

# Examination Malpractice in Sierra Leone: Causes and Effects on National Development

Angella Magdalene George<sup>1</sup> Daniel Rince George<sup>2</sup>

1. School of Community Health Sciences, Njala University Sierra Leone

2. School of Education, Njala University, Sierra Leone

E-mail of the corresponding author: [dr.george2006@yahoo.com](mailto:dr.george2006@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

*Examination malpractice* is a widespread concern that corrodes the foundation of educational systems worldwide. This abstract delves into the specific context of Sierra Leone, exploring the causes and far-reaching effects of examination malpractice on the nation's development. The causes include inadequate preparation, societal pressures, corruption, and the absence of values education. These elements contribute to a culture where cheating is normalized. The effects, in turn, reverberate across the fabric of society. The quality of the workforce diminishes, meritocracy erodes, education standards decline, and the nation's competitiveness is compromised. Economic growth, social cohesion, and moral values are all adversely impacted. In order to improve the quality of the education system, the country must invest in improving educational infrastructure, cultivating ethical values, and implementing strict enforcement and monitoring mechanisms during examinations. Eradicating examination malpractice is pivotal to realizing a robust education system and sustainable national development in Sierra Leone.

**Keywords:** Examination malpractice, National Development, education system

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## 1. Introduction

Examination malpractice is a pervasive issue that undermines the integrity of education systems worldwide. In Sierra Leone, this problem has far-reaching consequences, impacting individual students and the nation's development. This article delves into the causes of examination malpractice in Sierra Leone and its effects on the country's development. In Sierra Leone, examinations have widely been embraced as the preferred method of evaluating knowledge and skills. They serve as formal tests that gauge a student's comprehension and capabilities. Within an educational context, examinations are utilized to measure the extent of a student's knowledge within a specific timeframe. Adekunle (2003) perceives examinations as tools for appraising individual competencies and content mastery in general and specialized fields of study. Furthermore, examinations constitute a structured evaluation technique that presents individuals with inquiries or tasks designed to verify their accumulated knowledge and proficiencies (Oduwaiye, 2014).

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) characterizes an examination as a verbal or practical assessment conducted in schools or colleges, particularly a significant assessment essential for obtaining a qualification. Assessments can be administered orally, in written form, via digital platforms, or in a designated environment requiring physical demonstration of skills. The widespread examination malpractice in recent times has emerged as a pressing concern within the global education system. Allegations of diverse malpractices, encompassing actions such as espionage, question leakage, impersonation, and provision of special accommodations, mar numerous examinations.

Examination malpractice is described as any deliberate transgression of examination regulations aimed at conferring an undue advantage upon a candidate. Also known as cheating, examination malpractice encompasses illicit behaviours undertaken by students during assessments to secure favourable grades through unscrupulous means. This malpractice involves irregular methods of assessing candidates that contravene established examination norms and principles. The detrimental impact of examination malpractice on students is apparent, as many have grown reliant on such practices, forsaking genuine study efforts in the hope of replicating their previous questionable successes.

The educational system of Sierra Leone has engaged in extensive discussions concerning examination malpractice. Malpractice is a formidable challenge not only to examination boards but also to educational administrators, the broader education structure, the government, and society at large. The West African Examination Council (WAEC) (2003) defines *examination malpractice* as any inappropriate conduct or action displayed by candidates or individuals tasked with examination administration both within and outside the examination venue before, during, or after the examination to secure an unfair advantage. These misconducts have surged dramatically over the past three decades. The uproar over examination malpractice across all levels of the Sierra Leone educational system is a stark reflection of the erosion of societal values. The Sierra Leonean society celebrates mediocrity and views cheating as a clever strategy, emphasizing outcomes rather than the

methods employed. Society tends to justify the ends over the means, an attitude that aligns with examining malpractice with broader wrongdoings and corruption in society.

Similar to the way politicians engage in electoral rigging to obtain coveted political positions, students resort to cheating from primary to tertiary levels to advance within the education system. A myriad of misconducts encompasses examination centers as individuals strive to exploit the assessment process for personal gain. Regrettably, this is not limited to students alone; business establishments, parents, educators, school administrators, and examination officials conspire with students to perpetrate these unethical actions.

For instance, during the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and that of the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE), it is not uncommon to witness parents and relatives of candidates converging at examination venues under the guise of providing support. In Sierra Leone, it is typical to find up to 500 individuals present in an examination center meant for 300 candidates. Those not taking the exam often gather to assist those who are. The collusion among these various parties complicates efforts to counter this issue. Even penalties stipulated by the National Examination Council (NEC), ranging from result cancellation to lengthy prison terms, have proven ineffective at curbing the cheating culture due to the influence of collusion.

## 2. FORMS OF EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE

Examination malpractice refers to various unethical or fraudulent activities that occur during examinations. While the specific forms of examination malpractice can vary from one country to another, including Sierra Leone, some common examples include:

- **Exam Leakage:** This is an act that occurs before examination. It is the release of examination questions or answers to students or candidates before the scheduled examination date or time. This act undermines the fairness and integrity of the entire examination process. Leakage is commonly known in Sierra Leone and is mainly carried out by staff members of the examination authorities, printers, proofreaders, and messengers.
- **Impersonation:** This refers to someone taking an exam on behalf of another person. That is, an individual who is not registered as a candidate for a particular examination takes the place of one who is registered. It involves hiring a more competent and intelligent person in that subject area to assume someone's identity by presenting fake identification or documents to deceive the invigilators. In this type of malpractice, there is usually a conspiracy between the chief examiner, examination supervisor and sometimes other top examination officers.  
Most times, their booklets are exchanged before or after the examination. Candidate A writes the name and particulars of Candidate B on his or her answer script, while Candidate B does likewise. Examiners or invigilators hardly pick up this type of malpractice because both candidates registered for the same exams and have Index numbers.
- **Ghost candidates:** "Ghost candidates" is a term used in the context of academic examinations and assessment systems. It refers to individuals who are officially registered as candidates for a particular examination, yet they do not personally participate in the exam. Instead, these individuals employ various deceptive tactics to have someone else take the exam on their behalf. This practice is widely condemned and is considered a form of academic dishonesty, cheating, and fraud.
- **Special room:** In the case of WASSCE and BECE examinations in Sierra Leone, exams supervisors, Principals or others, task candidates to pay specific amount of money during exams so that they can be put in a special hall or room for assistance.
- **Rewriting of Examination:** This is the form of malpractice that occurs after the examination where the candidate is required to rewrite the entire or part of the examination. This act is usually aided by the examination officers, invigilators or examiners responsible for marking the script.
- **Double registration of candidate:** This is similar to impersonation, but in this type of malpractice, both candidates are registered and legal students for the examination. This occurs when two candidates register for the same exams, taking similar names or family names with the intent that one is the actual student and the other is writing the exams on his/her behalf. If, for example, Christian George, an intelligent student, wants to take the examination on behalf of Frances Cole, they will buy the entry form with similar names, Frances Cole (initially Christian George) and the actual Frances Cole. Francis will write Frances' name on her booklet while Frances writes Francis.
- **'Rubber Neck' or 'Giraffing':** The origin of this type of malpractice draws inspiration from one of Africa's indigenous wild creatures, characterized by an exceptionally elongated neck, legs, and a petite head (Akaranga & Ongong, 2013). This malpractice entails a student extending their neck to its maximum length in an attempt to observe and replicate the responses provided by another examinee for a specific question. The "Rubber nek" or "Giraffe" practice is deeply rooted in Sierra Leone's

- examination culture, representing one of the most enduring and prevalent forms of academic dishonesty.
- **Unauthorized Foreign Materials:** Using prohibited materials during exams, such as textbooks, calculators, electronic devices, or unauthorized formula sheets, is considered examination malpractice. This is perhaps the most common form of malpractice. It also relates to introducing unauthorized materials (e.g. parts or whole notebooks, textbooks, microchips and answers) into the examination hall. Foreign materials are frequently smuggled in pants, shoes, belts, wigs, hems and bras, deposited or fixed in the hall before the examination, or even smuggled in by the candidates or their aids during the examination.
  - **Makers Malpractice:** Deliberate alteration of marks designed to inflate or deflate a candidate's original mark. This can be initiated by examination officials or candidates (Eze, 2012 & Olanipekun, 2013)
  - **Inscription:** Students have progressed to the extent of etching materials or information on unconventional surfaces such as their bodies—like palms and thighs—as well as items like baby diapers, handkerchiefs, rulers, wallets, chairs, currency notes, tables, and even the walls of examination halls, as noted by Oredein (2006).
  - **Illegal activities inside and outside the examination halls:** Individuals determined to engage in dishonest practices manifest inappropriate conduct during exams. For instance, these actions include illicitly removing question papers from the examination hall, exchanging information with fellow candidates or intermediaries outside the hall, and even deliberately damaging portions of the question paper or answer booklet to facilitate malpractice.
  - **Bribery:** This variant of malpractice can be strategically exploited to foster a symbiotic alliance between teachers and students for the purpose of cheating. This introduces an economic dimension to the landscape of examination malpractices. A student might provide financial compensation to an examination official, not necessarily to purchase the question paper but to gain permission to utilize illicit resources concealed within the examination hall or to extend the duration of the scheduled exam period. In Nigeria, the pervasive practice of bribery, often called "sorting" within tertiary institutions, is notably widespread. Male students may extend money or valuable items as incentives, while female students may employ monetary incentives or even offer sexual favours to negotiate the "enhancement" of their examination scores. The prevalence of bribery is observed at the educational assessment system's secondary and tertiary levels.
  - **Plagiarism:** occurs when individuals use someone else's work or ideas as their own without proper citation or acknowledgement. This can involve copying answers from external sources or using pre-written essays or papers in an exam context.
  - **Exchange of booklet during examination:** this occurs when candidates exchange their answer booklets in the examination hall either knowingly or unknowingly to the invigilator so that their friends can write answers on their behalf
  - **Collaboration:** Engaging in unauthorized communication or collaboration with fellow students during an exam is another type of malpractice. This can involve sharing answers, whispering, or exchanging information covertly. Copying from another candidate's work with or without permission.
  - **Use of electronic devices and software:** Students may use mobile phones, smartwatches, or other electronic devices and software to access information or communicate with others during the exam. In Sierra Leone for example, students open WhatsApp groups where examination answers are shared. Students can also use google search or chat GPT to secure undue advantage over other students.
  - **Insider involvement:** refers to malpractices involving individuals involved in the examination process, such as teachers or invigilators, who facilitate cheating or provide unfair advantages to specific students.
  - **Forgery:** Creating or altering examination documents, such as answer sheets, attendance registers, or grades on report cards, with the intention of misrepresenting one's performance or academic record is considered forgery.

From the forms mentioned above of examination malpractice, it is evident that it is not only limited to the time and the place of examination. Mainly, it occurs either before, during or after examination. A typical pre-examination malpractice in Sierra Leone is in the process of registering WASSCE candidates for examinations. Ojerinde (2004), as cited in Anzene (2014), highlighted that prevailing pre-examination malpractice involves the enrollment of non-school candidates for educational assessments orchestrated by principals and their school administrators. This occurs despite explicit regulations prohibiting such actions. This phenomenon elucidates why secondary schools in remote regions, characterized by inaccessible roads or challenging landscapes that impede external oversight, observe a surge in candidate numbers during WASSCE examinations. These 'wonder centers' are established with primary financial motivations rather than a genuine intention to provide education to students. Also, pre-examination malpractice can take the form of leakages where students receive actual examination questions before the examination day.

Malpractice during examination day can take several forms, ranging from contributions by pupils and parents to examination officers or invigilators to allow them to either spy, allow foreign materials or help them answer questions on the chalkboard while they copy. It can also occur when answer booklets are taken out of the examination hall for someone to answer on behalf of the student, and the examiner or invigilator accepts upon return. Also, students who pay the requested amount by the exam supervisor, officer or invigilator are placed in a 'special' or separate room where they are allowed to use mobile phones or someone is allowed to answer questions.

Post-examination malpractices, conversely, encompass illicit activities occurring subsequent to the examination to secure an unjust advantage. For instance, candidates resort to methods such as tracing their answer booklets to the marking centers. In the context of BECE and WASSCE examinations, specific candidates employ pencils to inscribe their telephone numbers on their answer booklets, enticing the markers (examiners) to initiate contact to negotiate rewards. Similarly, some female candidates attach semi-nude photographs within their answer booklets to appeal to a potentially promiscuous male examiner. These photographs often bear contact telephone numbers. Additionally, collusion between students and officials from the West African Examination Council (WAEC) in the ICT room is witnessed as they collaborate to manipulate their grades within the system. This manipulation involves substantial financial transactions.

### 3. CAUSES OF EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE

Numerous factors have been put forth to explain the widespread instances of examination malpractice, particularly within the context of Sierra Leone.

- **Emphasis of certificate over skill/ability:** In Sierra Leone, the emphasis on certificates over skills has driven many students to engage in malpractice in pursuit of the necessary credentials. Society places such high value on possessing certificates that an individual's recognition often hinges solely on their possession of specific certificate considering them the ultimate measure of success.
- **Lack of Adequate Preparation:** Students facing inadequate learning resources and poor teaching quality may resort to cheating to compensate for their lack of knowledge.
- **Pressure to Succeed:** The intense competition for limited educational opportunities can create immense pressure on students, leading some to cheat in order to secure better grades. Lack of adequate preparation on the part of students can lead to examination malpractice by fostering desperation, fear of failure, and low self-esteem. Students may resort to cheating, copying, or using unauthorized materials to succeed. Pressure from peers, unrealistic expectations, and poor time management further exacerbate the situation. When students lack the necessary knowledge, they are susceptible to unethical behaviours to meet parental or societal expectations. Addressing this issue requires nurturing ethical awareness, promoting effective study habits, and creating an environment where learning is prioritized over rote memorization.
- **Corruption and Weak Monitoring:** Corruption and weak monitoring can facilitate examination malpractice by eroding the integrity of the educational system. When officials are corrupt, they might accept bribes in exchange for leniency or access to exam materials. Inadequate monitoring creates an environment where cheating can thrive unchecked. Students can collaborate without detection, using unfair means such as cheating, impersonation, or unauthorized materials. This undermines the value of education and rewards dishonesty. Combating this issue requires implementing stringent monitoring measures, fostering transparency, and holding individuals involved in corruption accountable to restore the credibility of examinations.
- **Social Expectations:** Societal pressure to perform exceptionally well in exams can push students to engage in unethical behaviours to meet these expectations. In Sierra Leone, a Certificate is more important than the skills to deliver, which prompted most students into malpractice to have the required certificate to be there. Society regards possession of certificates as Alfa and Omega, where an individual is only recognized if he possesses a specific certificate.
- **Lack of Values Education:** Lack of values education can contribute to examination malpractice by failing to instill ethical principles. Students who are not taught the importance of integrity, honesty, and hard work may prioritize success at any cost. Without a solid moral foundation, they might resort to cheating, plagiarism, or using unauthorized aids during exams. Values education equips students with an understanding of right and wrong, fostering a sense of responsibility and self-discipline. To mitigate malpractice, educational institutions should emphasize values education, promoting a culture of honesty and integrity that discourages unethical behaviours and encourages genuine learning.

### 4. EFFECT OF EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE ON NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Examination malpractice has detrimental effects on national development across several dimensions. Here are some of the key consequences



- **Quality of Workforce:** Examination malpractice undermines the quality of the workforce by devaluing educational achievements and fostering a culture of dishonesty. Individuals who secure positions through cheating or unethical means often need more skills and knowledge for their roles. This must improve overall competence and performance levels, impacting productivity and innovation. Furthermore, malpractice erodes trust in educational institutions and certifications, leading to scepticism about the qualifications of job applicants. In turn, employers might be forced to invest more resources in assessing skills and conducting additional evaluations. Ultimately, examination malpractice hampers the development of a skilled, capable, and trustworthy workforce, impeding socioeconomic progress.
- **Erosion of Meritocracy:** Examination malpractice erodes meritocracy by enabling undeserved advancement. When individuals cheat or engage in unethical behaviour, they bypass fair competition based on genuine skills and efforts. This undermines the principle that positions and opportunities should be earned through merit. Consequently, qualified candidates can lose out, leading to demotivation and inequity. Trust in institutions diminishes, impacting societal belief in fair competition. The long-term effect is a workforce and society where positions are occupied by those who lack qualifications, hindering progress, innovation, and the credibility of merit-based systems.
- **Diminished Education Standards:** The pervasiveness of malpractice diminishes the legitimacy of educational credentials, erasing public confidence in the educational framework. A nation that gains a reputation for engaging in examination malpractice forfeits its global standing. Consequently, documents or certificates from such a country are regarded with scepticism.
- **Loss of Competitiveness:** A nation's competitiveness is closely tied to the quality of its education system. Examination malpractice weakens this competitiveness on both national and global scales.
- **Economic Impacts:** Lower educational standards can lead to reduced innovation, productivity, and foreign investment, stunting economic growth.
- **Corruption and Decay:** Examination malpractice often involves corruption within educational institutions, examination bodies, and law enforcement agencies. This corruption extends beyond the exam room and can contribute to a culture of unethical behavior and decay within society. Malpractice can further widen educational and socio-economic inequalities, as those with financial resources may be more likely to engage in malpractice, while disadvantaged students may be left at a disadvantage.

## 5. ADDRESSING EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE

- Recognizing and compensating educators and examination personnel adequately: Providing teachers with improved salaries and establishing dedicated welfare incentives for examination officials is crucial. This approach serves to deter financial and material temptations from students, parents, and external parties, aiming to compromise the integrity of the examination process. The category of examination officials encompasses teachers responsible for invigilating exams, supervisors overseeing examination proceedings within schools, officials from examination bodies tasked with monitoring exam administration, and law enforcement officers entrusted with safeguarding examination centers.
- **Strengthening Educational Infrastructure:** Improving school facilities, teacher training, and access to learning resources can enhance the quality of education and reduce the incentive to cheat.
- **Promoting Ethical Values:** Integrating ethics and values education into the curriculum can help students understand the importance of honesty and integrity.
- **Proper funding of the education sector:** The government of Sierra Leone should acknowledge that education serves as the foundation of any society and a launching pad for advancement within today's intricate and competitive global landscape. The current state of our educational institutions, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, is marked by deteriorating classrooms and a need for proper furniture, such as chairs and tables.
- **Strict Enforcement and Monitoring:** Implementing stringent monitoring measures during exams, such as using technology and well-trained invigilators, can deter cheating.
- **Inclusive Access to Education:** Expanding access to quality education can reduce the competition for limited spots and alleviate the pressure that drives students to cheat.
- **Public Awareness Campaign:** Raising awareness about the negative consequences of examination malpractice can help shift societal attitudes and expectations.
- **Legal and disciplinary action:** Instituting legal consequences for those involved in malpractice and enforcing academic disciplinary measures can discourage cheating.

## 6. ROLE OF THE ANTI CORRUPTION COMMISSION IN CURBING EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in Sierra Leone has made significant efforts to curb examination malpractice. Some initiatives implemented by the ACC include:

- **Awareness campaigns:** The ACC conducts extensive public awareness campaigns to educate students, parents, and teachers about the consequences of examination malpractice. These campaigns aim to promote integrity and ethical behavior in the education system.
- **Collaborations with educational institutions:** The ACC collaborates with schools, colleges, and universities to develop and enforce strict anti-corruption policies. They work closely with educational authorities to implement measures that prevent and detect examination malpractice.
- **Investigations and prosecutions:** The ACC investigates allegations of examination malpractice and takes legal action against those involved. This helps create a deterrent effect and sends a strong message that such actions will not be tolerated.
- **Whistleblower protection:** The ACC encourages students, teachers, and other stakeholders to report cases of examination malpractice through a dedicated reporting mechanism. Whistleblower protection provisions help ensure the safety and anonymity of those who come forward.
- **Monitoring and supervision:** The ACC conducts regular monitoring and supervision of examination centers to ensure compliance with ethical standards and prevent cheating. They collaborate with other bodies responsible for conducting examinations to enhance transparency.
- **Strengthening institutional capacity:** The ACC focuses on building the capacity of educational institutions, providing training, and guiding them in developing systems to prevent examination malpractice. This contributes to the overall integrity of the education system.

### Conclusion

Examination malpractice in Sierra Leone is a multifaceted challenge that affects individual students and the entire nation's development trajectory. Addressing this issue requires an inclusive approach involving improving the education system, promoting ethical values, and enforcing strict measures against cheating. By doing so, Sierra Leone can foster a culture of academic integrity, strengthen its education system, and contribute to sustainable national development.

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