

# THE CHALLENGES OF ENSURING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ASSESSMENT IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS: THE CASE OF THE WEST AFRICAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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## ABSTRACT

*The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) was established in 1952 by an ordinance in order to bring educational assessment close to the grassroot and was charged with the responsibility of determining the examinations required in the best interest of West Africa. By this ordinance, the Council was empowered to conduct such examinations and award certificates which should not represent a lower standard of attainment than equivalent certificates of examining authority internationally. The mandate was hinged on the principles of: Best Practices, Accountability, Access, Equity, Trust, Confidence and Quality Assurance.*

*Quality assurance was identified as a fundamental tool for building institutional reputation in multicultural contexts and an indispensable foundation to protect the integrity of the assessment system.*

*This paper therefore discusses how the WAEC established since 1952 has been able to surmount the challenges attendant upon assessment in multicultural contexts and ensuring that standards are maintained through the instrumentality of quality assurance mechanisms.*

*The paper concludes with recommendations on how to effectively institutionalize quality assurance frameworks in the assessment system to guarantee standards.*

**Key words:** *Quality Assurance, Assessment, Multicultural, Society.*

## THE CONTEXT

The West African Examinations Council is West African's foremost examining board established by law in 1952, to determine the examinations required in the public interest in the English-speaking West African countries, to conduct the examinations and to award certificates comparable to those of equivalent examining authorities internationally. By this mandate, the Council is expected to:

- *Assist in the development of sound education;*
- *Ensure that educational standards are maintained; and*

- *Give the people of West Africa a vision of the great potentials which lie beyond examination.*

With its headquarters in Accra, Ghana, WAEC operates in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra-Leone, Liberia and The Gambia. The administrative structure of the WAEC naturally situates it in multicultural contexts both within each nation's boundary and internationally across the national frontiers of the five member countries. The West African Examinations Council conducts both international and national examinations in all its member countries. The West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is taken twice a year in the member countries; May/June for school candidates and November/December for private candidates.

Nonetheless, sequel to the challenges posed by globalization, urbanization, occupational mobility and cross border movements as evident in Anglo-phone West Africa, a vast mass of candidates' from different ethnic groups leave their native communities and move to other communities in search of educational opportunities. This culminates in diverse anthropological, linguistic and sociological contexts among candidates that sat the WASSC Examination, which has an implication for high stakes assessment practices. Across the national frontiers, government protectionist policies and inter-governmental diplomatic exigencies are critical challenges confronting an examination board like the West African Examinations Council operating in diverse cultural settings.

However, through the instrumentality of quality assurance, the WAEC has been able to confront the challenges of assessment in multicultural contexts and ensure that educational standards are maintained in the member countries.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT**

Education in most Anglophone West African countries cannot be said to have attained appreciable height in qualitative terms going by the observable developmental indices. Governments in this sub-region have made various provisions to ensure quality and standards in education. In Nigeria, such provisions are spelt-out in the National Policy on Education (NPE, FRN, 2004), the Roadmap for the Nigerian Education Sector (FME, 2009) and other policy documents approved by the National Council on Education (NCE) through the decisions and recommendations of the Joint Consultative Committee on Education (JCCE). Such policies include the National Education Quality Assurance policy (NEQA) and National Education Management Information System policy (NEMIS) just to mention but a few.

A few speak of quality as "the standard of something when compared to other things like it". To others, quality is viewed in the context of "a cost-benefit analysis approach". This school of thought seems to equate quality assurance with the concept of accountability. Ajayi and Adegbesan (2007) argued that, quality assurance is related to accountability both of which are concerned with maximizing the effectiveness and efficiency of educational systems and services in relation to their contexts, of their mission and their stated objectives. It is not just a feature of a finished product or services but involves a focus on internal processes and outputs and includes the reduction of wastages and improvement of productivity.

According to Addae-Mensah (2006), in all quality assurance matters there ought to be a certain minimum level that the organization sets itself, or is enjoined by legal norms not to fall below, and a certain optimum level that the organization strives to achieve in order to remain

competitive or satisfy its clients. However, in the view of Arikewuyo (2004), quality in education could be judged by both its ability to enable the students perform well in standard examinations and relevance to the needs of the students, community, and the society as a whole.

To most educationists, the term quality assurance includes, but goes beyond the realms of standard setting and judging the outputs in a cost-benefit analysis paradigm. It involves sensitizing the stakeholders about educational standards, results and cost implications so that they will have genuine information on which to premise their quality assurance decisions based on the principles of best practices. Thus, quality assurance in assessment in multicultural contexts includes: setting correct standards, evaluating whether they have been achieved and at what cost, presenting and interpreting this information to the public and accepting variation from the accepted minimum standards.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that quality means excellence, merit, fairness, openness, trust, transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and confidence. Quality assurance has been used in this context with reference to service in public interest because that is the major trust of the West African Examinations Council in the West African sub-region.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE WEST AFRICAN SENIOR SCHOOL CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION**

Mindful of the imperative of quality assurance in assessment in multicultural contexts, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) has strengthened its operations through the development of new performance indicators, benchmarking processes and standardized reference points for quality and standards such as frameworks of qualifications, output standards and criteria that focus on candidates' performance.

Pursuant to these quality assurance policies, there are about seventy (70) committees working on various aspects of the Council's activities at the local and international levels. These are in addition to the over 100 subject panels that operate from time to time to review developments in the different subject examinations. All these ensure that the operations of the Council are meticulously performed and they make the Council the foremost and major barometer for gauging the educational attainments of students at the end of the six-year secondary education in Nigeria and internationally across the Anglophone West African sub-region.

The WAEC, apart from upholding professional practices in the assessment procedures, has evolved other strategies aimed at ensuring quality assurance in the conduct of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). It is therefore highly expedient to examine the quality assurance measures under the following headings:

- Test Development Procedures
- Test Administration Procedures
- Coordination Meetings and Marking of Scripts
- Standard Fixing and Grade Award Meetings
- Results and Certificates

## **(1) Test Development Procedures:**

- Use of subject experts with considerable teaching experience to draw up the examination syllabuses;
- Use of classroom teachers and subject experts/specialists with cognate teaching experience as item writers, examiners, script selectors and moderators;
- Receiving test items from setters under strict security cover and the signing of copyright agreement;
- Editing and revision of test items by a qualified subject officer in-charge of the subject;
- Trial testing of multiple choice questions on a nationwide scale in all member countries;
- Moderation of test items by a committee of subject experts and educational evaluators drawn across member countries;
- Production of scoring keys and marking schemes alongside the test items;
- Statistical analysis of the multiple choice questions to establish their difficulty index and discrimination power;
- Calibration and banking of test items;
- Use of standardized Table of Specification for compilation of the final test papers;
- Final revision of test papers (proof-reading) to ensure that they are free from technical and grammatical ambiguities including cultural or social biases;
- Printing of the question papers and other examination stationery materials under strict security arrangement.

## **(2) Test Administration Procedures**

- ❖ Inspection of schools for recognition to present candidates for the examination by officials of Federal/State Ministries of Education, and thereafter, by officials of the WAEC using established standards criteria;
- ❖ Online registration of candidates after payment of prescribed examination fees to accredited banks (since 2005);
- ❖ Capturing of candidates pictures and other biodata electronically (finger prints would be included as from the next examination);
- ❖ Provisions of regulations governing the conduct of the examination;

- ❖ Validation of entries by schools to enable them update information on the status of the candidates they have enrolled/registered;
- ❖ Release of examination time-table several months before the commencement of the examination;
- ❖ Randomized allocation of examination number and centre to candidates who registered for the private candidates' examination;
- ❖ Appointment of men and women of high integrity as supervisors, monitors and invigilators on the recommendation of the State Ministry of Education and school authority;
- ❖ Declaration of interest and signing of undertaking by supervisors, staff of WAEC and other agents connected with the examination in order to uphold the integrity of the examination;
- ❖ Briefing of stakeholders and agents connected with the administration of the examination on their roles and the expectations of the WAEC from them;
- ❖ Use of supervisor's mailbag (lock-up bags) to deliver question papers and return of worked scripts;
- ❖ Use of senior staff to give out question papers and collection of worked scripts;
- ❖ Swapping of supervisors on daily or weekly basis;
- ❖ Daily distribution of question papers from WAEC office to designated custodian or distribution point;
- ❖ Use of electronic generated photo-album to admit candidates into the examination hall;
- ❖ Ensuring strict compliance with the stipulated seating arrangements for candidates' in the examination hall;
- ❖ Use of brailled materials for blind candidates and the use of experts in special education for supervision of blind candidates during the examination;
- ❖ Use of audio-visual aids for the visually or auditory challenged candidates.

**(3) Co-ordination Meetings and Marking of Scripts**

- Initial selection of scripts of candidates whose performance could be described as excellent, average, below average and satisfactory by the chief examiner in each subject;
- Production of dummy scripts;

- Preliminary coordination meetings for the standardization and finalization of the marking schemes and dummy scripts alongside the question paper;
- Main coordination meetings for assistant examiners and team leaders for the purpose of standardizing their markings;
- Progressive vetting of scripts marked by the assistant examiners by the Chief Examiner or Team Leader In-charge;
- Engagement of ad-hoc staff as checkers to go through the marked scripts page by page;
- Use of computer scanning machines to score the multiple choice questions;
- Ensuring anonymity of examiners;
- Marking of candidates scripts outside the geo-political zone or region from where the examination was written;
- Cross-checking and proof-reading of the recorded scores by the designated subject officer along with the examiners;
- Candidates who are dissatisfied with the grades awarded to them have the right of appeal for the review of their scripts.

**(4) Standard Fixing and Grade Award Meetings:**

- ❖ Statistics showing candidates' performance in all paper components for the current examination;
- ❖ Statistics of performance of candidates for previous examinations in the subject (3-year comparative analysis);
- ❖ Consideration of the question papers and marking schemes for the subjects for any form of difficulty or ambiguity that may have affected the performance of the candidates negatively;
- ❖ Consideration of the Chief Examiners' Reports indicating any special problems in the question papers and also the recommended grades based on the performance of candidates as observed from the marked scripts;
- ❖ Statistical moderation of the Continuous Assessment (CA) scores to correct for marks inflation inherent in the school-based assessment scores;

**(5) Results and Certificates:**

- Timely release of WAEC results in less than 60 days after the last paper was taken;
- Online result checker programme for candidates to check their results;

- Online result verification by educational institutions and employers of labour;
- Printing of candidates' date of birth on the certificates;
- High grade security features like water marks, holograms and copy-proof marks are embedded on WAEC certificates.

## **CHALLENGES OF ASSESSEMENT IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS**

Because of the multicultural contexts in which the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) operates in Nigeria and internationally across Anglophone West Africa sub-region, the task of ensuring quality assurance in the delivery of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is by no means easy. It is fraught with challenges. These include:

### **(1) Geographical spread and difficult terrains**

The vast land mass of Nigeria measuring 923,768.64 square kilometers constitutes a major logistics challenge to the delivery of the WASSC Examination.

### **(2) Instability and fragility of the political system**

Crises resulting from ethno-political logjams are major threat to the administration of the WASSC Examination across the Anglophone West African sub-region. Some years back, the administration of the WASSC Examination in Sierra Leone and Liberia were disrupted by the civil wars that ravaged these countries.

### **(3) Government protectionist policies**

The domestication of the law that established the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) by the governments of its member countries often poses some challenges that have threatened the mandate of the Council and its recognition as an independent international examining board with legal personality.

### **(4) Examination Malpractice**

Unethical examination conducts remain a major threat to the sanctity of public examinations across the Anglophone West African sub-region.

### **(5) Inconsistency of government policies**

Frequent changes of education policies by governments of member countries often affect the delivery of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE).

### **(6) Quota system syndrome**

The policy of equal representation and equitable distribution of positions among ethnic nationality is a major problem of assessment in multicultural contexts.

(7) **Security Threats**

In the Anglophone West African sub-region, due to the effects of globalization and cross border movements of people in search of the proverbial socio-economic opportunities there is a challenge of security to the delivery of public examinations.

(8) **Expanding candidates enrollment**

The rising number of candidates enrolled for public examinations in the Anglophone West African sub-region occasioned by globalization, occupational mobility and cross border movements without a corresponding improvement and expansion of physical infrastructure in schools and examination centres is a major challenge.

(9) **High cost of operation**

The cost of administering the WASSC Examination across the Anglophone West African sub-region is quite monumental judging from the human and material resources that are involved. These are resource persons (honoraria, transportation, flight tickets and hotel accommodation), information management, and production of examination materials and procurement of security documents.

(10) **Differences in national curricula**

Differences in the national curriculum of member countries demand that such areas of differences are adequately taken care of.

(11) **Language/Linguistic problems**

The national curricula in the five member countries recognized the major languages spoken in each country as teaching subjects at the secondary school grade. This implies that examinations would be conducted in these major languages; thus creating a deluge of examination subjects with entry figures that are often very low.

(12) **Religious bigotry**

Religious beliefs often pose serious challenges to educational assessment in multicultural contexts. Cases abound whereby the contents of examination question papers aimed at educating the populace about the impact of modernization on humanity were misconstrued to be blasphemous, thus generating serious breach of peace.

(13) **Conservative cultural doctrines**

Cultural beliefs are major feature of the process of teaching and learning in Anglophone West African sub-region. For instance, some traditional institutions in the sub-region still demand that public examinations be delivered within the precincts of their traditional abode for their palace workers.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proffered:

- Governments in the Anglophone West African sub-region should establish quality assurance bureau or regulatory agencies that will monitor the activities of public examination boards in their respective countries.
- A five-year strategic plan should be instituted by the various governments in the West African sub-region for the evaluation of the activities of public examination boards by reputable external assessors.
- Post examination auditing should be part of the activities of public examination boards across the Anglophone West African sub-region.
- Public examination boards in the Anglophone West African sub-region should work cooperatively together to ensure quality assurance through manpower exchange and development programme, assistance in the areas of logistics and intelligence information sharing.
- Government should allocate more funds to the public examination boards so as to enable them carry out research activities and thus obtain empirical data base on which reformative decision making can be predicated.
- The federal, state and local governments and NGOs should work cooperatively together to ensure quality assurance and accountability in the delivery of public examinations in the areas of capacity building.
- Public examination boards in the Anglophone West African sub-region should set necessary machinery in motion for the commencement of e-testing and e-marking assessment methodologies.
- There is need for continuous training and retraining of staff of public examining boards and other stakeholders to engender globally accepted best practices.
- Level playing grounds should be given to all public examination boards to operate irrespective of their legal personality.
- Countries with scarce resources should collaborate and form a unified examination board to foster regional cooperation.
- Political leaders across the Anglophone West African sub-region should re-dedicate themselves through responsible and responsive leadership that will engender accountability, peace and tranquility.
- Governments in the Anglophone West African sub-region should harmonize their education philosophy and policies for the region to witness rapid economic growth and development.

- The fragile security situations across the Anglophone West African sub-region call for urgent attention. Governments of each country should focus on their internal security mechanism to engender economic growth and development.

## CONCLUSION

The place of quality assurance in the delivery of public examinations in the national economy and development of any country cannot be over-emphasized. Every nation therefore, must ensure that public examination boards in their territory must give quality assurance the first priority. The frameworks for ensuring quality assurance should be strengthened through the development of new performance indicators, benchmarking processes and established reference points for quality, output standard and criteria that focus on candidates' performance.

Public examination boards do not have to be reactive to public scrutiny, but must be proactive, productive, innovative and creative in their service delivery. Quality assurance measures must be embedded in all facets of their activities and operations. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) places high premium on quality assurance and control in all facets of its operations. Our strength is our workforce and our weapons are research, innovation and technology.

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