

Examination malpractice in low-income contexts

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Question

- *What are the various forms of examination malpractice in low-income countries?*
- *What strategies have been deployed to address them?*

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Overview

This non-standard helpdesk report found that there was **little research evidence detailing the types of examination malpractice and even fewer studies focusing on effective strategies to mitigate these issues**. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the implications for corruption and bribery across entire education systems, this is unsurprising. As a result, from the outset it was agreed with the requester that expert comments and inputs would form the basis of the response to this query. Where evidence was found, this focused on Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and India.

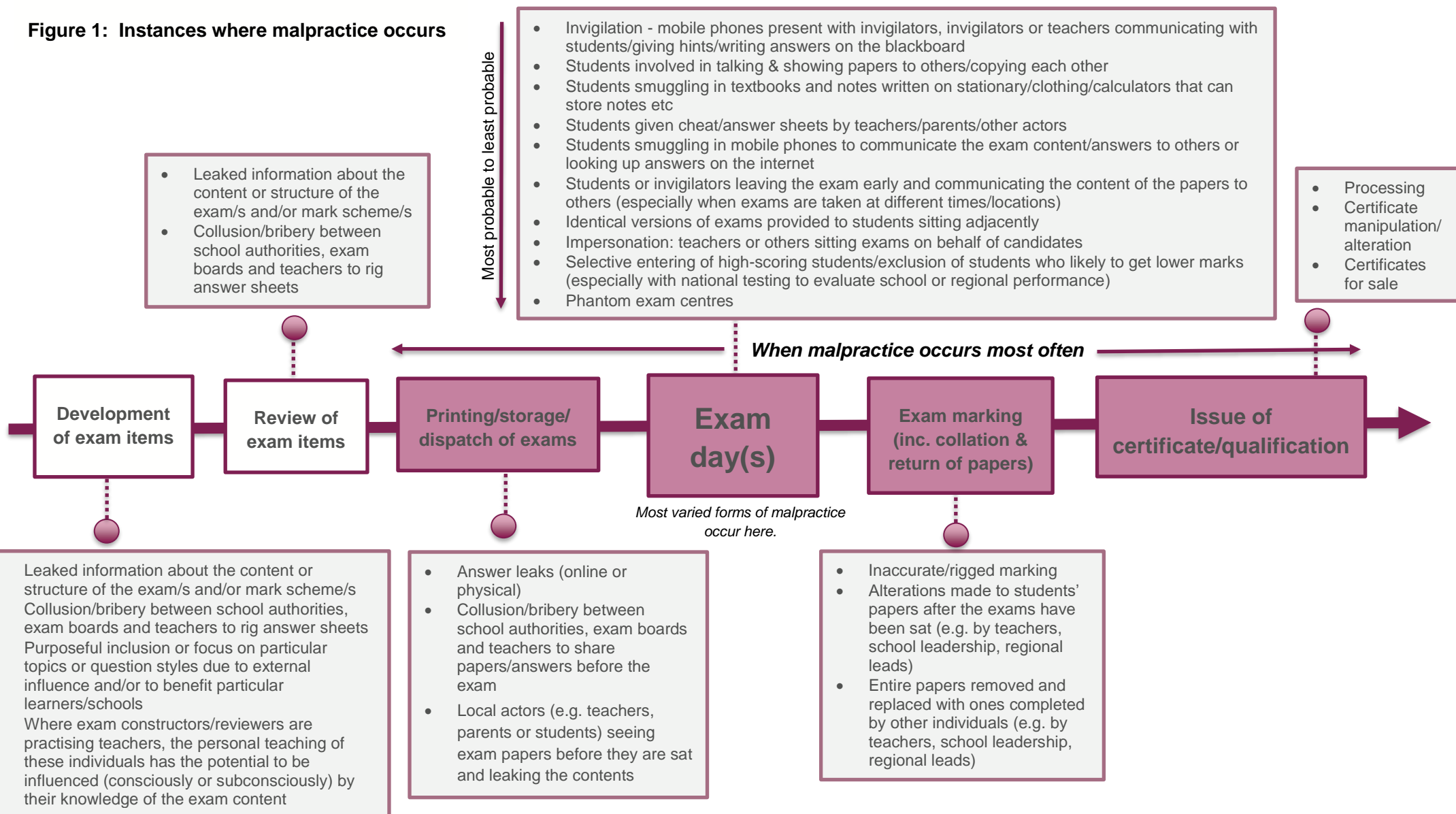
In this report, ‘malpractice’ is defined as purposeful actions intended to influence the marks/grades achieved by individual students or groups of students rather than considering other potential reasons for malpractice (e.g. to influence national policy, working terms and conditions etc.). Malpractice can have different motives and take different forms in different types of examinations (e.g. national assessments for system monitoring which are high stakes for individual schools or regions but not high stakes for individual learners). This report focuses on national exams taken under exam conditions rather than other components that may contribute to the final grades of students (e.g. coursework, School Based Assessment, continuous assessment). As a result, the information presented focuses on national summative examinations in pre-tertiary education.

This report has two parts. First, a typology outlining the most common forms of examination malpractice. The typology uses sources from newspaper articles, unpublished conference papers, blogs and other forms of grey literature. Second, a table addressing potential strategies to combat forms of examination malpractice. This was largely made up of expert comments and inputs with some references to research literature. The purpose of this report is to help refine and reframe the policy debate around this issue in Sierra Leone, drawing on evidence from other low-income contexts.

2. Types of examination malpractice

Figure 1 on the next page outlines the most common examples of examination malpractice and when they occur. The main perpetrators at each stage are listed in descending order i.e. the most influential actor down to the least influential actor.

Figure 1: Instances where malpractice occurs



Source: Author's own

3. Strategies to address examination malpractice

Table 1 on the next page shows potential strategies to address the various forms of examination malpractice with some accompanying notes where appropriate.

Other strategies to discourage cheating include the cancellation of candidate's work, disciplining of teachers, invigilators and other examination officials through a proposed 2-year ban. This has been reported to have greatly reduced cheating cases in Mandera County, Kenya (Adow et al, 2015).

Likewise, in Malawi strict protocols around test development, civic education campaigns, just in time printing and other sanctions have virtually eliminated examination leakages (Chalila & Nkhoma, 2003). Notwithstanding, cheating occurring in examination halls prevails in Malawi and many other low-income contexts (Chalila & Nkhoma, 2003). Such cases lead to disqualification of a candidate across all examinations if it involves introduction of reference materials in the examination hall. If it involves students copying from each other, candidates will be disqualified in that particular examination. If the examination malpractice involves the whole cohort of candidates, the centre could be deregistered for a number of years. Legal measures have also been taken against some teachers, candidates and others involved in some forms of examination malpractice.

In 2003, the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) planned to administer examinations to candidates at cluster centres. Cluster centres were designed to accommodate a number of schools to take examinations together. The arrangement in the hall was expected to minimise cheating (Chalila & Nkhoma, 2003). Results of this strategy were not available.

Others have suggested a lesser influence on summative examinations, qualifications and its link with progress and social mobility as this is often a strong motive for exam success (Jimoh, 2009). The suggestion moving forward therefore is an increased focus on school-based assessments, continuous assessments etc.

Table 1: Strategies to mitigate examination fraud (More detailed notes can be found in the Expert Comments Appendix)

Stage	Strategy	Sources/notes
Development and review of exam items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of security zone of offices involved in test development and police searching all those accessing exam offices during the development phase • Exam constructor training with clear emphasis on the expected behaviours and responsibilities coupled with severe sanctions for individuals found to be leaking information • Consistent recording of which individuals have had access to particular exam papers ensuring that exam constructors/reviewers are aware that leaks can be traced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chalila & Nkhoma (2003); Expert Comments
Printing/storage/dispatch of exams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just-in-time printing of exam papers • Centralised printing of exam papers • Tagging question bags with coded locks that must only be opened at the exact examination start time • Use of printing companies with secure facilities within the country, some examination boards run their own secure printing facilities. Some countries opt for overseas printing and exam paper security is often a factor in this decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Punjab Education Commission (2015); Adow et al (2015); Expert comments • In the case of tagging question bags, common practice by other examination officers such as invigilators, supervisors and monitors can involve deliberately delaying examination start time by 30 minutes. Within the 30 minutes, the coded locks are opened, and examination questions photocopied, sent to standby groups of people who answer those questions and provide the answers to the pupils who had fulfilled their financial obligations to them (Adow et al, 2015).

Exam day(s)

- Online registration system for candidates
 - Preparation of up to 6 exam versions which are reliable and comparable
 - Improved and simplified guidelines for invigilators with a focus on anti-cheating measures and punitive actions
 - Pilot registration and conduct of exams
 - Devolved responsibility of examinations to regions/districts
 - Stakeholder workshops on accountability
 - Development of monitoring apps/technology
 - CCTV cameras or deployment of police/other authorities
 - Exam registers which use statistical analysis to highlight any anomalies across a range of factors e.g. grouping, copy distance etc
 - Banning the use of mobile/cellular devices for invigilators, supervisors and candidates
 - Policies where no supervisor or invigilator is allowed, under any circumstance, to supervise or invigilate candidates from schools to which they are affiliated
 - Spot checks by regional or national staff
 - Establishment of distribution centres where exam question papers are kept for collection and written scripts returned by the examination centre daily. During movement of examination question papers and written scripts police personnel are deployed to provide the needed security. Distribution centres are normally manned by police for 24 hours.
- Punjab Education Commission (2015); WAEC Ghana; Adow et al (2015); Expert comments

Marking of exams

- Determine sample size and sampling methodology for rechecking papers
 - Select students for the sample
 - Retrieve papers of the selected students
 - Set up marking teams
 - Hold pre-marking trainings
 - Recheck the collected papers
 - Capture detailed item level performance of each candidate
 - Analyse variance in marks awarded after rechecking with original marks
 - Analyse performance across topics for each subject
 - Unreliable markers are cautioned or discontinued from marking
- Punjab Education Commission (2015); Expert comments

Issue of certificate/qualification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certificate security measures (e.g. technology used in bank notes and identity documents) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chalila & Nkhoma, 2003; Expert comments • These measures require the end users (e.g. tertiary institutions, employers, visa offices etc) to understand the security measures in order to be able to detect false certificates. Simple methods, such as printing candidates' photographs on their certificates (e.g. the West African Examinations Council from 1999) have also been used but this is becoming less of an issue because databases are increasingly available where certificate details can be checked by further/tertiary institutions or employers. For example, the West African Examinations Council's online system, WAECDirect, provides examination data from 1993 onwards and students can provide interested parties with a PIN that enables them to confirm student's examination results
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic education campaigns for the public to discourage examination malpractices. This has been done through campaigns on the radio, local TV and also through drama groups and other forms of arts. • Legislation against examination malpractice • Institutionalise effective, unbureaucratic whistleblowing policies (which protect those who disclose) and ensure that students who are caught cheating are blacklisted from entering secondary/tertiary institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chalila & Nkhoma, 2003; Jimoh (2009); Kyagaba (n.d.) • Legislation can often be ineffective due to poor enforcement/implementation as well as the depth of corruption in the context in question

Source: Expert comments, other sources stated above

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