

Determination of the Functionalities of Public Examinations for Achieving National Transformation in Schools

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Abstract

Public examination is a necessary prerequisite for guaranteeing that uniform standard is maintained in the conduct of examinations by the West African Examination Council (WAEC), the National Examinations Council of Nigeria (NECO), the National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB) for certification and the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) for entry into institutions of higher learning. These exams have been subjected to abuse by exam bodies, school administrators, exam supervisors and invigilators, students and parents thereby corrupting the system and compromising the ideals of government and the society for such exams through malpractices. The current national transformation programme of President Goodluck Jonathan promises to remedy this malady by providing necessary administrative will and capital for infrastructure, facilities, tools and personnel to ensure quality assurance. However, this takes zeal, commitment, discipline and attitudinal change on the part of all stakeholders. This paper therefore explained the concept of public examination, malpractices in public examination, and antecedents to examination malpractices. Also, effects of exam malpractices, the failure of public examinations and the impact of current transformation programme on public examination and then conclusion.

Key Words: Functionalities, Public Examination, National Transformation

Introduction

The procedure of finding out the outcome of learning over time through written objective tests and essay is regarded as examination. Examination can be internal or external depending on who conducts it, when it is conducted and the utility of the result so obtained. 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 is considered internal examination. This could be administered at the middle of the term or at the end of a term or at the end of a session for the purposes of judging performance and for promotion to the next class. On the other hand examinations whose timetable, questions, invigilation, supervision and marking is done by a body set up by the government for certification and/or placement of students is said to be external. Such examination bodies are The West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC), The National Examinations Council of Nigeria (NECO), The National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB) and The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). This type of examination is usually conducted nationally or internationally for candidates who seek to sit for such examinations and uniform system of grading is applied in judging their performance.

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. This examination may be internal or external. It could be oral, written or both. In Nigeria, an internal examination is one where students’ continuous assessment tests, terminal, semester and annual or promotional examinations are evaluated by the school the students attend. External examinations on the other hand are those conducted by external examination bodies such as WAEC, JAMB and other bodies authorized by statutes to conduct entrance examinations.

Transformation according to the Free Online Dictionary (2012) is “a marked change, as in appearance or character, usually for the better” while Dictionary.com (2012) defined transformation as “change in form, appearance, nature, or character”. A change or alteration, especially a radical one, the act of transforming or the state of being transformed (Collins English Dictionary, 2006).

The focus of this paper is to examine the effort of the transformation agenda or programme of the Federal Government under President Goodluck Jonathan on the conduct of public examination in Nigeria.

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. Obioma and Salau (2007) stated that at the end of secondary school education, students are expected to sit for public examinations such as the 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). 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. 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 in order to get cheap popularity and make some “dirty” money at the expense of educational standard and the quality of graduates produced. Sobowale, (n.d.) hinted that in spite of the spirited attempts by many concerned citizens to halt the slide, deterioration has continued to occur at an alarming rate. The unpatriotic attitudes and behaviours of critical players in the sector government functionaries at the ministries, parastatals and other agencies charged with responsibility for running education, school heads and their teachers, parents, officials of the two main bodies charged with conducting public examinations in Nigeria, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO), greatly diminish the efforts of those that mean well for education in our country.

Malpractices in Public Examination

Nwana (2000), while discussing aberrations on the Nigerian educational system stated that examination malpractice is the 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. 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 as defined by 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.

There are different forms of examination malpractice as categorised by the WAEC. They 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. From this definition, a fundamental fact seems to have been made clear: that there is no fundamental or real difference between malpractice in public examination and school examination. Furthermore, that the wrongdoing must be deliberate, contrary to the examination rules and intended to give an unfair advantage to the supposed beneficiary. Examination malpractices may also be defined by description. Its 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).

Adewale (n.d.) classified malpractices as pre-examination, examination and post examination malpractices. In pre-examination malpractices, candidates knowing their ability offer to give something (cash or kind) to somebody (examiner, messenger, typist, examination officer, invigilator, or head of department) so that examination materials could be released to them before hand (leakage), they then study the materials with the view to memorize answers to the questions raised in the examination question they had access to. Adewale explained further that malpractice during examination is done when materials the candidates feel could be of

assistance in answering the questions are smuggled in sheets of paper, written on unexposed part of the body like the thigh and hip and even on the palms of the hand. Copied answers could be brought in by a junior student, invigilator or policeman meant to provide security for the exam. The use of mobile phones, impersonation and copying from each other are forms of malpractices during exams amongst others. Post examination malpractice is perpetuated when an exam supervisor leaves the envelope containing the scripts for submission of scripts written outside the hall on previous arrangement or the substitution of scripts written elsewhere with the ones written in the hall. Others are changing results on a computer storage facility and tracing scripts to marking centre to lobby the examiners just to mention a few (www.naere.org.ng). According to Ojerinde (2004) one of the commonest forms is the registration of non-school candidates for school examinations. In spite of instructions against this practice, the principals of schools continue to perpetuate this practice every year. What they do is to register candidates who are not in SS 3 (the final years). Most of these candidates are no more in school and they are referred to as private candidates. Many are from urban areas, who prefer to register in less urban centres where monitoring is not likely to be strict. Since these candidates are not bonafide members of the school, they do not have any record of continuous assessment, which is compulsory for SSCE certification. The principals falsify continuous assessment results for them depending on how much money the candidates are able to pay.

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. Newswatch 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 are:

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 makes them panicky. As a result, they resort to what they consider to be the "second best option" to pass examinations, which is to cheat. There is the problem of over-admission of students against available facilities in most education institutions. This creates a situation where students are crammed into a small space, with few having any sitting place in the lecture halls when they have to attend lectures or have examination. 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. 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 suffocating poverty. Therefore,

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.

Examination malpractice is exacerbated by the escalating rate of frauds and fraudulent practices in Nigeria and it is generally a sad reflection of the moral decadence of the time. Society's perception of persons who take examinations more than once as academic failures: One of the major causes of examination malpractice in Nigeria is our societal perception that brilliant persons do not fail examinations or cannot take the same examination more than once. Hence, candidates in such public examinations as the SSCE, NECO, JAMB, etc, in order not to be victims of this perception, feel that it is a duty incumbent on them to pass at one sitting. Accordingly, the urge to indulge in examination malpractice becomes a controlling factor if such candidates must have to be seen as intellectual giants by their peers as well as members of the public.

In these days of financial straits, stipend paid as salaries are inadequate to meet the financial needs of many a person, therefore when the opportunity comes for one to make a few one or more naira, they all fall in droves for its irresistible fascination. 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. It is the theory of paper qualifications first before sound intellectual potentials. (www.bjournal.co.uk/BJASS/asp).

Lastly, in a society where excessive value is placed on paper qualification, it is certain that many would not spare any effort to ensure that they obtained whatever they needed to make a living, whether by a fair or foul means. One, however, ought to expect that institutions that were charged with the responsibility for examinations that ultimately determine the individual's locus in the society would do their best to ensure that competitions they organized were fairly executed. Unfortunately, however, some officials of our public examination bodies, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), the National Examinations Council (NECO) and the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB), do so much disservice to education in this country (<http://www.idowusobowale.com>).

Effects of Examination Malpractice

One obvious effect of examination malpractice is that 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 the wherewithal 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 student's 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, than the entire examination is not only discredited but also brought into disrepute (Ndifon & Ndifon, 2012).

In addition, Chukwuemeka (2012) elucidated that due to lack of 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. The results of these examinations over the years have been dismally poor, with frightening decline in each passing year.

The Failure of Public Examination

With the current deterioration in the educational sector such as the mass failure in public exams, lack of reading culture, poor infrastructure and facilities in schools, inability of students to defend certificates obtained amongst other reasons made the Federal Government under President Goodluck Jonathan to embark on a transformation agenda in order to overhaul the educational sector.

The possession of a minimum of five credit passes in any of the public examinations is 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. Of recent, the prospective candidates are further required to undergo university screening examinations as a condition for eventual admission. It is believed that these entry qualifications and entrance examinations will positively predict candidates' performance in the university. 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. It is also 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). A lot of rot and decay is being witnessed in the conduct of public examinations in Nigeria in such a manner that examination ethics is thrown in the dustbin and the integrity of the examinations and the purposes have been eroded by corruption in the educational sector.

In order to revamp this decadence there is every need for a national transformation in the way examinations are organized, written and marked. What should we do as individual stakeholders in the education industry? This calls for attitudinal change on the part of the teachers, students, examination bodies and parents to mention just a few. There is an urgent need now more than ever before for a national transformation as this problem is not restricted to only a part of the country. Kizito (n.d.) writing on "Public exams, the educational system and the Nigerian child" opined that the finger of blame should be pointed at all the players in the education sector from the exam boards to the education ministry through the principals and teachers down to the parents who have encouraged their children to abandon the midnight oil and adopt the wide and easy path that leads to destruction. It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure that students receive adequate instructions and erring teachers held accountable for any inadequacies. As for the teachers, it is their duty to mould the minds of their students. They are expected to fill these minds with the appropriate materials that will provide the right mix to enable them not only succeed in their public examinations but also in life. Hence it is important that there be reforms in the whole education sector particularly JAMB and WAEC (www.gamji.com).

According to Ihonvbere (2011) Transformation means to reform, refocus, redesign, regenerate, reorganize and reposition institutions, attitudes, structures, processes, policies and programs in the larger and longer-term interest of the majority in society. Transformation requires courage, strength, focus and commitment. While not ignoring national sensitivities, transformation requires using the best hands, ideas, and perspectives that would shape the process of lasting change. In sum, transformation is not a half-stop or ad hoc process, but a truly holistic one that involves all in society.

Daniel (2011) observed that perhaps all these was what motivated the Federal Ministry of Education to organize a two day National Stakeholders' Consultative Summit on improving performance in public examinations and looking for ways to stamp out the negative and dangerous trend the education sector is headed today. Of a truth, the poor performance of students in public examinations conducted by the examination bodies in Nigeria (WAEC, NECO, NABTEB and JAMB) is not only a source of concern to stakeholders but a national embarrassment. According to the Minister of Education, Professor Ruqayyatu Rufai, "this worrisome situation has attracted the attention of Mr. President, the National Assembly and the Honourable Ministers of Education, hence, the need for this Summit which has given stakeholders the opportunity to brainstorm on the ugly phenomenon. The summit whose main objectives were to sensitize the stakeholders on the issue of mass failure of Nigerian students at public examinations; identify who is responsible for what; recommend turn-around strategies for the way forward and who would do what to arrest the situation and; formulate implementation modalities for the recommended strategies.

The Impact of Current Transformation Programme on Public Examination

There are no magic wands of a remedy to the malaise in the educational sector. Every change that would be made requires commitment to programmes targeted at ameliorating the problem. To this end Osueke (2012) wrote that in addition to Access and Equity, Standards and Quality Assurance, Technical and Vocational Education, Education and Training, as well as Funding and Resource Mobilisation as priority areas, two new areas, Strengthening the Institutional Management of Education and Teacher Education and Development have been added to the Road map, with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), guidance and counseling, as well as quality assurance receiving greater attention. To ensure the later, a National Education Quality Assurance Commission is on the way. Nnabugwu (2012) quoted the Minister of State for Education, Bar. Ezenwo, N. Wike saying "in the area of ensuring standards and quality assurance, the administration has directly worked on the improvement of the capacity of our teachers in the basic education sector. Over 500,000 teachers have received training from Federal Government-initiated programmes in collaboration with state governments". Osueke also quoted the Minister of Education, Prof. Ruqayyatu Rufai as saying "We must return our institutions to their years of glory when they produced individuals who are today directing affairs in diverse organisations all over the world." The Minister promised that a 4-Year Strategic Plan for the Development of the Education Sector, will address shortcomings in the key areas of guidance and counselling, teacher development needs assessment and teacher professional development, Monitoring of learning achievement, and quality assurance.

Conclusion

In order to bring sanity to the conduct of public examination in Nigeria, the transformation programme of

President Goodluck Jonathan must be given impetus to provide the basic groundwork in terms of infrastructure and facilities needed for teaching and learning that will embolden the students to face such examinations. Teachers should be properly trained and motivated to do their jobs so that monetary inducement from candidates and parents be minimized. Offenders of exam malpractices should be penalized to serve as deterrents to others.

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