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Socioeconomic Implications of Examination Fraud and Assessment Irregularities in South Africa's Higher Education Sector: A Futuristic View

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Abstract: This paper, based on scholarly as well as documentary evidence, intends to highlight the socioeconomic implications of fraud and assessment irregularities in South Africa's higher education. Higher education institutions serve nation building purposes and as such it is expected that what they produce should be of high standard in order to further this purpose. Lately, owing to the rise in assessment malpractices across South African institutions of higher learning, calls have been made by business and society for ways to deal with this. This paper asks a few questions related to what constitutes fraud and assessment irregularities and the sources of these. The paper also points out what these portend for higher education in South Africa while at the same suggesting some recommendations. This paper contributes to the literature on the growing concerns of educators and researchers regarding high levels of examination malpractice and assessment irregularities within higher education sector globally, but in particular South Africa.

Keywords: *Exam malpractice; assessment irregularity; academic integrity; South Africa*

1. Introduction

Globally, almost every society perceives higher education institutions as exclusive priesthoods comprising wise men and women whose subjects are innocent students. However, this notion is speedily eroding owing to reports of corruption, malpractice and irregularities emerging from institutions of higher learning. This affirms that fraudulent practices do not only exist outside of citadels of learning. In fact, some argue that those who take part in corrupt practices in society and in government, fine-tuned their acts while at school. Of interest is the inability of graduates to sufficiently articulate themselves at the workplace often leading employers to re-evaluate job descriptions. Could this be the result of examination malpractice or assessment irregularities?

Several examination malpractices and or assessment irregularities are known to take place across the globe. Many of these are in the form of admissions, accreditations and awards. In Nigeria, it is common to bribe a university official in order to gain admission (Idoniboye-Obu, 2015) and obtain good grades (Jubril, 2010; Dimkpa, 2011). In Vietnam, one is very likely to access a very good, top school if one has the capacity to bribe (Coughlan, 2013; Trines, 2017). In South Korea, owing to the value placed on higher education, most families pursue admission to elite schools for their children. Admission into these elite schools therefore require that intense selection processes are undertaken leading to various sharp practices (Hultberg, Calonge and Kim, 2017). In Kenya, and interestingly, this was scrapped after a short while, legislation required members of parliament to hold a university degree (Mbaka, 2016). Before this legislation was scrapped, many law-makers had already started scheming their way into and out of universities with variants of academic qualifications. These cases are not unique to the developing countries.

There are several examples in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. A remarkable story is told about the University of Wales whose association with some dubious organisations left their qualifications with very little credibility (Jenkins, 2011; Trines, 2017). There was also Dickinson State University in North Dakota, USA that was placed on notice by its accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission after it came out that the university had been graduating international students without authenticated documents or appropriate academic prerequisites (grandforksherald.com, 2013). So, assessment fraud is a global phenomenon.

What constitutes examination fraud?

In 2017, UNIVERS (the independent news source of Tilburg university) reported that a Rotterdam teacher sketched what he considered sound tips for his students. In preparation for examinations, the teacher sent an

email to his students giving them a list of tips. The tips turned out to be exactly the same as the examination paper. The teacher was fired for this. In some other places, offering 'tips' or what some students regard as 'scope' is a fair attempt at ensuring that students do well. It can be argued that what is considered examination fraud in one part of the world, may not necessarily constitute examination fraud in another.

Owing to the difficulty of finding a common definition of examination fraud, I have rather taken the liberty of dismembering the term into their singular states that is, examination and fraud. To get an understanding of what examination stands for, it means a detailed inspection or study, according to the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.). It also refers to a formal test of a person's knowledge or proficiency in a subject or skill. Some words that can be used instead include test, assessment, viva, viva voce, quiz.

With reference to fraud, the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) defines it as "*wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain".* The Oxford Dictionary goes further to offer synonyms such as fraudulence, sharp practice, cheating, swindling, trickery, deceit, deception, double-dealing, duplicity, etc.
In line with these definitions and consistent with scholastic thoughts of Akaranga and Ongong (2013), Onyibe, Uma and Ibina (2015) as well as Wilayat (2009) and Fasasi (2006), examination fraud is a malpractice, which is described as a deliberate act of wrongdoing which goes against examinations rules and regulations. Essentially, the malpractice must have the capacity to offer a candidate an unfair advantage over others.

How is examinations fraud conducted? The literature is littered with various forms of examination fraud. Interestingly, the instructive thing about this phenomenon is that examination fraud is not only committed by students. Successful fraudulent examination practices are carried out by both students, lecturers and non-academic staff; specifically, those charged with managing assessments. Commonly known practices according to Onyibe, Uma and Ibina (2015) include:

- Students working together with examinations officials – in exchange of cash or kindness
- Impersonation or misrepresentation – someone else writing the examinations for a candidate
- The use of scribbled [hidden] notes and electronic devices such as smart phones/watches.
- Copying from someone while in the examination hall
- Submitting multiple scripts – this is a case where students hand in multiple scripts and then claiming that the one with the highest mark is theirs
- Not indicating student details on the answer sheet – same as submitting multiple scripts
- Bribing examination officials
- Exchanging answer booklets in the examination venue
- Access to examination papers before the examination

What are assessment irregularities?
Assessment irregularities therefore refer to contravening assessment or examination rules and regulations. The common known fraudulent practices listed above are some of the ways that this breach takes place.

The state of higher education in South Africa
Higher education in South Africa is in a state of flux. Several commentators such as Jonathan Jansen, Adam Habib, Naledi Pandor, and Blade Nzimande have put the blame on a number of factors, namely: Apartheid, affirmative action and broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE). The unequal education system of the apartheid era differentiated along racial and gender lines, thus adding to the poor quality of education that is experienced in today's higher education. Basic schooling structure is replete with negligence and dysfunction (Pretorius, 2014; Alston, 2018) to the extent that only a small pool of high school graduates has the necessary grades and subjects to access higher education, not to mention the so-called scarce skills. To improve access to institutions of higher learning, the government has recently lowered entry requirements. In fact, with the further lowering of pass mark, it is feared that the reputation of South Africa's education system slides faster on a slippery slope and thus higher education continues to feel the pressure to deal with students who have been ill-prepared for it.

The frustration within higher education in South Africa was captured by a speaker at a higher education conference in Cape Town in 2018 thus: "Imagine how deeply disturbing it is to read an essay written by a

postgraduate student at a university. The essay, usually riddled with grammatical errors, lacks both syntax and semantics." So basically, the government of today systematically continues to inherit an economy that steadily disadvantages its people.

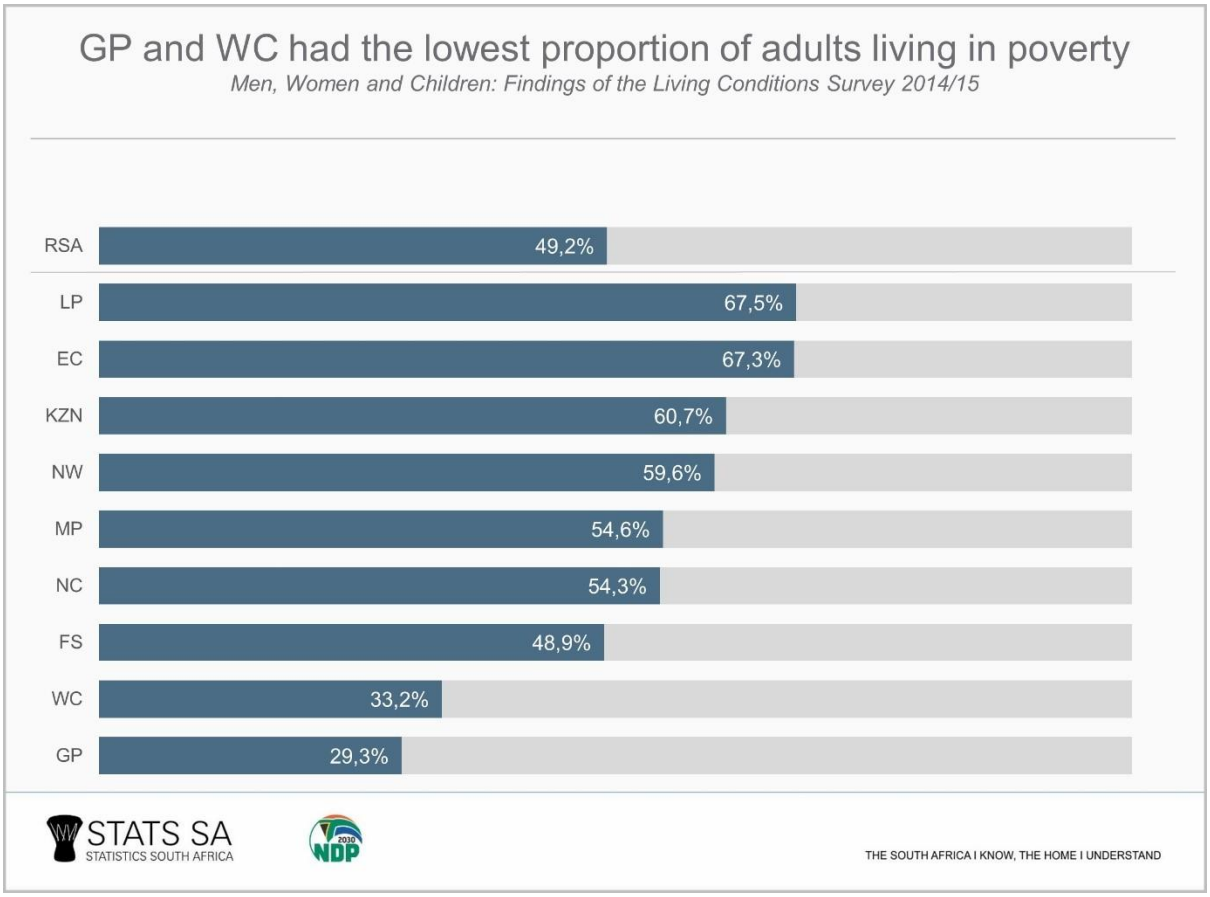
Discussion

In this section, the discussion starts with understanding where the intention to engage in examination fraud is derived from. This is followed by a discussion of the implications or outcomes of assessment irregularities and examinations fraud. The discussion section concludes with recommendations for addressing the phenomena of examination fraud and assessment irregularities.

The influence of society

Within society, there are three main sources from which the intention to cheat in higher education can be located. These include poverty, high premium placed on certificates and lack of role models.

With reference to poverty, it is understood that poverty is entrenched in South Africa to the extent that the three-pronged aims of virtually every government initiative include the reduction of poverty. Figure 1 shows that almost half of the population of South Africa live below the poverty line (StatsSA, 2018). Despite attempts by the government to improve citizens' living conditions, StatsSA notes that adults continue to experience higher levels of poverty. As such, for many South Africans, stepping out of the poverty cycle is a pipe dream.



Key: RSA=Republic of South Africa; LP= Limpopo Province; EC= Eastern Cape; KZN= Kwazulu Natal; NW= North West; MP= Mpumalanga; NC= Northern Cape; FS= Free State; WC= Western Cape; GP= Gauteng Province

Considering the high rate of unemployment, it is not surprising that there are many who see a higher education certificate as the only way out of poverty. In fact, recently, the government of South Africa, in its

desire to expand access to higher education, reduced the pass mark for the entrance examination to university and colleges. Although this is viewed by many as a ticking time bomb, it has, nonetheless, caused a throng of students marching to universities and colleges seeking admission. Some industry commentators have also blamed this rush for higher education on certain personalities who, though they brandished college certificates, were later found to have lied about their credentials. The cases of 'Drs' Belamant, Daniel Mtimkulu, Mohau Pheko, Pallo Jordan, Nico Bezuidenhout of South African Airways, Hlaudi Motsoeneng (former Chief Operating Officer of the South African Broadcasting Corporation), Ellen Tshabalala (WHO) and many others are striking examples of those who lied about their qualifications to stay on their high profile jobs.

Perhaps, many of those who scurry for higher education certificates now feel they need it by any means necessary especially if these so-called role models could get away with fraudulently stating their credentials. A notable frown recently came from the director of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), Shirley Lloyd, who said "there are plenty of others out there, and there are universities where there has been significant activity, but SAQA (SA Qualifications Authority) has not yet concluded its work so that they can be handed to the Hawks[1],"(Mphahele, 2019). Maghina (2018), in fact, reported that in the "2017/18 financial year alone there were 982 fraudulent qualifications uncovered". According to Maqhina, the then national minister of higher education, Dr Naledi Pandor, even said "There is an upward trend in the number of misrepresented qualifications that have been detected". Faking certificates is not unique to South Africa. It has been reported in many other countries. However, as an emerging economy, South Africa stands to lose especially considering the high levels of unemployment and crime. When high profile South Africans brandish fake certificates and go scot-free, there is nothing untoward that the younger ones will see in their behaviour. If they could get away with it, how about the young student in university or college who thinks he can also get away with cheating in an examination?

Within higher education institutions

Poor study habits: Several studies (for example, Okesina, 2019; Beattie, Laliberté, Michaud-Leclerc, & Oreopoulos, 2019) have examined study habits amongst students. Despite an inconclusive finding in terms of demographics, a common finding is that study habits are indicative of a student's propensity to achieve either a positive or negative outcome. A number of factors have been put forward as impediments to cultivating a good study habit. According to Pitan (2013) and Oluwatimilehin and Owoyele (2012), these include (1) lack of financial ability to provide study materials, (2) a culture of reading denotes the love to read and engage a learning material. Interestingly, often students only read for the sake of passing an examination and so, consequently, no culture of reading is developed. Pitan (2013) acknowledges the influence parents may have in inculcating the culture of reading among their children and claims that children learn from observing their parents who may not have had the habit of reading and invariably, the children develop poor study habits. Poor culture of reading and writing could also come from poor basic education background.

Unconducive environment: may refer to noisy homes and people who are likely to influence a student negatively. In some universities in South Africa, it is common to find overcrowded residential accommodation and that leaves the student who is willing to study very little opportunity to do so. In some cases, noisy parties are held in residences while some universities may be poorly funded and as such severely lack learning materials or facilities. In other cases, libraries close early, or not even open on weekends. Owing to a number of influences, students may not be able to properly manage time. South African universities experienced a wave of protests in 2015 leading to incomplete syllabus, and lecturers not attending lectures regularly.

Sibanda, Iwu and Benedict (2015a&b) found that the smartest paths to achieving good grades include: being present and on time for each lecture; listening and asking questions for clarity; participating and handing in

[1] The Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, *aka* The Hawks, is established as an independent directorate within the South African Police Service in terms of Section 17C of the South African Police Service Act, 1995. The Directorate responsible for the combating, investigation and prevention of national priority crimes such as serious organized crime, serious commercial crime and serious corruption in terms of Section 17B and 17D of the South African Police Service Act, 1995 as amended.

assignments; but more importantly reading through notes after each lecture. That way students are able to confirm what they learnt and or prepare questions for the next class and or do some more reading. In my experience, first of all, not all the students turn up for lectures and even those who are present are distracted by a number of things. Therefore, note taking and engaging the lecturer are often not experienced.

2. Implications of examination fraud and assessment irregularities

Opinions converge on what constitutes quality in higher education and so far, it is believed that assessment is an important key in determining the quality of education (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2001). Even though opinions still differ on what (outcome or process) and how (method) to measure, the argument that assessment facilitates quality standards remains unchallenged. Therefore, it is fair to suggest that assessments lend credibility to qualifications in higher education. Lack of credibility of qualifications will lead to a number of untoward circumstances.

Firstly, the integrity of the qualifications is compromised. This has the capacity to result in a downgrade of higher education institutions in South Africa, but more significantly may even wreck the struggling economy. Should this be the case, there is the likelihood that graduates of South Africa's higher education institutions are relegated in favour of those with foreign qualifications. Nigeria is a good example of this. Okoh (2014) describes how the relegation of academic credentials in Nigeria has had adverse consequences, which include lack of recognition of academic qualification, unproductive labour force, and lack of confidence in the educational system. Basically, Okoh argues that compromising assessment rules and regulations will derail the course of development of a nation. Essentially, a compromised education system will lead to "delayed absorption of graduates into the labour market" (Dimkpa, 2011).

South Africa continues to face the three-pronged socioeconomic problem namely unemployment, poverty and inequality. With unemployment comes a variety of socioeconomic problems such as poverty, prostitution, teenage pregnancy and drug abuse. Should the perception of the public be that higher education qualifications are tainted owing to compromised assessments that will further strengthen unemployment. Considering that education is seen as a means out of poverty; facilitating employment as well as social integration and financial freedom (Iwu, Mandyoli, and Magoda, 2018), it can be argued that good quality education enables one to attain necessary workplace competencies (Archer and Davison, 2008).

Currently, South Africa's unemployment rate is at over 27% (StatsSA, 2019). Youth unemployment is even higher giving rise to speculations that owing to loss of faith in qualifications, many firms are no longer in a hurry to let their aged population go on retirement. Notwithstanding "benefits such as mental stimulation and social engagement are associated with staving off chronic disease", not allowing an aged workforce to go on retirement has its own demerits (Harvard Medical School, 2018).

Employers these days no longer consider only academic qualifications but a set of skills from "well-rounded, experienced people" (Iwu, Mandyoli and Magoda, 2018, p.292). This is further compounded by the stringent conditions imposed by the private sector in South Africa because of the notion that university graduates are ill-equipped for the world of work. In fact, in 2012, City Press warned that "a university degree or diploma no longer guarantees employment for young South Africans as hundreds of them struggle to obtain employment". Without jobs, many more citizens will rely on social grants for child support, disability and frail care (Iwu, Manyoli and Magoda, 2018). Basically, a downgrade of qualifications may lead to increase in unemployment.

As graduate unemployment is fast becoming a scourge in South Africa, several public-private partnership initiatives such as the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) skills development programs, the National Skills Development Agency, and the National Skills Fund have yet to tame this.

Continued perpetuation of bad governance. Dada, Udoaka and Dada (2013) are concerned that much of the governance issues which are common in Africa will continue to erode the democratic sustainability of African nations. Therefore, to assist with nation building, higher education institutions have a role to play. To build a nation requires citizens who are able to read and write. This is what Cornelius-Ukpepi (2015) refers to as

literacy, which enables someone to "govern adequately and act honourably in any position" (p.2). The extent to which citizens crave for certification and the boldness with which it is sought bad governance is perpetuated through those whose assessments were either compromised or have compromised the assessment system.

3. What can be done to address these?

Resources need to be channelled to basic education: I particularly believe that learning does not only take place at schools. The homes are also important learning spaces. But at the same time, basic education should plug the holes that exist at homes. Not too long ago, it was reported that some schools in some South African provinces did not have qualified teachers, and basic infrastructure (Richter & Samuels, 2018; Hannaway, Govender, Marais & Meier, 2019). It must be understood that many students in South African universities these days come from disadvantaged homes. This means that if they are not sufficiently taught at basic education level, and they finally access higher education, they will very likely struggle. This is what Mfaco (2015) regards as one of the significant reasons for high drop-out rate in universities.
According to News 24, "*Proper education has the potential to increase the employability or income generating capacity of South Africa's majority poor thereby enabling them to be employed or become entrepreneurs in their own right [thus] mitigating the high inequality levels in South Africa".*

Improving access to higher education should not mean lowering standards: Lowering standards will not help the nation because what it means is that with mediocre marks, anyone can get into university. There is a growing theory among academics that lowering standards is an admission by government that leaners are unable to achieve good grades and so, to make it easy for them to exit basic education into higher level, pass mark is lowered.

Transformation at higher education institutions: should not be parochial. This is somewhat related to Scott's (2017) argument in the Mail & Guardian:

Transformation is essential for economic development and social cohesion, because both depend on fully recognising and using the talent that exists in the country.

Skills shortage in South Africa led to the recruitment of academics from other parts of the world for nation building purposes, including Africa. The Immigration Amendment Act of 2004 (Act 19 of 2004) (The Presidency, 2004) aimed at attracting the needed scarce skills to assist with the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment. Drawing from the experiences of countries such as Japan and England, one can argue that South Africa's desire to bring in qualified academics from outside its shores was a move in the right direction. However, with what some commentators regard as 'protectionist' elements in the Act, it meant that the hiring of any foreign academic would have to be done only on the grounds that there was a sufficient attempt at finding a local who possess and can do the job. This seems to have been the practice until recently when issues of equity and 'foreign national' identity began to emerge.

With the emergence of the Codes of Good Practice on the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (2015), there seems to be confusion regarding its interpretation in many universities. The recent debate that was begun by the Chair of South Africa's parliament's higher education portfolio committee sought to reduce the number of foreign students and lecturers to below 10% of a university's student and staff population may have spurred some foreign national academics to consider themselves not South African enough to access certain positions irrespective of being in possession of the South African passport. This position seems somewhat to relate to the arguments made in an article by Klaaren (2010) where he argues that the issue of constitutional citizenship in South Africa is a highly contentious one leaving it to several interpretations. Klaaren (2019) further argues that South Africa's citizenship debate must be globally located perhaps suggesting that citizenship of any nation cannot be two-tiered. If the perception among some foreign academics is that they are not South African enough to access certain positions and in fact promotion at South African universities, it may affect the internationalisation posture of the universities.

In discussing the internationalisation dimension of a local South African university, Obadire (2018) notes that the negative perception of foreign (African) academics threatens internationalisation of South African higher education. He goes further to say that "internationalisation can only be sustained in an environment devoid of discrimination, violence and segregation that might encapsulate xenophobic undertones. Manifestations of xenophobia would threaten the success of the process of internationalisation through reducing international student and staff numbers. Ultimately, it might adversely impact on the institutional standing of the university" (p.190).

4. Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that if practical steps are not taken to eradicate the scourge of examination fraud and assessment irregularities, South Africa's higher education institutions will deteriorate and what they stand for will come to nought. Of importance is that South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 mirrors the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. With regard to higher education, South Africa's National Development Plan 2030, intends to, among others:

- Increase enrolment at universities by at least 70 percent
- Increase the percentage of academic staff with doctoral qualification in the higher education sector from the current 34 percent to over 75 percent
- Produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million per year
- Expand science, technology and innovation outputs by increasing research and development spending by government and through encouraging industry to do so [industry partnerships]
- Increase the number of students eligible to study towards maths and science based degrees to 450000

It is not in doubt that should examination malpractice and assessment irregularities continue; it may be difficult to realise these goals. Higher education institutions have an important role to play in the future of South Africa. At least they can help change the course of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

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