

## **PUBLIC EXAMINATION IN NIGERIA: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND VALIDITY OF PUBLIC EXAMINATION SCORES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper x-rays' public examination in Nigeria, its contemporary issues and validity of public examination scores in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Public examination is a necessary prerequisite for guaranteeing that uniform standard is maintained in the conduct of examination by various examination bodies. This paper argued that these exams have been subjected to abuses by exam bodies, school administrators, exam supervisors and invigilators, students and parents thereby corrupting the system and compromising the ideas of government and the society for such exams through direct or indirect involvement and abetting of exam malpractices. The remote and immediate causes of examination malpractices were discussed under the antecedent of examination malpractices. Impacts of examination malpractice on the validity of examination scores and its inherent dangers were unveiled. However, possible way out and solutions were suggested which include that government and stakeholders in education in Nigeria should deemphasize certificate and emphasis on learning for skills, criteria reference test should be introduced in place of norm reference test to eliminate grade consciousness and public examination fees should be subsidize if possible made free for all qualified citizens, among others.*

**Keywords: Public Examination, Contemporary Issues, Validity, Scores, Nigeria.**

### **Introduction**

Educational programmes are normally identified with measurable and achievable objectives. The quest for a measure or verification of the extent the learner has achieved the objectives of programmes has led to the adoption of examination among other measures. Examination, therefore, is the series of written or verbal questions presented to examinees in order to determine their extent of achievement or mastery of the curriculum content or ability to exhibit certain behavior in line with the objectives of the programmes (Ismail & John, 2017). Also, the Free Online Dictionary (2012) defines examination as "a set of questions or exercises evaluating skill or knowledge". Oxford Dictionary (2012) also defined examination as "a formal test of a person's knowledge or proficiency in a subject or skill" and finally,

Collins English Dictionary (2006) defined examination as written exercises, oral questions or practical tasks, set to test a candidate's knowledge and skill. According to Ndifon and Ndifon (2012), examination is a process through which students are evaluated or tested to find out the quality or knowledge they have acquired within a specified time. Notwithstanding the ongoing argument on the veracity of examination in establishing the examinees' true capabilities as evidence abound negating examination as a true yardstick of measurement, examination remains the most widely use tool in determining the level of students' academic achievement and abilities. The procedure of finding out the outcome of learning over time through written objective tests and essay is regarded as examination (Juliana, Joseph, Emmanuel,& Andrew, 2013).

Examination can be internal or external depending on who conducts it. Examinations conducted by schools, colleges and universities to mention just a few in which the teachers plan the examination timetable, set the questions, invigilate the students during the examinations and mark the answer booklets without external input are considered internal examination. While examinations whose timetable, questions, invigilation, supervision and marking is done by an exam body set up by the government for certification or placement of students referred to as external or public examination (Julian et al).

### **Public examination**

Public examination is that kind of examination that is open and accessible to all who are qualified to sit for such examination because they have been taken through the same curriculum preparatory for the examination. Examples of public examinations include West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), conducted by the National Examinations Council (NECO), and the National Technical and Business Certificate Examinations (NTCE/NBCE) also conducted by the National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB), First School Leaving Certificate Examination (FSLCE) conducted by State Ministry of Education (Obioma and Salau, 2007). The authors viewed public examinations as external school examinations open to the general public and conducted by these examination bodies using tests that have appropriate psychometric properties. The uniformity in the administration of the public examination, grading, interpretation and judging examinees performance and its standardized nature is a major contrast between nonpublic and public examinations.

Public examinations in Nigeria have become a source of worry to educationists and the government due to the manner it is being handled by students, parents and the bodies vested with the conduct of such exams. The conduct of public examinations have suffered in the hands of examination bodies monitors, supervisors, school administrators, teachers, students and parents as they aid and abet examination malpractices.

### **Malpractices in Public Examinations**

Currently in Nigerian educational system, examination malpractice is the major attack on the quality of education. Nwana (2000) refers to examination malpractice as massive and unprecedented abuse of rules and regulations pertaining to internal and public examinations, beginning from the setting of such examinations through the taking of the examinations, their

marking and grading, to the release of the results and the issuance of certificates. While Balogun (1999) defined examination malpractice as cheating at examination or any act intended to benefit or give undue advantage to oneself or another by deceit or fraud, before, during and after examination. Also, The World Bank in relating the issue to public examination system sees it as a practice which involves deliberate act of wrongdoing, contrary to the official examination rules designed to place the candidate at an unfair advantage. Furthermore, examination malpractice according to WAEC (2003) is any irregular behaviour exhibited by candidates or anybody charged with the responsibility of conducting examination in or outside the examination hall, before, during or after such examination.

Examination malpractice has been categorized by WAEC to include bringing in foreign materials to exam halls, irregular activities inside and outside examination hall; collusion; impersonation; leakage; mass cheating and insult/assault on supervisors. Others include assistance of candidates by invigilators to answer or have clue to difficult concepts. Some invigilators also go to the extent of answering some parts of the question for candidates. In line with the definition, a fundamental fact is made clear: that there is no fundamental or real difference between malpractice in public examination and school examination. Hence the wrongdoing must be deliberate, contrary to the examination rules and intended to give an unfair advantage to the supposed examinee or examinees. Examination malpractices methods are elastic, varying in forms, shapes and sizes with differing designations such as "microchips", 'macro chips', 'download', 'laptop', 'giraffe' and 'quite recently, the use of 'mercenaries'(Ekpu,1991). Micro and macro chips are same techniques, but the difference lies in the size of the materials imported into the examination hall'. Whereas, the former has to do with small pieces of extraneous materials imported into the examination hall, the latter is of a more significant size. "Download" refers to the bringing in of the whole text from which the candidate intends to copy. Here, the scientific calculator and in recent times, the GSM mobile phones are easily used to store data and formula. 'Laptop' is a form of examination malpractice often carried out by female students, who perpetuate it easily by wearing of skirts. Hence, the lap of the culprits is used as the writing surface from which relevant information can be copied in the examination as the need arises. "Giraffe" on the other hand is the age-long style whereby candidates stretch their necks in order to see and copy from other candidates in the examination hall (University of Calabar Students Handbook, 1997) in (Ismail & John, 2017).

In line with the aforesaid, day- long experience has it that often a time, the score and grade level of some secondary school graduates in public examinations do not reflect their real learning improvement. Therefore it is opinioned that scholars and evaluation expert should look beyond conventional exam malpractices and consider some practices that affect the test scores negatively. Hence test security ensured in secondary school has not yielded the expected result in the face of various forms of test item compromise and test item practice public examinations.

Test item compromise and test item practice are two parts of test familiarity. In this context test item compromise refers to a situation where the test respondent by any means have clue or knowledge of the test items before the test administration. It include leaking exam questions in parts or full. It may be inform of soft or hard copy. The era of technology have

abated test compromise so much in every level of examination. Evidence has shown that some students through the help of computer hackers get the questions and answer to their question. Social media has become the easiest channel for transferring and circulating the test items. This menace cannot be checked using any of the test theories or even the strictest test administrative condition hence requires attention in the field of evaluation. This is because the testees resort into cramming and practices focusing on the items of the test. The effect of these on the test score is one of the focus of this study.

Test item compromise does not mean the same with test item practice, test item practice refers to situation where teachers teach or consciously teach the test respondents the items set in the test. Shogbesan and Faleye (2016) identified various forms of test item practice as given of areas of concentration to students, repetition of test items, teaching, revision and answering possible questions or items in the test. The authors agreed that the two variables test item compromise and test item practice are related but differ in the sense that in test item compromise the respondent is absolutely sure that the items are part of the test. This may take the form of test leakage, where the test respondents have good knowledge of the items of the test before actual administration commenced. Thus in test item practice the respondents may be speculative, forecasting, predictive or being sure of the test items and went ahead to practice the items either on their own or with their teachers. One of the most popular form of this is preparing exams with past questions which observation has shown that this activities are predominant in Nigeria public examinations such as NECO, WAEC and UTME boards that makes available compiled past questions for test item practice. This has been overlooked without good knowledge of its effect on validity of a test score. There is no doubt that these aspect of examination malpractices exact strong limitations to public examination and the use of public examination as a tool irrespective of its good psychometric properties.

### **Antecedents to examination malpractices**

Makoju, Adewale, Nwangwu and Shuaibu (2004) reported the responses of parents of secondary school students when asked the factors they think encourage examination malpractices in Nigeria? Many parents (1375 out of 3289, representing 41.8 percent) indicated that questions are not related to the syllabus and as a result, examination malpractice is encouraged. Makoju et al. said there are two types of syllabi, one developed by an examination body referred to as examination syllabus and the one developed by Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) known as teaching syllabus. Although these two syllabi should be common in scope, the report has always been that JAMB syllabus is overloaded and difficult for candidates, so candidates often times find it difficult to cope. This promotes examination malpractice. Other factors responsible for examination malpractice such as emphasis on paper qualification; parents' desire for their children to pass at all cost; and corrupt supervisors and custodians of examination papers are reflections of the wider society. Apart from those two potent factors, another strong reason for examination malpractice is the emphasis on paper qualification. Until less emphasis is laid on paper qualification and we place emphasis on the skills acquired in order to function well in the society, the issue of examination malpractice will continue to persist. The craze for paper qualification is the offshoot of the poor implementation of our national policy on education. Emphasis is gradually being removed from proper acquisition of demonstrable skills and academic excellence to possession of paper qualification not backed up with practical

experience to show for it. One social menace the governments in Nigeria have fought from one regime to another is checking exam malpractice. It is a part of the on-going struggle to sanitize society. Denga and Denga (1998) highlighted the existence of dubious and fraudulent admission process, right from the primary level to the tertiary level. With the active connivance of some of the staff of these examination bodies, parents get their wards admitted by all means even when they have failed the entrance examination or aptitude test. Hence, the system is saturated with persons who know that they have cheated their ways into our educational institution and are poised to cheat their ways through to the end. News watch Magazine (1991) reported causes of examination to include: Shortage of facilities such as classrooms, hostels, recreation facilities, constant supply of electricity, lack of good libraries and books, adequate teaching and non-teaching manpower suitably qualified for the purpose, are some of the causes of examination malpractice. Other antecedents to malpractices include:

- strike actions
- over admission
- high cost of education
- certificate premium
- grade consciousness

### **Strike actions**

The frequent and indiscriminate closure of institutions of learning resulting from frequent strike actions, naturally leads to unstable academic calendar. This forces our academic institution to condense semesters and course work in order to catch up with the time needlessly lost to strikes. Such rushed academic programme which subjects the students to receiving so many lectures at so short a time introduces a negative chain reaction in the Nigeria education system which affects every level of education. As a result, they resort to what they consider to be the “second best option” to pass examinations, which is to cheat.

### **Over admission**

In the recent era, evidence abound that population of pupils/students admitted every academic year in various level of education since to be more than the available teaching and learning facilities in the in the school due population explosion and increase in awareness for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Review of literature has shown the rate of functional classes is low across the levels. This creates a situation where pupils/students are crammed into a small space, with few having any sitting place in the lecture halls when they have to attend lectures. This state of affairs is certainly not conducive to learning. This condition does not but gives impetus to the students wanting to seek external help. Hence, they cheat in examinations.

### **High cost of education**

The high cost of undergoing academic studies is another factor encouraging malpractice in examination. Education today is no cheaper as students pay high school fees under the guise of charges both in their institutions and fees for public examinations – SSCE, NECO, JAMB. As a result of these exorbitant fees(which in some cases, is now being borne by some State Governments) students ensure that the examination is a “one off” thing. This indeed is a realistic expectation in a land where there is high level of poverty. In view of reality of the economic situation of the country parents and students would stop at nothing to do

everything to pass because if they should fail, it is not likely that they would have the money to retake them in a place certificate valued so much.

### **Certificate premium**

Premium attached to certificate is prestige and degree of importance attached to it. Certificate is one of the products of evaluation. It is a consensus attestation in a written form duly authenticated by head of institution or examination bodies. Its presence evidenced that an individual or the bearer has gone through series and requisite levels of training and by implication possesses the requisite knowledge and skills required of people exposed to the educational programme. Certification is a process not a product. It is the sum of the process involve in issuing certificate to the person or persons deemed qualified by the institutions or organizations. Ideally certification ensures that certificate is only awarded to the people who have acquired the knowledge and skills of interest. Unfortunately, this practice turned into a cankerworm that is destroying the quality of education in Nigeria as over emphasis on certificate instead of helping the system, weakens the education system.

Evidence abound that in Nigeria, certificate seems to be the major aim of going to school and preoccupies the mind of learners at secondary and university level of education. In line with the above claim, a survey of motivating factors behind students' quest for junior, senior and university education in north central Nigeria by Iwuagwu (2019) reported that 70% of junior students agreed that they are going to school to get knowledge, 83% of senior secondary school students agreed that they are going to school to acquire certificate, while 91% of university students also agreed that they are going to school to have degree certificate in lieu of knowledge and skills. Over glorification of paper qualification to the detriment of sound intellectual potentials makes some students who strongly believe in the philosophy of "the end justifies the means" to seek to acquire paper qualifications by all means even to the detriment of hard work (Juliana, Joseph, Emmanuel, & Andrew, 2013). The authors identified the theory of paper qualifications first before sound intellectual potentials as a result of high important attached to certificate and certificate grade in Nigeria. There is no doubt that this is highly paradoxical to quality education and in turn increases grade consciousness and examination malpractices in public examination.

### **Certificate Grade Consciousness**

In Nigeria, certificates are ranked into grades in various levels of education with which the quality of the certificates are ascertained. In primary school level public, FSLC is graded into Pass, Credit and Distinction; in secondary school public examination, it include Pass at E8 level to D7 level which is regarded as poor pass, pass at credit level 6 to 4, which is moderately pass, pass at B level 3 to 2 referred to high level pass, and pass at A level pass which represent very high pass; at university into Pass Level, Third Class Honors, Second Class Lower Division, Second Class Upper Division, and First Class Honors. These grades of certificate in any level of education have certain incentives attached to them. Mostly when those with low grade are denied access to further education and job opportunities. This triggers grade consciousness which exerts negative impact on studying to learn and for mastery rather learners focus on cramming to pass without in-depth knowledge and understanding of what they ought to know. This suggests reason why there is a gap between the curriculum and real life application of knowledge at every level of education in Nigeria.

### **Issues with validity of public examination scores**

Obviously, the major issue of public examination is malpractices. The validity of public examination scores is in doubt in the face of alarming rate of examination malpractice in the contemporary Nigeria. Examination malpractice makes nonsensical nonsense of the public examination scores on which decision and judgment are based. Hence, bias examination scores lead to erroneous grade and erroneous certificate. It undermines the integrity of the examination bodies as well as the quality of certificates they issue. Both nationally and internationally, products of this system are viewed no more than illiterate graduates who lack what it takes to hold their own in the labour market. Examination malpractice leads to loss of faith and confidence in examination as true test of knowledge. When there exist obvious disparity between the students' level of work and the grades earned, especially when it is tilting in favour of less intelligent and less hardworking people who more often than not earn good grades because they have the relevant connection and financial muscles, then the entire examination is not only discredited but also brought into disrepute (Ndifon&Ndifon, 2012). In addition, Chukwuemeka (2012) elucidated that due to inadequate qualified teachers in our primary schools, secondary schools and at the tertiary level, what would be expected is not far-fetched from what we are seeing today in our senior secondary school examinations conducted by WAEC, NECO, NABTEB and the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) for admissions into universities and tertiary institutions.

### **Indicators of the failure of public examination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The major indicator pointing to the failure of public examination and loss of confidence in the validity of its score is the introduction of post UME examination. Apart from possession of a minimum of five credit passes in any of the public examinations as a pre-requisite for sitting for the University Matriculation Examination (UME) conducted by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board. Candidates' admission or placement into Nigerian universities irrespective of whether the university is Federal, State or Private owned is contingent on meeting the prescribed cut-off mark in the UME. In the recent time, the prospective candidates are further required to undergo university screening examinations as a condition for gaining admission. Secondly, in ideal situation it is believed that JAMB score of the candidates should predict UME score of the candidates but observation that JAMB lacks predictive validity over UME. Also, Juliana, et al., (2013) observed that entry qualifications and entrance examinations that ought to positively predict candidates' performance in the university are not. However, public examination bodies responsible for the award of certificates and placement of students in the universities have been facing a lot of criticisms due to the poor performance or poor quality of our universities undergraduates. Several professionals and researchers in education have argued that the glorious days of high academic performance and enviable achievement among Nigerian undergraduates have reached a vanishing point.

### **The needed transformation on public examinations**

It is quite disturbing to note that graduates from Nigerian universities who happen to go for further studies abroad are often made to face further examination before being admitted. The foregoing presents a gloomy and worrisome picture considering the fact that Nigerian universities had been adjudged to produce world-class graduates who have distinguished themselves in their areas of calling (Obioma & Salau, 2007). This may not be unconnected with decay being witnessed in the conduct of public examinations in Nigeria in such a manner that

examination ethics is negated and the integrity of the examinations and the purposes have been eroded by corruption in the educational sector (Juliana, Joseph et al., 2013). These call for immediate proactive measures on the side of education stack holders to revamp public examinations in line with the following suggestions:

- Adequate learning facilities should be provided by the government.
- Quality assurance department that adequate qualified, motivated and committed teachers are employed.
- The government and stakeholders in education in Nigeria should deemphasize certificate and emphasis on learning for skills.
- Criteria reference test should be introduced in place of norm reference test to eliminate grade consciousness.
- Public examination fees should be subsidize if possible made free for all qualified citizens by the government so that it will not be a do or die affair give the economic hardship.

## Conclusion

This paper therefore concisely conclude that public examinations in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are faced with contemporary issues that undermines the validity of public examination scores which is examination malpractices of various forms while examination malpractice is rooted in its antecedence as discussed in this paper. Therefore there is urgent need for all education stakeholder to stop blame game and take decisive measures to remedy the situation.

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