



Towards the Standardisation of the English Language Component of the Mature Students' Entrance Examinations into Ghanaian Universities:

Rethinking the Individualistic Approach

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Abstract

The Mature Students' Entrance Examinations (MSEE) is one route through which most Ghanaian universities admit students for undergraduate studies. This paper was purposed on advocating the standardisation of the English language component of MSEE. It was argued in this study that the English language component of the MSEE must be administered by an especially constituted regulatory body of national character to ensure that it is standardised, rather than the relying on the individualistic approach being practised presently. It was advanced that the individualistic approach (where the universities set their own questions based on their own standards) is fraught with quality problems. A qualitative desk survey method was assumed comprising 102 appropriate literature which were reviewed and synthesised. It was indicated that having a regulatory body of national character regulating the English language component of the MSEE is crucial to ensure test quality. It was recommended that a paradigm shift (from the individualistic approach) will help ensure quality standards for admissions, as done with the use an analogous examination such as the West African Examination Council's (WAEC) West African Senior School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) which is the main conduit for university undergraduate admissions in Ghana.

Keywords

English language, Ghanaian universities, Mature students, Placement examinations, Uniformity

INTRODUCTION

The practice of examinations is deeply rooted in educational systems throughout the world. Examinations are, therefore, activities that all educators and students must face or take part in because examinations are the core of education (Xiaojiang, 1991; Boud, 1995). There is a substantial collection of literature on what constitutes an examination (Brown, 2001, 2003, 2004; Carroll, 1980; Fagbamiye, 1998; Hanna & Dettmer, 2004; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2001; Uduh, 2009). Carroll (1980), for example, claims that examinations are methods or tools used to gather information about people's behaviours so that conclusions about their qualities within a given subject or domain can be drawn. Examinations are methods for monitoring and judging the quality of education in any nation, according to Fagbamiye (1998). Additionally, Brown (2001) describes examinations as a formalised collection of methods for evaluating individuals' competencies. Kellaghan and Greaney (2001) advance that examinations are measures designed to acquire data regarding students' skill

levels. Examinations are a “means for testing a person’s aptitude, knowledge or performance in a certain topic,” according to Brown (2003: 4). The tool that accurately assesses test takers’ capabilities within a certain topic, he continues, is a well-constructed examination. The idea that examinations are methods teachers employ to gather information about the teaching and learning process is consistent with the latter definition (Hanna & Dettmer, 2004). Also, examinations are processes used to determine how much a learner has retained regarding the goals of particular assignments, according to Uduh (2009). The “unravelling” feature of examinations is crucial to these definitions. In other words, examinations are crucial for revealing examinee behaviours so that such data can be employed to make choices regarding the examinees (Brookhart, 2004).

Many academics have developed various classifications for characterising or figuring out the resolves or goals of examinations (Black & William, 1998a; Berry, 2018; Brown, 2004; Cohen, 1994; Jacobs *et al.*, 1981). Berry (2018), for instance, lists the four categories of examinations as proficiency, placement, diagnostic and achievement. Proficiency examinations are designed to test proficiency in a particular subject area (such as academic or business). Berry continues by averring that placement examinations give assessors information on how to place test takers on the best or satisfactory levels of language programmes; these placements are dependent on the precise results that test takers receive on such placement examinations. According to Briggs, Alonzo, Schwab and Wilson (2006), tutors can better understand their pupils and plan lessons by using diagnostic testing. Diagnostic examinations, according to El-Hamid (2011), identify students who lack the necessary background information, comprehension or abilities. According to De Pierola (2014), a diagnostic examination is the systematic collection and valuation of specific data using students’ abilities in a given subject area. De Pierola adds that valuations that concentrate on important knowledge and concepts can provide this data. Berry (2018: 3) posits that achievement examinations “are intended to reflect achievement or progress over a course of study and can be either formative, during a course of study or summative, at the end of the course”.

Through placement examinations, prospective students are given consideration for enrolment in universities. For instance, Zwick (2002) notes the prevalence of several standardised, high-stakes placement examinations in North America. Educators use the Scholastic Assessment Test for college entrance (SAT), the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), the Law School Admission Test (LAWST) and the Graduate Management Admission Test for admission to graduate and professional schools (GMAT) (Fletcher, 2009).

Universities in West Africa employ placement examinations to choose suitable students for enrolment in a range of undergraduate and graduate programmes of study. One such examination typical to Ghana is the “Mature Students’ Entrance Examinations” (MSEE). Candidates are considered eligible to sit for this examination provided that they are at least twenty-five (25) years old. Additionally, applicants must have prior work involvement in the disciplines they wish to study (recognition of past or prior learning). Candidates are typically tested in four categories: English language, Mathematics, Science and a subject-specific examination. Before being considered for placement, candidates must be successful in all of the stated categories. This study focuses on the English language component of the MSEE. The rationale underpinning this choice is that the English language is the Medium of instruction or Language of Teaching and Learning (LOTL) in all Ghanaian schools (Dolphyne, 1995; Ghana Education Service, 2010; *Author*), and, is, as such, a crucial component in the determination of whether or not a candidate possesses the right skills and competences to be granted admission into Ghanaian universities to pursue undergraduate studies. The study concentrates on the English language component of the MSEE since this examination precisely deals with candidates’ English language information and skills based on which they are given or denied admission into Ghanaian universities.

Grounded on the fact that the English language component of the MSEE (which is considered more or less an analogous examination to the West African Examinations Council’s [WAEC] West African Senior School Certificate Examinations [WASSCE] English language component) is individualistically administered as opposed to the WASSCE English language component which is regulated by WAEC, it is advanced in this study that the practice of universities setting their own English language component of the MSEE questions affects the quality of the examination. It is followingly contended in this paper that the English language component of the MSEE must be administered by an especially constituted regulatory body of national character to ensure that it is standardised as is done by WAEC for the WASSCE English language component. This position is based on the fact that the English language is the LOTL in Ghana. The implication is that the students would cope with the other components (Mathematics, Science and a subject-specific paper) which are also set in English because by passing the standardised English language component of the MSEE, they would have shown their competence in handling the other subject areas of the MSEE.

In order to achieve this, an overview of the Ghanaian university undergraduate entrance examination landscape is presented. The methodology then follows, after which the individualistic approach being applied in the conduct of the English language component of the MSEE and its negative effects are presented. Thereafter, arguments on the standardised high-stakes testing position, a vignette on its coverage and the necessity for its continuation are presented. It is then advanced that there must be a paradigm shift from the individualistic approach to the adoption of a regulatory body of national character to oversee the running of this examination. It is further indicated that the latter approach stands to better inform decisions made by Ghanaian universities in respect of undergraduate admissions through the English language component of the MSEE because of the quality that it stands to guarantee.

UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS LANDSCAPE IN GHANA: AN OVERVIEW

In addition to the WASSCE, the Mature Students' Entrance Examination is used by the majority of universities to admit students. The WASSCE, which is administered by the WAEC for final-year Senior High School (SHS) students and private applicants, has long been the primary examination used to evaluate applicants for undergraduate admissions to tertiary institutions in Ghana. The WASSCE is a nationally standardised examination in which all applicants respond to the same questions. Usually, the test is given to school candidates in May or June and to private candidates in October or November.

The entry season for school candidates is from September to November, and the process lasts for six to eight weeks. The continuous assessment scores of the applicants are, nevertheless, provided on CDs by the schools to WAEC. School officials list their applicants and upload their entry information online. The entry period for private candidates is from February to May, and listing is completed online. The process of offline registration is used for private applicants who list through accredited private organisations. The core disciplines for the subjects under examination are: English Language, Integrated Science, Mathematics and Social Studies. Depending on their programme of study, candidates choose specific elective subjects. Agriculture, Business, Technical, Vocational, Visual Arts, General Arts, and General Science are the available programmes. To be considered qualified for university placement, candidates must take either three or four electives, pass at least three of these elective disciplines and have passes in all four core disciplines (<https://www.waecgh.org/EXAMINATIONS/WASSSCE.aspx>). Candidates are judged to have passed a subject if their scores range from A1 to C6. Grades between D7 and F9 are regarded weak and cannot position students to gain undergraduate university admission. A breakdown of the WASSCE grading scheme is shown in Table 1:

Table 1 WASSCE Grading System

Credit Grades	WASSCE Grading System	Points
A	A1	1
B	B2	2
C	B3	3
D	C4, C5, C6	4
Pass Grades: Not Acceptable for Tertiary Admission		
E	D7, E8	Pass-no credit
Failing Grade		
F	F9	Fail

Source: <https://gh.usembassy.gov/education-culture/educationusacenter/educational-system-ghana/>

In addition to the WASSCE, prospective students who want to enrol in undergraduate programmes also take an examination that is administered internally by the universities to choose applicants. This examination is known as “Mature Students’ Entrance Examinations” (MSEE). Candidates are deemed eligible to sit for this examination provided that they are, at least, twenty-five (25) years old. Additionally, candidates must have work experience in the disciplines they wish to study (recognition of past or prior learning). Candidates are typically tested in four categories: English language, Mathematics, Science and a subject-specific paper. Before being considered for placement, candidates must be successful all of the examinations. The successful candidates join the WASSCE candidates in the mainstream universities and are taught using the same pedagogical approaches.

METHODOLOGY

It is argued in this paper that the practice of universities setting their own English language component of the MSEE questions affects the quality of the examination. It is further contended that the English language component of the MSEE must be administered by an especially constituted regulatory body of national character to ensure that it is standardised as is done by WAEC for the WASSCE English language component. A qualitative desk survey method of research was chosen. Books, journals, reports, the internet, theses, conference presentations, web sources and newsletters were used to gather secondary data appropriate to the study. Some existing literature on the Ghanaian university undergraduate entrance examination landscape, arguments on the standardised high-stakes testing position, a vignette on its coverage and the necessity for its continuation were reviewed and synthesised. The study covered 102 relevant literature; out of the 102 literature, 49 are journal articles, 20 are books, 6 are reports, 4 are conference presentations, 10 are website sources, 4 are theses and 9 are newsletters. Literature was retrieved through Google search engine and google scholar.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Individualistic application of the English language component of the MSEE and its negative effects

All the Ghanaian universities which administer the English language component of the MSEE do so independently. That is, all of the universities organise the examinations internally based on their own standards. This practice, consequently, renders the English language component of the MSEE a “university-specific” entrance examination. This means that the test content, the test structure and the scoring rubrics are all not the same across the universities; they are tailored to suit the standards of each examining university. In a study conducted by (*Author*) on the English language component of the MSEE of six Ghanaian universities, it was found that all the six universities used in that particular study, by and large, tested different English language competences, that the test structures employed by the universities differed significantly

and that the universities tested only two (Reading and Writing) of the four basic language skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening).

The English language component of the MSEE did not equal the criteria of the WASSCE English language component, which is the main conduit for undergraduate admissions by Ghanaian universities (*Author*). Whereas the MSEE's English language component covered Reading and Writing, the WASSCE's English language component tested Reading, Writing and Listening. The English language component of the WASSCE focused on Antonyms, Synonyms, Usage, Registers, Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions, Literature, Essay Writing, Reading Comprehension, Run-On Sentences, Dangling Modifiers, Punctuation, Synonym, Summary and Essay Writing. For the English language component of the MSEE, the areas tested are Word Classes, Spelling, Registers, Literary Devices, Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions, Usage, Antonymy. In another study in which (*Author*) set out to evaluate the criteria used in the setting of the English language component of the MSEE questions across six universities in Ghana, a number of major weaknesses were found: 1) the universities did not have a standard test model that they followed to set the questions, 2) the universities did not give English language assessment and measurement training the assessors who set the questions, 3) the universities largely did not pre-trial the questions to ensure reliability, 4) the universities largely did not consider the characteristics of the test takers in the setting or design of the questions and 5) the universities followed different processes to set the questions, without following any acceptable quality standards.

Since there is no body of national character backed by any legal instrument to regulate the conduct of the English language component of the MSEE in Ghanaian universities, the quality that is present in the WASSCE English language component is lacking in the English language component of the MSEE. These two examinations are not parallel with respect to quality. This poses a problem since both examinations play pivotal roles in the university undergraduate admissions landscape in Ghana.

Arguments on the standardised high-stakes testing position, a vignette on its coverage and the necessity for its continuation

Research on university entrance examinations around the world are not in their infancy (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Davey *et al.*, 2007; Guest, 2008; Hernan, 1995; Jinghua & Costanzo, 2013; Mouton *et al.*, 2013; O'Sullivan, 1995; Powers, 2010; Stapleton, 1996; Sawaki *et al.*, 2008; Yoshida, 1996a). Standardised high-stakes examinations have enjoyed significant patronage as a means through which students are selected for placement in schools globally. A number of extant literature have touched on the practice of this type of examinations (Davey *et al.*, 2007; Eckstein & Noah, 1989; Guest, 2008; Jones & Valentine, 1984; Schudson, 1972; Simner, 2000; Valentine, 1987).

The debate regarding the appropriateness of standardised high-stakes examinations has raged on for decades. A number of scholars have argued vehemently against the continuous administration of standardised high-stakes examinations. This is because the drawbacks are perceived to overshadow the positives (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Bigelow, 1999; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Casas & Meaghan, 2001; Derworiz, 2000; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Jones Haney, 2000; Jones & Hargrove, 2003; Knapp, 2002; Madaus, 1991; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; McNeil, 2000; Nichols *et al.*, 2005; Orfield *et al.*, 2004; Popham, 1999a; Siegel, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999). Some of the arguments raised against the administration of standardised high-stakes examinations are that when standardised test results are released, politicians, school boards and the media use these test results to compare students, teachers and schools because these test results are perceived by these stakeholders and members of the public as the medium for establishing fair educational standards. However, the examination results are not fair as they have been wrongly assumed to be by those in favour of the administration of standardised high-stakes examinations, and, therefore, cannot be used as a medium to compare students, teachers and schools (Bigelow, 1999; Popham, 1999a).

On their part, Smith (1990), Oakes (1990), Lee (1992), James and Tanner (1993), Kohn (1999), Casas and Meaghan (2001), Amrein and Berliner (2002) and Booher-Jennings (2005) advance that instead of teachers focusing on developing crucial life skills of students, the urge to aid students produce good results diverts valuable instructional time to teaching specifically to fit test expectations or requirements. Extreme test preparation, according to one study, "distorts the whole objective of examinations, which is to assess learning and understanding, not only to obtain higher test scores," (Ravitch, 2010: 160). That is, music, arts and physical education are all relegated to the background and emphasis put on reading books, writing and solving mathematical challenges. In addition, Haladyna *et al.* (1991), Liberman (1991), New York State United Teachers Task Force (1991), Herman and Golan (1992), Camara and Brown (1995) and Casas and Meaghan (2001) stress that, even for the examinable areas in standardised high-stakes examinations, there is bias in what is taught since topics most likely not to be tested are often overlooked by teachers and the reverse taught. This perceived practice narrows the curriculum – a situation that culminates in students losing valuable contents.

Hymes (1991), Rodriguez (1996) and Orfield and Wald (2000) argue that standardised high-stakes examinations are not appropriate for all kinds of students because students have different socio-demographic characteristics. Consequently, not all of them can handle the enormous pressure that is often associated with the preparation, the writing and the post result-release stress. Such anxiety, it is believed, can destroy the self-concept and reduce students' urge to study (Fleege, 1992; Smith, 1990; Koretz *et al.*, 1991; Madaus, 1991; Paris *et al.*, 1991; Scharer & Rogers, 1994; Spatig, 1996). Furthermore, these examinations are believed to have limited reliability, lack validity and lack fairness in the area of the impact that family income, race and gender have on the results produced (Baker *et al.*, 1993; Burns, 1998; Desjarlais, 1978; Guthrie, 1998; Haney & Madaus, 1989; McVey, 1991; Owen & Doerr, 1999; Rynor, 2000; Sinbuke,

1996; Wainer, 1993; Wilson & Martinussen, 1999). More so, the teachers are also not spared, as the examinations affect their work effectiveness, cause confusion and stress them as well (Hartman, 1991). These make teachers, parents and students suffer considerably because test results are used as the only yardstick to measure students' learning (Haladyna *et al.*, 1998).

There is a large number of proponents for the continuous use application of standardised high-stakes examinations, despite the arguments advanced by the critics (Finn, 1995; Schmidt, 2000; Evers & Wallberg, 2004; Mehrens, 2004; Moses & Nanna, 2007; Ravitch, 2010; Phelps, 2011, 2012). In particular, Phelps (2012) showed that 93% of the qualitative studies stated that there were positive benefits of testing on instruction in reading to summarise the influence of testing on students' achievement from 1910 to 2010. For instance, Phelps (2012) cites that results are used to improve course work. Additionally, on the subject of "teaching to test", Phelps (2011) indicates that "aligning a course of study to the test is eminently responsible behaviour when the content domains of a test match a jurisdiction's required test standards." (Phelps, 2012: 42; 2011). Again, Phelps (2011) stresses that, in the absence of nationally constituted bodies to oversee such examinations, the public would be left with no means to reliably measure learning on schools. Other scholars emphasise that standardised high-stakes examinations serve as diagnostic tools, help in gauging the impact of curriculum and reveal valuable data on both tutors and students' effectiveness and progress (Evers & Wallberg, 2004; Finn, 1995; Mehrens, 2004). For instance, Mehrens (2004) asserts that multiple choice questions (MCQs) are superior to other assessment techniques for evaluating learners' knowledge and skills. According to Koretz (1995: 156), "examinations...have redeeming social value." It is obvious that, when used wisely, assessment has a lot to offer educational reform. Additionally, Schmidt (2000), Moses and Nanna (2007) and Ravitch (2010) postulate that standardised high-stakes examinations serve to motivate both learners and educators to raise their academic achievements and again aid to bridge the educational lacunae of ethnicity, race and class.

Use of National bodies as placement examination regulators

Eckstein and Noah (1989), Scoppio (2000) and Phelps (2012) have indicated the wide application of national examination bodies that regulate entrance examinations. In specificity, Eckstein and Noah (1989) cite China, England, Wales, France, Japan, Sweden and the United States of America (USA) as some of the countries that use this approach.

For instance, Schudson (1972), Jones and Valentine (1984), Valentine (1987) and Phelps (2011) are among the researchers who have studied ways students gain access into universities in the USA. These scholars report that there is a College Entrance Examinations Board that administers the College Entrance Examinations which all aspiring university candidates take and use the results to seek admission into universities. On their part, Davey, Chuan and Louise (2007) espouse that the Chinese Ministry of Education plays the regulatory role of ensuring quality in the application of all the nation's placement examinations. For instance, the Ministry of Education enacted significant revisions to modernise the examinations, to improve their fairness and objectivity and to uniformise the procedure across the country as soon as issues with its design were discovered in the 1990s. Similar to this, Guest (2008) notes that Senta Shiken is used in Japan (the national examinations that all applicants seeking entry to Japanese universities have to take). After identifying that both Writing and Speaking tasks were non-existent in the examinations, receptive skills including a Listening component were added to the examination in 2006 to standardise it across Japan. In South Africa, the Centre for Educational Testing for Access and Placement's (CETAP) Academic and Qualitative Literacy (AQL) Test and the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) which is a well-accepted and authoritative test that has been administered by several South African higher institutions of learning (ICELDA, 2011; Loan Le, du Plessis & Weideman, 2011). Similarly, in Ghana and in other Anglophone countries such as the Gambia and Nigeria, the WAEC runs the WASSCE examinations which is the mainstream university entrance examination (Author; Berry, 2018).

ALTERNATE SOLUTIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

It is evident, from the extant literature reviewed that the application of both the standardised high-stakes testing approach and the individualistic approach are not without criticisms. It is based on these arguments and counter arguments that it is proposed in this paper that an examination body of national character be established to oversee to the running of the English language component of MSEE in the placement of undergraduate students into Ghanaian universities; this is to ensure that there is guaranteed quality across the nation in its application.

Practically, this will involve policy makers constituting a special body that will be tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that core examination quality assurance practices such as: 1) using standard test model(s) to set the questions, 2) giving the assessors English language assessment and measurement training, 3) pre-trialing the questions to ensure reliability, 4) considering the characteristics of the test takers in the setting or design of the questions and 5) following standard processes to set the questions (Berry, 2018) are achieved. This could be done in two ways: 1) the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) allowing the universities to constitute a cross-university body to oversee the administration of the English language component of the MSEE or 2) the GTEC spearheading the whole process by constituting the body and running all affairs related to the management of the English language component of the MSEE in close consultation with all the practicing universities. For the former, the universities could set up this body with its leadership coming from within the universities and changeable after a period of, say, two years. This will ensure a fair representation of all universities and a better room to engender the cross-fertilisation of ideas. Expected standard will be

set, and the leadership will unfailingly ensure that such expected high quality standards which can ensure the proper application of the English language component of the MSEE are guaranteed and applied.

With respect to the latter, a WAEC-like body made up of educators who are well versed in English language assessment and related technicalities could be constituted in order to infuse quality (Luna & Turner, 2001). This way, an appreciable degree of parallelism will be established with its closely-related examination – the English language component of the WASSCE. In order to deal with any potential weaknesses of this approach, key stakeholders must develop a national English language component of the MSEE policy and monitor the process of its application closely to identify emerging weaknesses and also act swiftly through the implementation of appropriate reforms to address those emerging weaknesses. When these are done, the quality of the English language component of the MSEE will be, to a large extent, ensured.

CONCLUSION

Within the Ghanaian higher education environment, the English language component of the MSEE utilised for admissions into Ghanaian universities has grown significantly in popularity. Based on the evidence from the extant literature, it has been argued that the English language component of the MSEE is a UNIVERSITY-SPECIFIC examination because educators test different English language competences, employ various test approaches and only evaluate two of the four basic language skills (Reading and Writing). It has also been argued that the individualistic approach being applied in the conduct of the English language component of the MSEE has the principal negative effect of not guaranteeing quality standards for assessing candidates' English language competencies. From the foregoing, it is argued that a regulatory examination body should be set up by policy makers to oversee the conduct of the English language component of the MSEE in Ghanaian universities, as is done by WAEC for the WASSCE English language component.

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