

The Challenges of Maintaining the Integrity of Public Examinations in Nigeria: The Ethical Issues

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Abstract

The qualitative merit of examination or test-taking for diagnostic, placement and quality control is usually measured in terms of its appropriateness and the quality assurance of its outcomes. Consequently, it becomes inevitable that for any examination to be credible, it must possess key elements which are validity and reliability. These key elements can only be present if examination is free and fair, devoid of cheating and all sorts of malpractices. This presupposes that examination conduct must be guided by a set of rules and ethical standards. Considering the strategic importance of examinations in the society and the numerous unanswered questions of moral integrity bedeviling the conduct of public examinations in Nigeria, this paper articulated the ethical issues and challenges facing the correct conduct of public examinations in Nigeria. Suggestions and recommendations were proposed with a view to enhancing the qualitative merit and the integrity of the nation's educational enterprise.

Keywords: Public examination, Examination Malpractice Index (EMI), Examination ethics, Examination malpractice

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, achievements at any level of education are crowned with certification for those who successfully complete the course of study with good academic records. Thus, at the end of secondary school education, students are expected to sit for public examinations such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE), conducted by West African Examination Council (WAEC), Senior School Certificate (SSCE), conducted by National Examinations Council (NECO), the National Technical and Business Certificate Examinations (NTCE/NBCE), also conducted by the National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB). In addition, there are various certificate examinations conducted by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) for admission into Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education. Professional bodies also have their professional examinations conducted for purposes of accreditation, professionalism and licensing of their membership. Such professional examinations conducted in Nigeria are: the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN), Chartered Institute of Bankers of Nigeria (CIBN), Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) among others. Examinations occupy a very strategic position in our lives (educational and industrial) today. Teachers and counsellors rely on them for a comprehensive evaluation of their students and clients. To decide whether a student merits being promoted to another class, a series of achievement tests that will eventually culminate in a well - founded decision has to be given. In industrial setting, experts in human relations and employment bureaux utilise tests in reaching a decision as to the employability of an individual applicant.

Despite the strategic importance of examination or test taking for diagnostic, placement, classification and quality control in Nigerian institutions, the integrity and credibility of public examinations have been greatly eroded and corrupted with increasing incidence of examination malpractice. Olagboye (2004) lamented that, the situation appears so bad that many Nigerians and interested stakeholders including employers of labour have almost lost confidence in the values of examinations and their results. In a study conducted by Arijesuyo (2010), he warned that

Government and major stakeholders should feel sufficiently concerned because of the threat of examination malpractice to the educational system and national development. He further noted that, the preponderance, scope and sophistication of examination malpractice in the country, has rendered the products, and credentials of the schools suspect. Each year billions of Naira is lost by parents and governments when examination bodies cancelled hundreds of thousands of results as a result of examination irregularities.

Describing the trend which examination malpractice has taken since the last decade, Arijesuyo (2010) observed that Examination malpractice had become a well organized business in which supervisors/invigilators of examination, subject teachers and even school authorities and their host communities have played prominent role. It is no longer news that invigilators are often beaten up by desperate students who accuse such invigilators of standing in their way to cheat. Ukoha (2007) reported that some host communities in Nigeria have chased away invigilators considered to be uncooperative during examinations all in the name of securing key to success for their wards. From the foregoing therefore, one may conclude that various group of people partakes in encouraging examination malpractices. Most of the time, the family, the school and the society serve as reinforces that promote anti-social behaviours of examination malpractice.

2. Periscoping Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice is any illegal act committed by a student single handed or in collaboration with others like fellow students, parents, teachers, supervisors, invigilators, printers and anybody or group of people before, during or after examinations in order to obtain undeserved marks or grades. The means of perpetrating this illegal act may range from bringing in un-authorized materials to the examination hall, disrupting the conduct of examinations, buying examination papers, changing of grades after examination and impersonation to using money or candidate's body to earn marks. Examination malpractices constitute one of the greatest problems that have generated a lot of discussions among Nigerians because it threatens the very foundation of the educational system. Examination as an instrument for decision-making, is always prone to fear and anxiety. Many examinees would want to pass the examination by all means. Also, many school authorities and parents would want to explore means of getting good grades for their students and children. Hence, they resort to different forms of malpractices before, during and after examinations. According to Adesina (2005), examination malpractices include leaking out questions to students, girraffing and smuggling of material into examination hall. Others are deliberate extension of time by supervisors and invigilators, change of scores, buying and selling of examination grades, question papers and prepared answers, and trading sex for question papers, marks and grades. Also, Magaji (2006), identified impersonation, collusion between candidates, collusion between candidates and officials, assault and intimidation, mass cheating, teacher-student affair, bribery, spying, submission of multiple scripts, use of coded or sign language, multiple entry for the same examination among others, as different forms of malpractices in Nigeria.

The phenomenon of examination malpractice is not new in Nigeria and indeed all over the world. In Nigeria, the history of examination malpractices could be traced back to the colonial days when the "Nigerian Chronicle" of January 9, 1912 widely reported how the questions of Senior Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate leaked (Fasasi; 2008). After independence, there was hardly any year when there was no examination malpractice recorded by the leading examining bodies in Nigeria. Adesina (2005) reported incidences of examinations leakages in West African Examination Council (WAEC) papers in 1963, 1967, 1971, 1977 and 1981 as a result of which administrative panels of enquiry were set up. The Federal Government panel of enquiry was set up to investigate the 1977 examination leakage; the panel recommended *inter allia*;

"sanctions for WAEC officials who were involved in the malpractice, introduction and use of continuous assessment as a factor for award of certificate and shedding of WAEC workload and the establishment new examination bodies" (Adesina, 2005).

Consequently, new examination bodies were established. These were Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) established in 1978 now renamed Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in 2010 to conduct matriculation examinations for admission into universities, polytechnics and colleges of education; National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB) established in 1992 to conduct business and technical examinations; National Board for Educational Measurement (NBEM) established in 1992 and changed to National Examination Council (NECO) in 1999 to conduct school certificate examinations (Arijesuyo, 2010).

As a result of the alarming and worrisome trends in the figures and statistics of examination fraud given by the leading examination bodies in respect of post-primary public exit examinations in recent years, and the attendant crises on the country's educational system, a number of legislative and administrative promulgation were enacted by the Federal government between 1984 and 2000. The Federal Government's promulgation of Decree 20 in 1984, which stipulated a 21-year jail term for those found guilty of examination malpractice. Also, there was decree 33 of

1999 stipulating imprisonment for a term up to five years or fine of N50, 000.00 to N100,000.00 for any person convicted of examination malpractice (Arijesuyo; 2010). In spite of these measures, the menace continued to occur in virtually all public and institutionally organized examinations and the situation appears to have defied recommended solutions.

In the same vein, WAEC in its complementary effort, to ensure equity, fairness and integrity in its public examinations also carried out research activities, organizes seminars, subject workshops and item-writing workshops. These efforts were targeted towards promoting the overall quality assurance of public-exit examinations conducted by the examining body. WAEC's research, among others, includes monitoring and appraising Council's goals and processes as well as examining educational problems relating to the management of testing and educational measurement. (Uwadiae & Oke, 2006). These authors reported that between 1990 and 2006 WAEC conducted a total of one hundred and three (103) research studies. The break down is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that majority of the studies were assessment related. A good percentage (34.0%) of the studies conducted focused on performance of candidates in examinations. Others areas focused were on improving the quality of examination items, gender related matters, aptitude test development and testing, equivalence of certificates, and examination malpractice related issues and so on. These studies were embarked upon as a result of the need to promote qualitative and ethical integrity of public examinations through empirical studies on the conduct and management of examinations. It is pertinent to note that all the findings from the various studies were being incorporated into the assessment procedures of WAEC to promote equity in testing techniques and as a means of preventing examination malpractice. Despite all these efforts by government, examining bodies and other major stakeholders in the nation's educational industry at curbing the problem of examination malpractices, it has remained persistent and intractable.

In a response to the challenges posed by the problem of examination malpractice which has almost assumed a state of national emergency in the country, the House of Representatives in conjunction with the National Universities Commission (NUC) and other major stakeholders organized a two-day summit tagged: *Confronting the scourge of examination malpractice: Threat to the Nigerian Educational system*, between 21st and 22nd of August 2006. The report of the summit as published by THE NATION Newspapers revealed that, the Deputy Vice-chancellor of the University of Ilorin Nigeria, was quoted in his paper that, between 1996 and 2006 WAEC cancelled an average of 10% of post primary exit examinations on the basis of examination malpractices. Similarly, Table 2 gives a summary of WAEC annual statistical report of examination malpractice for the WAEC/SSCE post-primary exit examinations between 2000 and 2010. Table 2 indicated that 781, 019 (8.25%) of 9,465,978 candidates who sat for WASSCE were either withheld or cancelled during the period as a result of examination malpractice. The analysis further showed that the national Examination Malpractice Index (EMI) has remained persistently high ranging between 5.47 and 12.87 during the period surveyed. This means that of every 100 students who wrote WAEC between the period of 2000 and 2010 in Nigeria, at least 8 of them were involved in examination malpractice.

Arising from the above considerations and coupled with the commitment of Federal Government to implement the decisions reached at the earlier summit on: *Confronting the scourge of examination malpractice: Threat to the Nigerian Educational system*, held between 21st and 22nd of August 2006, the Federal Ministry of Education in 2007 blacklisted and derecognized 324 secondary schools across the nation as centres for conducting public examinations from 2007 to 2010. The statistical distribution of the number of schools blacklisted on account of examination malpractices across the six geo-political zones of the country is presented in Table 3.

Arising from the presentation in Table 3, it became evidently clear that examination malpractice in Nigeria secondary schools is a national problem. It occurs in all the geo-political zones in the country. It also revealed that the South-South zone has the highest number of schools involved in examination fraud which accounted for 116, (36%), followed by South-West zone with 86 (26.5%). While the North-East zone has the least with 8 schools representing 2.5% of the perpetrators. From the statistical presentations, in Tables 2 and 3, it could be concluded that this national problem which started as a mustard seed in form of mere cheating in early 60's to collusion in the 70's, smuggling in of scripts into the hall in the 80's and later metamorphosed to impersonation, and hiring of contractors in the 90's has today grown to become an organised crime among the stakeholders. It is now like a fig tree! And the problem is still pending in the Nigerian society. The predisposing factors seem to suggest apparent moral decadence and misplaced societal value which have a resonance effects on the school system and Nigerian society at large.

Casual observation of an average Nigerian student seems to suggest a negative attitude that defeats the purpose of examination in the school system. For instance, it has become a common phenomenon among in-school adolescents who have already imbibed negative life skills into their system to look for shortcuts to examination success. Many of the perpetrators take solace in the popular maxims that 'the ends justify the means'. The apparent increase in the

proliferation of examination miracle centres popularly called “Parie centres” are all consequential effects of misplaced moral values and negative attitudes among Nigerian youths which are all known to defeat the purpose of education in the school systems.

3. Public Examinations in Nigeria and the Imperatives of Ethical Integrity

Examinations at any level must be designed and executed in a manner that reflects the real capabilities of the learner without any external aid or forged knowledge by fraudulent practice that could distort the exact or approximate knowledge in the field of learning by the learner being tested. The performance of the learner is usually graded as a means of giving a relative quantification of a candidate’s academic ability. The grading system, which may vary from one situation to the other are essentially based on general concept of comparison with similar learners at the same level. In the light of the foregoing, it becomes inevitable that for any examination to be credible, it must possess key elements which are validity and reliability. These key elements can only be present if examination is free and fair, devoid of partiality, cheating and all sorts of malpractices. This presupposes that Examination conduct must therefore be guided by a set of rules and ethical standards. Ethical issues in the context of this paper therefore deals with being decent, fair, good, honest, just and virtuous in the management of examinations. Succinctly put, ethics is a set of principles that govern good human conduct. Arijesuyo (2010) asserts that ethics can simply be defined as laid down guidelines, principles, codes of conduct, rules and regulations guiding behaviour of a group or an organization.

In order to tie the concept of examination and ethics together, we would rely on the prescription of Examination Ethics Project, (2001) which described examination ethics as “the moral principles laid down for the conduct of an examination or the moral correctness of an examination”. In a related development Animba (2003) also defines the concept of examination ethics as:

“The correct conduct and behaviour which should underpin an examination system such that it gives an authenticity to the certification resulting. Therefore, rules, regulations, expectations and code of conduct designed to guide or determined all segments of the examination constitute ethics”. (p.8)

The importance of examination ethics can therefore not be underscored. It helps students not only to identify their true talents but to achieve their destinies. It helps them to cultivate habit of hard work, which is the indispensable building block for all great achievements. It is the basis of regarding certificates as true reflections of knowledge, skills and abilities. Strict adherence to examination ethics helps students to cultivate and sustain high moral standards in all undertakings. It gives practical meaning to concept of academic excellence. It promotes institutions as places for transforming moral values and for breeding future leaders forged on a solid moral foundation (Arijesuyo, 2010). Based on the above analysis, and considering the central position examination ethics occupy in given credence to the quality of our educational and industrial settings, it becomes expedient that the management of examination should not be taken lightly. Every effort must be made to properly harness every resource (both human and material) needed, in order to achieve the objectives of examinations in the school system. Management of examination should therefore start with creating in the students’ sense of responsibility from day one and also teaching them proper study skill and helping the teachers and managers of examination and all stakeholders to develop matured personality. When these are imbibed, management of examination will become very easy as both invigilators and the students will no longer find it difficult to abide by the moral principles underpinning the correct conduct of examination.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The inability of Nigerian school system to translate the nations’ educational philosophy into reality is obviously due to the inculcation of inappropriate attitudes and values by many Nigerians for such values are inimical to personality growth and development, and correspondingly to the nations’ attempted leap to higher heights. As Adesina (2005) opined, social, economic, political and technological development is not merely a function of the acquisition of knowledge and skills; but rather; what an individual decides to do with such knowledge and what he considers valuable to him in the society. Thus, actions and behaviours of some parents, teachers, students, examination bodies as well as other major stakeholders in recent times; have been seen as being detrimental to the nation’s educational survival. Hence, Elizebeth, Akpo, Idaka and Theresa (2009) posited that Nigerians’ social, economic and political stability in the ever dynamic and competitive global economy as a nation depend fundamentally upon the quality assurance of its educational programmes and the quality of its graduates.

The researcher therefore calls on government to compliment its current aggressive fight against examination malpractices through the establishment of National Commission for Examination Ethics (NCEE). The commission is being proposed as an Agency under the Federal Ministry of Education and should be made responsible for overseeing all matters relating to the promotion of examination ethics. In addition, students should also be

encouraged to compliment government effort in the promotion of examination ethics through the formation of Anti-Examination malpractice Brigades in the schools. This could be done through peer education programmes. Relevant organs in the educational sector and school counsellors should also step-up effort at organising workshop for students on how to study effectively for examination and abhor the evils of cheating during examination.

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Table 1. Themes of the studies conducted by WAEC (1990-2006)

S/N	Themes	Number of studies	Percentage
1	Improving quality of examination items	27	26.2
2	Continuous/School Based Assessment	8	7.8
3	Performance of Candidates	35	34
4	Gender related Assessment Issues	2	1.9
5	Aptitude Test Development and Testing	2	1.9
6	Examination Malpractice	6	5.8
7	Equivalence of Certificates	5	4.9
8	Equity in Assessment	10	9.7
9	Staff/Examination Bodies Related Issues	5	4.9
10	Entries in Examination	3	2.9
	Total	103	100

Table 2. Statistics of WAEC/SSCE examination results cancelled/ withheld due to malpractice between 2000-2010.

Year	Total no. of candidate	No. of result withheld/cancelled	Exam. Malpractice index (EMI)
2000 (Nov/Dec)	877549	65093	7.4
2001 (Nov/Dec)	866626	43546	5.6
2002 (May/Jun)	909888	95519	10.5
2003 (May/Jun)	929294	111969	12.05
2004 (May/Jun)	513583	65832	12.8
2007 (May/Jun)	1275330	137735	10.8
2008 (May/June)	1369142	74956	5.47
2009 (May/June)	1373009	109201	8.0
2010 (May/June)	1351557	77168	5.71
TOTAL	9,465,778	781,019	8.25

Table 3. Examination Malpractices in Nigerian Secondary Schools

S/N	Zone	No of Schools	Percentage
1	North-Central	54	16.6
2	North-East	8	2.5
3	North-West	12	3.6
4	South-East	48	14.8
5	South-South	116	36
6	South-West	86	26.5
	Total	324	100