

## EFFECTS OF EXAMINATION POLICIES ON SCHOOL CULTURE IN HIGH SCHOOLS IN UGANDA

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined the effect of examination policies on schools' culture in central region of Uganda. A sample of 382 A' Level students and 234 teachers were used. The main instrument and techniques for the study was questionnaire. The study found out that there is a significant effect between examination policies and school culture which in turn affects quality of education. The use of examinations has made many to belief that passing is the key. The pressure of examination policies encourages teachers to internalize the norms, values, and expectations of stakeholders and to accept responsibility for conforming to them, by ensuring that students pass.

**Key words:** Examination, policies and school culture

### INTRODUCTION

According to World Bank (2008) policy makers and researchers are increasingly concerned with low education quality in the era of increased education spending. Poor education outcomes at the individual level, not only limits one's progression further in school but also negatively affects an individual's future income and productivity. Nevertheless, the recognition of the problem of poor learning outcomes has not translated into the development of more effective actions to improve education quality in Uganda at high school level.

On the other hand, the education sector in Uganda has its creed rooted in academic qualifications, represented by certificates awarded based on students' performance in examinations at different levels. Educational outcomes in Uganda are measured by examinations results. Students, teachers, and schools derive their credit from examination results. "Teachers teach for examination success" is the often-heard phrase in the country. The result is that teachers train students to reproduce facts and definitions, leading to rote-learning.

Many teachers teach in more than two schools, a state that makes educationists to question the quality of graduates produced (Kasozi, 2005). The scramble for examination marks is thus started by the Ministry itself, and schools rush to grab the academic cream declared by the Ministry. The public professes passing examinations through whichever means, as the essence of education. High rate of competition among schools have

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contributed towards examinations malpractices in the country over the years, despite the fact that Uganda National Examination Board has taken strict measures to reduce examination leakages (Basheka, Muhenda and Kittobe, 2009). What is unclear is how to harmonize the examination policies approaches so that mechanisms that permit continuous processes of empowering graduates to be self-sustainable in the long run, are applied.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A study conducted by Adeyemi (2008), on “The Influence of Class-Size on the Quality of Output in Secondary Schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria” found out that class-size and endowment funds in order to build more is a critical factor in determining the quality of output from classrooms and procure more specialist teachers among secondary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Students and all the principals noted that schools with small class-sizes had better quality due to student-teacher ratio. Officers agreed on the need for regular inspection and likewise, the approved teacher quota of one and one monitoring of schools by the state’s ministry of half teacher per class should be allowed to remain but education should be properly used in the distribution of teachers. It was therefore recommended that government should provide more classrooms in all secondary schools in the state to cater for small class-sizes.

The study of Adeyemi (2008) portrays a critical system in which the researcher assessed the outcome of students based on class-size and a descriptive design was used. In analyzing the findings, the correlation product moment was used. This helped to determine the relationship among the variables. Although the study was essential, it should be noted that it was descriptive whereas the current study proposes a correlation design so as to correlate the variables of study. At the same time, it did not handle quality of the outcome and the processes of attaining such a quality which is the concern of the ongoing study.

Most studies on the education sector in Uganda have largely rotated around educational statistics like school enrolment, drop-out rate, performance in examinations, sex ratios of students, teacher-student ratios, access in terms of distance and adult literacy as the key predictors of human development. Little or no studies have been done on the influence of examination policies on quality of education that encompasses the life skills, relevant knowledge, attitudes and values acquired during the schooling process and its direct impact on a people’s, productivity, entrepreneurial abilities **and** innovativeness among those who do not proceed to higher levels of education. Thus, the ongoing study aims to explore the influence of examination policies on quality of education in secondary schools in Uganda.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study used a correlational research design and used both qualitative and quantitative methods. A sample of 386 high school students was used from 8 different districts in central region. The data was collected using self-administered questionnaire. Inferential statistics were used in which specifically Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to analyze the data.

## RESULTS

The study assessed the effect of examination policies on school culture in high schools in central region of Uganda.

**Table 1: Effects of examination policies on school culture**

School culture	Examination policies
Manage the instruction time properly by starting and finishing the lesson on time.	.750** (0.000)
Organize interclass and inter school debates for the students.	.393** (0.000)
Are qualified and competent enough to teach.	.642** (0.000)
Have space to enable the teachers to move around during the teaching learning process.	.297** (0.000)
Condition (light, neatness and quality of seats) is to the standard that promotes learning.	-.588** (0.000)
Principal makes regular classroom visits (when teachers are teaching) for support.	-.609** (0.000)
There are textbooks and reading materials available for each student which can be consulted.	.622** (0.000)
The buildings are conducive for teaching learning activity.	-.337** (0.000)
The library is full of the necessary reference materials such as current books in each subject.	.714** (0.000)
Laboratories are at the services of science students.	.376** (0.000)
Science teachers use laboratories effectively to teach sciences.	-.607** (0.000)
Principal mobilizes the school community for a safe and orderly school environment.	-.234** (0.000)
There are full time teachers who can be accessed at any time.	.292** (0.000)
Teachers always work hard to cover the entire syllabi as outlined by the Ministry of Education and Sports.	-.266** (0.000)
The teachers always prepare us to remember the points during the examinations periods so that we pass well	-.196** (0.000)
There is career guidance that provides necessary information on subject combinations that lead to tertiary level courses.	.414** (0.000)
The school pays much attention to my talents through facilities that promote talent development.	-.469** (0.000)
Principals initiate the school community to aspire high expectation in student achievement.	-.531** (0.000)

**\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

## DISCUSSION

The study assessed the effect of examination policies on school culture in high schools in central region of Uganda. It was established that examination policies affect culture of high schools in central region of Uganda. The study found a significant relationship ( $r$  value = .750,  $p$  = 0.000), between examination policies and teachers managing the instruction time properly by starting and ending on time. The use of examinations has made many to believe that passing is the key. The teachers' use of time in teaching is not a big deal as long as the students can pass their examinations.

Furthermore, it was found that examination policies affect school organization of interclass and inter school debates for students. A significant relationship ( $r$  value = .393,  $p$  = 0.000), between examination policies and organizing interclass and inter school debates for students. Since schools are meant to be accountable to the parents and society in terms of students passing rate, schools opt to concentrate on academics at the expense of co-curricular activities. Traditional schools need to be ranked highly, which makes them to think in terms of academics.

The study also looked at examination policies and schools having qualified and competent teachers. A significant relationship ( $r$  value = .642,  $p$  = 0.000), existed between examination policies and schools having qualified and competent teachers. Schools always need to have qualified and competent teachers such as those who are 'examiners' to help the students pass their examinations through drilling them in examination strategies.

Schools opt to create a culture that promotes high rate of success in national examinations. It is thus not surprising that the purposes and goals of many schools are to have good teachers who will make the school maintain its rank and name in the national examinations. In a situation like that quality of education is limited to passing and not preparing a holistic student. The examination policies do influence the school culture of having teachers who are examiners to ensure high rate of success of the students. Based on the findings of the study, UNESCO (2005) argument is pertinent here, in which they point out that much as the government is the pace setter & quality watch dog in the education sector, it has not gone without notice that issues of poor quality have been noticed in government aided & owned institutions.

The enrollment is growing each year than new teachers could be recruited and trained, schools built, and textbooks procured and distributed. If well planned and adequately resourced, secondary education has the potential to provide an environment where large numbers of adolescents can gain the skills and knowledge needed to better participate (economically and socially) in a peaceful, democratic society as well as develop the necessary knowledge to avoid risky behavior and lead a healthier life.

Moreover, the study looked at examinations and classroom conditions. The findings revealed a significant relationship ( $r$  value = .297,  $p$  = 0.000), between examination policies and classroom conditions such as nature of seats, and space for teacher movements.

Overcrowded classrooms often do not have enough space for supplementary equipment. Maintaining quality when faced with the dramatic increase in quantity has been difficult. Parents have complained about the poor quality of education. They attribute this inadequate education quality to poor quality teaching, shortage of textbooks and other instructional materials, high teacher/students' ratios and poor school management, which fails to strengthen the school culture. In relation to the findings, Kwitonda (1995) notes that the education sector in Uganda have largely rotated around educational statistics like school enrolment, drop-out rate, performance in examinations, sex ratios of students, teacher-student ratios, access in terms of distance and adult literacy as the key predictors of human development. Little has been said about the life skills, relevant knowledge, attitudes and values acquired during the schooling process and its direct impact on a people's, productivity, entrepreneurial abilities and innovativeness among those who do not proceed to higher levels of education. Emphasis in examinations is always put in examination which inhibits the culture of the school, as well as quality of education.

Besides, the study looked at examination policies and head teacher visiting teachers when teaching, in which there as a significant relationship ( $r$  value =  $-.609$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) between the variables. Most schools have crated culture that promotes good performance through head teacher's visitation of their lessons. However, this is meant to ensure that students are taught which focus on the outcomes of education-in particular, student learning- can be attributed to the formal recognition and concern that many students spend a considerable amount of time in school without acquiring useful knowledge and skills.

Since the national examinations are used as sole determinants of students' future, school always need to create a picture that the students are taught as well as they pass. They look to it that teachers are present in classes drilling the students. In support of the forgoing, Adeogun (2003) argues that the quality of the educational system depends on the quality of its teaching staff and that a school without human resources may not be able to achieve the goal and objectives of the educational system. Chapman and Adams (2002) also noted that teachers are the major indicator and determinant of quality education. Highly professional teachers, who are dedicated, are needed in schools. It has been established that there is high correlation between what teachers know and what they teach.

In assessing the examination policies and school culture one of the aspects assessed was textbooks and reading materials availability that be consulted. The study a significant relationship ( $p$ . value =  $.622$ ;  $r=0.000$ ) between examination policies and availability of textbooks and reading materials to be consulted. Schools always try their best to ensure that there are textbooks and reading materials than can be used among the students. They build their decisions on the premises that as long as students attain good grades the school is serving its purpose. Thus, the school culture that promotes passing of examinations rarely takes time to rethink the nature of graduates it produces. There is a very strong argument being made in the curriculum for practically-oriented secondary education aimed at specific skill shortages. These make students to lack the necessary skills of scientific inquiry and

investigation using practical techniques to solve societal needs. In this manner then the quality of education is always questioned.

Similarly, the study assessed the examination policies and whether buildings are conducive for teaching learning activity. A significant relationship ( $p$ . value =  $-.337$ ;  $r=0.000$ ) between examination policies and whether buildings are conducive for teaching learning activity. This means that due to the value attached to the examination policies schools never too much mind about infrastructure and conducive environment. Appalling learning environment is always a key feature. In many of the private and government institutions there is inadequate infrastructure. Exam-centric education for Uganda high school students, and considers how this exam-oriented education negatively affects the education process, socialization, and ability to learn beyond studying for testing requirements. In reference to the above, Mustafa & Cullingford (2008) pointed out that teachers have little control regarding what and when they teach and these have an impact on how they teach. In this case, fulfilling their role as instructors, teachers work in different environments, face numerous challenges, and engage in various activities using different approaches, and hold diverse feelings, beliefs and attitudes toward their work, their students and the subject.

Furthermore, it was found out that examination influences school library which is part of the school culture. The findings had a significant relationship ( $p$ . value =  $.714$ ;  $r=0.000$ ) between examination policies and school culture. In this case, the schools have created their culture by stocking their libraries with specific textbooks or pamphlets which students can use to underscore examination answering techniques. In this case, the high schools have lost focus of imparting holistic knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable young people to be effective in *life and work*, including being able to deal with paradox and conflict generated by change, being agents not just recipients of knowledge, skills and attitudes and being lifelong learners and members of a flexible workforce.

Also, the study looked at examination policies and school laboratories. A significant relationship ( $p$ . value =  $.376$ ;  $r=0.000$ ) between examination policies and school Laboratories being at the services of science students. The weak relationship shows that teachers do not use much of practical experiments in teaching sciences. The culture of the classroom reflects to some extent the aspects of other educational cultures to which the teacher has been exposed. The culture of a school can be a positive influence on learning or it can seriously inhibit the functioning of the school. In any working environment, employees and clientele prefer to be in a situation that is appealing and invitational.

Furthermore, there was need to ascertain the effects of examination policies on school culture in terms of Science teachers using laboratories effectively to teach sciences. The findings revealed a significant relationship ( $r$ . value =  $-.607$ ;  $p=0.000$ ) between examination policies and science teachers using laboratories to teach sciences. The implication therein was that examination policies affect the use of laboratories in teaching sciences. This means that the use of laboratories is based on examination experiments which students need to know and not teaching most of the aspects practically. Most schools lack the necessary apparatus for experiments which make them to only handle experiments for

specific areas that they feel will be examined. The examinations policies influence culture and consequently affect the quality of education.

It was also found out that there is a significant relationship ( $r$ . value=  $-.234$ ;  $p$ .=0.000) between examination policies and school culture in relation to principal mobilizing the school community for a safe and orderly school environment. Since the findings show a negative relationship this implies that school head teachers rarely link school and community towards orderly school environment. Schools are concern with the drilling students towards good grades which the major aim of success. Students in Uganda are taking a key exam that will determine their future. Focusing solely on examinations, the head teachers, often dwells in advising students how to work hard and pass their examinations, which comes at the cost of students losing their imaginations and creativities. This fails the culture that could be promoted in schools, as students are forced to memorize the materials taught in order to reproduce them.

Another aspect considered in the study was examination policies and school culture of having full time teachers. The result showed a weak significant relationship ( $r$ . value=  $.292$ ;  $p$ .=0.000) between examination policies and schools having fulltime teachers. Uganda has more private schools as compared to government schools. Most of the teachers in most cases work in more than two schools which mean that they do not have enough time for one school. Since schools' search for examiners as part of the teaching staff, then most of them are part-time who work for either one or two days a week. In such scenario schools fail to create a conducive school culture that promote learning. The issue of absenteeism, not only of teachers but also of students and head teachers has been taken up in earnest as part of Uganda's efforts to make the system more efficient. The hierarchy of leadership at the school levels creates the parameters within which cultures can be created. In other words, teachers are expected to follow the dictates of the principal and other administrators regardless of other cultural aspects of the school. Furthermore, students are expected to follow the dictates of teachers (and all other adults in the school) as well. This hierarchy contributes to the culture of schools heedless of individual teaching or leadership styles. However, this is not the case, due to the high issues of teachers who are part-timing as well as excelling in academics of students in specific subjects make head teachers not to follow up.

School culture was also assessed in terms of teachers completing syllabi as outlined by the Ministry of Education and Sports. The findings showed a negative weak significant relationship ( $r$ . value=  $-.266$ ;  $p$ .=0.000) between examination policies and schools culture in terms of teachers always work hard to cover the entire syllabi as outlined by the Ministry of Education and Sports. Competition among schools makes it difficult for teachers to handle the syllabi as outlined by the Ministry of education and Sports. Teachers always teach examinable areas and leave out those areas that are not examined. The use of the exam results has also affected the way teachers teach. The examinations are really made hard to eliminate students. So the best way one can pass the examinations is by cramming and learning and re-learning things. This has made many teachers to resort to teaching specific content that they believe is examinable. Teachers personal experiences, values, norms, and

prior education all influence their views of the curriculum, pedagogy, and change even before they step foot into a classroom. Any change that is proposed that runs counter to the teacher's already developed culture and philosophy will be resisted. Teachers who contentedly stay in a school for a number of years do so because their subjects are done well, and also the school is a place where the underlying stream of values and norms coincides with their own.

Examination policies and school culture was also inferred to as regard career guidance that provides necessary information on subject combinations that lead to tertiary level courses. The result revealed a significant relationship ( $r$ . value= .414;  $p$ . =0.000) between examination policies and school culture as regard to there being career guidance that provides necessary information on subject combinations that lead to tertiary level courses. It is part of school culture to provide career guidance, however, with a weak relationship it implies that schools just do it moderately. Hence examination policies pressure affects school culture in handling career guidance. Most schools take specific subject combinations which students have to deal with. Consequently, examinations affect school culture the lives of all school personnel, including and especially teachers in their classrooms. Schools are shaped by cultural practices and values and reflect the norms of the society for which they have been developed. Zhang (2008) argue that the rituals and procedures common to most public schools also play a part in defining a school's culture. For example, organizing the students and curriculum by age and grade level, and systematically rewarding or punishing students for behavior and/or academics all add to the confluence of the culture of schools.

In dealing with school culture it was necessary to handle school contribution to development of students' talents. The findings showed a significant relationship ( $r$ . value= -.469;  $p$ . =0.000) between examination policies and whether the school pays much attention to talents. This means that schools rarely pay attention to talent development in terms of putting in place facilities that promote talent development. Few schools prioritize talent development of students. Competition in national examinations has made many schools to concentrate on drilling students towards excelling in academics ignoring the talent development of students. Thus, examinations affect talent development of students, which in turn affects the quality of education offered to students. The school experience can help students grow and develop knowledge, skills and abilities for success in the workforce and for aspiring career choices. Co-curricular activities provide students with a network of peers and adults who have interests and talents similar to their own. Students who participate have the chance to excel individually, be part of a group, and gain real-life lessons about the importance of teamwork, responsibility, commitment, and hard work. However, most schools have failed to honor co-curricular activities. The findings contradict World Bank (2008) who argues that co-curricular activities provide students freedom and opportunities for expressing themselves outside the tight formalities of the school program and, at times, are more important for their emotional and social health. These activities provide opportunities of self-expression and provide outlets for the flow of the surplus energies of



the students. Thus, extracurricular activities are valuable for developing proper attitude, habits, interest, ideas and even careers among learners.

Lastly, the study looked at school culture in relation to head teachers initiating the school community to aspire high expectation in student achievement. The findings indicated a negative significant relationship ( $r$ . value=  $-.531$ ;  $p=0.000$ ) between examination policies and principals initiate the school community to aspire high expectation in student achievement. Schools struggle on their own as the community does not contribute much towards inspiring the students to work hard to excel academically. Therefore, the relation between the school and the community is based on the students passing their examinations. Doing well in tests carries favor in the examinations, which demands memorizing significant volumes of information for the purpose of passing tests. The high scores are also deciding factors behind getting a chance to attend elite universities. Thus, for years examinations demand most students to spend years of continual memorization and writing preparing for the examinations, which affects the culture and the quality of education at the long run. The head teachers have superior knowledge all round and the relevant academic qualification to enable one to improve the running and performance of the school. Uganda Examination Council is committed to guarantee fairness in conducting of examinations. Head teachers are supposed to promote free and fair environment for examinations, and they ought to sensitize the students and community on examination ethics. However, school heads have no time for such, which affects the schools culture that promotes cheating in order to ensure students pass.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a significant effect between examination policies and school culture which in turn affects quality of education. The use of examinations has made many to believe that passing is key. The pressure of examination policies encourages teachers to internalize the norms, values, and expectations of stakeholders and to accept responsibility for conforming to them, by ensuring that students pass. An exam-centric education assigns student aptitude based only on test scores, oftentimes leading to the marginalization, if not outright disregard, of lower performing students. In this case, the high schools have lost focus of imparting holistic knowledge, skills and attitudes that would enable young people to be effective in *life and work*, including being able to deal with paradox and conflict generated by change, being agents not just recipients of knowledge, skills and attitudes and being lifelong learners and members of a flexible workforce.

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