

# MATRIC EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT OVER THE YEARS IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

*Patrick McMahon*

## **Abstract**

In looking at examinations in history over many years, it must be realized that it is very difficult to compare and judge papers of the past by the standards of the present.

South Africa has undergone many changes over the past 30 years – ideologically and technologically. It might thus be difficult to compare the “then and now” with any accuracy.

One should remember what the technology was like in connection with examination preparation some 30 years ago. Papers were typed on to wax stencils and old roneo machines were used to reproduce copies. Cartoons and other source materials (if not re-typed) were often reproduced very poorly.

The quality of the older papers is going to be very different from those of the present.

## **Is this a problem?**

Can we judge the people of the past by our standards... At least, technologically speaking? I would tend to say : No!

It would be foolish to criticise the Voortrekkers for their difficult route through the country and not for using the N1 to get from the Cape to the interior. The N1 was not there – how could they use it?

It is amazing how quickly technology has brought the world closer to us – it used to be remarkable if people could see the Durban July horse-race on cinema screens on the same evening as the day it took place – nowadays we are discontented if we do not see sporting events from across the world live, as they happen. The advent of fax machines, considered wondrous many years ago as they replaced telegrams and ticker-tape are now considered almost obsolete as they are being replaced by internet usage and e-mails.

Do ideas also go out of date in the same way? When people criticize

politicians or historians for ideas that they held many years ago.....were our more modern ideas in place and just being ignored or were they like the N1 for the Voortrekkers, still waiting to be constructed?

Bearing in mind the problems of being judgemental on account of new technology and new ideas, are the examination papers now better or worse than those of many years ago??

There are possibly two standpoints that could be adopted. The politically correct version would be as follows....

Examination papers are MUCH better now – we have the new South Africa with its new ideas – there is more focus on interpretations and sources – the history taught is more Afro-Centric – South Africa is now located within Africa etc.

The politically incorrect version would be...

Well, you know what education is like now – standards have slipped – no factual knowledge or memory skills are needed to answer any questions – so, it's easier – everything is given to the younger generation etc. So...

Which version is correct?

Let us examine and analyse the matter by looking at some old papers, but I believe there is no easy or “ideally correct” answer to this question.

Let's start by looking at a really old question paper. (Source A).

This shows that even many years ago, there was some questioning over just looking at the facts – more interpretation and sources were always considered part of the history examination!

A 1973 student history paper (Source B) shows that... Still much content was required but it does give a:

1. Critical analysis of syllabus.
2. Knowledge that interpretation of the data is required.

## **In the 1970s and 1980s**

There was considerable bias in the question papers and this was accompanied by a rigid memorandum. No alterations could be made to it! This was a sign of the times and a reflection of the country. This was

a huge problem and tended to stifle initiative, as well as trying to make everyone conform to one way of thinking. A good example of this is the following question (Source C).

Most of the questions that were framed in this way did not allow for discussion or an alternative point of view. You agreed with the point of view that was given in the paper and based your discussion around that.

One of the best examples of bias is this question from the T.E.D. history paper from 1984. (Source D) Once again, characters are portrayed in a manner that is not neutral – in fact, the portrayal is downright controversial – but the questions that were set take the drawing as factual and one has to argue from that viewpoint.

It is easy to be complacent about these questions as they occurred a long time ago – in a “different country”. But... we must ask ourselves... do we have similar biases today? It was easy to present alternative views to the questions given above, because the question paper was considered by many to be very “narrow” or “politically incorrect”. Nowadays, would we be as keen to look for alternatives in our newly-won democracy? Surely it is up to the historian and the history teacher to examine both sides of the story at all times?

In the period 1988/9 – in the Transvaal Education Department, there seemed to be a change on questions on apartheid. There was a question set which questioned the bias of the Hertzog government towards benefiting the Afrikaners.

(Source E) and the breakthrough question came when the examiners were, for the first time, given the freedom to let the matric candidates question apartheid – from different points of view. (Source F). We were quite surprised that this question was allowed, but looking back on it today, it is not that radical a question – it just seemed so at the time because previously such questions were not allowed to be asked. It did, however, take many of the students (as well as the teachers) by surprise and not that many of them answered the question. By the 1990s, some of the questions had become quite sophisticated. Source materials were used to stimulate essay questions as can be seen from the partial question from the 1990s (Source G) here was still much that was purely content-based, however, and there seemed to be a division of what

should be asked for “facts” and what should be asked for “interpretation” – somewhat of an artificial division, in my view, as the two really go hand in hand.

Of course, this was not the whole picture! History papers from *some* education departments in the mid-1990s still looked at blatant regurgitation – fill in the missing word – true or false (etc) as is shown by this page from a 1994 examination. (Source H)

Some curriculum reform was initiated in September 1995 by discussions that led to a document which became known as NATED 550. This, effectively was a stop-gap measure which had a restricted brief – that is to “clean up” the syllabus and make it more acceptable, but the participants were told that the changes should not be so drastic as to require new textbooks to implement them and that the arrangements would only last for two years.

The arrangements did improve the syllabus, but it was only an interim step, which eventually lasted for 12 years and was never really seriously re-visited.

This document and discussion of it could take up an entire paper on its own, but it has come under a fair amount of criticism for not undertaking further reform. The fact was that the framers of the document were not really given a licence to do that! Criticism of the document from that point of view is unfounded, but criticism of how long it lasted might be more valid.

Despite the changes, there were still some problematic papers at this stage! This can be seen by examining Source I. Not much had changed in this paper over the many years that we have looked at. Nevertheless, the movement towards more creative history papers was driven by a few provinces. These changes and improvements looked at the extended use of sources and a revised system of essay-marking. Whereas in the past, the emphasis was on factual content and the “one fact, one tick, one mark” syndrome, a new more global assessment was being looked at in order to facilitate the content and interpretation method.

We were, however, all still in our own little shells and there was no consistency in the history papers throughout the country. The same year that the previous paper (Source I) was set, a quite different paper was set in another province, also at the Standard Grade level. (Source J.)

In 2002, it was decided that history should become a national paper and a meeting was held in Pretoria to facilitate this. This meeting led to much “horse-trading” amongst provinces as to what should be allowed and what should not. After agreement was reached, this was elaborated in the new national guidelines that were sent to the provinces and a modern, more sophisticated history examination was born in 2003.

I believe that there are still some problems in this examination –

1) *The question of content*

- This has been a problem – educators indicate that content is important, but they spend much of their time looking at skills. Content and skills go hand in hand and one without the other is problematic.
- The worry is that any student who is good at languages and comprehension would be able to work through the source-based documents and answer them well – without a study of the historical period involved.
- In the past, examiners have been criticised for having content without analysis, now there is a criticism that there is analysis without content.

2) *The amount of reading needed*

- This has also become a problem with the introduction of the source-based questions. History examinations are now much bigger and thicker than they have been before. This could be a concern for students for whom English or Afrikaans is a second or third language.
- It is possible to overcome this problem by varying the sources – pictures, cartoons, statistics etc require much less reading and could help to alleviate the problem here. In addition to this, more questions could be asked on fewer sources.

3) *Contextualisation*

- This is potentially another problem –although question papers in the past have been under-contextualised, the tendency today is to over-contextualise – to explain everything in the source so clearly that the candidate is led to the answer.

4) *Much is left to markers*

But, it should be agreed that there are many pluses to the current examination - The examination is:

- Much more sophisticated than before –it certainly gives the impression that it is a modern-day, analytical and useful piece of work which will benefit students in their life-skills when they leave school.
- Showing an improvement in the types of questions asked, as they look at both sides of the story, are as unbiased as one might expect and are marked according to a flexible memorandum.
- Effective in its use of sources, for whereas those may on occasions be overdone, the importance of using original source material as a tool in the examination cannot be over-emphasised.

5) *Much better in its clarity, as technological advances have made examinations look better, clearer and easier to understand as the years have progressed*

**Remember that there were Questions like that from the beginning – but:**

There were many differences in papers under the apartheid system:

- both by provinces;
- and by race;
- so, the modern examination is still something of a mixed bag- in any case, it only has a few more years to run as the new curriculum is imminent;
- it is hoped that history teachers & the examination panels will keep the new assessment alive and healthy, as free as possible from bias ... but still requiring the discipline of history to master the examinations. In my view, the history teachers of the country have a vital role to play to see that the subject is being promoted in the history classrooms and by the national examination!

Together, we must all play a role to ensure that the subject that we teach and love is...

- enjoyable

- truthful – free from bias and
- academically respectable

Let us try and solve these problems and go and create responsible history together.