

THE Rev. Henry Latham says:—"University examinations are found to take their origin from the "disputations" which appear very early in the history of Educational Establishments. Dialectical discussion had entered largely into the higher education in classics, and when the University of Bologna was incorporated as a school of Law, by the Emperor Frederick I., in 1158, disputations soon came into vogue as exercises for degrees."

Examinations are effective in three principal ways as regards education. First, they act as stimulants, partly by appealing to the combative spirit in human nature and the desire to excel. To those who have been habituated to examinations it seems useless to work for anything in which they are not going to be examined, and the examination will not act as a stimulus unless something is to be got by it.

Hence, competitive examinations should not be often repeated. A single comprehensive one at the end of a long course may do good, but it must not be kept always immediately in view.

The pupil should not himself study examination papers nor speculate on the most profitable course; the best way to get marks is to learn honestly for learning's sake alone.

Secondly, examinations serve as guides—a good examination shows what is meant by knowing a subject. The pupil, or even a teacher, by looking over a thoughtfully drawn up paper of questions gets a higher standard of knowledge. On the other hand examination papers which are so meagre that the pupil finds no call on him for intelligence, or in which he can pass by doing a very small portion of the paper, have a most injurious effect. They give the student a low view of knowledge, because he is confident of passing with what he thinks he can learn in a week or two before the examination.

Thirdly, examinations oblige a person to be able to produce his knowledge, and encourage him to bring it out in a terse and lucid style. They give no credit to loose or floating knowledge. Notions that are in solution are not available, they must be crystallized in a definite form before an examiner will accept them. One of the commonest defects of loosely trained minds is that they are very deficient in exactitude, and do not appreciate the enormous difference between going "somewhere near" the mark and hitting the precise point.

There are always some students of an anxious disposition who will over-fag themselves at the approach of an examination. This is more frequently the effect of over-worry than over-work. It will usually be found on inquiry that the hours of work per diem have not been excessive, but the evil is that these students have had no rest; when not at their books they are letting their minds run on their work, fancying that they are forgetting something; they are haunted by the idea of the examination, and become physically unfit for it; they are, in fact, unequal to any call on their nervous energies. The examination is the first call they encounter, and their weakness is shown in that; but they would probably have been in the same condition the first time they were called on to face any responsibility, such as to make a speech or write an article by a given day. After an examination or two this nervousness is overcome by the stronger sort.

The objects of a pass examination are to sift out incapacity, and to ascertain that the candidates have gone through a certain process of education. The value of these is only that they show that men can apply their minds and express themselves passably well.

The difficulty of a pass examination depends both on the number of compulsory subjects it contains and on the standard maintained in each.

Feeble men can go through an examination in one or two subjects at a time, if the standard be moderate. Thus an examination which can be passed piece-meal is a poor criterion of brains, while one embracing many subjects ensures a certain embracing many subjects ensures a certain strength of head, but not lasting knowledge of any one thing. It remains to say something as to practical methods of examining.

The value of oral examinations lies chiefly in detecting shallow knowledge. The student must perform experiments and explain them, and must identify and describe specimens—this convicts an impostor. On paper a candidate may avoid a searching question,—in viva voce he has no escape.

Neglect of the early acquisition of good mental habits is the cause of many failures. A man may be rejected once from love of amusement or from underrating the examination, but he does not fail again if he can help it. A second failure shows a moral or intellectual incapacity.