

TWENTY - EIGHT YEARS OF UNIVERSITIES MATRICULATION EXAMINATIONS IN NIGERIA: THE JOURNEY SO FAR AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to discuss the Universities Matriculation Examinations (UME) in Nigeria after its 28 years of existence. The discussion was focused on the two main issues, which have affected the validity and reliability of UME adversely. They include use of only achievement tests in the UME and examination malpractice. The author argued that only achievement tests should not be utilized in the selection and placement of candidates into Nigerian universities since the main function of such tests is not for prediction of academic success in schools. A combination of aptitude and achievement tests was therefore recommended for the UME. The author further discussed the various forms of examination malpractice which UME candidates practise. The effects of the malpractice were adequately highlighted and necessary recommendations made.

Introduction

Brief Historical Background of University Matriculation Examination (UME)

Admissions into universities in Nigeria were formerly conducted by individual universities. According to Okwudili (1996:1) "each university used (o set and conduct her own matriculation examinations as well as admit students. Individual candidates were allowed to apply for admissions into as many universities as they wished. Anugwo (2002) pointed out that each university set her own standards for admissions and admit her own students. Indeed, this type of admission favoured the individual universities, especially in the aspect of raising revenue/funds. This was so because each university used to sell her own admission forms as well as collect the entrance examination fees.

Some limitations were bound to confront the admissions conducted by individual universities in Nigeria. Discussing these limitations the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1976) pointed out that this style of admission introduced discrepancies in the goals and admission policies of various universities, as well as created variations in the admission standards and content of examinations of different universities. Tremendous examination anxiety/stress was caused the candidates who sought admissions because dates and times of taking entrance examinations in some universities often clashed (Anugwo, 2002). In addition, Angulu (1988) indicated that an intelligent candidate could apply for admissions into several universities, sat for their entrance examinations, and possibly secured admissions into all of them, thereby depriving other qualified candidate chances in those universities whose offer he might decline. Angulu (1988) further stated that candidates were compelled to travel to far places to take entrance examinations while their parents were forced to spend too much money on transportation and purchase of forms. In general, this style of admission put enormous strains on the candidates and their parents, particularly those who applied to many universities and did not gain admissions. Some candidates even lost admission due to ethnic and sectional sentiments exercised by their universities of choice.

It was in the light of these problems that the Federal Government of Nigeria inaugurated the National Committee on University Entrance in 1976. This committee in 1977, recommended that a Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) be introduced in the country to replace entrance exams by individual universities. The JAMB was finally set up by the Decree (Act) Number 2 of 1978 (Okwudili, 1996). This Decree was amended by Decree (Act) Number 33 of 1989. part of the functions of JAMB as reported by Angulu (1988) included: i. to conduct Universities Matriculation Examinations (UME) for candidates seeking admissions

into universities in Nigeria, and ii. to place suitably qualified candidates in the available places in the universities. Thus, in 1978,

JAMB conducted the first UME in Nigeria and from that 1978 to date, JAMB has been •conducting the UME in the country.

Subjects Examined in the UME

As specified by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB, 2004^a) 23 subjects are examined in the UME. They include: Agriculture, Arabic, Art, Biology, Chemistry, Christian Religious Studies, Commerce, Economics, French, Geography, Government, Hausa, History, Home Economics, Igbo, Islamic Studies, Literature in English, Mathematics, Music, Physics, Principles of Accounts, Use of English and Yoruba. Out of these subjects, JAMB (2004^b) stipulated that Use of English is mandatory for all candidates writing the UME. In addition to Use of English, each candidate is also required to select any three subjects which are relevant to his/her course of study in the UME. Thus, a total of four subjects are required to be taken by every candidate in the UME (JAMB, 2004¹).

Some courses and subjects which candidates are required to write in the UME for admissions into them (JAMB, 2004^b) were shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Courses and their subject Requirement

S/No.	Courses	UME Subjects
1.	Accountancy	Use of English, Mathematics, Economics, and any Social Science subject
2.	Banking and Finance	Use of English. Mathematics, Economics, any one Government or Geography
3.	International Relations	Use of English. Mathematics, and any two of Economics, History. Government, French, Geography, and Literature in English
4.	Mass Communication	Use of English, Literature in English, Economics and Government
5.	Agricultural Science	Use of English. Chemistry, Biology/Agriculture, or any one of Physics and Mathematics
6.	Engineering	Use of English, Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics
7.	Anatomy	Use of English, Biology, Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics
8.	Optometry	Use of English, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology
9.	Computer Science	Use of English, Mathematics, Physics and one of Biology, Chemistry, Agriculture. Economics and Geography
10.	Political Science	Use of English, Government, or History, plus two other Social Science subjects
11.	Law	Use of English, and three other Social Science subjects
12.	Medicine	Use of English, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology
13.	Medical Laboratory Science	Use of English, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology
14.	Pharmacy	Use of English. Physics, Chemistry, and Biology
15.	Geology	Use of English, and any of Chemistry. Physics, Mathematics. Biology and Geography

For a candidate to be offered admission in a course, he/she must obtain an acceptable level of performance at the UME in the relevant subjects to the course (JAMB, 2004^b). Each subject is graded in percentage (100%) and the maximum scorable mark is 400.

The Journey So Far

This section was discussed under two sub-headings including use of only achievement tests in the UME and examination malpractice.

Use of Only Achievement Tests in the UME

After 28 years of UME in Nigeria, this author observed that only achievement tests have been used in the examination and selection of candidates for admission in Nigerian universities. Achievement tests as defined by Nwana (1982) and Onunkwo (2002) are tests administered to students in order to determine how far they have learnt what they were taught. For Nwagu (2003) achievement tests are tests used to determine the degree of attainment of individuals in tasks, courses or programmes to which they were sufficiently exposed. Thus, a student's performance in an achievement test is an index of his/her mastery of the topics he/she was taught.

Achievement tests are usually set or written from syllabuses which contain topics they are meant to emphasize. In Nigeria, some examples of achievement tests are internal examinations organized by schools' Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) organized by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and National Examinations Council (NECO). These examinations have detailed syllabuses. Universities Matriculation Examinations (UME) are achievement tests because they are based on well spelt out syllabuses prepared by JAMB.

One obvious limitation of achievement tests is that they are not good predictors of students' academic success or progress in schools. In other words, the main function of achievement tests is not for selection and placement of candidates into courses or programmes of study but for determination of how far students have learnt the topics they were taught.

The disturbing question (very critical) one may ask at this stage is - why has JAMB persisted in using only achievement tests in the UME for the 28 years of its existence? Indeed, this author is unable to answer this question but for sure, it is both professionally and technically erroneous to do so. The reason is obvious - achievement tests are not adequate predictors of academic success in schools. This could explain why many students who passed the UME usually perform poorly or at worst fail their courses of study in the universities. As a university lecturer, observation has shown that many students who passed the UME to read different courses, especially medicine and engineering usually drop half-way. This is as a result of wrong selection through UME using achievement tests. This act has caused severe harm/damage to the universities in Nigeria. Students who were wrongly selected and placed into courses they cannot study through UME are normally frustrated. They do get 'carry overs' (i.e., failure, re-sit) in most courses as well as extra year(s) in their programmes. It is this frustration that also leads many students into different social evils such as cultism, alcoholism, rape, sexual harassment, examination malpractice, bribery, and the likes.

Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice as defined by Onyechere (1996) means any act of wrong - doing or neglect that contravenes the rules of acceptable practice before, during and after an examination by anybody in any way. It involves any behaviour or acts exhibited or omitted by people at any time which render examinations impotent as a true measure of academic achievement. The main effect of examination malpractice is that it lowers the quality of education any where it occurs as well as reduces the standard of graduates produced through it. Hence, examination malpractice is an evil. This explained why the Federal Republic of Nigeria as cited by JAMB (2004^b) enacted the Examination Malpractice Decree in 1999 and specified penalties for victims of examination malpractice. The punishments provided include three (3) or five (5) years imprisonment or 1450,000.00 fine, or both imprisonment and fine.

- There are several forms in which examination malpractice can occur. These forms as identified by JAMB (2004^a) are cheating, stealing of question papers, impersonation, collusion with others with the intent to cheat or secure unfair advantage for self or for another, disturbances at examinations, misconduct in the course of an examination, failure to obey lawful orders of supervisors, invigilators or agents of the examination body, forgery of result slip, breach of duty and conspiracy.

However, it is disheartening to mention here that UME (in spite of its crucial nature as a selection examination) severely has experienced multifarious forms of examination malpractice for the 28 years of its existence. As a supervisor of UME for many years now, the researcher has practically observed the following forms of examination malpractice during UME. Copying in the halls, snatching question papers from examiners, writing outside the halls, bribing examiners to allow cheating, using policemen to exchange copied materials, selling of live question papers by officials, allowing intelligent candidates to write for others, hiring undergraduates to write the exams, registering intelligent students to write for others, proprietors of schools bribing examiners and officials, parents buying UME results for their wards, candidates and their agents beating up the supervisors and law enforcement agents to allow them cheat.

Indeed, these forms of examination malpractice observable during UME have rendered the results of the examinations invalid and unreliable. As a result of the malpractices, many students who would have failed the examinations usually pass with high scores. This is disastrous and misleading because such students when selected and placed in the universities often become frustrated due to their inability to meet up the demands of their courses of study. Specifically, they obtain carry-over in many of their course offerings and this leads them to extra years in their programmes. Majority of these frustrated undergraduates often engage in cultism, alcoholism, rape, sexual harassment, lecturer and students assault/molestation, destruction of university property, and the like.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were advanced based on the two key issues discussed in this paper. The issues were, use of only achievement tests in the UME and examination malpractice. 1. Regarding use of only achievement tests in UME, this author recommends the use of both aptitude and achievement tests in the UME. Aptitude tests as defined by Ohuche and Akeju (1988), Ukwuije (1993), Kaplan and Saccuzzo (2001) are tests that measure students' ability to learn or acquire (with training if necessary) a specific skill or knowledge. In other words, aptitude tests are administered so as to determine students' potentials to successfully learn various tasks. Thus, they are tests used in predicting future performance of students.

The major difference between achievement and aptitude tests is that while aptitude tests assess students' ability to learn if exposed to training, achievement tests measure what students have learnt after exposure to training. Hence, since aptitude tests are predictive in function, they are mostly used for selection and placement examinations (i.e. entrance examinations) such as UME. It is noteworthy here that when aptitude tests are used in selecting students for admission, the successful students always excel in their courses of study because they were selected based on their capabilities or aptitudes. The problems of carry over, extra years, frustration, examination malpractice, etc, are drastically minimized in this situation.

The specific aptitude tests recommended for use in the UME are those for verbal ability and quantitative ability. For verbal ability, tests in verbal reasoning and reading comprehension should be used. The punishments provided include three (3) or five (5) years imprisonment or ₦450,000.00 fine, or both imprisonment and fine.

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The specific aptitude tests recommended for use in the UME are those for verbal ability and quantitative ability. For verbal ability, tests in verbal reasoning and reading comprehension should be used. For quantitative ability, tests in arithmetic reasoning, algebraic problems, interpretation of graphs and diagrams, as well as descriptive statistics should be used.

Regarding the achievement tests component of the UME, it is recommended that each candidate, in addition to the specified aptitude tests should take achievement tests in three subjects relevant for his/her course of choice. For example, a candidate who applied for medicine should take the aptitude tests (i.e. verbal ability and quantitative ability tests) plus achievement tests in Physics, Chemistry and Biology. The achievement tests in English should be abrogated from the UME. Examination Malpractice is an evil and should be fought against by all means. The government and every individual should join efforts in eradicating the evil from the UME in particular and the entire Nigeria education system in general. Enough law enforcement officers should be earnestly employed for action on the days of the UME. JAMB as a board should be more careful with their question papers so as to avoid leakages from source. Special centres should be abolished for UME. Parents and other persons who abet examination malpractice should be given prison sentences.

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