STANDARDS AND STATISTICS

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HARDLY anyone in India talks about the teaching of any academic subject without referring to "falling standards".—Not only in India : you can read about "falling standards" in the U.S.A. and about "falling standards" in the U.K., and there also angry people write about "drastic steps".

When "standards fall", so persistently and in such different countries, it would seem useful to look for a general reason rather than repeat unpleasant remarks about local weaknesses. Of course, when we talk of a "falling standard" what we mean is that performance is not so good as it was. To say this, however, we must be using some kind of measuring technique, and we must have some established, that is, not falling standard on which we compare the performance of present-day students with the performance of previous students. Let us look at the measuring technique, and then at the standard, applied to University students.

A generation ago, in India, and in the U.K., access to University education was controlled in one of two ways, by an economic barrier, or by a set of ruthless, annual eliminating tests. Very few got past all the tests which beset the way to College : perhaps one in ten. After this elimination-process, we might guess that each hundred University students comprised ten potential scholars (call them "First Grade" students), sixty fairly efficient workers (call them "Second Grade" students) and thirty "passengers", or "Third Grade" students, students, that is, who did not contribute to the academic life of the University but who followed the Courses (academically poor students with rich parents, athletes, students unable to keep healthy, and so on).

Within a generation, in India, University enrolment has increased sevenfold : for every hundred students in 1936, there are now seven hundred. The increase is due partly to the increase of Secondary School enrolment, and partly to the removal of some of the barriers which used to stand in the way of Secondary School pupils.

University enrolment has increased sevenfold, but have the numbers of Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3 students each increased sevenfold ? The answer is : No. We could not expect the number of Grade 1 students to show such an increase. The elimination process in the schools never affected them, so that the diminution of its ruthlessness could not lead to an increase in their number. In 1936, any really outstanding boy (one cannot write "girl"), any boy who

was a potential scholar, had a good chance of reaching a University. Because there are far more girls at school now, we may expect some increase in the number of potential scholars from the girls; but it is probably optimistic to expect the number of Grade 1 students to have more than doubled. Nor could we expect the number of Grade 2 students to have increased sevenfold. The elimination process did not affect them seriously in the past. Certainly, we can expect a considerable increase in their number, because of the wider coverage, inside the country, of the Secondary School system; but we cannot expect a sevenfold increase. Let us guess that their number has increased fourfold.

Now we have accounted for 260 students from our 700. The remainder can be thought of as Grade 3 students. Making a table, we have:

	Total	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
1936	100	10	60	30
1959	700	20	240	440

An individual University teacher does not see these total figures, however. What he sees is the distribution. Whereas in 1936 a hundred students showed the distribution:

10	60	30

a hundred students now shows the distribution:

3	34	63

On this basis, the University teacher's complaint of a "falling standard" is comprehensible: well over half of his class consists of potential "fails".

However, the "falling standard", obviously, is a "falling standard" only in those terms, for there has been no actual reduction—in fact there has been a doubling—of the number of Grade 1 students; and there has been no actual reduction—in fact there has been a most substantial build up—of the number of Grade 2 students.

The teacher then is correct, from his point of view, only if he says that the *average* performance has fallen: this is not the same thing as saying that the standard has fallen. Saying that the average performance is not so good is not the same thing as maintaining that the ability of the ablest one hundred, or one thousand, or five thousand students to-day is smaller than the ability of the ablest hundred, or thousand, or five thousand students of twenty years ago. There is no evidence that the second statement is correct; there is, indeed, much indirect evidence against it.

And, though we sympathize with the University teacher about *his* "average", I am afraid that his allegation of a lower average performance must be challenged also. Indeed, the comparison set out above, of the internal distribution of each hundred students into "grades", is inadmissible. From a statistical viewpoint, valid comparison requires that similars, not dissimilars, are set side by side. In other words, if in 1936 we had category "x" students accepted into the University, and category "y" students rejected, and in 1959 we have the comparable "x" plus "y" students accepted, then we can make two fair comparisons : we can compare the "x" students of 1936 with the "x" counterpart section of the 1959 admissions, or, we can compare the "x" + "y" students of 1959 with the "x" + "y" students of 1936. The comparisons are set out below :

	accepted	rejected
Compare 1936	$\boxed{x}$	y (+ z)
with 1959	$\boxed{x}$ +y	z
OR		
Compare 1936	$\boxed{\text{x} \qquad \text{y}}$	
with 1959	$\boxed{\text{x} + \text{y}}$	

As has been stated, there is no evidence that the comparison "x" (1936) and "x" (1959) is to the disadvantage of 1959. Since the education of the "y" (1936) students probably ceased at the time of their rejection from the school system, and since the education of the "y" (1959) students continues, it is difficult to believe that the comparison "x" + "y" (1936) and "x" + "y" (1959) would not turn out to be favourable to 1959. In other words, our problems are problems of rising, not falling standards.

A University teacher who loses his belief in "falling standards" still has in his class one student who fails for each student who passes ; and is, perhaps, not likely to be impressed by what he may consider a statistical sophistry. Yet the usefulness of the statement of the statistical position is that it enables us to see our position without prejudice. When our judgement is coloured by an impression of "falling standards", we see the problem of this situation in terms of "maintaining" these standards, and "remedial" work. The statistical account shows that prescriptions along these lines are likely to be useless, and practical experience, in the U.S.A. and in the U.K., as well as in India, confirms this conclusion.

Once the statistical position is clear, and if the realities represented by the statistical account are accepted as the realities of to-day

(there is little use in protesting against their existence), then it suddenly becomes clear too that rising or falling standards are not relevant ; in fact that a standard does not exist in order to rise or fall or be maintained : a standard exists to serve a purpose ; and if the purpose alters, a different—not "higher" or "lower"—standard is required. The statistics suggest that there is a change in purpose. The University population is seven times what it was a generation ago, though it comes from a total population of around the same size (it used to include what is now the population of Pakistan), and this larger University population is differently constituted from the University population of a generation ago. From a sociological point of view there is no question about the reality of the *conditions* for a change of function. And as far as English itself is concerned, there can be no hesitation about stating the need for a change of purpose in the kind of instruction and work. A generation ago, an Indian University English curriculum was based on the examination syllabuses of London University. There were straightforward reasons for this, some of them valid at the time. This same pattern of syllabus is proving thoroughly unsatisfactory in the U.K. itself, since University conditions have changed a good deal there too. There can be no conceivable reason for retaining it in India, where, as a model, it is now useless. "Maintaining standards" is, indeed, a policy of frustration.

The first criterion for a contemporary standard, as it seems to the writer, is that the University teacher's work shall be effective ; and for his work to be effective, students with average attainment, average ability, and average application must be able to pass the examination. Only then is there the possibility for contact to occur, through the Courses, between teacher and students ; without this contact, there is no worthwhile learning.

The second criterion for a contemporary standard is that the English should be felt to be useful. This means that English, for average students in India, can no longer be an end in itself. If English is still required on a large scale, it is as a means to an end. It follows that, for average students, English Departments should discontinue autonomous, irrelevant Courses, should see what use is required of English for study in the various Arts and Science Departments, and should collaborate with the teachers of these Departments to give the students what they need. If a poorly equipped student has to struggle with Chemistry or Archaeology text book-English, an English Course which consists of some simplified text, or some miscellaneous poems and essays, not to speak of a play by Shakespeare, is an additional, irrelevant burden, instead of a pertinent, welcome help.

᭟ The third criterion for a contemporary standard of useful English is that it shall measure ability, not knowledge. The student should be told what use he is expected to make of English, and the examination should test his ability to make that use of English. If all that is required is that he should be able to read a technical article, with the help of a dictionary ; then his ability to comprehend a technical article, with the help of a dictionary, is all that should be tested.

A word about those who want to study English literature

Naturally, the work of an English Department is not bounded by the requirements of a reasonable contemporary programme for average students. Its further activities might be expected to have statistical legitimacy too ; and therewith the reasonable expectation of a traditional or better than traditional standard. What proportion of the total number of students may be expected to want to specialise in English, whether Literature or Language ? For this number, specialist courses are required. What proportion of the total number of students may be expected to want to follow voluntary—unexamined-courses in, let us say, spoken English ? Courses ought to be available for such students. In these specialist and voluntary courses, we might reasonably expect unencumbered work and real achievement.