

ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY EXAMINATION PRACTICES IN KENYA: SETTING, MODERATION AND MARKING

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Abstract

Examinations play a critical component of the education system. This study sought to assess the University examination practices in Kenya. The objectives of the study were; to establish the procedures involved in setting University examinations in Kenya, to assess the procedures on marking University examinations in Kenya and to establish the procedures on moderation of University examinations in Kenya. The study targeted all the 74 chartered Universities in Kenya. Stratified sampling was adopted. The sample was made up 10 Universities comprising of 5 Public Universities and 5 Private Universities. Findings of the study revealed that majority of Universities in Kenya administered sit in examinations set and marked by course lecturers who had not been trained to perform such activities. It was concluded that there was need to reform University examination policies and guidelines in Kenya. The study recommended that Universities should embrace online examinations and other contemporary examination practices such as screen marking.

Keywords: Practices, Examinations, Assessments, University, Kenya

Introduction

Examinations continue to play a critical role in most education systems across the World. The conduct of examination by and large determines quality of education being offered at any given level (Hughes, 1989; Mackatiani, 2017 & Ogula, 2003). Eisemon (1990) noted that examinations are a powerful instrument to influence what students learn at school and how they will apply the knowledge and skills outside school. According to World Bank (2020) examinations provide the basis for certifying a student as having completed a formal course of studies in an educational system or for placement at the job market. This is particularly an important consideration in countries with limited employment opportunities and nonexistent unemployment supports. In some countries, examinations play a selection and equity role where they are used to select students for the next level of an educational system.

It has been argued that the quality of output of an education system can be conceptualized better as a triangular relationship consisting of the curriculum content, pedagogy and examination system (Hughes, Butler, Kritsonis & Herrington, 2007; O'slivan, 2018; Teixeira & Rocha, 2008; McCabe, Feghali & Abdallah, 2008; Lin & Wen, 2007; Olasehinde-Williams, Abdullahi & Owolabi, 2003). Some scholars have pointed out that a weak examination system; that allows examinees to cheat is a recipe for dishonest school graduates.

History of University Examinations

A survey of literature reveals that examinations have existed since medieval times. However, there are variances in form and purpose of the examinations offered across Universities over time. For instance; on the issue of setting; early Universities in the United States strictly administered internal examinations. This was a complete departure from Japanese Universities which heavily relied on external examinations (Usher (2016). On the other hand, Greek medieval Universities relied on the course instructor's recommendations such that one could be awarded a degree as long as the person could impress his or her instructors in an audition. Otherwise, ancient Universities in China, Europe and Africa offered written examinations.

Until the mid- sixties, Universities in Germany administered oral examinations. Even where degree programs differed considerably, most of them if not all had a component of oral examinations. However, the key role of oral examinations was pronounced in diploma programme where the learner was expected to pass oral examination before proceeding to the next level of education (Kelm, 2001). Whereas oral examinations differed from one program to another, the state had an interest in controlling the knowledge. Consequently, a representative of the state participated in the examination, however without examining the candidate. Oral examinations were defended because they were thought to provide an opportunity where the students could show their strengths and the examiners had a clear and complete impression of the candidates' knowledge and abilities. Furthermore, it was thought that written tests gave too much scope to chance and cramming (Paulsen, 1966).

In the USA, the final written examination formed a major component of the final grade for the course. However, students are also graded on attendance, participation in class discussions, homework assignments, papers, quizzes and midterm examinations. In South Africa, the Bar examination is tripartite in nature. In this case, three distinct institutions separately conduct training, regulations and administration of the examination (KIPPRA, 2019).

Whereas Universities in Kenya have been working towards offering quality education, management of examinations remains a major challenge. Mwangi (2017) reported that University examinations in Kenya face challenges including but not limited to generous marking, examination cheating, plagiarism, low quality examinations, poor internal and external moderation and untrained examiners. Omolewa & Kellaghan, (2003) and Greaney & Kellaghan (2003) observed that most of the public examination being offered in institution of higher learning were limited in knowledge and skills they assess; they contained limited reference to knowledge and skills that students need in everyday life outside school. According to Graves (2008) weak examination processes and systems were a recipe for examination cheating. Ben- Jacobs (2014), noted that assessments today are based on the lowest level of taxonomy- they are based on what students can remember or recall.

Whereas attempts have been made to evaluate examination and assessments processes with a view to enhancing provision of quality of education, such efforts entailed reviewing examination systems and processes at lower level at the expense of higher education. The review of examination processes includes the World Bank Policy Paper of 1988 on Education in Sub Saharan Africa that focused on reforming public examination systems and processes to enhance education standards. In addition, the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) highlighted the need to strengthen

examinations and evaluation systems to ascertain whether learners acquired knowledge and skills that schools were expected to impart (ADEA, 2003).

In 2008, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched Assessment of Higher Education Outcomes (AHELO) feasibility study to assess whether it was possible to develop international measures of learning outcomes in higher education. The project was meant to complement institution based assessments by providing a direct evaluation of student learning outcomes at global level to enable institutions benchmark performance of their students against their peers for improvement (Tremblay, Lalacente and Roseveare, 2012). The AHELO was also supposed to see whether it was practically and scientifically feasible to assess what students in institutions of higher education know and can do upon graduation within and across diverse contexts.

Despite the numerous efforts to improve examination systems and processes; there is more to be done to safeguard University examinations; particularly in the context of pandemics and other emergencies. No wonder, some critics have suggested abolition of 'traditional' examinations. For instance, the Macquarie University in Australia have argue such examinations fail to develop self-sufficient learners. They also argue that examinations produced superficial understanding of topics, that they fail to represent the kind of skills that graduates require in real life. (The Australian, 2020). This argument may be valid given that some employers have been complaining over graduates they hire; reporting that most of them are deficient in basic skills such as problem solving and critical thinking yet some of these graduates were ranked highly in the graduation lists (Bok, 2017).

Moderation is an important aspect of an examination system. Moderation is supposed to verify consistency and appropriateness of an assignment task in relation to other units at the same level in the same discipline; check that the assessment is appropriate to the unit learning outcomes and ensure that marking criteria are appropriate (Hughes, 1989). Johnson (2001) noted that there were a variety of models of moderation which include; universal double blind marking; universal non-blind double marking; moderation of the entire cohort as check or audit; moderation by sampling of the cohort and partial moderation. Hughes (1989) argues that institutions should choose the most appropriate practices for their programs. Studies have shown that moderation of examinations in public Universities in Kenya lacked the seriousness it deserved (Kathula, Adhiambo, Mwalw'a & Waweru , 2018; Mwangi 2017).

Ofqual (2011) stated that marking is a process of awarding a score to a candidates work by an examiner based on a predetermined criterion. Chamberlain and Taylor (2010) argued marking process should begin with training the marker on application of marking scheme so as to ensure consistency and reliability in the process. Whereas traditional marking system which involves one person marking a whole script or center has been used over time, there are many developments that have taken place.

New developments in marking systems include conveyor marking also referred to as item level marking. Bukenya (2006) points out that conveyor marking involves organizing markers into teams in which one marker is assigned a question to mark. Risiro (2014) reported that involving more than one person to mark a script was an effective way of achieving reliability. Pilnot de Moira (2011) and Spear (1996) also suggest that item level marking reduces bias (hallo effect) and removes influence of one marker on the script. Conveyor belt marking has been adopted in marking of ordinary level national examinations in Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania, where it has been reported that the system has reduced time of marking, remarking and biases (Manyumba and Mutwiri, 2009).

Other types of marking include automated marking and onscreen marking (Ofqual, 2013). Tisi *et al.*, (2013) notes that the reliability of assessment scores heavily depends on the system of marking applied. Onscreen marking is a form of e-marking that has been applied in various countries such as South Africa, United States of America, United Kingdom and China (Zhang, Powers, Wright & Morgan, 2003). The system exploits information technology by scanning scripts into images, storing the images in OSM environment and transmitting them to markers.

According to Tisi, Whitehouse, Maughan & Burdett (2013) because a scanned script can be divided into different parts, it is possible to distribute the same script among different markers. This will enable marking at the question level thus facilitating double marking and improving marking reliability. Raikes *et al.*, (2004) argues that On screen marking (OSM) has the benefit of enhanced quality assurance in marking.

Statement of the Problem

The Corona pandemic that started in Wuhan China in December 2019 and later spread across the world in 2020 largely affected many sectors. Of this, the education sector was the worst hit. The aftermath was massive closure of schools and

other learning institutions. In a bid to remain afloat, some learning institutions opted to use digital technology to deliver education to learners at home. Whereas some may have succeeded quickly in adapting the new approaches, developing countries were not quite prepared. In fact, in countries such as Kenya, the education sector literally came to a halt for close to a year due to lack of infrastructure to deliver digital content, inadequate skills and limiting education policies. From lessons learnt from the coronavirus, it becomes evident that there is a need to re-evaluate education systems to make them more resilient. This study sought to assess University examination practices such as setting, moderation and marking.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were;

- i. To establish the practices involved in setting University examinations in Kenya.
- ii. To assess the procedures on marking University examinations in Kenya
- iii. To establish the procedures for moderation of University examinations in Kenya.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Kenya. The study population comprised of all the 74 chartered Universities. The study involved a desk top review of University policies and guidelines on examinations. Stratified sampling was used where the institutions were first classified into public and private chartered Universities. Thereafter, simple random sampling was adopted to select ten (10) or 14% of the Universities in each category. The study sample consisted of 5 public and 5 private Universities.

Findings and Discussion

The study targeted 74 chartered Universities in Kenya. In gathering data for the study, stratified random sampling was used. Chartered Universities were first classified into public and private. The population consisted of 30 Public and 34 Private Universities respectively. A sample of 20% of the Universities in each category were sampled to participate in the study. The sample consisted of 12 Universities.

Table 1: Universities Sampled by Sub Group

Sub Group	No.	Sample
Private Universities	34	6
Public Universities	33	6
Total	74	12

Source; Researcher, 2020

Document analysis schedule was used to analyze the process involved in setting, moderation and marking of examinations in selected Universities.

Results and Discussions

Objective 1: To establish the practices involved in setting University examinations in Kenya.

The first objective sought to establish the practices involved in setting University examinations in Kenya. Setting of examinations is a process of preparing question items to be used to assess learning outcomes (Ogula *et.al.*, 2006). Table 1 presents findings on the practices involved in setting University examinations in Kenya.

Table 1: Procedures and Regulations Guiding Setting Examinations in Kenyan Universities

Examination Regulation	Frequency	%
University administers Internal examination	9	100
University administers External examination	-	-
University administers various forms of examinations	9	100
University examination is set by internal examiner	9	100
University train/ inducts examination setters	-	-
University engages other experts other than course lecturers to set examinations	1	10

Findings depicted in Table 1 suggest that examinations set at University were of various forms. The University examinations majorly comprised of coursework assessments and sit in written continuous assessment test (CATs) and final written regular examinations. On setting of examinations, the study revealed that majority of Universities in Kenya required the course lecturer to set the examination in the course taught. This was contrary to the practice in Manchester Metropolitan University where examinations were set by an academic staff member from the department who did not teach the course being assessed (Ombasa, 2017).

Whereas allowing the course lecturer solely set examination probably ensured that the examination was set by a person well familiar with the course content, this practice would as well give the course lecturer opportunity to set an examination that focused more on covered without necessarily meeting the course requirement. This could lead to a disconnect between the examinations offered and expectations of other stakeholders such as employers and professional organizations. In addition, relying heavily on the course lecturer to set the examination may pose a challenge in the event that the course lecturer is either indisposed or incapable due to unavoidable circumstance as was the case during corona pandemic. Furthermore, administering sit in as opposed to online examination was a recipe for the spread of pandemics at the University.

On training of examination setters, findings presented in Table 1 indicate that University examination policies and guidelines had no particular reference to training of setters. Seemingly, the policies assumed that course lecturers were competent enough to set quality examinations. However, there is no way we can assume that every course lecturer is competent enough to set a quality examination without adequate training and induction on setting examinations. This is supported by a study conducted by yet some lecturers lacked pedagogical skills to enable them set quality examination (Mwangi, 2017). Furthermore, the findings suggest that Universities are not prepared to enable the lecturers to embrace change. In the wake of pandemics such as Corona, it would be highly appropriate for Universities to consider training lecturers on various aspects of setting examinations including examinations that can be administered online. that can be administered online.

The study further revealed that majority of University examination policies had no provided for quality assurance framework for class assignments. This was contrary to the practice in other Universities such as Manchester Metropolitan University where all assignments were supposed to be developed in line with Quality Assurance Agency's UK Quality Code. The code requires all t assignments to be verified before being given to students and that such verification should be done by a member of staff who does not directly contribute to the assignment.

The study also revealed that examination policies had no clear guidelines on how to ensure that there was little or no recycling of questions for majority of the Universities did not provide guidelines to safeguard against recycling past examination papers. It was only one University which had such a guideline. But still,

the policy seemed inadequate since the policy had not specified the minimum by which any examination paper must differ from any paper previously administered. For instance, examination policy of Edith Cowan University required that all examination papers must differ by a minimum of 25% from any paper previously used in that unit (ECU, 2020). Without clear guidelines on recycling, there were high chances of course lecturers recycling examinations. This was more likely to happen where course lecturers had heavy workloads and could not get enough time to set new examinations within stipulated guidelines.

Objective 2: To assess the procedures on marking University examinations in Kenya

The second objective of the study was to assess the procedures on marking University examinations in Kenya. Results are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Procedures on marking University examinations in Kenya.

Examination Regulation	Frequency	%
Examinations are marked by internal examiner	9	100
Examinations are marked by external examiner	-	-
Examinations are marked using traditional system of marking	9	100
Examinations are marked using conveyor belt system	-	-
Examinations are marked using automated/ onscreen marking	-	-
Examinations are marked centrally	-	-

The findings of the study presented in Table 2 revealed that University examinations were marked by the internal examiner who was the course lecturer. Majority of the Universities applied traditional marking system. Under this system of marking, one person marked a whole script or center. Bukenya (2006) pointed out that under this system, a marker is assigned scripts to mark by the marking supervisor. The process starts with the chief examiner and senior examiner developing question papers and marking guides. Senior examiner then trains the markers on how to apply the marking guide (Ofqual, 2011; Ofqual, 2013). Risiro (2014) observed that traditional marking scheme had high chances of bias since the examination was marked by the same person who taught the course and went ahead to set the examination. Probably, the course lecturer was too familiar with the students and would not rule out halo effect in marking. The implication of employing the traditional system of marking is that the marker handles a high number of scripts hence exposing him or her to high risk of contracting viruses such as corona and other related pandemics.

The study also found that University examination policies were silent on training of markers. Mwangi (2017) noted that quality of University examinations was poor because markers were not trained or inducted. Whereas marking requires certain skills, it seemed Universities in Kenya were not equipping the lecturers with the skills for quality marking. Furthermore, the policies were silent on the marking venue other examining bodies such as Kenya National Examination Council Examination (KNEC) and the Kenya Accountants and Secretaries National Examination Board (KASNEB) examination policies in Kenya were silent on marking venue. This implied that the marker had the discretion to mark on campus or off campus. Essentially, it would be difficult to monitor and control marking to ensure quality. In addition, marking examinations off campus would increase chances of contamination thus exposing other people to greater risk.

Objective 3: To establish the procedures for moderation of University examinations in Kenya.

The third objective of this study sought to establish the procedures on moderation of University examinations in Kenya. The findings of the study indicated that all Universities had policies that provided for procedures and guidelines on moderation of examinations. University examinations were supposed to be moderated by internal and external examiners who were academicians in the are being examined. Moderation process involved both examination drafts and marked scripts.

The study observed that policies on moderation of examinations had no provision for the external moderator to interact with either the internal moderator or course lecturer. Therefore, it was not possible for the two to reconcile certain issues that could arise during moderation. Unlike in Essex University, in most Universities in Kenya, professionals and other industry players were not given a chance to check on quality of examinations being administered. Hughes (1989) and Johnson (2001) suggested a variety of models of moderation which include; universal double blind marking; universal non-blind double marking; moderation of the entire cohort as check or audit; moderation by sampling of the cohort and partial moderation. Hughes (1989) argues that institutions should choose the most appropriate practices for their programs. The findings of the study revealed that University examination policies in Kenya did not specify the model to be adopted for moderation of examinations.

Conclusion

From the findings of the study, it was concluded that there was need for Universities in Kenya to reform examination policies on setting, marking and moderation to make them more resilient in the context of pandemics such as corona.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and conclusions thereof, the study recommends that;

- i. Universities should adopt modern marking techniques such as on screen marking as opposed to manual marking.
- ii. Universities examinations should be administered marked online to safeguard the lecturers from contracting pandemics such as corona.
- iii. Universities should train lecturers equip them with skills to mark and set quality examinations.

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