



Who needs examinations?

Should school exams go the way of the fountain pen? **John White** introduces his new book about school examinations.

Most of us cannot imagine a school system without examinations. We take them as much for granted as some of us did fountain pens forty years ago. Yet they are far from being wholly beneficial, as the pens were. They are a huge source of anxiety to students, their families and their teachers. They dominate the secondary curriculum and discourage thought about what education should be for. They corrupt pedagogy. They are happier testing shallow understanding than deep. They are often inaccurate.

Why, then, do we not only put up with them, but see them as key to any state-of-the-art educational system? In **Who needs examinations? A story of climbing ladders and dodging snakes**, I try to answer this question.

For the early Victorians who invented them, they were part of the solution to a wider social problem. How could the rising middle classes of the new industrial age secure professional jobs for their sons when these posts were under the patronage of the landed establishment? Entry by examination, first at school, and then directly into a profession or via a university degree, seemed a functional,

objective and fair alternative. Just as the Americans, who were having their own love affair with exams, exported them to Japan, the British introduced them into India. Together, they sowed the seeds of the 'examination hell' that overtook both countries and is now rife in China.

In the book, I look first at the multiple defects of school examinations, and then bring up to our own times the historical story above. Much of the British account has to do with the very natural desire of the more privileged to maintain their family's position in the social scale, often, as after 1902 and 1944, by making the schools attended by possible competitors exam-free zones (but not since the 1980s, as more sophisticated tactics have taken over). In the final part of the book, I explore what might replace school examinations.

Please see page 24 for further details on John White's book. John would welcome feedback on his article at john.white@ioe.ac.uk. He is emeritus professor of philosophy of education at the IOE.