

CREDIBILITY OF SCHOOL EXAMINATIONS IN ZIMBABWE: A REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

It is certainly true that examinations play a major role both in assessment of learning and selection of candidates for subsequent stages of education and/or for employment, (Bray 1998) hence most countries consider assessment and examinations as one of the most important aspects of the education system. Like in most Commonwealth countries¹, Zimbabwe inherited an examination model of the UK, characterized by Ordinary (O) and Advanced (A) Level examinations. However after gradually taking over the examination process, suddenly, there have arisen negative sentiments on credibility of examinations and maintenance of assessment standards. Is there any objectivity in these statements or it is just a nostalgic attachment to pre-colonial institutions? This paper tries to answer this particular question as well as exploring alternative solutions

Keywords: Zimbabwe, School Examinations, Curriculum Development, Education

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe, a former British Colony known as Rhodesia, is a landlocked country in Southern Africa, sharing borders with Mozambique to the east and north east, South Africa to the South, Zambia to the north, Botswana to the west and south west as well as Namibia to the west at the Caprivi Strip. Zimbabwe's education system consists of primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. Primary education is seven-years and compulsory, secondary education comprises a four-year O-Level cycle where the official entry age is 13 years, and a two-year Advanced Level (A-Level) cycle. Like primary education, the secondary curriculum is centrally designed by the CDU² in the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture. After O-Level, a student may choose to proceed to A-Level or go to any of the following: teacher's training college, technical college, agricultural college, polytechnic, and nursing training college (Kanyongo 2005). By the mid-1990s, Zimbabwe had achieved near universal primary education for all and literacy levels for 15 – 24 year olds rose from 95% to 98% between 1992 and 1999 (Government of Zimbabwe 2004, Murira 2001)

School Examinations in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's school examinations have a long history dating back to the pre – independence era, when the country depended heavily on UK based examination boards both for Schools and University. The ordinary level and advanced level examinations were the preserve of several external examinations

¹ Zimbabwe joined the Commonwealth of Nations soon after Independence in 1980. However the country left the Commonwealth in 2008 in protest of the Commonwealth heads of government and states attempt to intervene in Zimbabwe's political issues

² Curriculum Development Unit

board such as the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), The University of London Schools Examinations Board (ULSEB), and the Associated Examinations Board (AEB). AEB was meant for white sat for students while UCLES was mainly used by African pupils³ The country had its own Examinations Branch under the Ministry of Education which, besides playing an administrative role for external examination, administered the terminal primary school grade seven examinations, the secondary school Junior Certificate examinations, and the grade eleven examinations⁴ that was meant for African students. The discriminatory purpose of the assessment system was meant to disadvantage a large section of the population that happened to be black and hence after independence in 1980, Zimbabwe became determined to take control of its examinations. Dorsey (1981) gives a preview the problem “The black child... entered a system that was voluntary and highly selective. Whether he continued at various levels depended on his ability to pass examinations with a high mark and his parents' ability to pay his school fees. In 1975 only 54.5 percent of the grade 1 cohort completed the 7-year primary school course, 9.9 percent went on to secondary school, 4 percent completed form 4, and the number in the sixth form qualifying for university entrance was 0.3 percent.” (Dorsey 1981)

According to Abraham (2003) citing Bond-Stewart (1986) and Mazhero (1986) it was such resentment toward outside involvement in the examination system and lack of faith in the previous examination process that led to the localization⁵ of examinations to take place between 1984 and 1994 with emphasis initially on 'O' level examinations. AEB examinations were gradually phased out while UCLES took over all examinations and assisted with localization.

The Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) was established through an Act of Parliament (Zimbabwe School Examinations Act of 1994) as the body responsible for assessment in primary and secondary education in Zimbabwe (Abraham 2003). ZIMSEC then took over activities from the Exams Branch in Zimbabwe and the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) of the United Kingdom (UK). The ZIMSEC Act (1994:67) empowered ZIMSEC to: consider and approve subjects suitable for examination, confer or approve the conferment of certificates, diplomas and other awards to persons who have passed examinations, maintain the integrity of examinations at primary and secondary level, appoint panels or boards of examiners, approve and register examination centers, organize and conduct such examinations in subjects that form part of a course of primary or secondary education, enter into arrangements, whether reciprocal or otherwise with persons or organizations, inside or outside Zimbabwe, for the recognition of certificates, diplomas and other awards granted by the council.

The localization of examinations was completed in 2002 when ZIMSEC finally took over the control of Advanced level examinations. Though it still falls under the Ministry of Education, ZIMSEC is an autonomous institution controlled by a Board of directors representing different stakeholders in society with an interest in education, and remains funded through a government vote, examination fees, as well as its own fund-raising projects. The ZIMSEC board includes educationists, industrialists, University Vice Chancellors among others. The Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) is now responsible for all examinations in primary and secondary education, which are Grade 7 examination, Zimbabwe Junior Certificate of Education (ZJC)⁶, Zimbabwe General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (ZGCE O-Level) and Zimbabwe General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (ZGCE A-Level) examinations.

³ In Zimbabwe, the term ‘White’ is commonly used to refer to people of European origin while the term African is often used to refer to blacks.

⁴ Grade eleven examinations were meant for African students who could not be absorbed to write the O level examinations. Under the colonial administration, a quota system was adopted where in any given year, only 12.5% of all African students leaving primary school were allowed to proceed to through the normal O level academic route also known as the F1 system, 23.5% was channelled towards a vocational based curriculum F2 system. The rest had to drop out of school. Despite the curriculum being skills based the F2 system was heavily resented by the black population leading to their abolition because it was considered to be for the less academically gifted and led to a dead end in terms of further education (Gumbo 1986, Mungazi 1989, Zvobgo 1994)

⁵ Localisation is a term used in Zimbabwe to refer to the taking over of examination administration by ZIMSEC from UCLES

⁶ The ZJC examination has been temporarily discontinued.

ZIMSEC and CDU: Is there a duplication of effort?

As noted by Yoloye(1986) most countries in Anglophone Africa (Zimbabwe included) institutionalized the search for relevance in educational content by setting up national curriculum development centres, whose task was that of preparing curriculum materials hence localization of content was one of the ways of achieving curriculum relevance. In 1980 Zimbabwe created the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). It had the mandate to develop ZJC and O level syllabuses, teaching materials like pupils and teachers modules as well as approving textbooks for use in both primary and secondary schools. These educational resources had to be produced in line with the country's chosen ideology of Socialism then. The Unit then under the directorship of Fay Chung, who later became the Minister of Education and Culture, adopted a broad based approach of involving all stakeholders in the development of subject specific curriculum. This is captured in the UNESCO report on education in Zimbabwe which says "the curriculum constitutes the legal framework for the development of teaching/learning activities. It should respond to the needs of the society and to the needs of individuals. The curriculum development process, therefore, involves close co-ordination between a variety of stakeholders and institutions. Curriculum development work cannot be done in isolation. Because of this, decisions about curriculum issues are made in close consultation with the learners, parents, teachers, heads of schools, education officers in the regions, the examinations council, subject specialists, commerce and industry, teachers colleges and universities." (UNESCO – Government of Zimbabwe 2001)

Thus the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council was not only given the responsibility for making decisions on assessment objectives as well content of public examinations, assessment and the awarding of grades but, also to offer syllabus review suggestions. ZIMSEC and CDU were meant to complement each other on curriculum and assessment matters and initially this arrangement worked well. Problems surfaced after the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) that later resulted in the downsizing of CDU. ESAP was a creation of the IMF, which instead of reducing poverty, it led to poverty spreading all over Zimbabwe (Richards and Govere 2010). This resulted in ZIMSEC slowly assuming the duties of the CDU, particularly revising and drawing up of syllabuses in addition to examinations. By 2000 when the process of localizing Advanced level examinations began, CDU was a shadow of its former self and since then ZIMSEC has been reviewing syllabuses, developing test items, and running examinations on its own. This scenario reveals the following Firstly, the checks and balances associated that were meant to be between curriculum developer (CDU) and the assessment arm (ZIMSEC) is no longer there.

Secondly, it is no longer clear if the national goals and aims are adequately catered for since the CDU is not fully operational. The philosophical and ideological aspects of education were better catered for through CDU, with ZIMSEC assessing the candidate's learning in line with national needs. Though current syllabuses do contain aims and objectives that appear to be in line with national goals, the process of developing them should be left to curriculum practitioners.

However, it is also true that the current situation has demonstrated that they may have been no need of having two institutions with overlapping interests and functions. It could be prudent to have curriculum planners with ZIMSEC. UCLES both developed and assessed its own syllabuses and hence there is no reason why ZIMSEC cannot do the same.

It appears as if CDU was of benefit to a few individuals. In most cases, the curriculum planners were the authors of school textbooks and hence tended to approve books they had written or had been written by their colleagues. The fact that CDU personnel were privy to the requirements for writing school text books meant that they could monopolize the production of school textbooks, which are of course a big business in Zimbabwe. At least ZIMSEC offers a level playing field as it recommends set books from the commercial market, and leaves educationists to get whichever textbooks are appropriate to cover a syllabus.

Standards are Falling! – Says Who?

ZIMSEC is affiliated to the Association of Educational Assessment in Africa (AEAA) and the International Association of Educational Assessment (IAEA). It is also monitored by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre. This ensures that ZIMSEC adheres to internationally acclaimed standards of assessing student achievement. Despite the affiliations and accreditation, ZIMSEC (2003) points out that one of the most frequent asked questions is whether the localisation of examinations has not led to a decline in standards of examinations. One then wonders why a section of the Zimbabwean community could claim that assessment standards plummeted with the complete takeover of examinations by ZIMSEC such that they will struggle to find a place at any reputable university in the future.

Localisation was a phased process and was carefully executed to ensure that assessment was not compromised (ZIMSEC 2003). Initially UCLES controlled the setting of examination items, the marking and processing of results. At this point ZIMSEC only played an administrative role in ensuring that the examinations were conducted in time and under appropriate conditions. The institution then went through a period of association with UCLES where the administrative and assessment processes were slowly transferred to ZIMSEC. This included the training of markers, chief examiners, item writers and other essential personnel. Later on the institution's association with UCLES changed once again with ZIMSEC taking control of most examination processes and UCLES assuming the role of a validating body. During all this time there were no problems of examinations credibility. Once ZIMSEC completely took over the examination system, credibility issues seemingly cropped up. There is a multiplicity of reasons for such a scenario:

Zimbabwe has existed for a greater part of its life as a socially divided community of haves and the have not. The previous advantaged communities could not accept competing with the less privileged through the same exam. Social differences have always been perpetuated by making sure that examinations focus on foreign values and knowledge thereby ensuring the success of the country's elite only. Basing the exam on the same values and goals increased competition for all and hence falling standards could be a necessary scapegoat.

Previously, a Cambridge School Certificate was a passport for admission to many foreign Universities. This was by virtue of Cambridge's tradition as a reputable academic institution. Holders of UCLES certificates had often been admitted into UK universities since they had British certificates. However, with ZIMSEC certificates, they had to be evaluated first before gaining entrance and in some cases at a cost. This probably did not imply an inferior education system but that at that point ZIMSEC was an institution of unknown reputation. But this defies the point that ZIMSEC and UCLES conducted examinations in partnership for a decade. Maybe, the partnership should have been over a lengthy period before weaning off ZIMSEC.

Lastly the idea of high standards and quality is central in the Zimbabwean society be it in the sourcing of goods or services. School certificates have always been seen to be issued by a University (Cambridge or University of London). The sudden change where a University seal is no longer visible on a school certificate is the cause of credibility rumblings. Some question as to when ZIMSEC became a University. What Zimbabweans fail to appreciate is that localisation did not only take place in Zimbabwe, but also in many SADC states such as Botswana, Swaziland and Tanzania, and examinations councils in these states are the sole certifying authorities. The nostalgic feeling of the good old days takes time to pass away and at times, creates perceived problems where they are nonexistent.

However, credibility questions could have been fuelled by technical problems such as examination leaks and at times the administration of wrong papers during an exam. The continued leaking and disruptions of ZIMSEC examinations each year have had a negative impact on the credibility of the local examinations body. This has been compounded by the movement of experienced examiners to

greener pastures, leaving a gap with no one to fill. (Ncube 2004) What most people fail to realise is that such problems are not only pertinent to Zimbabwe but to many countries worldwide. Probably one could ask; what could be the best way forward to restore confidence in the examination system?

Restoring Public Confidence in the Examinations System

There are three options that would help restore ZIMSEC's credibility. The first option would be to bring back the partnership between ZIMSEC and the University of Cambridge. The degree of the partnership could vary from Cambridge International Examinations (CIE)⁷ taking direct control of the examinations to acting as a validating body. Either way that need is there. It appears as if the Ministry of Education and Culture is already moving toward that direction. Officials from CIE have visited ZIMSEC to determine what could have gone wrong with localization (Coltart 2009, Nyathi 2010). Rewinding the clock could restore confidence in the examination system in the shortest possible time since Zimbabwe has had a long partnership with the University of Cambridge dating back to the colonial period. To borrow from Jansen (1990) Cambridge Overseas Certificate not only serves internal expectations and the state's legitimation needs, but may also reflect a need for the metropole's validation of the quality of Zimbabwe's graduates and, therefore, of the "success" of the state in meeting international standards. It should be noted that this problem of preferring foreign certificates is not peculiar to Zimbabwe only. Studies in Mauritius and Malta have shown that candidates would prefer a certificate from Cambridge or London than a local one (Bissoondoyal 1996, Sultana 1996 in Bray 1998). Though re-establishing the ZIMSEC Cambridge partnership would be a worthwhile move, this would impact negative again on the economy through the repatriation of large sums of money that the country had tried to avoid through localization. In any case education comes at a cost!

The second option could be that of finding a local validating body like the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). UZ' programmes and certificates are accepted throughout the world and having the University seal on school certificates would give them weight. Furthermore, UZ's Department of Teacher Education has the monopoly of certifying teacher trainees through its 14 associate colleges. Thus adding ZIMSEC to its portfolio would not be a problem. However, Zimbabwe now has 14 Universities, which also have their own education departments. ZIMSEC could still affiliate to any one of the Universities or a body including all Universities in Zimbabwe could be created to validate ZIMSEC's examinations. This is possible by enacting an act of parliament that would set out the parameters through which ZIMSEC would partner any University of a group of Universities.

The last option would involve the whole SADC region and hence it is subject to international cooperation among the SADC states. Bray (2003) discusses how some governments that have been anxious to detach their education systems from metropolitan agencies but which have had misgivings about embarking on national arrangements have instead joined regional bodies. Three well established regional examination bodies, which include the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA), are given as examples. Since the SADC⁸ countries are aiming towards total social and economic regional integration, this could finally be translated into the education sector as well. A regional examination body may bring with it thorough supervision of the process of setting, printing, and packaging of examination papers to avoid both errors and leakages. This would also help Boards such as ZIMSEC to manage its information base efficiently to avoid errors during the publication of results so that the results retain credibility. It would be easy to do that taking into account the fact that most SADC states share the same colonial history, boundaries, culture etc. Of course different political ideologies and governance styles could be an immediate impediment. Some governments

⁷ CIE is the successor to UCLES

⁸ Southern Africa Development Community is a grouping of 14 countries in Southern Africa that started as an effort to reduce the economic dependence of independent Southern African countries on South Africa before 1994. It has since changed its focus towards a total regional integration.

would see it as surrendering national pride and compromising national goals while others might see their educational position as being watered down and thus reducing their standards.

Whilst a regional examination body could be an appealing solution, it presents problems in the sense that the SADC countries have different educational systems as well. The duration of both the junior certificate and ordinary level vary from one country to another, and so are university entrance qualifications. An effective regional examinations board would need to standardize these differences. However, it is possible to have a regional examinations body that comes up with country specific examinations that are recognized within the same region.

CONCLUSION

The issue of examinations is a contentious one since they are a vital instrument determining the students' prospects for further education and employment. Unfortunately, for developing countries most of which are former colonies, examinations have been controlled from educational centres in the developed countries. Efforts to establish credible examination systems as in Zimbabwe have been affected by the long established tradition of preferring foreign qualifications hence negating efforts to ensuring curricula from matching the broader community needs (Namasasu 1990). This was worse by economic problems that coincided with localisation and incompetence at some levels of examination administration. As detailed in this paper, credibility can still be built by re – establishing partnership with Cambridge. Total control of examinations should come after a long working relationship coupled with a gradual weaning system. A regional examination system could also be of benefit to SADC.

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