

# At last an alternative to GCE for Cypriots

WHICH English exam should schools and institutes in Cyprus use? That was the question which Gleen Fulcher, the head of the English Institute, sought to answer at the IATEFL meeting at the British Council last week. **GEORGE KENNEDY** reports.



■ Gleen Fulcher

He started off by looking at a piece of research not yet published in Cyprus. "The ESU Framework Project looks at how we can compare the different exams. Is it a question of chalk and cheese or can we make meaningful comparisons?"

The English Speaking Union "trained their examiners in 24 scales, marked a set of essays and speech samples and then sent them to all the examining boards. They wanted to see how the different sets of marks compare."

Given the traditional reluctance of various exam boards, especially London University which sets the GCE O-level English Language exam (syllabus B), to offer themselves to outside scrutiny, it may seem surprising that they agreed to help in the research; but "the exam boards couldn't afford not to be included as the results would be distributed all round the world."

The results of most relevance to Cyprus are the ones which show the following "equivalences": a J.M.B. pass is a low 6 on the ESU scale at which point you can also find Pitman Higher Intermediate, ELTS grade 6 and London G.C.E. 'O' level grade 3; on the other hand, the Cambridge First Certificate grade C is a lower 5 and the Cambridge Proficiency grade C is a higher 6.

This is the first time this sort of comparison has been made. But does it work?

"There is one problem. There is no estimate of the reliability and validity of the marking system of the exam boards which would have refused any such request. London University, for example,

would not have liked any comparison to be made between its January and June results."

Another problem relates to the ECU's own markers. It started off with 35 but in the final statistics only ten are included: is this because the results of the other markers were far from being in agreement with these ten? In the oral interviews marks the range of agreement that was given for different markers stretches from 0.53 which is very low to 0.975 which is almost perfect. The ESU report writers have a lot of explaining to do.

Turning to the exams which are used in Cyprus, Mr. Fulcher poured scorn on the GCE. "It is aimed at the top 20 per cent and that is not just intent but is current practice. Cyprus never gets higher than a 22 per cent pass rate."

"Then we have the disparity between the January and June results; how is that students who fail in June get much better results the following January? The answer may be that the exam board, adopting a norm-based criterion, simply gets its computer to lop off the top twenty per cent. Now in January -- and this is true for most of the world -- the majority of the candidates are probably those who have failed in June. It is a different section of the population that is being tested." Thus, the inference is clear, you do indeed have a better chance of passing in January.

Apart from all this, there are more objections to the GCE. "Last year at the English Institute 114 GCE students took a "mock" exam, took the exam itself and two ELTs modules; they had all

taken the First Certificate exam (FCE) before and had received teachers assessments of their abilities." Some of these measures correlated quite well but "we found that we just could not predict our students' grades in GCE."

What little correlation there was between FCE and GCE for the lower grades. But, overall, GCE stands out as being "totally different from all other measures. I suspect that there is something seriously wrong with GCE."

But what are the alternatives? The Joint Matriculation Board is one, but there the attempts to get rid of cultural bias can lead to an exam so esoteric that no one has heard of some of the items which figure in the tests. Mr. Fulcher gives everyone a splendid example of one such item which was a comprehension test on the part of a yacht and which was unintelligible to nearly everyone.

Next there is the nine-point scale ELTs exam. "It is very popular. There has been a recent change: the speaking section has been taken from the subject-specific area and put in the general section. And it is now to be recorded." It is the reading and writing modules now which test the specific areas of arts and social sciences, life and medical sciences and physical sciences and technology.

The speaker didn't mention it but one disadvantage of this exam in Cyprus is that results obtained in it are only valid for a short time. This makes it not so good for young Cypriot males about to enter the National Guard.

Finally, the International GCSE was outlined. This could well be the answer to the exam conundrum, especially for language institutes in Cyprus.

"It has two levels, the core and extended levels. Everyone does the first one which offers you a possible grade from C to G. The old U of the GCE has now gone; all students who would otherwise "fail" the GCE with a U (for Unclassified) will now get a certificate which states what they can do, rather than what they can't do." The exam also has a large oral component which should suit the institutes for whom oral work is, naturally, very important.

The exam is recognised by all British universities but will it be recognised in Cyprus? "We asked the Ministry of Education here if it recognised the validity of GCSE. It said 'no'. But it also said it didn't recognise the validity of GCE either. However, it recognises the 'usefulness' of both."

As regards private employers in Cyprus Mr Fulcher claimed that it is a matter of getting the exam widely used in Cyprus and then getting the employers to accept it. In this respect his informative and entertaining talk has surely been a first step in the long-awaited introduction of a viable alternative to the dreaded GCE.