

Level at first sight seems wide. For the June 2000 and January 2001 examinations, the following 32 Mode 1 subjects were offered (Edexcel Foundation, 1999):

Accounting, Art and Design, Bengali, Biology, Chemistry, Chinese, Classical Arabic, Commerce, Computing Studies, Economics, English Language, English Literature, French, Geography, German, Hindi, History B (European), History C (Modern World), Human Biology, Italian, Malay, Maltese, Mathematics A, Mathematics B, Pure Mathematics, Modern Greek, Physics, Religious Studies, Spanish, Swahili, Turkish, and Urdu.

However, while this range might seem considerable, in practice it is much more restricted. For example, it is difficult to conceive of many (or any) Maldivian students taking Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Italian, Malay, Maltese, Modern Greek, Swahili, Turkish or Urdu.

The Maldivian Ministry of Education requires its Grade 10 students to take a minimum of six O Levels. A few Maldivian students take as many as 15, but the majority take much fewer than that. The subjects actually taken by Maldivian students during the years 1991 to 1999 are shown in Table 2. In the latter year, only 16 subjects were taken from the total Edexcel range.

Unlike the O Level examination, the A Level examination is still taken by many UK students. Perhaps because of this, the range of subjects offered by Edexcel at A Level is wider than at O Level. The following 43 subjects were offered for June 1999 and January 2000:

Accounting, Ancient History, Classical Arabic, Art and Design, Biology, Business Studies, Chemistry, Chinese, Computing, Economics, English Language, English Literature, French, Geography, German, Government and Politics, Graphical Communication, Classical Greek, Modern Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Modern Hebrew, Hindi, History A, History B, History D, Human Biology, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Law, Mathematics, Pure Mathematics, Mechanics, Further Mathematics, Ndebele, Physics, Polish,

Russian, Shona, Sociology, Spanish, Turkish, and Urdu.

As at O Level, however, not all the A Level subjects on offer are appropriate to Maldivians. Table 3 shows the actual subjects, and the number of subject-entries, taken by Maldivian candidates in the years 1991 to 1998.

5. The dialectic of the international and the national

5.1. *Benefits from existing arrangements*

It is arguable that the link with ULEAC and its successor, Edexcel, has served Maldives well. This may have been particularly the case in the early years, when the Maldivian education system was much smaller than the size it had reached by the late 1990s, and when Maldives lacked sufficient available personnel with technical competence to operate a strong domestic examination system. Of course, even in the 1950s Maldives had a few well-educated people who, even if they were not specialists in the task, could have designed and operated an examination system had they been required to do so. However, because such people were in short supply, they were needed for more urgent tasks elsewhere in the economy and society. The link with ULEAC served Maldives' needs by providing a technically sophisticated system which led to qualifications which were recognised in most destination countries of importance to Maldivians who wished to proceed for further study or other activities. The examination system was perhaps elitist and poorly related to Maldivian daily life, but that did not matter so much when numbers were small and the reasons for adopting such an arrangement were satisfied.

In such a situation, it would seem that the benefits from external linkages embodied in the examination system outweighed any problem that might have arisen. Much of the development literature in the 1970s and 1980s stressed the need for post-colonial countries to develop their own education systems and reduce dependence on metropolitan models (e.g. Ward, 1974; Fägerlind and Saha, 1983;

Table 2
O Level subject-entries and pass rates, by subject, Maldives, 1991–99^a

	1991		1993		1995		1997		1999	
	No. sat	% pass	No. sat	% pass	No. sat	% pass	No. sat	% pass	No. sat	% pass
Computing Studies ^b										
Art & Design ^b	60	82			55	73	85	79	107	63
English	439	31	835	32	100	97	114	53	213	78
Maths	416	37	791	47	1244	32	1487	16	1874	23
Biology	308	53	496	54	1183	40	1421	29	1922	42
Chemistry	290	78	421	73	622	48	595	51	682	48
Physics	335	58	440	65	555	66	540	56	613	67
History	36	50	112	53	571	53	573	43	618	58
Geography	34	29	98	33	165	55	148	53	121	52
Economics	111	47	293	34	135	19	107	22	84	44
Integrated Sci.	191	64	288	71	509	34	643	40	1124	37
Fisheries Science	73	97	156	91	345	83	509	63	1170	72
Human Biology	28	86	166	80	316	75	216	68	150	73
English Literature	16	50	35	100	92	52	61	83	53	71
Pure Mathematics			67	100	138	47	52	44	53	32
Accounting	38	34	188	46	473	62	730	58	1296	60
Commerce	27	11	114	32	315	26	531	32	968	37
Religious Studies					13	77				
French	2	50	1	0						
Graphical Comm.	2	50								
Total	2406		4501		7147		7812		11 078	

^a Source: Department of Public Examinations, Male.

^b The June candidates have been grouped with the candidates for the following January, since the January examinations are the main ones for those cohorts. Thus, the 1999 figure, for example, includes entries in June 1998.

Table 3
A Level subject-entries, by subject, Maldives, 1991–98^a

	1991	1993	1995	1997	1998
Accounting	1	4	33	35	43
Art	1	5	8	1	
Biology	19	37	106	76	83
Business Studies			29	34	31
Chemistry	41	60	116	106	104
Economics	9	11	35	31	46
General Studies				1	
Geography		4	6	6	
Government and Politics			16	23	8
Graphical Communication			1	3	
History	7	12	14	5	6
Law		1	9	14	
Literature	1		2	3	9
Mathematics	24	63	142	106	133
Pure Mathematics	3	1	30	3	1
Mathematics and Statistics	13		1	2	7
Further Mathematics		8		17	22
Applied Mathematics			6		
Mechanics					1
Physics	42	70	125	88	106
Religious Studies			4		
Sociology				4	5
Total	161	276	683	670	605

^a Source: Department of Public Examinations, Male.

Anderson and Windham, 1982), but in Maldives it was arguable that the international links in examinations were both necessary and desirable. By the mid-1980s the Maldivian authorities felt concern about certain elements which were neglected by the ULEAC system; but their solution was to supplement the ULEAC arrangements with the Dhivehi and Islamic Studies national examinations rather than to replace the ULEAC system.

5.2. *Misgivings about existing arrangements*

By the late 1990s, misgivings about at least some features of the ULEAC links had grown. This was partly because the Maldivian education system had itself grown. The increased number of candidates raised the volume of expenditures; and concern was expressed more loudly about the nature of the curriculum imposed by the examination system. Particular attention focused on the O Level arrangements.

Table 2 shows that the number of candidate entries in the ULEAC/Edexcel O Level examinations increased from 2,406 in 1991 to 11,078 in 1999, i.e. it more than quadrupled over an eight-year period. At A Level, candidate entries had expanded by almost the same proportion, from 161 in 1991 to 605 in 1998 (Table 3). Since Edexcel demanded payment in pounds sterling, this growth created a substantial drain on foreign exchange. In 1999, Edexcel charged £22 per O Level subject and £45 per A Level subject, creating a total bill in that year of £271,000 (US\$431,000). Additional costs were imposed on the Department of Public Examinations, which administered the examinations locally, as well as on schools and families. One cost to the DPE was for air-freighting answer scripts to London. For security reasons this was done through a courier company, and in January 1999 cost US\$7,000 for the O Level scripts. The Ministry of Education required Grade 10 students each to take at least six O Levels and two SSC

subjects. The DPE charged fees of Rf50 (US\$4.30) for administering each O Level subject, plus Rf75 (US\$6.40) as a standard charge for SSC and a further Rf75 for each SSC subject. Thus a candidate taking the minimum incurred costs of Rf2,900 (US\$255). This was equivalent to 20 per cent of the annual per capita income, and was a particularly heavy burden for families in the atolls outside the capital.

Other misgivings arose about the elitist nature of the O Level qualification. Table 2 shows that large numbers of pupils failed, and some gained no qualifications at all. Particularly dramatic were the failure rates in English: 77 per cent of candidates failed in 1999, and 86 per cent failed in 1998. Failure rates had also been high in the early 1990s; but this was considered more acceptable when the secondary education system was small and designed to be elitist. With the expansion of the system to embrace many pupils with less academic backgrounds and aspirations, many educators felt the need for a qualification more similar to the GCSE.

The third source of misgiving arose from the nature of the curriculum. The fact that the examination required importation of books and other materials from the UK was generally accepted as necessary, even though it created a further drain on foreign exchange. However, because the O Level had been phased out in the UK, authors and publishers were unwilling to invest time and capital in updating the books. This was especially problematic in such subjects as commerce, economics and computing studies.

The curriculum was also shaped by the combination of subjects which could be taken at O Level, which was rather limited. As noted above, worldwide Edexcel only offered 32 Mode 1 O Level subjects compared with 43 A Level subjects, and about half of the subjects were not suitable for Maldivian students. No General Science was offered of a type which could be studied by non-science stream students; and no general subject in social science could be offered to non-arts stream students. This made the curriculum undesirably narrow.

Perhaps even more striking were the biases arising from the nature of the questions. One reason

why failure rates in English were so high was that Edexcel insisted first that fluency should match the standard expected of native speakers, and second that the types of native speakers which Edexcel had in mind seemed to be ones inhabiting the UK. The result was that questions contained cultural bias which imposed unnecessary hurdles on Maldivian candidates. Four examples may illustrate this point:

- One paper included a passage on transport. The forms of transport with which Maldivian students are most familiar are boats and perhaps aeroplanes. Unless they have been abroad, Maldivians will never have seen trains, horses, camels or long-distance buses. While students may have seen other forms of transport on television and in books, they were nevertheless disadvantaged in comparison with counterparts in other countries.
- Another paper had a passage on national parks which, at least in Europe and Africa, are usually large in area and contain wildlife. Some Maldivian students associated the topic with Sultan Park, a small and carefully tended garden in Male which has a very different scope and function.
- In 1998, a comprehension passage focused on the ship *Titanic*, which hit an iceberg in 1912 and sank. To be fair, even in the UK few students have ever seen an iceberg (though they are more likely to have experienced ice and snow). But the advantage that UK students had was that a major feature film on the topic had recently gripped the country. Many UK students would have seen and discussed the film. Fewer Maldivian students would have seen the film, even in Male, especially in 1998.
- One comprehension passage referred to a Department Store which has many branches in the UK and is called Debenhams. The passage was about the different items which were sold in sections on different floors. Maldives has no Department Stores of this type, even in Male; and many students were put off by the unfamiliar word 'Debenhams'.

These four examples all came from English papers. An alternative example of the same type of prob-

lem may be taken from the commerce syllabus, for which the examination assumed knowledge of cheques, credit cards, bar-codes, etc. which are rare in Maldivian daily life. A few stores in Male do use bar-codes; but they would be frequented only by the more prosperous students, and the use of bar-codes would be quite alien to youths on the remote atolls. In general, even Male retains an economy based on cash and small shops, very distant from the chain stores and high-technology commerce on which some examination questions were based.

At A Level the syllabuses and examinations were hardly more relevant to Maldivian daily life. However, it seemed that educators and the public in general were more tolerant. This was perhaps because total numbers remained small, and the Maldivian system therefore remained elitist. Also, because A Levels were still in active use in the UK, publishers were more willing to update textbooks. A further point was that A Levels were perceived as more important than O Levels for international mobility. This was chiefly because domestic opportunities had increased for O Level graduates, and only about 15 per cent of students still sought foreign studies after Grade 10. Moreover, some applicants found that O Level was actually less widely recognised than had been assumed, even in the UK. Thus, at least one family in 1998 found, when applying to a UK institution, that the institution looked askance at the O Level certificate because the O Level had ceased to exist within the UK and the institution considered it an archaic qualification.

Finally, the examinations had a backwash in the medium of instruction. A powerful pedagogical case can be made in favour of instruction in the mother tongue, which is obstructed when the examinations use English as the medium. On this matter, however, the government has chosen a pragmatic path. A 1995 Education Sector Review (Maldives, 1995: 88) noted that tensions on the medium of instruction cannot in fact be resolved on pedagogical grounds:

since the parents on Male would not support a change from English to Dhivehi medium primary schools and the island schools are chang-

ing as quickly as they can secure the teachers necessary to provide instruction in English medium. The real issue here is how best to assist these schools in helping students make up their deficits in English.

This view suggests that English-medium education is likely to remain (albeit with tensions), and that this aspect of the backwash in the language of O Level examinations should not be over-emphasised. Nevertheless, as the Education Sector Review also observed (p. 124), “the structure of secondary education purchases external credibility at a substantial price in terms of both finances and curricular relevance”.

5.3. *Alternatives and constraints*

When considering ways to tackle this dissatisfaction with the Edexcel link, particularly at O Level, the Maldivian authorities faced three main alternatives. The first was to negotiate with Edexcel to secure better value for money and improved relevance. The second was to change the external link from Edexcel to another board. The third was to replace the metropolitan examinations with national ones. However, none of these arrangements was necessarily straightforward and without constraints.

Beginning with the first option, one important factor in any professional–client relationship is the scale of the market share. Two factors had greatly increased Maldives’ share in Edexcel’s external operations, namely the shift of some other countries away from London examinations and the growth of the Maldivian education system. The result of the combination of these factors was that in the January 1998 sittings, Maldives represented 32.4 per cent of the Edexcel O Level subject-entries worldwide (Edexcel Foundation, 1998: 17). Maldivian entries were a much smaller proportion in the June sitting; but even when the January and June sittings were combined, Maldives formed 11.0 per cent of the total. Edexcel has sometimes been perceived as more concerned with the UK than with overseas clients, and some Maldivian educators had felt frustrated by the organisation’s unwillingness to address some of their professional

queries. However, Edexcel was showing signs in the late 1990s of being aware of its unfavourable image, and seemed willing to seek improvement. The point for the present paper is that, particularly when substantial financial transactions are concerned, client states do not necessarily have to see themselves as helpless recipients in international transactions of this kind.

The second option was to change the external provider. The most obvious alternative was UCLES, which has a larger operation than Edexcel and which has demonstrated much more willingness to work in partnership with small states and other clients to meet their perceived needs (Sadler, 1998). The Namibian example was given above. Other examples in which UCLES has demonstrated flexibility to tailor examinations are found in Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. For Maldives, UCLES would not necessarily be cheaper than Edexcel; but UCLES appeared to offer greater flexibility and the possibility of tailoring examinations to fit Maldivian circumstances.

The third option, which could be seen in combination with one or both of the previous ones as well as a separate alternative, was to localise the examinations. The principal challenge here was in technical competence and administrative capacity. Comparative survey shows some states which are quite large but have chosen not to localise examinations, such as Singapore (population 2.9 million), and others which are even smaller than Maldives but which have moved to localisation, such as Tonga (population 95,000). The Singaporean case is instructive since the country has considerable technical expertise as well as economies of scale, yet has chosen to retain the links with UCLES for reasons of perceived standards and international portability (Chong, 1998). Tonga took a more nationalistic approach, but has been assisted by a regional body of a type not available to Maldives, namely the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (Rees and Singh, 1998). Tonga also makes use of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority for some components of its system (Murtagh and Steer, 1998; Tonga, Ministry of Education Examinations Unit, 1998).

To some observers, the option to localise examinations at the Grade 10 level was particularly

attractive because the element of international recognition had declined in significance. Local provision of A Level (Grades 11 and 12) education had increased in quantity, and the proportion of Grade 10 leavers who went abroad either for employment or further studies was very small. Indeed, such were the failure rates that rather few Grade 10 graduates could have gone abroad for further studies or employment had they wanted to.

An initial question concerning the option to localise examinations was whether the country had enough national expertise to do so. In this domain, constraints were undeniable, even if they were less acute than they had been in the past. One way to enlarge the pool of expertise, which is also followed in other small states (see, e.g. Sanerivi, 1998: 94), would be to use teachers and other personnel in the education system and wider society. The Department of Public Examinations in the Maldivian Ministry of Education already does this in connection with the national SSC and HSC examinations, and the strategy could be extended. It does encounter administrative complexities from coordination of part-time personnel and the need for confidentiality, but ways have been found to handle these complexities.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that in the short run—and perhaps even in the longer run—enough local expertise will be found to localise all dimensions of the examinations. This being the case, the question would be how Maldives could access expertise as required. One solution would be for the Maldivian authorities to make their own appointments, using their contacts and perhaps assisted by one or more of the professional associations of examiners. One long-established body is the International Association for Educational Assessment, which has a substantial number of small-state members (International Association for Educational Assessment, 1996). A younger body is the Association of Commonwealth Examination and Accreditation Bodies, which was set up following the 1998 Commonwealth Secretariat meeting in Wellington, New Zealand, and which has a specific mandate to provide mutual support to small states.

Another way for the Maldivian authorities to gain access to external expertise would be through

a contractual arrangement with a body such as UCLES or Edexcel. UCLES already has long and demonstrated capacity in the localisation of examinations and the operation of partnerships with this goal in view. The government of Bahamas, for example, has launched a Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education in conjunction with UCLES (Sumner and Archer, 1998). UCLES provides important technical expertise and moderates the standards, and the certificate bears the crests of both the Bahamian government and the University of Cambridge. This arrangement has assured the public that localisation of the certificate has not been at the expense of declining standards and loss of international recognition, and in many respects achieves the best of both worlds. UCLES has embarked on similar arrangements in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (Davids, 1998; Ralise, 1998; Kumalo, 1998). Although Edexcel has not been so strongly involved in such ventures, precedents also exist with that organisation. For example, when the Secondary Education Certificate was localised in Malta, one problem concerned local perceptions of the reliability of the examination (Debono et al., 1999; Sultana, 1999). To address this issue, in 1998 the Maltese authorities negotiated an arrangement through which Edexcel would become part of the paper setters' and markers' panels. As noted by Ventura (1998) (p. 14), the process was expected not only to serve as a quality audit, "but also as an opportunity for subject-specific training in examination skills and as a way of instilling confidence in the examination and enhancing international recognition".

6. Conclusions

This article has taken the domain of secondary school examinations to explore tensions and issues associated with a dialectic between the international and the national in one particular setting. While of course the Maldivian case has its own distinctive features, the key features of the dialectic may be found in many small states (Bray, 1998a).

From the perspective of dependency and interdependency, several features deserve particular emphasis. The first is that within Maldives, ambiv-

alence about the links with London in the examination sector only came to a head in the late 1990s, i.e. over 30 years after independence. This was chiefly because the Maldivian secondary education system prior to that time was very small and elitist. As the system expanded, it began to cater for larger numbers of people who had less need for international recognition of their qualifications and who were perceived to be disadvantaged by a curriculum which was in many respects alien to their needs and social contexts. Another effect of educational expansion was that Maldives had a greater pool of domestic expertise capable of running at least parts of a local examination system. Also, as the system expanded the costs in foreign exchange greatly increased. During the late 1990s the main debate focused on the O Levels, but it seems likely that in coming years a similar debate will focus on the A Levels.

The issues outlined in this paper are felt particularly acutely in small states. In part this is because states with small populations are, by definition, limited in their pool of domestic expertise for professional activities of all types. Also, small states are generally characterised by open economies and reliance on larger states for aspects of higher-level training. Some small states do have national universities; but those institutions are inevitably limited in the range of specialisms which they can cover, and a need will always exist for some external training.

At the same time, the paper has shown that small states do not have to resign themselves to being passive and disadvantaged actors in the international arena. In the domain of examinations, the Maldivian authorities have the power to negotiate with external bodies to secure packages which will best suit their needs. Even small states have bargaining power in such relationships, chiefly because relationships are usually ones of interdependence rather than complete dependency.

The paper has also added to the literature which shows the variations in the circumstances facing particular small states. Because Maldives has no obvious regional partners, it cannot easily join a regional body comparable to the CXC, the SPBEA or WAEC. Also, the Maldivian situation is more illustrative of patterns among the smallest of the

small than of larger states which can draw on national universities and greater pools of expertise. As such, this case study fits into a spectrum of situations and circumstances.

Finally, the article shows the value of comparative analysis. The Maldivian authorities can learn much about issues and options by examining models and solutions in other countries; and perhaps readers in other countries can improve their own understanding of tensions and strategies by considering the case of Maldives. The article may also play a role in broader conceptualisation about the nature of the field of comparative education. The paper commenced by noting the 1999 textbook edited by Arnove and Torres which is subtitled 'The dialectic of the global and the local'. Arnove's introduction within that book states (Arnove, 1999: 1) that:

Understanding this interactive process [between the global and the local], the tensions and contradictions, is central to recasting or 'reframing' the field of comparative and international education.

Arnove argued that such recasting or reframing was needed to take account of changing forces on the world stage and corresponding changes in economic, social and educational policies. The discussion presented here can assist in the broader understanding which Arnove had in mind.

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