



*Full Length Research Paper*

# Sorting' in examinations: Evaluating the quality of assessment in Universities in Cameroon

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## Abstract

Society tends to attribute much doubt about the quality of graduates to the activities that are taking place in universities in Cameroon. Greatest amongst such activities is examination malpractice. Recently, a new trend in examination malpractice that is struggling to gain grounds especially in Cameroon Universities is 'sorting'. The purpose of this study was to find out psychosocial factors that influence students' tendencies towards 'sorting' in Universities. To achieve this purpose, a questionnaire was administered to 338 students in Universities in Cameroon. Four hypotheses were formulated in their null form and tested at 0.05 level of significance. Based on the results of the study, the researcher recommended the encouragement of inter-University course examination unions that could collaborate to take care of the construction and scoring of course examinations. More intensive counseling services were also recommended for both students and lecturers while severe sanctions were also recommended for perpetrators of 'sorting'

**Key word:** Sorting, grade falsification.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is so far the surest process through which society ensures a desirable change in the behaviour of her young members. Airasion (2001) holds that examination grades are the most common means through which parents and the society can be informed about the learner's academic progress and performance. The students' achievement is communicated to parents and the society through the certificates they get. Through the quality of service of the benefactors of these certificates, the school and the society can be evaluated in terms of how well they are realizing their goals. Joshua (2005) notes that grades by themselves provide limited information; communicate little in the way of specific information about how the student has learned, and rarely includes information about students' motivation, cooperation and behaviour. As a result of these, he advises that, something more than grades from cognitive assessment are needed to give parents a full portrait of the student. Assessment reports should therefore be made to include the assessment of more attributes than the cognitive. When the results of such assessment are falsified, the impact on the society is disastrous, as the

expectations from the students will not reflect the grades they possess. Grade falsification has been studied variously in the direction of examination malpractice. A new dimension of examination malpractice currently finding grounds in universities is 'sorting'. This refers to the negotiation of examination scores with course instructors and school authorities using incentives. The factors that influence such a new trend of falsification of grades remain a puzzle to parents, students and school authorities.

Assessment involves a report on how students can demonstrate that they have reached their learning goals. Scores in examinations are affected not only by the content to be evaluated but also by how the examinations are administered. No matter the effort devoted to constructing a test that is appropriate in content and format, there is no guarantee that the individuals for whom the examination is intended will be motivated to respond consciously and honestly to it, or even understand what they are asked to do. In addition they may become fatigued, distracted or for other reasons experience a decline in concentration and recall. If these

result in poor performance in the examination, the students may resort to sorting in order to ensure a pass in the course. Santrock (2004) reports that 'from 1987 to 1997, among students taking the SAT test, the proportion of students with A average rose from 28 to 37 percent. Meanwhile over the same period, the combined verbal and math scores of those 'A' students dropped by 14 points'.

Aiken (1998) also noted that "it was discovered some years ago that certain California teachers were erasing students' answers to items on the California Achievement Program (CAP) test and marking the correct answers in order to make both the students and the schools look better'. He therefore noted that cheating after examination 'which is largely represented by sorting' occurs randomly when points are added to an applicant or employee's score, by some one, to make the person appear competent for whatever reason. The virulence and degradation that this type of examination malpractice causes, calls for a swift and prompt reaction of the various stakeholders of education, especially in Universities in Cameroon especially at the time when the country is facing the challenges of meeting up with the millennium development goals and vision 2035. Students, who have developed the tendencies towards sorting, no longer attend lectures but keep themselves busy devising methods of penetrating the school examination authorities. The certificates acquired by such graduates thereby deceive the public when they are presented for employment purposes. It is for this reason that this researcher elected to look into sorting in examinations in Cameroon Universities. This was done by studying some hypothesized psychosocial factors that could influence sorting among university students. The sample was drawn from two in Cameroon.

### **Theoretical Background**

The concept of examination and selection is as old as the history of man. The Lord said to Gideon, "The men you have are too many for me to give them victory over the midianites..... I will rescue you and give you victory over the midianites with the three hundred who lapped the water. Tell every one else to go home" (Judges 7:2-7, p248). Those who were told to go home should have very much loved to be among the three hundred. Given an opportunity, they should have 'sorted'.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory is derived from the work of Albert Bandura which proposed that social learning occurs through four main stages of imitation; close contact, imitation of superiors, understanding of concepts and role model behavior. The social learning theory of Bandura

emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory has been applied extensively to the understanding of psychological disorders, particularly in the context of behavior modification. It is also the theoretical foundation for the technique of behavior modeling which is widely used in training programs. When testing is carried out, students observe the tendencies and therefore have to learn how others go about in the practices. If they observe that students succeed through sorting the tendency will be that all of them make an effort to sort. They thus learn from each other by exchanging best practices as they observe each other carry out their examination processes.

Bandura (1971) propounded the social learning theory on the proposition that behaviour is learned and that the individual's psychological and social adjustment can be examined in relation to the accumulated impact of a series of learning experiences. Observational principles of learning can adequately explain such social and psychological adjustments. He contends that the most fundamental and significant principle of social learning is through reinforcement. Based on this theory, the fundamental basis of sorting tendencies could be that of reinforcement by some agencies within the university system.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research design used for this study was a survey because this study focused more on the opinion, attitudes and beliefs of the students in Universities. The study was carried out using 225 students in the University of Buea, and 113 students in the University of Douala in Cameroon, making a total of 338 students. The selection of the students was done using stratified random sampling and purposive sampling. Here the faculties in the universities were identified and those that were used were selected using simple random sampling. Then the students in these were selected using the purposive sampling method where respondents were given the questionnaire to answer because the researchers new they were knowledgeable about the variables under study. Interviews were also conducted using an interview guide. Table 1 shows the distribution of the students in terms of gender and age.

The instrument used for data collection was a thirty-four-item questionnaire. One section of the questionnaire requested personal and demographic data while the other section requested information on test anxiety, fear of failure, examination self concept and students socio economic background. Each item contained a scoring scale where students' opinions were scored with scores ranging 1-4. The questionnaire was validated and tested for reliability using the Cronbach coefficient reliability

Table 1: Distribution of respondents in terms of age and gender in the universities.

University	Gender			Age			Total
	M	F	Total	<20	20-25	>25	
Buea	105	120	225	44	132	49	225
Douala	60	53	113	08	82	23	113
<b>Total</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>338</b>

estimate. The reliability of the whole instrument was 0.87, a value that was considered high to warrant its use for the study.

One research question was posed: How is the manifestation of sorting in the Universities? The following three hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 alpha level:

1. Psychosocial factors (test anxiety, fear of failure, students' perception of lecturers, examination self-concept and students' socio-economic background) are not significant predictors of students' tendency towards 'sorting' in Cameroon Universities.
2. There are no significant effects of age and gender on students' tendency towards 'sorting' in Cameroon university examinations.
3. There is no significant difference in students' tendency towards 'sorting' in examinations in the University of Buea and the University of Douala in Cameroon

## Data Analyses and Interpretation

### Manifestation of sorting in Cameroon Universities

**Sales of handouts and textbooks:** Teachers produce handouts to facilitate their teaching. Teachers see it very necessary for students to possess these handout to facilitate their learning so they impose the acquisition of these handouts to the students. To ensure that students acquire these handouts they take down the names of the students who have payed for the handouts. The students who have their names on the list are compensated through marks while those who have not bought are punished. This causes the students to buy the handouts whether they like it or not in order to acquire these marks or favours from the lecturer.

**Purchase of marks through direct exchange of money:** some students who already know the weaknesses of their teachers do not take their lessons seriously so they spend time preparing money to pay for such courses. From the interview students pay sums of money up to thirty five thousand Francs CFA in certain faculties to validate the course in question.

**Sorting through sex:** some lecturers identify some girls in their class that are ready to give in for sex to gain marks.

**Boba jobbing:** some students sacrifice their time to do odd jobs for lecturers in order to gain favours from them. Jobs range from cleaning their farmlands/building plots to minor jobs in their homes to earn marks.

## Testing of the Three Hypotheses

### Hypothesis one

The following psychosocial factors (test anxiety, fear of failure, perception of lecturers, examination self concept, and students socio-economic background) are not significant predictors of students' tendency towards sorting in universities.

A multiple regression was performed using the psychosocial factors as the predictors and students tendencies towards sorting as the criterion. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 2.

The results of the regression indicate that 6.4% of the variance of students' tendencies towards sorting is accounted for by these psychosocial factors. This value is small but significant since the calculated F-value for the prediction (4.523) is higher than the critical F-value of 2.23 at 0.05 alpha level with (5,332) degrees of freedom. The result also shows that the calculated t-values of test anxiety ( $t=2.231$ ) and students' perception of lecturers ( $t = 2.99$ ) are both higher than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 alpha level and 336 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected for these psychosocial variables. Hence tests anxiety and students' perception of lecturers are significant predictors of students' tendencies towards 'sorting' in university examinations.

On the other hand, students' socio-economic status, fear of failure and examination self-concept are not significant predictors of students' tendency towards sorting in university examinations, since the calculated t-values are all less than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with 336 degrees of freedom.

### Hypothesis two

There are no significant effects of age and gender on students' tendency towards 'sorting' in university examinations. The statistical analysis used to test this hypothesis was the 2-way analysis of variance (2-way

**Table 2:** Multiple regression analysis of the prediction of tendencies towards sorting using psychosocial variables.

Variables	unstandardised Coefficients		standard Beta	standardized coefficients			
	B	Error		t	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Constant	4.222	1.221		3.458	0.253	064	4.523*
SES	.057	.031	.107	1.835			
Anxiety	.124	.056	.131	2.231*			
Fear	.127	.066	.114	1.906			
Plecturer	.142	.062	.124	2.299*			
Self. Concept	-0.052	.058	-.053	-			

\*P<0.05 F<sub>(5, 332)</sub> = 2.23 t<sub>(336)</sub> = 1.96

**Table 3:** Result of two-way ANOVA of the effects of students' age and gender on their tendencies towards 'sorting' in university examinations.

Dependent variable: Tendency towards sorting

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Corrected model	23.440	5	4.688	0.527	0.756
Intercept	19011.606	1	19011.606	2136.067	0.000
Age	7.565	2	3.782	0.425	0.654
Gender	0.298	1	0.298	0.033	0.855
Age & gender	13.341	2	6.670	0.749	0.473
Error	2954.895	332	8.900		
Total	30627.000	338			
Corrected total	2978.334	337			

a. R square = 0.008 (Adjusted R squared =0.007).

**Table 4:** Independent t-test analysis of the difference in students' tendency towards sorting in examinations in the University of Douala and the University of Buea (N=338)

University	N	X	SD	t=value
Nigeria	225	8.87	2.93	
Cameroon	113	9.36	3.05	1.44*
Total	338	9.03	2.98	

\*p>0.05, df =336, critical t = 1.96

ANOVA). Table 4 shows the factorial ANOVA results of the effects of students, age and gender on students' tendency towards sorting in university examinations.

The result in Table 4 shows that the F-ratio for each of the 2 factors (age and gender) and for the two-way interaction is not statistically significant at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was therefore retained for age and gender and the two-way interaction of age and gender.

This means that students' tendency towards sorting in university examinations is not significantly dependent on the gender and age of the student. Also the two-way interaction of age and gender is not significant, meaning that the difference in the tendencies towards sorting between males and females does not vary with the age of the students.

### Hypothesis three:

There is no significant difference in students' tendency towards 'sorting' in examinations in the University of Douala and the University of Buea. The statistical analysis technique used to test this hypothesis was the independent t-test. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 4

The calculated t-value of 1.44 is lower than the critical t-value of 1.96 at .05 level of significance with 336 degrees of freedom. With the result of the analysis, the null hypothesis was rejected. This result therefore means that there is no significant difference in students' tendency towards sorting in examinations in the University of Buea in Cameroon and the University of Calabar in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

Assessment of students' learning has generated considerable interest in educational circles. This interest has focused mainly on such issues as the extent to which teachers should set standards in their assessment and assessment reports in the direction of efficient test construction and quality of scoring. At the level of universities where the sole authority of declaring the fate of the learner is the prerogative of a particular course instructor the quality of the report becomes complex as this can be influenced through sorting. This study which looked into the evaluation of the quality of assessment in Cameroon universities by looking into the tendency towards sorting in examinations, focused attention on students from the University of Buea and the University of Douala using psychological variables like test anxiety, fear of failure, examination self concept and students socio economic background.

From the testing of hypotheses, the following findings were derived.

1. There is a high manifestation of sorting in examinations in Cameroon universities
2. Tests anxiety and students' perception of their lecturers are significant predictors of student's tendencies towards sorting in university examinations.
3. These psychosocial variables account for 6.4% of the variance in students tendencies towards 'sorting' in University examinations though this figure looks small, it is however significant.
4. Students' tendencies towards 'sorting' in university examinations is not significantly influenced the students age or gender.
5. There is no significant difference in students' tendency towards 'sorting' in the University of Buea and the University of Buea.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The students' tendency towards sorting in both universities is quite high. Some of the students in their responses attested that they would rather prefer to sort and graduate rather than taking the risk of being prudent and failing and therefore spend an extra year. Like the case of the Medianites who should have loved to be among the 300 who lapped the water, students' anxiety during examinations have caused a lot of pressure on

them when preparing for examinations. After such panicking they usually look for a way out to put down the stress thereby ending up in sorting as a last resort. Lecturers avail themselves to students and make them know that it is possible to sort in their courses. Some lecturers give scripts to other students to mark. When the students know these they tend to trace the scripts wherever they are to see how they can sort. Therefore the way students perceive their lecturers highly affects the way they think about sorting in their courses.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Final award of grades for certification should not be left in the hands of the course lecturer(s) alone.
2. Inter-University course examination unions should be encouraged to take care of the organization of undergraduate examinations.
3. Counseling services in Universities should be improved so as to prepare students adequately towards examinations.
4. Invigilators of University examinations should be appropriately supervised and paid so as to enable them do effective supervision.
5. Punishment to the perpetrators of sorting should be severe and intensive so as to scare others from carrying out such acts.

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