



## Public Examinations in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** The paper examined the public examinations in Nigeria: challenges and prospects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with special focus on the causes, consequences and solutions. The paper traced the origin and development of public examinations to the colonial era where examinations and syllabuses were British oriented. Infrastructural inadequacy, population explosion, examination malpractice, poor funding among others were identified as major challenges facing public examinations in Nigeria. However, the paper identified emphasis on paper qualification, dearth of learning resources, laissez-faire attitude to work, favouritism and godfatherism to mention, but a few as causes of the problems faced by public examinations in Nigeria. Poor performance among students, reduction of our certificates to mere weightless papers especially in the sight of foreigners, due to examination malpractice is some the consequences faced as a result of the problems. The paper concludes that, a proper re-orientation as regards the virtue of integrity as an entity is all that is needed to confront this myriad of challenges faced by public examinations in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Public Examinations, Challenges and Prospects, 21st Century.

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## INTRODUCTION

To Saro-Wiwa in Diénye (1998), education is what creates the man and places him in a particular cultural milieu. For a child is born without culture, it is education that enables him to acquire the learning, values and skills of his society. No wonder, when he was in charge of education affairs in late 60s in Rivers State, he advocated for an education system that will help us discover our own self. This discovery to him, is not necessarily a scientific or technological one, but a discovery of what we were, what we are and where we are going. It is a discovery of our rights and privileges and what we need, to achieve our desired goal. Education, being a process of teaching and learning is evaluated through examination at the end of the learning period. Examination not only serves as a

feedback for the trainer to ascertain the level of knowledge skills and attitude acquired, but also, serves as a measure of knowledge retention by the trainee. Any misconduct or irregularity distorts this feedback mechanism and gives a false outcome of the learning process, hence, the need to examine public examinations in Nigeria.

Asuru (2006), states that, public examinations are such examinations that are externally developed, administered, scored and controlled. He also calls them formal or official examinations and that they are administered by central authorities or bodies that are not directly involved in the teaching of the candidates that take such examinations. He explains further why public examinations are also called external examinations and adds that, results of public examinations are

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used for selection, certification, measuring of the examinees' learning and so on.

The history and development of public examination in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era. Onunkwo (2002), notes that, students of the British colonies in West Africa (Nigeria, Gold Coast (now Ghana), Sierra Leone and Gambia), in the days of colonialism sat for external examination that were completely foreign. These examinations were set by the London University School Examinations and Matriculation Council; University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate; the London Chamber of Commerce; The Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and The City and Guilds of London Institute.

Onunkwo asserts that, these examinations and the syllabuses on which they were based were by all standards, British oriented and of little or no benefit to the colonized people. He adds that even the colonial administrators were not unaware of this phenomenon. So, It became expedient that something should be done and quickly too.

Apart from the "foreignness" of these public examinations, Onunkwo also notes that, there was the problem of increasing population of students who registered for the examinations. Of course, this naturally led to other administrative and technical problems. So, the stage was set for an "action plan".

Consequently, in 1949, a Royal Commission headed by Dr. G.B. Jeffrey was set up and mandated to deliberate on this issue. The commissioners went to work and published their report in 1950 in which they recommended that an examination body be established in West Africa. The secretary of state for colonies who apparently was already aware of the then prevalent predicament quickly accepted the recommendation. This led to the birth in 1952, of the West African Examination Council with its headquarters in Accra, Ghana. In 1953, West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) conducted its first examination which was named the Public Service Executive Competitive Examination.

Be that as it may, at this point, this indigenous examination body was still a toddler nursed by the imperial government. For instance, in 1952 when the council's first registrar was appointed, a British named Mr. Kenneth Humphreys was the imperial choice and in 1955 when West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) conducted its first West African School Certificate (WASC) Examination, it was done in conjunction with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. In 1959, the ordinance which established the council was amended by the four countries. This made the West African Examination Council

autonomous with powers to make its own appointments as well as delegate powers to appropriate committees in member countries.

However, the romance between West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate continued till 1973 when such collaboration eventually ended. West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) was no longer a toddler. It had become fully grown with five member countries (Liberia joined in 1970).

In Nigeria, the West African Examination Council is saddled with so many responsibilities. Onunkwo lists some examinations which were then conducted by WAEC and they include:

1. West African School Certificate (WASC) Examination;
2. General Certificate in Education (GCE) Ordinary Level;
3. General Certificate in Education (GCE) Advanced Level;
4. National Common Entrance Examination for Federal Government Colleges; -
5. First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) Examination;
6. Teachers Grade II Certificate Examination;
7. Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Examination;
8. City and Guilds Examination;
9. Higher School Certificate (HSC) Education;
10. London General Certificate in Education (GCE Advanced and Ordinary Levels) Examinations and
11. Common Entrance Examination for Nurses.

That was too much for a single examination body to handle. Apparently the situation called for the establishment of other public examination bodies so that WAEC might not collapse under such a great weight. Consequently, the National Teachers Institute (NTI), came on board in 1976; the National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB) followed in 1992 and the National Examinations Commission (NECO) joined in 1997 (Samuel and Alamina, 2007). Under a different circumstance which was to centralize university admission, the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) were established in 1977.

No doubts, there is no man-made institution that is perfect or problem-free. These public examination bodies have their fair share of problems. What then are these problems? If these problems do exist, what are their causes? What consequences can be delineated from these problems? Are these problems absolutely insurmountable or are there signs of silver linings at the end of the tunnel? Put differently, can any solution be proffered?

These are the various issues that are addressed in this paper. The paper equally took cognizance of the dynamics or vicissitudes of the 21st century as they relate to the issues under review.

### **Challenges of Public Examinations in Nigeria**

It is considered appropriate to emphasize that, the focus of this paper does not in any way imply that the activities of the public examination bodies in Nigeria should be regarded as an exclusive tale of a litany of challenges. To hold such an erroneous position is to discredit the laudable work these bodies are doing. While this paper appreciates and recognizes the various contributions of these bodies, it also believes that a people can only register growth or advancement as a group when they begin to deal with their problems and not when they continue to sing their praise. This, indeed, is the quintessence of the focus of this paper.

As regards the challenges of public examinations in Nigeria, it should be noted that they are varied. While some of these challenges are peculiar to just one of the examinations, others cut across them all. And for the purposes of this paper, it is appropriate to classify these problems for a much better systematic analysis. The challenges among others include:

#### **1. Challenge of Infrastructural Inadequacy**

Onunkwo (2002) identifies inadequate infrastructural facilities as one of the fundamental problems of public examinations in Nigeria. Infact, he uses the phrase "Lack of infrastructural facilities". Though, the use of such a phrase may be regarded as an extreme 'assertion, to Onunkwo it might be an expression of extreme inadequacy.

He notes that, Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) does not have access to adequate number of halls, seats, desks and so on. WAEC suffers from the same problem. National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB) lacks even office accommodation, not to mention equipment like computers. NECO is not exempted from the same problem. National Teacher's Institute (NTI) does not have its own lecture halls. It uses centres hired from communities and often these communities are hostile. To a very reasonable extent, this problem negatively affects the overall performance of these public examination bodies.

#### **2. Challenge of Ever-Increasing Enrolment**

The number of candidates who sit for some of these public examinations annually falls in hundreds of thousands. This poses a problem as far as effective supervision is concerned. The

recruitment of more supervisors and invigilators in order to meet up with the demand has been a huge financial weight on West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) every year (Onunkwo, 2002).

The gravity of this challenge will amply be appreciated when it is looked at, against the background of infrastructural inadequacy. When any specie embarks on procreation in a geometric proportion without a conscious effort to increase resources in a proportionate magnitude, then crisis is born. Are the public examinations in Nigeria in a crisis situation? Indeed, they are:

#### **3. Challenge of Unreliable and Greedy Staff**

Asuru (2006) observes that, one of the major challenges of public examinations is the incessant leakages of examination papers! Nwana (1982) traces the sources of these leakages to fraudulent staff among others. The reprinting of these leaked papers has constituted a huge financial burden to these examination bodies, and this has continued unabated and has become a worrisome issue that needs urgent solution.

#### **4. Challenge of Insufficient Funding**

The presence of the dearth of infrastructural facilities coupled with the issue of the ever-increasing yearly enrolment will naturally point to the challenge of insufficient funding. Onunkwo (2002) even alludes to the problem of insufficient course books, libraries and qualified staff in the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), as a direct result of inadequate funding by the Federal Government. In the same vein, the National Business and Technical Examination Board (NABTEB), does not have enough state offices. It is so pathetic that, just one zonal office serves about three or more states (Onunkwo, 2002). The other examination bodies are not faring any better. Infact, National Examination Council (NECO) is still grappling with the problem of insufficient printing equipment, computers, office accommodation, vehicles among others. All these have direct bearing on the problem of insufficient funding.

#### **5. Challenge of Unnecessary Delays**

Asuru (2006) identifies and frowns at the challenge of late release of results and certificates. Onunkwo (2002), reechoes this same challenge and adds that, apart from the late release of results, JAMB sometimes releases students' numbers and centres so late that it becomes virtually impossible for such victims to take part in the examination even after these students had been duly registered and had prepared for the said examination. However, this problem in recent time has been minimized as more technologies have been employed in the

conduct of examination by some of these examination bodies.

## 6. Challenge of Inconsistencies

Sometimes, students' grades and centres are completely omitted; their names, courses and universities of choice are mixed up. This challenge is largely associated with the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board. It is a sad and most disturbing scenario because apparently it puts the academic future of the victims in jeopardy.

## 7. Challenge of Malpractice

The challenge of examination malpractice in Nigerian educational sector, is like what the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDs, is to the global society. Enyi (2006), Asuru (2004), Onunkwo (2002) and other scholars have devoted time to write about it. It has become a hydra-headed dragon devastating our education industry with reckless abandon. The external examinations are not the only victims. The dragon devours without discrimination.

Enyi (2006), notes that, the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), in 2003 cancelled the results of ten thousand (10,000) candidates out of the ninety one thousand nine hundred and fifty two (91,952) who wrote the teachers' grade two certificate examination due to examination malpractices. In the same year West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) withheld the entire results of 37,932 and partial results of 46,243 of the 56,242 candidates who sat for the Nov/Dec West African Senior Certificate Examination. It has been a tale of shame.

These may not be the only challenge of our public examinations. This paper only examined the major ones. For instance, there has been an outcry from some quarters against Joint Admission Examination Board (JAMB's) quota system because it denies some candidate's admission on the ground that, the number allotted to their states for the year had been filled. This is most frustrating, especially when candidates with lower scores from other states are offered admission. It has also been observed that, most young students despise National Teachers' Institute (NTI) programmes and regard them as adult education courses. These are some of the major challenges of public examinations in Nigeria.

## Causes of the Challenges of Public Examinations in Nigeria

A critical analysis of these challenges as discussed herein presents a gloomy picture indeed, infact so pathetically gloomy that a state of emergency should be declared in our public

examinations. The big question now is: who or what is to be held responsible for this "cancerous situation"?

Enyi (2006) does not want to bite more than he wishes to chew. So he concentrates on the challenge of malpractice and identifies the causes as:

- i. Settlement syndrome in the society;
- ii. Laissez-faire attitude to work;
- iii. Inadequate accommodation and infrastructural facilities for examination;
- iv. Dearth of learning resources;
- v. Unorthodox criteria which promote the admission of less qualified candidates;
- vi. Indecent familiarity among tutorial staff and their students;
- vii. Emphasis paper qualification;
- viii. Favouritism and godfatherism and
- ix. Lack of godly upbringing.

The list no doubt, cannot be said to have been exhausted as regards the challenge of malpractice. Be that as it may, malpractice is not the only challenge of public examinations in Nigeria. When any conscientious observer takes a systematic study of this divergent challenge, naturally he will find himself being led to certain factors as the causative agents of these challenges.

The phrase "causative agents" as used here does not in any manner imply that such "agents" are established for the exclusive duty of ensuring that our public examinations will have challenges. It is only used in the sense that their "actions", "inactions", "overactionst" and "underactions" have in one way or the other contributed to the challenges under review.

Some of these causative agents include:

1. Government's insensitivity;
2. Greed among some staff of the public examination bodies;
3. Indiscipline among some staff of Nigerian schools;
4. Truancy among some Nigerian students;
5. Perverted philosophies of some Nigerian parents as regards examinations;
6. The overall perception of the Nigerian society as regards paper qualification and certificates;
7. Prevalence of societal moral decadence, etc.

The itemization of these causative agents is a deliberate act. This is because they can easily be delineated from the study of the various problems. To do any form of elaboration of them will be tantamount to mere repetition.

### **Consequences of the Challenges of Public Examinations in Nigeria**

The consequences of these challenges are very glaring. For instance, the prevalence of infrastructural inadequacy has led to poor performance among some students. A situation where students have to stand or sit on the floor to write examinations because of insufficient seats will only lead to poor performance.

When a student performs poorly in such an examination, several things can happen: the student may decide to quit academic pursuit and go for something less prestigious. When this happens, the student lives to regret. He may also decide to repeat the examination. This decision costs him extra expenses. Some even go for forged papers. Most of those in this category get rusticated from the universities when their certificates are discovered to have been forged. Some of these victims are rusticated in their final years in the university after they had spent so much money and time. They leave the school frustrated, disappointed and angry against the society. Many of them end up in bad groups and gangs. They constitute themselves into an outfit with the sole purpose of unleashing terror against an "insensitive" society. All these can be traced back to the poor result occasioned by the fact that these poor victims had to sit on the floor to take the examination.

Let it be stated clearly that, the above statement is not implying in any manner that, recourse to violence against society should be regarded as a reasonable means of repaying society for her possible "misdeeds" to these victims, the fact being emphasized here is that, when some people feel frustrated they find it very difficult to handle it. They would rather choose to find a way of retaliation against whatever it is they feel is the source of their frustration. It is not only unfortunate, it is most pathetic.

The challenge of irregularities or malpractices has far reaching consequences. Many scholars have decried this hydra-headed dragon which has devoured the reliability and validity of our certificates. Examination malpractices have reduced our certificates to mere Weightless papers especially in the sight of foreigners. Some of our people who are privileged to gain admission overseas are often compelled to do a remedial course before the main course because, apparently the admitting schools do not trust the validity and reliability of the certificates presented. This sounds like a national insult.

Cases also abound where persons with "beautiful" certificates fail to perform in the very

areas where they claim proficiency. So, examination malpractices end up putting round pegs in square holes! This does not only retards development, it under develops a nation.

Earlier, the point has been made that most of the time, due to leakages; examination papers are cancelled out- rightly and subsequently reset. This costs so much, and similarly, some candidates' results are often withheld or cancelled due to malpractices. Re-sitting for such examination also constitute financial burden on the victims.

From whichever angle it is looked at, the divergent challenges of the public examinations in this country, reveals that, the consequences are enormous, shameful and regrettable.

### **The Way Forward to the Challenges of Public Examinations in Nigeria in the 21st Century**

There is no challenge without a solution. Even the highly dreaded virus that causes AIDs has a solution. So, the challenges of public examinations in Nigeria can be tackled and successfully too. All of us are witnesses to the challenges of indiscipline in this country. But we also know that, when Gen. Buhari and Gen. Idiagbon came onboard with an unmitigated vigor to deal with the challenges of indiscipline, Nigerians roused the discipline that had been hiding in them so that overnight Nigerians could no longer urinate anyhow nor jump the queue. If we had built on that, we would have been better off now in matters of discipline.

The 21st century is an Internet Age. The operational principles of the internet have the capacity to frustrate all fakes and forgeries. If we put these to use, then our people will sit up. Those whose stock-in-trade is to forge certificates will be out of business and our students will have no alternative other than to sit tight and study.

The Nigerian populace needs a re-orientation as regards the virtue of integrity as an entity. This re-orientation should be followed by requisite legislation with stiff penalty against offenders. We are aware that there have been previous legislations which were like toothless bull dogs that only barked but never were able to bite. This one should be different. There should be no sacred cows. When Nigerians see and hear of public examination board members, teachers, students and parents as well as invigilators and supervisors who have been convicted and either imprisoned or fined, Nigerians, like in the days of Buhari, will "fall in line."

While all these are being packaged, the government should ensure that, the issue of

infrastructural inadequacy is tackled properly so that a “holistic” solution will be possible.

Enyi (2006), has expressed fear that the problem of public examinations in Nigeria, especially that of examination irregularities/malpractices will defy solutions. That has been the view of several scholars. But having looked at our collective previous experience as a nation, that if the issues raised herein are put in place, our public examinations and results will be respected at home and honoured abroad.

## CONCLUSION

Public examinations in Nigeria have colonial roots. Today, they have come of age and as usual with growth. As identified in this paper, these examinations have divergent challenges. The question now is, is the situation entirely hopeless? Of course, not. Some people might think our case is hopeless because they see the Nigerian situation with a European or an American eye. But they forget that, Europe and America have trial-tested their systems for several years. This giant of Africa is a great nation and we are going to achieve great feats. All we need is the collective will to achieve. With a

government that has the courage to arouse this collective will in us, not only in the area of public examinations, but in other areas of our national endeavours, other nations will soon come to learn from us.

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