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SUSTAINING PUBLIC TRUST IN QUALIFICATIONS AWARDED BY THE WEST AFRICAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL (WAEC) IN GHANA

ABSTRACT

‘Public qualifications – and therefore providers of high stakes assessments – depend on trust; the trust of candidates, educators, employers, and society at large. However, trust needs to be earned, and once earned, protected’. (Viewpoints, Cambridge Assessment, 2008)

The perception that educational standards are falling has dominated public discussion on education in Ghana for several years. In the debate, the older generation seems to display scepticism about the standards of attainment of the younger ones. Major changes in the school curriculum since 1987 have deepened the uncertainty surrounding educational standards. As pointed out by Lebus (2007) ‘continual change erodes confidence and creates confusion’. The victims of this crisis are the Awarding Bodies which dutifully have to satisfy increasing demand for qualifications. Since WAEC will continue to contribute to the development of human resource of the country by awarding qualifications required for the progression of young people in education and employment, it must inspire and safeguard public confidence in its certificates. This paper examines the level of public trust in the qualifications offered by WAEC and ways in which it could promote and sustain long lasting public confidence.

Key words:

Trust

Confidence

Accountability

High Stakes Assessments

Qualifications

INTRODUCTION

Public trust and confidence play critical roles in the success of organizations. In the area of public examinations the boards elicit trust and confidence through the delivery of fair, reliable and valid assessment outcomes on which both individuals and institutions could make appropriate decisions. Today, factors like harsh criticism of examining boards in the media, frequent changes in curricula, rampant forgery of certificates and other forms of examination irregularities and perception of falling standards of education have created credibility gap between the boards and their major stakeholders. In spite of this, students continue to submit themselves to the boards to be assessed. Indeed it is a fact

of school life that assessments are inescapable and indispensable because they remain the primary means of evaluating students' attainments and abilities and often determine their progression in school or placement in jobs. But the future of a public examination board does not only lie in the high technical quality of its assessments but also the confidence reposed in it by its major clients and stakeholders. The boards therefore carry a heavy responsibility of maintaining standards and offering assessments that society can trust and use for its development. This paper examines the case of WAEC in Ghana paying particular attention to the current level of trust and how it could boost it.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

'Trust' is a multi-faceted concept that can mean several things to people; it does not appear to conform to any one universal definition. In one sense trust can be considered in the context of information, where 'honesty' and 'telling the truth' are the critical factors. (MORI 2003, p. 4) It is also used here in a sense that is synonymous with 'confidence'; that is, reliance on another's words, integrity or discretion or having faith in a person or thing and that a 'chosen course of action is the best or most effective.' (Answers.com) 'Public trust' as used here therefore refers to the confidence reposed in officials or institutions and the expectation that they will faithfully perform the duties of public office. 'Accountability' refers to individuals or organizations taking full responsibility for services or actions and reporting their activities as prescribed by law or conventions governing their actions; in a word, being answerable..Accountability is a vital factor in sustaining public trust in an organization. For example trust could be lost through a mistake or perception of lack accountability and regained through an apology. 'High-stakes testing' are measures whose results are used to classify, retain or promote students. Madaus (1988) cited in an article titled, 'High-stakes Decisions' in info@ncrel.org (2008 p. 1) identifies three specific characteristics of high-stakes tests: 1. They lead to perceptions that a particular test has significance that transcends the purpose it was designed to meet; 2. They exert strong influence on teachers' decisions about how and what to teach, despite the educational system's explicit curriculum; and 3. They transfer the determination of curriculum from school and classroom-based educators to whatever agencies have designed the test.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on public trust and confidence generally see both concepts as key success factors in the performance of organizations. To the Committee on Standards in Public Life, UK (2008) public trust is 'a pillar of public life' as 'it is concerned (not only) with perceptions of honesty but also about confidence and satisfaction with outcomes of service delivery.' p. 2 Similarly, Heintzman et al (2006) consider public trust and confidence as 'drivers of performance' p 2. As noted by the Office of Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada ((2010) 'trust can be earned' as 'people are willing to trust but only when they really believe that the institutions act with integrity, are motivated to take public interest into account' p. 3. It is for this reason that Lebus (20007) sees the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) a means of creating long term trust in the UK qualifications system. Similar public institutions like the Ombudsman, Media Commission, have been set up and charged to ensure that organizations under them conform to laid down codes of conduct and consequently evoke public confidence. Distinguishing between 'trust' and 'reliance' Townley et al (2010) argue that trust affects peoples' emotions and compensation cannot atone for the loss of trust because it is not fungible. In their view '...public relationships can survive failures of reliability but not failures of trust. This is because such failures undermine the relationship itself; 'they go to its heart' having 'deleterious effects on the quality of our collective social and political life.' p. 6 Specific to assessment, much of the literature affirm the centrality of trust in running a credible assessment system. Billington et al (2008) declare that 'trust is clearly central to the examination system in the UK – its very legitimacy depends upon it ... the cost of distrust for those agencies responsible for administering examinations is likely to be high.' (p. 2) In his seminal work which evaluated people's perception of WAEC in Ghana, Addae-Mensah urges the Council not to rest on its oars but do 'more to build stronger public confidence in its capacity to prevent examination malpractice and build a more positive public image' p. 43.

HIGH STAKES EXAMINATIONS CONDUCTED BY WAEC IN GHANA

Following the reforms of 1987, the structure of pre-tertiary education in Ghana is 6 years of primary school, 3 years junior high school and 3 years of senior high school. The reforms led to the replacement of the Common Entrance, Middle School Leaving Certificate and GCE Ordinary and Advanced level examinations with two high-stakes examinations; the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Whilst the BECE is a national examination, the WASSCE is an international examination. A novel feature of both examinations is the addition of continuous assessment scores to the examination marks to determine the grades of candidates. The results of both examinations are used for certification and selection of students for higher education; the BECE is the basis for selection into secondary school whilst the WASSCE takes one to tertiary institutions, notably university, polytechnic, teachers and nurses training colleges. In the area of employment, the WASSCE certificate is the basic requirement for entry into clerical grades and junior levels in many institutions such as the public service, police and the army. In fact WAEC is the sole assessment board at this level.

WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF TRUST IN WAEC?

Levels of trust and confidence in institutions vary considerably across stakeholders and over time and are determined by the varied inclinations and expectations of individuals or groups. It is generally accepted that 'people today generally do place less trust in authorities and institutions than they used to. (Tyler 2006 p 1) On the other hand it could be argued that 'public expectations have risen over time; people expect more from organisations and the individuals representing them. This demands that institutions manage public expectations carefully by making expectations easier to meet. In this sense there is a clear need for more considered communications.' (MORI 2003 p. 5) Has WAEC also lost public trust and confidence? What are the manifestations of trust or distrust in WAEC? We attempt to answer these and other questions in the next section. Our analysis is mainly based on public perception as reflected by the media from 2000 to date. It is based on the assumption that the media does not only mirror society but also influences it.

Low Point

Over the years WAEC has built an image of a strong and credible public assessment body, following in the footsteps of its predecessor, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) It has contributed to the development of its member countries in the area of human resource development over the past 58 years. However, this reputation has been put on the line by certain factors, especially the unfortunate occurrence of examination irregularities, in the course of its existence. Addae Mensah, a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Legon is cited by the Daily Graphic Newspaper of 29th October, 2007 lamenting about 'examination standards (are) being seriously compromised through all sorts of malpractice. ... Because of the intense competition for limited spaces ...students are looking for short cut to success. ... Cheating at examinations and forging of certificates and qualifications are ... rampant' (p. 3) A survey of news paper publications over the past few years reveals public disenchantment with irregularities that have occurred in examinations conducted by the Council. The year 2004 appeared to be the lowest point as revealed in this editorial of the Network Herald of August 10: 'WAEC has once again done what it has gained the most fame for in recent times – the cancellation or withdrawal of examination papers'. In 2007 President Kuffour urged the Council to take steps to prevent malpractice and thereby protect the image of its certificates. (The Ghanaian Times 2007 p. 4) In the study conducted by Addae-Mensah (2006) respondents rated the Council's ability to prevent leakage of questions lowest out of the five questions posed to find out their trust in Council's operations. Similarly, the Research Department (2010) reports of low trust of respondents in the Council's security measures during conduct of examinations.

Restoration of trust

With the application of ICT in the delivery of some services WAEC started to win back considerable admiration from some its stakeholders. An editorial of the Ghanaian Times of February 27, 2004 captioned 'A Pass Mark for WAEC?' following the introduction of on line facility for candidates to check their results captures the changing mood. The findings from Addae-Mensah's (2006) survey of seven out of the ten regions of Ghana confirms the fact that matters have taken a good turn as 'the confidence of Ghanaians in its (WAEC's) main product both internationally and nationally seems to be quite good. ... About 93 percent of (the) respondents rate the national acceptability of WAEC certificates ... average to very high.' p. 42. On April 16, 2008 a letter to the Editor of The Ghanaian Times Newspaper captioned 'Public Trust in WAEC – crucial ingredient' commends WAEC for leaving no 'stone unturned in reducing examination malpractice' and urges it to 'be careful not to erode the trust and confidence reposed in it all these years'. p. 15

Acceptability of Qualifications by Tertiary Institutions

An indicator of the resurgence of public confidence in WAEC qualifications was the decision by the universities to admit candidates holding WASSCE certificates without recourse to the University Entrance Examination which was conducted for three years following the introduction of WASSCE. Baku & Baku (2009) report that the entrance examination was abolished because its 'results were providing about the same evidence as the SSSCE results in relation to students' first university examinations'. p. 89 They also report that a study by the Research Department of WAEC on the predictive validity of the SSSCE as a selection tool for university admissions shows positive correlation between performance in both examinations. Of the 25 subjects studied only four did not have significant relationship.

Opinion of Candidates

Students are often reluctant to take responsibility for their poor performance but those surveyed by Addae-Mensah (2006) displayed candour in their inclination not to blame others for their poor grades. Though just 54% of the respondents accepted that candidates' performance reflected their abilities, as high as 70% of them would not blame examiners for their poor grades. Obviously these responses give credibility to assessments conducted by WAEC.

CHALLENGES

Perception of falling Standards

A major challenge in sustaining confidence in qualifications is how to stem public perception of falling standards in education. Cambridge Assessment (Viewpoints 2010) describes the situation in the UK as follows: 'Each summer, the public debate seems to commit the same logical mistake. If the numbers gaining the highest grades increase ... then standards must be slipping (the exams, apparently, are getting easier). If the numbers attaining the highest grades decrease ... then standards must be slipping (the attainment of students of students, apparently, is reducing). Similar interpretations are given to results in Ghana. Amedahe (2009) reports that the 'Ghanaian public has become sceptical about the quality of the products of basic, secondary as well as tertiary levels of education' (p. 75). In fact the Government itself admits that the quality of education has declined. As recently as 2007, the Government White Paper on the 2002 Committee on Review of Education Reforms for example admits that 'more recently there has been almost unanimous agreement that under the latest 1987 reforms public education in Ghana has failed to meet expectations in terms of its coverage, quality, equitableness and economic utility' (p. 4) The Editorial column of the Daily Graphic of Thursday April 12, 2007 says it all when it declares that 'to date the country has not found answers to the problem of churning out school leavers who do not have the competencies in literacy and numeracy. It further argues that it 'was not the case in the good old days' (p. 2). In a sense this perception of falling standards seems to be fuelled by nostalgia for the GCE qualifications. The older

generation seems to rate their accomplishments higher than those of the younger ones. But is it really true that there are no high fliers in the younger generation?

In the case of the products of basic school, two other factors contribute to the impression of poor standards. First is the norm referenced stanine grading system used in grading the BECE. Though it might be useful for the selection of candidates for secondary school education, it undoubtedly leaves the unfortunate impression that half of the candidates fail the BECE each year. The situation is further worsened by the misconception held that all students who cannot proceed to secondary school have failed though this is caused by limited vacancies in the secondary schools. A misinterpretation of the situation is captured in this editorial comment of The Ghanaian Times of October 24, 2009: 'once again the issue of abysmal performance of some basic schools ...has ... generated a lot of discussions in the media'. It is obvious from the examples cited that the paper and the general public have mistaken the cut off for admission into secondary school as pass mark for the examination. Though the perception of falling standards is controversial, WAEC must take note of the concerns and eliminate all conditions that will detract from the quality of its certificates.

Failure to note differences

There is no denying the fact that the debate on falling standards has failed to take into consideration marked differences between the curricula of the GCE system and the BECE-WASSCE structure. Before 1987 secondary school education was 7 years; 5 for the Ordinary Level and 2 for the Advanced Level. The WASSCE is being taken after 3 years of secondary school education. There have been major changes to the content and combination of subjects as well. Taking the WASSCE as the direct equivalent of the GCE A level is therefore wrong.

Governmental Control

Another big hurdle is how to manage the effects of changes to the curriculum. It must be admitted that education policy is a political issue. Governments are obliged to deliver quality as promised the electorate. But as pointed out by Oates, cited by Mail Online (2010) frequent changes do not only create confusion but also makes it difficult for the boards to maintain standards as it leaves the public uncertain about the qualifications being awarded by the boards. Oates insists that 'Maintaining standards is one of the most challenging things an awarding body has to confront. We have to reduce the frequency and scope of change in qualifications. ... Frequent arbitrary change is extremely unhelpful in terms of maintaining standards.' p. 2

Due to the changes in the Ghana basic school curriculum for instance, ICT was introduced as an examinable subject and Religious and Moral Education (RME) and Agricultural Science removed. Following agitations by the public RME has been restored. So within a short period of five years candidates will offer different papers at the BECE in terms of number and content. Obviously this will impact upon their levels of attainment.

The independence of the boards in designing qualifications is essential for quality assurance. Examination board officials have had cause to complain about the influence of Government officials in this area. In the case of WAEC the hand of education authorities in qualifications design can be seen in two areas; the delay by the Ministry of Education to change the norm referenced Stanine Grading system for the BECE as recommended by its own Curriculum Research and Development Division (CRDD) and the proposal by the CRDD to change the split between continuous assessment and examinations scores from the ratio of 70:30 (External: Continuous Assessment) to 50:50 parity. 'It is of course, entirely right for the government to decide on what should be taught in our schools. But if standards are to be maintained, the design of qualifications must be carried out independently;' (News - Cambridge Assessment 2009 p.2)

Forgery of Certificates

What is the guarantee that all certificate holders genuinely acquired them? The forgery of certificates partly accounts for the perception of falling standards in the eyes of the academic community and employers. There is no doubt that this creates credibility gap between the boards and the public and worsens the burden of evoking public confidence in certificates awarded by the examining board. For example, 94 students were dismissed from one Polytechnic in 2006. This was detected because of the policy of verifying the authenticity of certificates presented by applicants by public institutions. It is important to note that WAEC has countered this practice of forgery of its certificates by embossing the pictures of candidates on their certificates and offers verification of certificate services to institutions. Verification of documents is the ultimate solution because ICT is exploited to perpetrate forgery of documents.

THE WAY AHEAD

We agree with Neil Fitzgerald's, view of trust, cited by MORI (2003) that one 'can have all the facts and figures, all the supporting evidence, all the endorsement that you want, but if you don't command trust, you won't get anywhere. And trust, of course, is the one thing that can't be built in a one-off spate of advertising. Trust is built over the long term, on the basis not of communication but of action. And then again, trust, once established, can be lost in an instant - one ill-judged remark and it's gone forever." p. 1 The bottom line then is the creation of conditions for the development of lasting relationships with all stakeholders. In building such relationships communication, attitude and manner of delivery of services are crucial. WAEC should therefore ensure that its staff, especially front line officers, display the highest form of friendliness and compassion when dealing with the public. The current exercise to educate staff on customer care is therefore a step in the right direction.

In the area of products and services it is important to offer innovative and strong products. We have recognized the central role of research in this area. We therefore need to step up our research activities. But as we develop new procedures and services we should not depart from our core values that have motivated and sustained us for close to 60 years.

It is also necessary to elicit public support in fighting the vices forgery and other examination malpractice. The support offered by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education in the face of the furore generated by the publication of names and pictures of candidates who cheated in examinations is worthy of note. The assurance by its Chairman that the Committee 'owe it a duty to support the measures instituted by WAEC to bring sanity into the conduct of examinations in the country' when members of the Committee visited WAEC on November 19, 2009 gives us confidence that we can count on public support in its fight against examination malpractice.

Of crucial importance is expansion of consultations and outreach with education authorities and other stakeholders. Having consultation with the Government for instance will give WAEC the opportunity to help shape major changes and achieve stability in the area of curriculum development. One also recognizes the positives of collaboration with others in the field and sharing of experience with them.

As a matter of priority, we should offer training and support to teachers in the area of test construction especially. This is because their school based assessments scores affect the final grading of candidates. This will help deal with the issue of unreliability of continuous assessment scores.

Whilst we strive for independence, accountability and transparency should underpin our activities. In the light of the fact that Ghana does not have a regulator like the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations (Ofqual) in the UK, WAEC must consistently audit and upgrade its quality assurance procedures. Addae-Mensah's (2006) recommendation that the Council should engage independent assessors to evaluate its examinations every five years is worth considering in this respect.

As pointed out by Addae-Mensah (2006), the uncertainty and anxiety of the public partly emanates from the lack of knowledge of some of the operations of WAEC. There is therefore a need for more frequent engagement with the public and openness on issues the public needs to know. We also need to disabuse the mind of the public about certain myths like WAEC does not use continuous assessment scores and people can buy qualifications. The grading systems used for both the WASSCE and BECE need to be clarified as a matter of urgency.

Finally, management needs to provide strong leadership which plays an important role in developing trust and confidence in organisations. A visionary, honest and efficient leadership will not only lead to the achievement of the Council's vision of excellence but also boost public trust and confidence in WAEC.

CONCLUSION

From the foregone it is clear that WAEC enjoys appreciable public trust and confidence which are lifeblood of successful enterprises. To continue to be relevant, it should implement the policies such as accountability, engagement with the public, research, collaboration and strong leadership by management to develop, boost and sustain public trust and confidence.

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