

Assessment Irregularities and Examination Malpractices in Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT

For some time now in the Cameroon educational system, the examination boards, higher institutions, and the society as a whole had been crying aloud on examination irregularities. From 2005-2015 academic years, some school personnel are said to have leaked examination questions and cheated in the writing and correction of the examination papers. The General Certificate of Examination Board (GCEB) and the Office du Baccalaureate (OB) administrative officials have denounced the examination fraud in some schools. The recent cases in June 2015 in the Advanced Teachers' Training institutions and the Faculty of Education students were alleged victims of assessment irregularities that affected the actual students' output. These and more are examples that attest for assessment irregularities. Based on this premise this study is to explore the probable causes of these irregularities in the tertiary education. The following variables like assessment tools, physical and psychological environments, the know-how of the evaluator and the students' factor were envisaged for the study. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the works of some eminent scholars like, Bandura and Spring. Four research questions were formulated, from which a 10-items questionnaire was established and purposive sample of 220 lecturers, and 220 students from higher institutions in Yaoundé were used. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used and the results indicated that assessment irregularities have a significant impact on examination malpractices.

Key words: Assessment, evaluation, examination irregularities, tertiary

Introduction

Many factors justify the need for quality education in Cameroon universities. Some of these factors include the increase in demand for white collar jobs in the society, the lack of students' credibility of certificates. Many intervening factors account for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment process. These processes of learning and teaching are complementary while assessment is implicated in the two. The need for quality in the tertiary education is not limited only to Cameroon but all over the world. The ability to engage in high-quality assessment has become a sine qua non for educators because effective assessment requires mastering the professional knowledge and skills involved in the field of assessment and evaluation.

On the other hand, the increase in students enrolment is another variable that is making assessment process difficult and consequently leading to low quality in education; Amin (2009) cited in Wirngo (2013) in a study based on assessing students in an examination in higher education reveals that, there is high repetition rates of 40%, failure rates of 41%, low pass average of 25 % and an overall pass rate of 59% in end of course examination. Most of our graduates from the tertiary sector do possess certificates attesting their knowledge, that is their observed scores whereas in reality their know-how and competencies (True score) do not reflect in their real life application, the Office du Baccalaureate attests in 2013 examination where the cut-off point was deliberately (with an aim to enable more student obtain a pass) reduced to 6/20 thus indicating an error in measurement and evaluation process.

Theoretical Considerations

Theoretical concepts, theories and related literature were reviewed to enhance the study base on the objectives. The field of assessment and evaluation like all other

specialised disciplines has developed many important concepts. A few of these are briefly discussed here

Assessment irregularities: To Glidden (1996) assessment irregularities can be defined as;

- Events which can cause “assessed” performance that are not related to actual performance.
- Process variation (intentional or not) which creates a bias of outcomes.

Malpractice: The World Bank Group (2001) defines malpractice in public examinations as a “deliberate act of wrongdoing contrary to official examination rules and is designed to place a candidate at an unfair advantage or disadvantage.

Evaluation is a systematic determination of a subject's merit, worth and significance, using criteria governed by a set of standards. It can assist an organisation, programme, project or any other intervention or initiative to assess any aim, realisable concept/proposal, or any alternative, to help in decision-making; or to ascertain the degree. It uses information based on the credible evidence generated through assessment to make judgments of relative value: the acceptability of the conditions described through assessment.

Assessment is a process of determining "what is." Assessment provides faculty members, administrators, trustees, and others with evidence, numerical or otherwise, from which they can develop useful information about their students, institutions, programs, and courses and also about themselves. This information can help them make effectual decisions about student learning and development, professional effectiveness, and programme quality (Tanyi, 2014)

Examination refers to a measure of the amount and quality of learning achievement. It is a means to gauge the teaching learning process and ascertain the attainment of educational objectives. It is also a means of verifying and appraising achievement and ability. Owolabi (2003) cited in Amin (n.d.) asserts that examinations are

test of knowledge acquired after a learner has been subjected to programmed instruction. Ogunniyi (1992) cited in Amin (n.d.) defines examination as a means to measure the forms of critical skills, values, attitudes and knowledge which learners are expected to possess and demonstrate after a period of formal instruction.

The Social Control Theory

The social control theory cited by Spring (2004) states that human behaviour is influenced by both biological- natural and environmental forces. Biologically, it states that human beings are animals and are capable to commit crimes because it is their nature to do so. Environmentally, the theory holds that in spite of their biological nature; environmental factors such as social interactions can modify the behaviours of human beings. Relating the theory to this work we find that examination malpractices are the innate tendencies of man, and the environment through laws, regulations and rules can modify these innate tendency to cheat during assessment. Some students may refrain from such acts for fear of punishment.

The Social Cognitive Theory of Bandura (1977)

Another theory, which explains the behaviour of students, is the social cognitive theory of Bandura (1977), as cited by Tanyi (2009). He believes that behaviour whether deviant or appropriate, is as a result of observing and copying the social behaviours of others in the society. To him, these observed behaviours would increase in frequency especially if some reward is got from their manifestation. Relating the theory to this work, students who imitate their friends and indulge in malpractices if sanctioned, the probability of repeating this practice is reduced but when poorly handled the frequency of this manifestation is increase since they receive some gratification in scores they do not merit.

Problem Statement

The examination boards, higher institutions, and the society as a whole have been crying aloud on examination irregularities. The degree number 93/036 of 29 January 1993, article 65 attest also for the government concern in examination mal practices. Still these practices are on the rise. From 2005-2015 academic years, some school personnel are said to have leaked examination questions and cheated in the writing and correction of the examination papers. The General Certificate of Examination Board (GCEB) and the Office du Baccalaureate (OB) administrative officials have denounced the examination fraud by some school administrators of both private and government schools and the students. The recent cases in June 2015 in the Advanced Teachers' Training institutions and the Faculty of Education students were alleged victims of assessment irregularities that affected the actual students' output. These and more are some of the examples that attest for assessment irregularities.

Another problem associated to this study are the lack of skills by the evaluator or assessor in terms of test construction - test items are usually poor constructed and not taking cognizance of the different levels of domains of the various objectives. The environment has an impact in assessment which most assessor neglect such as small halls where children are crowded and this causes cheating and at times children fear, some others come to the halls with high anxiety and this causes the level of the adrenaline to increase. All these often account for students malpractices. It is on this premise that this study seek to explore the impact of assessment irregularities on examination mal practices in the tertiary sector of education in Cameroon.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is therefore to explore the impact of assessment irregularities on examination mal practices in tertiary education in Cameroon. From this objective, research questions were formulated and later transformed into 4 alternative hypotheses as:

- 1) Student's psychological factors (self-esteem, anxiety stress) are significantly linked to examination malpractices.
- 2) The environment (physical and psychological) has an impact on examination malpractices.
- 3) The evaluators' know-how is significantly related to examination malpractices in our universities.
- 4) Assessment tools have a significant impact on examination malpractices.

Scope of the study

This is related assessment irregularities and examination malpractices in tertiary education based on students' psychological factors (self-esteem, anxiety stress); the environment (physical and psychological); the evaluators' know-how; and Assessment tools.

Significance of the study:

It is hoped that this study will empower the evaluator to be more professional in handling the affairs of assessment.

It would reduce the level of examination malpractices

Review of Literature

Students' Psychological Factors

Students' attitudes and perception towards assessment contributed significantly to assessment irregularities. You could hear statements such as "I just want to have this certificate for my reclassification, or advancement in the public service" as such there is a question of "do or die" in the quest to obtain certificates for these purposes. Students are sometimes put under the pressure of "you must pass" those who fail are considered societal misfit, failures, no hope for white color job which is still much valued in Cameroon; hence they resort to one form of cheating or the other. Examining factors associated with students themselves Natamu, (2005) observes that it is the fear of being

looked at as a failure in society that contributes to students' involvement in examination mal-practices. It is in this line that Kibuuka (1999) condemned the students as lazy, morally decadent, less interested in the process of learning, ill prepared for examination and yet desirous of good qualifications and certification. Such students often get involved in examination mal practices.

Others students consider assessment as a means of punishment or sanction from the teacher you could hear negative comments such as "the test doesn't reflect what he or she taught, there is no validity, it was a trap, the test is subjective, the teacher just want to show that he knows and so on. These influence their self-esteem, self efficacy and of course goal valuation. To prove that they are not empty vessels as some teachers perceive they go through extra miles to obtain what they feel the teacher is refusing from them. Consequently, any of these forms of examination malpractices (copying, leakages, external assistance, collusion...) may be carried out.

Physical and psychological Environment

Physical environment in this context refer to observable assessment structure in terms of classroom size, number of candidates, number of seats available, lighting, calmness, availability of invigilators, sufficient writing materials, spacing between students. Arguing for environmental factors, Denga (1983) asserts that, the environment to which the students are exposed to, such as crowded classrooms, computer laboratories, attest to this unethical conduct. While the psychological environment means, the mental state, feeling, emotion, self-confidence, anxiety, and stress all of this can accelerate or reduce assessment irregularities. Ajibola (2005) cited in Amin (n.d) looks at factors associated with the psychology of the learner. He explains that psychological factors such as stress and anxiety experienced by the students during examination induced by parents, donor, administration and others lead to their undesirable habits.

In the tertiary education in Cameroon, it is observed that, there is an escalating student population given by rising number of A-level school leavers, wider access to tertiary education as a government policy to increase literacy rate, creation of new programs and above all affordable fees structure. This phenomenon has led to large enrollment of students that makes quality assessment difficult. For example, objective tests are not written to obtain good assessment because a lot of copy works where students keep on seeking for techniques of assisting their friends (finger trick).

Assessment Tools

Another issue worth mentioning is that of assessment tools employed in the educational system in Cameroon. Sometimes the test items are poorly constructed, validity and reliability issues are not addressed, and the content does not sample the objectives. It is in this light that Amin(2003) stresses on, assessment tasks that merely reward superficial, shallow or reproductive approaches to learning and that fails to direct students into the type of students that leads to higher-order learning objectives of university education. Ebireri (2004) believes that the inability of the institutions of learning to diversify their methods of measuring and evaluating students leads to examination malpractices. He argued that though there are other methods of assessing and testing knowledge, tests have emerged as the only yard stick. This has caused over dependence on certificates as a key to employment thus leading to a crazy rush by most students to acquire them either legitimately or illegitimately.

Assessment is an integral component of teaching and learning. Each teacher is thus free to choose any assessment tool (method) as he or she deems necessary. The methodology employed in assessment in higher education should be diverse and must be appropriate to the purposes for which the assessment is being used. Therefore assessment is the end process in teaching.

What happens in the university is the utilization of the traditional paper and pencil format either it is subjective as essay format, writing of projects, take home assignment without specific criteria to follow or objective formats such as selection items, multiple choice, matching which is rarely administered for reasons teachers say it is time consuming and too demanding in item analysis and issues of validation. It is eminent that the type of assessment tool itself constitutes an irregularity which can lead to malpractices in examination.

Evaluator's know-how

Finally, assessment irregularities may results from evaluator's know-how. In the Cameroon education system, educational measurement and assessment is not a cut across course. Very little is found in the curricula of higher teacher training programs, and when they do exist the content is devoid of essential concepts. More so, the majority of teachers in the tertiary sector have not gone through this program because it is not a requirement to lecture in the university. This implies that these evaluators lack the necessary skills; competencies and do not even master the essentials in this domain. They thus assessed their students based on how they themselves were assessed or on their personal subjective basis. Consequently an important cause of assessment irregularity is the lack of know-how in assessment practices of evaluators,(test development, test analysis, scoring and interpretation, test administration) lack of knowledge in essential concepts and the mismatch between instruction and assessment outcomes.

Major forms of examination malpractices

- 1) External assistance: unethical practice, observed in the faculty of education where in the administrators responsible for coding and decoding alters the initial score of the marker thus changing the grade of the students concern.
- 2) Leakages: this is when the content of the examination is disclosed by the teacher, examiners, printers, proof readers or school administration.

- 3) Smuggling of foreign materials: this involves “crib notes” and answer booklets. Smuggled into the examination hall either in pants, shoes or on parts of the body by students and or friends.
- 4) Copying: peeping another candidates work with or without permission this relates to classroom inadequate spacing between desks and supervision or tight classrooms.
- 5) Collusion: very common, unauthorized passing of information between candidates (scripts or notes) candidate involvement and or familiarity with invigilators.
- 6) Substitution of scripts: this is replacing answer sheets handed out during the course of the exams with ones written outside the centre. This involves invigilators or teachers working outside the exam room.

Methodology

In this work the survey research design is used. Specifically the cross sectional survey was used. The study was carried out in the University of Yaounde 1, Centre region -Cameroon and the population consisted of all teachers and students of the Ecole Normale Superieure and Faculty of Education. The sample size was purposely chosen from the target population of 4350 students and teachers. We use 220 teachers and 220 making a total sample size of 440. The reason for the sample size was the accessibility of teachers and students since most of them were on holidays.

Data was collected using 2 sets of questionnaires design for students and teachers. The validity was insured by calculating the content validity index, this index stood at 0.88 greater than the predetermined index of .70, thus validating the instrument. The reliability was established through test – retest and the calculation of Cronbach’s alpha which stood at .74 greater than .60 the first obtained index, thereby establishing the reliability of the instrument.

A face to face approach was used in the administration of the instrument and data obtain was analysed through the Pearson product – moment correlation index. This statistical process was done through SPSS.

Results

- 1) For Hypothesis 1, the calculated value was .307, correlation significant at .01 level which is also significant at .05 level of significance. This value is greater than the critical value of .194 gotten from the Pearson table. As such the research hypothesis which stated that “student’s psychological factors are significantly linked to exams malpractices was confirmed. Concluding that, mad rush for certificate, anxiety, stress, low self-esteem and low self-efficacy significantly influence their conduct during assessment and examination consequently they resort to examination malpractices.
- 2) For Hypothesis 2, the level of significance calculated stood at .000 smaller than .05 the test statistic. The alternative hypothesis was. It was concluded therefore that assessment irregularities arising from the environment (physical and psychological) had a great impact on exams malpractices.
- 3) For Hypothesis 3, the alternative hypothesis stated that “the evaluator’s know-how had a significant impact on examination malpractices observed in our universities. The calculated test statistics stood at .326 significant at 0.05 level. This value is greater than the critical value of .194 thus confirming the research hypothesis. It was then concluded that the evaluator’s knowledge, know-how in essentials of assessment practices such as test analysis, considerations on levels of objectives of each domain, significantly influence exams malpractices observed.
- 4) Finally, Hypothesis 4 stated that “assessment tools have a significant impact on examination malpractices. The calculated test value was found to be .677 with two stars denoting that the correlation is significant at .01 level which also means that it is significant at .05 level (two-tailed test) this value falls at the rejection zone of the null

hypothesis. The null hypothesis was rejected thus confirming that assessment tools used such as objective format in large classroom favoured cheating, use of subjective tools like essays were taxed of bias, script to script carry over effect, halo effect etc

Discussions and Conclusion

From the analysis, it is evidenced that, the student factor, physical and psychological environment, assessment tools and evaluators know-how are responsible for assessment irregularities. Examination malpractices seriously damage public confidence and the validity of examination scores.

Table 1

Summary of Results from Testing the 4 Hypotheses

#	Null hypotheses	Test value (r_{xy})	P- value	Coefficient of Determination (r_{xy}^2)
1	Student's psychological factors (self-esteem, anxiety stress)are significantly linked to examination mal practices.	.307	.000	.09
2	The environment (physical and psychological) has examination mal practices	.770	.000	.59
3	The environment (physical and psychological) has examination mal practices	.326	.015	.11
4	Assessment tools have a significant impact on examination malpractices	.617	.000	.38

$\alpha = .05$, $df = 438$; critical $r = .194$; The null was rejected for all the tests.

It is also very important for educators to master the art of assessment so as to be apt to translate the learner's behavior in numeral terms which validly and reliably represents the amount of the particular behavior and indicate aspect of education that was designed to change.

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