

The Argus
30th Dec. 1898.

The Argus, January 2nd 1899.

THE MATRICULATION FAILURES

TO THE EDITOR OF THE ARGUS.

Sir,—In to-day's issue, in speaking of the matriculation examination just concluded, you very properly draw attention to the high percentage of failures in such elementary subjects as geography and arithmetic, as well as in the science subjects, chemistry and physics, and blame the secondary teaching for the neglect of such subjects, or, at least, for poor work in them. The percentage of failures in these subjects is indeed high, in fact, so much higher than usual, that I am inclined to think the secondary schoolmasters should not get all the blame. Perhaps it would be possible to obtain a fairer view of the matter if a comparison were made with the results of previous examinations.

In geography, for instance, the percentage that failed at the recent examination is, in round numbers, 52, whilst for the three years preceding the percentages are 39, 39, and 31. Now, does it not seem strange that all schools should at one and the same time have shown a singular neglect of this subject, and have sent up candidates with a preparation so poor in comparison with that of former years? Either this has been the case, or, what is much more probable, the fault lies with the examiner, who has been more exacting in his demands. It is this variation of standard which leads to the uncertainty in the matriculation. Teachers, from their experience of a number of examinations, are led to expect that a certain amount of proficiency in a subject will be sufficient to secure a pass, and act upon this, when suddenly, as on the present occasion, all their calculations are upset, with the result that there is a percentage failure of 52. It is interesting to compare the results of the other subjects that you mention, viz., chemistry, and physics. In chemistry, the percentages of failures for the three preceding years are 42, 37, and 29, showing a gradual improvement each year, whilst at the recent examination it abruptly rises to 63; in physics, again, we have 33, 38, 35, and now 65. The percentages in arithmetic for the past four examinations are 48, 46, 45, and 48. You specially draw attention to this subject, on account of its importance, but it is generally recognised by teachers that the standard of the papers set is at least 100 per cent. more difficult than that of five years ago, and it is gradually rising, and this rise accounts for the higher percentage of failures. In conclusion, then, I would like to say that although the secondary teachers are prepared to take a share of the blame of failure, the examiner, with his uncertain standard, is no less responsible.—Yours, &c.,
GRESHAM ROBINSON,
Carlton College, Dec. 23.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE ARGUS.

Sir,—Every year, no doubt, on the publication of the results of the matriculation examination a wail goes up from unsuccessful candidates and from the teachers of unsuccessful candidates. It was said by a prominent barrister at a recent meeting of the University Senate that this fact was an illustration of the Australian propensity, in any contest, to win, tie, or wrangle. And perhaps most of your readers, perceiving that this is so in a good many cases, have little sympathy with these cries of the lost. For all that, however, in this year's examination an instance occurs, either of such carelessness on the part of the examiners or of such flagrant disregard by them of an implied contract, that attention should be drawn to it in the general interests of fair dealing.

The trouble is in connection with the pass paper in chemistry; and the figures which you kindly publish every year do not, in this instance, fully show out the true result. In pass chemistry 39 candidates presented. Of these 39 three passed. There were thus in this subject 92.3 per cent. of failures. Practically the whole of the pass candidates failed—or else it was the examiners who failed.

As soon as I had seen the pass paper I wrote to the chairman of the board of examiners, and pointed out that one of the eight questions in that paper was clearly outside the limits laid down in the calendar. Professor Masson acknowledged that this was so, but said that no candidate would be rejected except those who failed to satisfy the examiners on the remaining seven questions. But I had also pointed out that the cast of the remaining questions of the paper was quite unlike the cast of previous papers; and that previous papers were the only guide as to what, within the wide and general limits set by the calendar, the particular nature of the examination should be. Professor Masson said nothing as to this. The numerical result, quoted above, however, fully bears out the truth of my assertion; and one can only repeat that such a radical break with the traditions of the examination, as is shown by this paper, and by these results, is a repudiation of the tacit contract between examiners and examinees. The examiners in all these matriculation examinations must be understood as saying to examinees, "You learn certain things as outlined in the calendar, and further defined by the papers previously set by us, and we will set a somewhat similar paper, and let you through if you show sufficient knowledge of that paper." If the examiners wish to raise the standard, still keeping within the limits as set by the calendar, they can gradually introduce new questions, and reject a gradually increasing number of candidates. Or they might give notice by public advertisement that they meditated a coup at the end of some given year. Candidates would in that case, at least, experience all the pleasurable excitement of battle, even if afterwards they had to bear the slaughter of defeat. But in the present instance there was no battle. The affair was a mere thumbed slaughter, arranged by the examiners with all the skill, if one may be pardoned for comparing little events to great events, of a Kitchener and the appointments of a Maxim.

Indeed, the absolutely dead in this day's work amounting to 92.7 per cent., the slaughter was much greater than that in any battle fought by the Sirdar.—Yours, &c.,
J. MACPHERSON, M.A.,
Science Master C.E.G.S.,
Dandenong, Dec. 23.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE.

MATRICULATION EXAMINATION,
NOVEMBER, 1898.

EXAMINERS' REPORTS.

The examiners in the several subjects at the recent matriculation examination of the Melbourne University have reported to the registrar as follows:—

LATIN.

The Latin papers seem to be slightly below the average of recent years. The knowledge of elementary grammar shown even by the better candidates is very inadequate; the memory drill essential to thoroughness is evidently neglected. That set books are apt to be viewed solely as a series of exercises in translation, without any regard to the interest of their contents, is again shown by the general inability to draw a fairly correct map of Gaul. The honour papers are very much below the usual standard.

W. E. CORNWALL.

ALGEBRA.

I have nothing to add to the details of results already sent in.

E. J. NANSON.

GEOMETRY.

Out of 100 marks 46 were obtainable for book work and 54 for exercises, and the standard for a pass was 50. The candidates obtained on the average 57 marks each, so that if a strong candidate were allowed to transfer his surplus to a weaker brother or sister, all could have passed with a margin to spare. But, as three candidates out of every 10 actually failed, it is evident that those who passed sent in as a whole a satisfactory body of work. The most pleasing feature in the answering was the number of quite correct but unconventional answers sent in to the somewhat uncommon first question. It illustrated in a more marked degree than usual a steady improvement that is taking place in the direction of a frank and unreserved communication between examinee and examiner. Candidates seem to realise that a weak case in geometry cannot be strengthened merely by keeping quiet about its weak points, and that it is best in every way to send in a plain, unaffected statement of how they do think rather than of how they think they ought to think. In answering the sixth question about constructing a square equal to a given rectangle some candidates still start off with a preamble about constructing a parallelogram equal to the rectangle and having one angle equal to a given right angle, but the number of such over-cautious, timorous ones is much less than it used to be in the days when exercises were excluded.

In teaching the properties of tangents many of the country teachers seem to explain them purely as limiting cases of the properties of secants. It is an excellent practice for teachers to explain this method of regarding the tangent by the way, but it is a great mistake to found demonstrations of the properties of tangents on it for pupils of the age and limited mathematical experience of the average matriculation candidate. Of the many country candidates who answered questions 8 and 9 by this method, only one expressed himself with a perfect grasp of it, the rest by little vaguenesses of wording making it plain that they were repeating mostly on faith a formula of the teacher's. It would be a pity if these remarks discouraged such valuable explanations as that of the relation between tangents and secants, but teachers should be prepared to indicate in passing matters of this sort, trusting that they will bear fruit in good time, but not making them substitutes for what the pupil requires for his immediate needs.

For an excellence both in the matter and the manner of their answers, securing from 90 to 100 per cent. of the marks, the following candidates deserve mention:—12, 24, 91, 106, 179, 239, 264, 274, 337, 403, 424, 490, 559, 576, 658, 765, 843, and 944.

In the honour work the usual satisfactory standard was maintained. The only really feeble answering was that sent in in explanation of the three values of the co-sine of the third of an angle whose co-sine is given. Not more than two or three out of the 29 candidates could give an explanation of this to a fellow-student with the remotest chance of its being intelligible. Proficiency in the formal part of the work seems to be gained by the sacrifice of that part which is of greater educational value because exercising the powers of thought. But, on the other hand, some of the formal work is quite excellent.

WILLIAM SUTHERLAND.

ENGLISH.

At this examination the pass paper was divided into two parts, and it was necessary for candidates to satisfy the examiners in each part. It might have been expected that candidates would know the set work, but would run a risk of failure in the unprepared part. The exact opposite, however, was the case. Not more than four who satisfied the examiners in the second or prepared part failed in the first part of the paper, which consisted of an essay, parsing, analysis, and a few general grammar questions. The consolation of this statement is that it seems to show that the English has not been crammed.

The statistics are not unsatisfactory. Of 800 candidates presenting pass or honours 303 failed to pass. In both classes of candidates are many who in thought and expression show decided signs of immaturity, and are manifestly too childish for what they are attempting. Spelling is not, on the whole, bad; and yet spelling that may be called chaotic is a frequent cause of failure, and some of the candidates for honours are conspicuously unsatisfactory in this essential matter. It is an old ground of complaint that candidates know so little about themselves as to enter for honours when they are quite unfit for them. Out of 165—surely a large number of the ambitious—only 56 obtained the honours for which they contended. I must, however, mention that the number failing absolutely is smaller this year than in earlier years. It amounted to 39, or two out of every 11.

On the whole, it may be reported that there is a decided improvement in grammar, especially in parsing, and that composition is better. But the literary faculty—the comprehension of standard English prose and verse—is deficient, or perhaps the fault is simply immaturity. One sign of this—carelessness—is very apparent, for instance, in copying words and names given in the printed questions. Teachers might well practise their pupils in the simple matter of copying out. A certain amount of poetry is appointed to be learnt by heart. This is probably "heard" by teachers. It would be of advantage if the lines were oftener written and then carefully examined. The following famous lines were asked of candidates:—

"Though equal to all things, for all things unfit;
Too nice for a statesman, too proud for a wit,
For a patriot too cool, for a drudge disobedient,
And too fond of the right to pursue the expedient."

The little word "too" figures in these lines no fewer than four times. A candidate knowing how rightly to spell it might fairly be expected to repeat it correctly. Comparatively few did. "Port Phillip" is responsible for a quite common insertion of a second "l" in the proper name Phillip, the father of Alexander the Great, even though that name stood correctly spelt before the candidate's eye in cold print. Classical names are often oddly mangled—Alexandra, Appola, Appolo, Opolo, Dianna, Latronia, &c. Perhaps as many fail through carelessness as through ignorance.

EDWARD E. MORRIS,
First Examiner in English.

HISTORY.

Honours.—There were 50 candidates, and 32 of them obtained honours. Of those who did not, 12 were and six were not awarded a pass. The average of the marks gained by all the candidates was 65.6 per cent. of the marks obtainable. In November, 1896, it was 64.4 per cent.; and in November, 1897, it was 60 per cent. All but two of the candidates were able to earn marks in each of the three divisions of the paper. Of these two, one did not attempt the Roman division, and the other did not attempt the Grecian. Candidates should observe that for honours the regulations prescribe all the divisions.

The question that was taken by the greatest number of candidates was that respecting the struggle by which the plebeians at Rome attained equal political rights with the patricians; and this was also one of the questions that were best answered. In dealing with the question about Tiberius Gracchus, not a few of the candidates lost marks by failing to show why his agrarian proposals were opposed by the Italians. The phrase "Napoleon's Continental system" was misunderstood by some candidates, who said nothing about Napoleon's decrees against England's commerce and a great deal about his wars.

Pass.—The answering in the pass paper at this examination seems to be somewhat better than the answering at the previous November examination. Perhaps it is inevitable that among the unsuccessful candidates there should be some that make a strange jumble of persons and events after the manner of Bill Adams; but we were scarcely prepared to be told that Copenhagen and Malplaquet were among the battles won by Wellington, and that Sir Walter Raleigh distinguished himself at Trafalgar. Too many of the candidates continue to show that in reading their history they do not make a practise of looking up in a map the positions of the places mentioned. It is needless to say that such candidates miss a great deal of the benefit they could derive from this study. For example, how can a student understand the object and the results of the campaign of

Blenheim, and have an adequate idea of the ability of the English general, unless he knows the position of Blenheim, and traces on the map the marches made by Marlborough to reach that position?

A number of the candidates wrote George the Third's famous saying with an error in spelling, thus:—"I glory in the name of Britain." A look at one of the common text-books (Ransome's) showed that the candidates had followed unquestioningly a misprint there found. This was surely a fault, for it caused the whole point of the saying to be missed; but it was more excusable than the fault of those who in answering a question on rotten boroughs misspelt the word "rotten," correctly spelt in the examination paper under their eyes; and the number who did this was surprising. Several candidates gave Old Salem as the name of a rotten borough. Candidates would do well to remember that, when their answering places them on or near the border-line between pass and failure, bad spelling and slovenly writing are likely to lead to failure, while neat writing and good spelling will often determine in favour of a pass.

J. S. ELKINGTON,
ROBERT CRAIG.

FRENCH.

The recent matriculation examinations for pass and honours in French have been remarkable for the number as well as the high average of proficiency of the candidates who presented themselves. Looking back upon the last decade and a half, the progress made in the interval is considerable. The utility and expediency of these bi-annual competitive examinations seem amply justified by the results achieved, and it may be asserted without hesitation that they have acted as a healthy stimulus to both students and teachers, and have raised the general level of education in Victoria to a height little anticipated by the most hopeful advocate of a system of public schools accessible to all. The lately printed lists of the successful candidates show that every part of this colony, every class of society, every religious community have all participated in this general advance, and taken an honourable share in the important work of the education of the young. The number of failures, though annually diminishing, is mainly due to insufficient preparation, and an additional year or half year of sound scholastic training would have enabled most of the competitors to secure the object of their ambition.