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Corruption during final external examinations in private secondary schools in Nigeria: Qualitative insights into operations and solutions to ‘Miracle Examination Centres’

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Glossary of terms

Continuous Assessment Scores [CAS]: This is a summary of academic performances of the first [SS 1] and second [SS 2] years of senior secondary schooling of a 'school-based' SSCE candidate in Nigeria.

JSS 1 – JSS 3: Also known as junior secondary school in Nigeria and comprise the first three years in a secondary school (referred to as high school in some other countries).

SS 1 – SS 3: Also known as senior secondary school in Nigeria and comprise the last three years in a secondary school. SSCE is statutorily taken in SS 3 and shows successful completion of secondary schooling in Nigeria. Under special circumstances and in accordance with the regulations of the examination bodies, it can also be taken by a non-secondary school student, which we would classify as the 'non-school based' SSCE.

List of abbreviations

CAS	Continuous Assessment Scores
CSO	Civil society organisation
JAMB	Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board
MECs	Miracle Examination Centres
NABTEB	National Business and Technical Examinations Board
NAPPS	National Association of Proprietors of Private Schools
NECO	National Examinations Council
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NYSC	The National Youth Service Corps
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
SSCE	Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations
WAEC	West Africa Examination Council

Executive summary

The quality of the secondary education system in Nigeria is ranked below average by both local and international bodies. Corruption is a major reason for the low ranking and poor performance in secondary schools, and manifests in the form of widespread examination malpractice in Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (SSCE). Although there is published evidence of examination malpractice in both public and private Nigerian secondary schools, there is little information available on how private schools in particular sustain this practice through institutional arrangements. This qualitative study, undertaken in southern and northern parts of the country, explores exam malpractice in the context of private secondary schools in Nigeria that have registered as examination centres to conduct SSCE but have institutionalised corrupt practices and are securing rents from intense patronage. Such centres are commonly known as Miracle Examination Centres (MECs) or special centres. Our study explores the operations of MECs with the aim of providing viable solutions to the problem of exam malpractice. We interviewed 181 stakeholders involved in examinations in secondary schools. They include parents and students, as well as representatives of examination bodies, Ministries of Education and civil society organisations (CSOs). The findings show that private schools that engage in organised malpractice are widespread and enjoy huge support and patronage from community members. The schools could be described as avenues for obtaining illegal services during external examinations, upon payment of agreed fees. Candidates who meet the financial demands of these centres are either provided with the examination question papers in advance, or are given the answers before or during the examination itself. Other illegal services may also be provided to ensure the candidates obtain good grades. It was also found that efforts to reduce the activities of MECs have recorded limited success due to the centres' strategies to court popularity in the communities where they are sited.

We recommend an innovative solution that involves enforcement of rules by stakeholders at the grassroots level in the education sector (horizontal solutions), in addition to some actions to be taken from above, including by the Ministries of Education (vertical solutions). We argue that these two forms of action will complement each other in tackling the problem of exam malpractice. Horizontal interventions include mobilising rule-following schools against MECs by facilitating in-school policies to prevent undue migration of students, and enabling owners and directors of non-corrupt schools and higher authorities to expose and enforce sanctions against MECs. We also recommend support for rule-following schools, CSOs, communities and students around whistle-blowing, as many of these stakeholders are keen to expose MECs but are thwarted by the absence of clear reporting channels and protective policies.

Overall, the quality of education in Nigeria, in terms of curriculum content and delivery, is challenging; students may feel forced to rely on MECs to pass SSCE and could be supported by their parents who do not want their children to be associated with failure or trying to avoid repeated payments for the examinations. However, some of the candidates are only interested in securing the certificate and not the knowledge that comes with effective schooling. Therefore, while it is important to strengthen examination processes and ethics in

Nigeria, an emphasis on well-funded, quality education that comprises a sound curriculum, accepted and supported by all schools and examination bodies, as well as competent teaching of curriculum content and provision of psycho-social services for students, must form part of a comprehensive approach to the problem of MECs.

Keywords: Academic corruption, Examination malpractice, Examination fraud, Miracle Examination Centres, Special Centres, NECO, WAEC

1. Introduction

The educational qualification that Nigerians need if they are seeking admission into tertiary education, applying for formal and some informal jobs, or contesting political positions, is the Senior School Certificate. This certificate is secured upon passing the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE). Around the country, SSCEs are conducted by various examination councils. In this study, the focus is on SSCEs conducted by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO). WAEC and NECO examinations are carried out by accredited public and private secondary schools, under the supervision and coordination of the examination bodies, alongside the various Ministries of Education in each of the 36 States in Nigeria, and the Federal Capital Territory. Candidates who sit these examinations are expected to obtain a minimum of five credit passes.

Given the premium placed on the SSCE, acquiring good grades has become a key objective for most Nigerians, even if this entails compromising examination processes and ethics (Adeshina et al., 2014; Odidi, 2014). One way of acquiring excellent but unmerited grades in WAEC and NECO exams is through 'Miracle Examination Centres' [MECs], which have become well known as centres for examination fraud that offer candidates the promise of excellent grades through illegal means (Aworinde, 2015; Onyedinefu, 2019). Their practices may be characterised as institutionalised or organised academic corruption in Nigeria's educational system. The MECs are not covert: they are part of the school system, owned by individuals or groups, and even registered by the government (Anzene, 2014). A systematic review by Agwu et al. (2020) shows that some private secondary schools are hubs for MECs, and that MECs provide an important channel through which MECs secure rents by attracting more candidates during WAEC and NECO examinations.

A recent ranking of global education systems placed Nigeria at number 124 of 140 countries (World Economic Forum, 2019). The ranking rates the overall quality of education in various countries, of which quality of examination processes is a foremost consideration. This poor rating can be ascribed, in part, to the proliferation of MECs, which casts doubt on the overall integrity of the educational system in Nigeria (Akintunde and Selzing-Musa, 2016). Considering the prevalence of MECs, the country's education system rating is unlikely to improve unless decisive and incremental steps are taken to address corrupt practices.

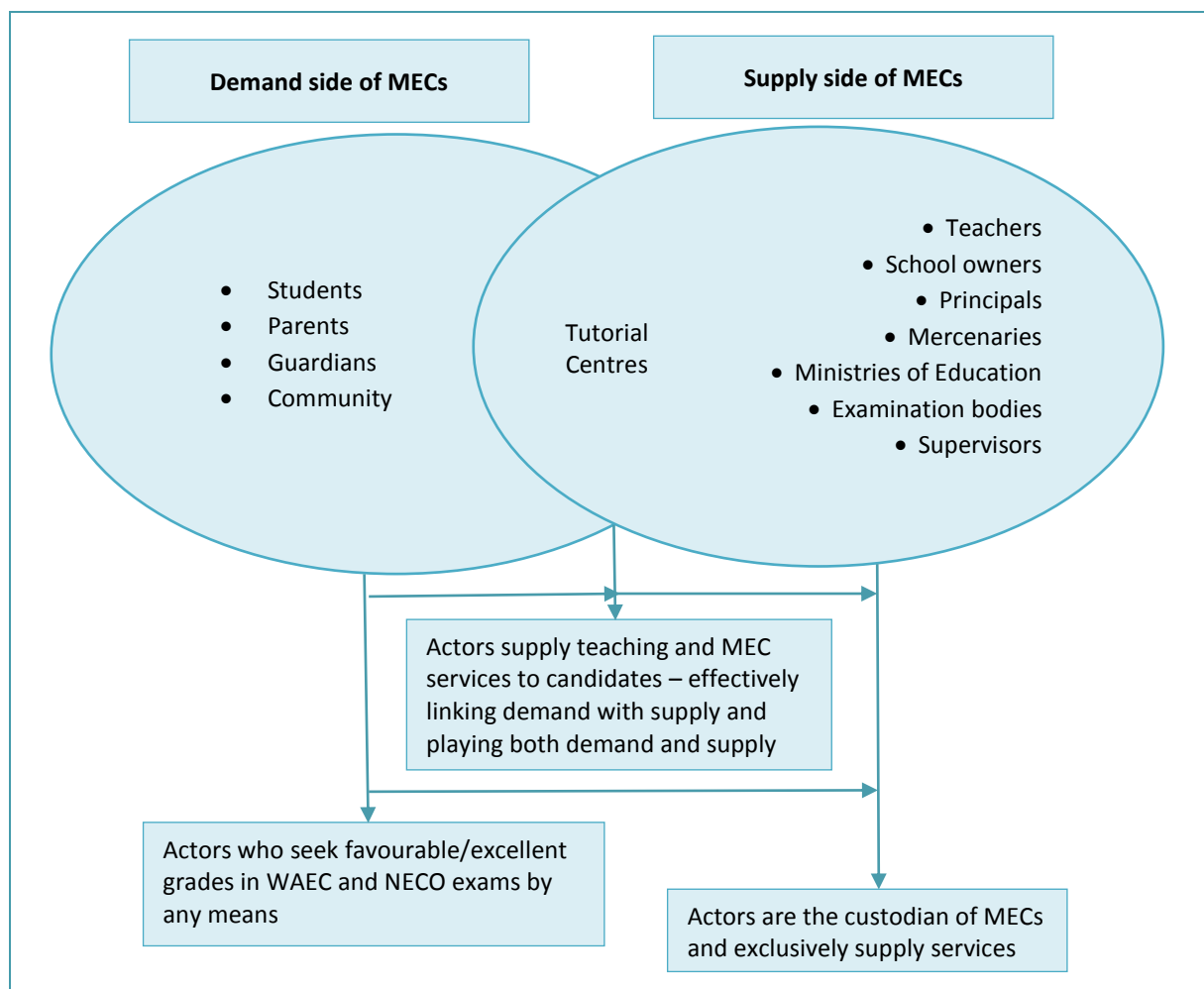
Corruption is commonly defined as an abuse of entrusted powers for private gains (Transparency International, 2020). The conduct of secondary school final examinations is a power entrusted to accredited schools, examination bodies and the Ministries of Education. Corruption in this context is manifest when these supposedly trusted actors compromise examination processes to secure rents by colluding with candidates to award unmerited high grades.

Studies have shown that a network of actors sustain the activities of MECs. They include students, teachers, school owners, principals, officials at the Ministries of Education, examination supervisors, individuals hired to resolve issues for the schools (popularly

referred to as 'mercenaries'), tutorial centres offering linkage services, officials from the examination bodies, and parents/guardians and community members (Ibrahim, 2014; Aworinde, 2015; Raji and Okunlola, 2017). The complexity of the network of actors reflects the intractable nature of the corruption in MECs and the challenges of dealing with it.

The network of actors that sustain MECs may be categorized into demand and supply sides. On the demand side, there are people who want to achieve good grades without putting in the necessary effort and who are willing to pay the economic cost to MECs or any other body ready to help them. Students, parents, guardians and members of the general community who need good SSCE results to increase their chances of qualifying for future opportunities fall into this category. School owners, principals, teachers, 'mercenaries', examination supervisors and officials at the Ministries of Education and examination bodies make up the supply side. They are ready to meet the demand by offering corrupt services to candidates, in exchange for payment and other private benefits. In between, there are tutorial centres that act as the link between the demand and supply sides; they liaise with MECs to help candidates who register with their centres for extra lessons to acquire good grades (Agwu et al., 2020). Figure 1 is a schematic representation of the demand and supply sides of MECs in Nigeria.

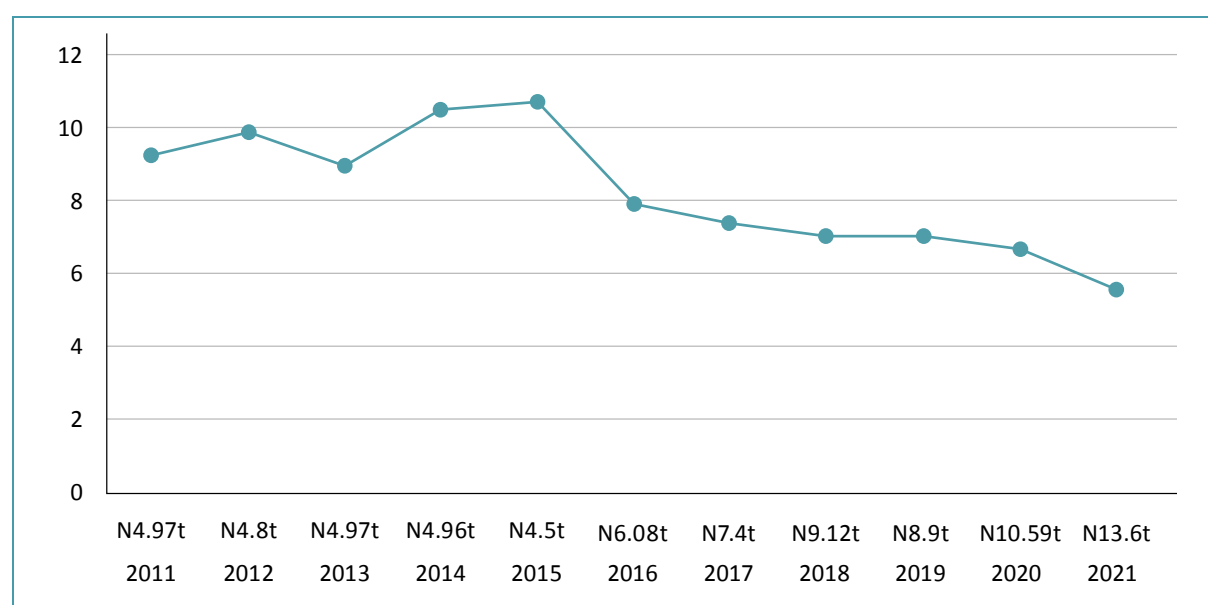
Figure 1: Demand and supply interaction of MEC services in Nigeria



Recognising the demand and supply sides is important for understanding problems of corruption and how to solve them (Dixit, 2015). However, we can go a step further by exploring the factors driving demand and supply, and why they have either survived unhindered or been able to metamorphose to evade interventions. The Nigerian government has expressed interest in addressing malpractice in school exams, as evidenced by the 1999 Examination Malpractice Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This Act criminalises examination malpractice, defining it as the adoption of unscrupulous strategies to gain undue advantage before, during or after an examination. Those caught in the act of examination malpractice are fined ₦50,000 to ₦100,000 (approximately £100– £200) and could spend up to four years in prison. Complementary measures spelled out by the law include the blacklisting of MECs and other centres identified as accomplices in compromising the examination process. Candidates caught breaking the rules could be targeted, and even banned from writing examinations for some years (Animasahun, 2013). However, there are concerns that these sanctions look good on paper but fall short on enforcement, and in some quarters, there are arguments that they should be stiffened to promote deterrence (Animasahun, 2013; Akintunde and Selzing-Musa, 2016).

Against this backdrop, reflecting on government spending on education is instructive. Education is listed as part of the concurrent legislative list in Nigeria, which means it draws funding from both Federal and State Governments (Afemikhe and Imobekhai, 2014). The examination bodies (WAEC and NECO) derive funding from the budgetary appropriations of the Federal Government, and most technical support comes from the States. Government investments in education reveal the value placed on education in Nigeria and could provide insights into the funding of examination bodies and the dominant influence of private secondary schools within the education space. Figure 2 shows the percentage of budgetary allocation provided to the education sector in the decade 2011–2021.

Figure 2: Percentage of Federal budgetary allocation to education, 2011–2021
(adapted from Budget Office of the Federation, 2021)



The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommends an international benchmark of 15%–20% budgetary allocation to education across the world (Afolabi and Ekiti, 2021). The data shown above reveals that Nigeria's budgetary allocation to education is dwindling, and comes nowhere close to the UNESCO recommendation. At the time of writing, the country's proposed 2022 budget allocates 7.9% of ₦16.39 trillion (£29.87 billion) to education (Elebeke and Esiedesa, 2021). WAEC and NECO have consistently lamented poor funding as impediments to their operations, with particular emphasis on addressing certain technical and human factors that compromise the integrity of their examinations (Agwu et al., 2020; Anazia, 2020). Others, by contrast, accuse the examination bodies of not being prudent in the management of allocated resources, and they are charged by the government with improving their contributions to the Consolidated Revenue Fund (Anazia, 2020; Inside Business, 2020; Akubo and Umeh, 2021).

In their study of the nature and drivers of MECs, Agwu et al. (2020) draw attention to the role of poorly paid supervisors, teachers and officials of the examination bodies who see the financial proceeds generated by MECs as a means of improving their financial situation. They also identify a grossly underfunded public education system which has given rise to the proliferation of private schools that are often profit-driven and further exploit profit-making opportunities such as using WAEC and NECO examinations to secure rents. Such factors explain why the education sector of Nigeria is listed as one of the five most corrupt sectors in the country (Socioeconomic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), 2019).

Corruption as practised in MECs deepens inequities (Tierney and Sabharwal, 2017). Qualified candidates are deprived of registering for these examinations with approved fees, as there is an increasing normalisation of unapproved fees. These are unofficial payments but many of our respondents referenced them as being in the 'normal' course of things. They are as well forced to compete with peers on unfair grounds. Understanding the disparate operations and impacts of MECs is therefore important, and should be accompanied by committed efforts to develop and promote strategies to stem the activities of these centres.

The objectives of our study were to:

- 1 identify the drivers of MECs operating in private senior secondary schools in Nigeria
- 2 understand the political-economy connections that sustain MECs
- 3 identify possible gender nuances around MECs
- 4 provide practical explanations of the measures adopted by MECs in compromising WAEC and NECO examinations
- 5 identify horizontal and vertical interventions against MECs (both with and without evidence of success)
- 6 proffer recommendations to improve the conduct and integrity of WAEC and NECO examinations.

2. Methodology

2.1. The Anti-corruption Evidence (ACE) approach to MECs

Fundamental to the SOAS-ACE approach is the mobilisation of anti-corruption strategies among actors who are 'insiders' within a particular sector, so that enforcement is based on peer-to-peer monitoring. This contrasts with the widespread tendency to focus solely on vertical or top-down enforcement as an anti-corruption measure. Khan et al. (2019) argue that the ACE strategy is especially helpful in developing countries where political complexities around government structures (vertical actors) manifest in political corruption and bureaucratic bottlenecks that make it difficult for rules to be enforced. This implies that organisations and grassroots structures (horizontal actors within a sector or sub-sector) can usefully be mobilised to take up anti-corruption efforts. In the context of this case, it is vital to understand the scope of specific issues around MECs that could be handled differently by horizontal actors (school owners, students, teachers, principals, faith-based groups, community-based groups and parents) and by vertical actors (examination bodies and government institutions) (Agwu et al., 2022). It is imperative to state that the ACE approach is not critical of government interventions to address corruption. However, it argues that in contexts where efforts from governments have not been forthcoming, a different approach to anti-corruption is needed that will be feasible and can produce cumulative results. Thus, our study seeks to uncover evidence that supports viable horizontal strategies, while also recognising the need for government-driven interventions.

2.2. Study area

The study was conducted in four locations, Abuja, Anambra, Edo and Kogi, that had been identified earlier as hotspots for MECs (Agwu et al., 2020). Abuja and Kogi represent the northern region of Nigeria, while Anambra and Edo represent the south. There are 850 public secondary schools and 1,357 government-approved private secondary schools across the four locations that are most likely centres¹ for WAEC and NECO examinations (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

2.3. Study design and selection of participants

From an extensive literature review and preliminary fieldwork visits, the study team was able to successfully map the key actors within the MEC space, as well as actors that are interested in advancing ethical values. The identified key actors include private school owners (both rule-followers and rule-breakers), top-ranking staff of examination bodies and state and federal levels Ministries of Education, community groups, faith-based

¹ It is believed that once the Government approves a secondary school, the school is eligible to be accredited by the examination bodies. However, that might not be the case, as government-approved schools might not meet the accreditation demands of the examination bodies.

organisations, tutorial centres, security agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the National Orientation Agency, which is responsible for the promotion of policies and values in Nigeria. Participants were selected from these categories using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. For instance, we identified rule-breaking schools (MECs) by asking individual community members to mention schools popularly known for guaranteeing excellent WAEC and NECO results without the need to study. Through the same means, we identified community members who attested to having patronised such services and made justifications for their choices. In all, 107 persons were interviewed in-depth, while 74 university students who had taken WAEC and/or NECO examinations within the 10 years preceding 2021 participated in focus group discussions. The aim of including these university students was to achieve some level of triangulation. It was also felt that this group of participants would be willing to share their experiences of MECs since they faced little or no risk of backlash or intimidation, unlike current examination candidates. In total, 181 persons across the four study locations participated in the study.

2.4. Data collection

We collected data over three months during 2020 and 2021, divided into several phases of preliminary fieldwork visits/pre-testing the study tools, the in-depth interviews, and the focus group discussions. The guidelines for the in-depth interviews and group discussions were developed following a systematic review of literature on examination malpractices and MECs, and facts obtained from preliminary fieldwork experiences. We pre-tested the tools in Enugu State and adopted the lessons from these experiences to shape our tools. Interviews were designed to last for about an hour, while the focus group discussions lasted for about 90 minutes. Consent forms containing details of confidentiality, anonymity, withdrawal from participating, audio-recording and full disclosure were issued to all participants. If they were satisfied with the contents of the consent forms, the participants were asked to provide their signatures before the interviews and discussions commenced. The study was conducted following the easing of COVID-19 lockdown during which the strict enforcement of pandemic control measures, restrictions and protocols prevailed in Nigeria. The study tools were approved by the Ethical Review Board of the University of Nigeria (NHREC/05/01/2008B-FWA00002458-1RB00002323).

2.5. Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews and discussions were first transcribed into English. Transcripts were studied and coded both inductively and deductively. Deductive coding entailed placing quotes under a list of codes generated from the research questions, while inductive coding meant that newer codes could naturally emerge by studying the narratives of the participants. A final spreadsheet with the codes and quotes was produced, and members of the research team took turns to read through it to ensure that the codes were exhaustive and the quotes were rightly placed (see Padgett, 2008).

3. Results

The findings of the study are presented in this section. Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. We then present our findings related to the nature of MECs and their operations that compromise WAEC and NECO examinations; the drivers of MECs, including political-economy connections; and other relevant factors including gender nuances and religious influences. We follow this with some recommendations for possible interventions. It is important to note that we made no direct efforts to target parents of exam candidates who had patronised MECs. However, the high percentage of in-depth interviewees over 30 years of age (Table 3) suggests a fair representation of the parents' population.

Table 1: General summary of participants

Participants by study location N = 181	Number	Percentage
Abuja	26	14.4
Anambra	24	13.3
Edo	71	39.2
Kogi	60	33.1
Participants by interview method N = 181		
In-depth interviews	107	59.1
Focus Group Discussions (exclusively university students)	74	40.9

Table 2: Summary of the socio-demographic features of university students in FGDs

Participants of Focus Group Discussions N = 74	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	31	42
Female	43	58
Religion		
Christian	69	93.2
Muslim	5	6.8
Age		
≤20	19	25.7
>20	55	74.3
Any experience with MECs		
Yes	66	89.2
No	8	10.8
Period the students took WAEC and/or NECO exams		
2011–2014	20	27
2015–2020	54	73

Table 3: Summary of the socio-demographic features of interviewed representatives of agencies and community members

Participants of In-depth Interviews N = 107	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	70	65
Female	37	35
Religion		
Christian	63	59
Muslim	44	41
Age		
≤30	10	9.3
>30	97	90.7
Any experience with MECs		
Yes	104	97.2
No	3	2.8
Marital status		
Married and ever married	90	84.1
Single	17	15.9
Workplaces of participants		
Rule-following schools	17	16
Rule-breaking schools	21	20
Representatives of examination bodies	10	9
Representatives of Ministry of Education	13	12
Representatives of civil society organisations and National Orientation Agency	11	10
Representatives of tutorial centres	8	7.5
Representatives of security agencies	8	7.5
Community members	19	18
Income satisfaction perception		
Salary is enough	17	16
Salary is not enough	90	84

3.1. Nature and defining features of MECs

A first important step to understanding MECs is to know what MECs are and what they look like. Community members, officials in schools, examination bodies and other government and non-government actors provided helpful descriptions, which we triangulated by getting responses from university students and interviewing some actors in MECs (rule-breaking schools), as identified by community stakeholders. First, the activities of MECs are not shrouded in secrecy; they are often popularly known as centres that guarantee (unmerited) excellent SSCE results. The more popular they are, the more candidates they attract. Private secondary schools were mentioned more frequently, although we also heard of the existence of MECs in public secondary schools. The quotes below are representative of many of the narratives we collected.

This school next to my shop is the best place for whatever you are looking for. All the persons working in my shop got their results from there. Anyone in Benin will confirm what I am saying now. If you can pay, please go there and you are sure of an excellent result. (Community member, Edo)

This is very popular among private schools. You know that everyone wants to pass SSCE. Any private school that is not ready to bend, will definitely lose candidates. (School owner, Abuja)

We discovered that MECs are very convincing about delivering good results to their clients. They are quick to dismiss what could be considered as obstacles to delivering on their promises to clients, and boast about the intense patronage they receive.

Yes, we are sure of having our students pass ... we know the supervisor that will come here, and we know what to do to make supervisors happy and allow us assist the students. The scores for Continuous Assessment are arranged. So, our clients are not scared, and that is why we have a lot of them each examination year. (Exam Officer in MEC, Anambra)

The focus of MECs appears to be on the money and the excessive profits or rents they secure during examinations; they usually pay little attention to teaching and learning, or to the quality of their infrastructure. There are a few MECs with good infrastructure and teaching services, but we found these to be less common.

You can easily know a MEC. First, they usually lack the infrastructure but during examinations, they have a lot of candidates. Candidates that never progressed through their system, because they do not even have what it takes to teach. We need to ask questions ... Yes, of course, they make so much money during the examinations because more people register with them. You will even see those that register ahead of the call for registration. (School Vice Principal, Edo)

The last quote highlights the typically high number of registrations in MECs during examination periods. Most of these registrants had not come through the MEC (following the yearly progression from class to class that is commonplace in education). This confirms a principal feature of MECs, as schools that are structured in the form of an inverted pyramid – there are more students (examination candidates) in Senior Secondary (SS) class SS 3 (the final class in secondary school), of which most are present only during WAEC and NECO examinations, and fewer students in the five preceding classes (Junior Secondary (JSS) 1, 2, 3 and SS 1 and 2). This is reflected in the following quote:

We need to investigate the fact that in the kind of schools we are talking about now, you will see 10 or 20 students in other classes, and this same school will present over 200 candidates once it is time to write WAEC and NECO. This has been going on for years, and we are sincerely bothered. (School owner, Abuja)

We also came to know about an intense informal economy characterised by the arbitrary inflation of examination fees, with widespread bribery and extortion. MECs charge as much as ₦40,000–₦65,000 (between £73 and £118) for each of the WAEC and NECO exams, as against the official rate of ₦29,000 (approximately £53) for both examinations. The breakdown of these fees was interesting, with MECs blatantly telling their clients that some parts of the money would be reserved for administration of the examinations, which translates into bribes for supervisors and the following of their scripts to ensure that they get a good grade. Yet we also learned that, beside the registration fees, candidates are made to pay sundry amounts of money (usually ₦1,000–₦3,000 (£2–£5)) each time they come to sit their examinations, with more money demanded for difficult subjects such as Mathematics, English, Physics, Chemistry, etc. As one student observed:

In all honesty, we all know that paying for WAEC and NECO should be about ₦26,500 (\$53). But if you register with any MEC, you pay as high as ₦60,000–₦70,000 (\$120–\$140) just for either WAEC or NECO. Then, they begin to tell you that you must pay sorting or administrative fees and many other payments. And you still need to sew or buy the uniform of the school to look like their students plus some ₦1,000 to ₦3,000 you must come with to the hall to pay bribes. (University Student, Kogi)

We noted that most MECs are located in rural areas, in remote and inaccessible places. The logic behind this is that they need to stay away from city centres to avoid easy detection, mostly by unannounced supervisors. In these remote locations, MECs often have networks that inform them of approaching invigilating personnel. This was explained by a student:

At the centre I wrote [my exam], the men who ride motorcycles around the community are the informants. Once they notice a strange face heading towards the centre, they put a call across so that we behave ourselves. (University Student, Anambra)

Finally, there are cases of MECs which had buildings in city centres but which sited WAEC and NECO examinations at locations away from the city centres, leading to a migration of WAEC and NECO candidates to rural locations towards the examination period.

We have some of them in the town, but most of the MECs are in the interior places. They are avoiding monitoring, because supervisors might find it difficult and could get tired going to those interior places. (Official, Ministry of Education, Abuja)

Five years ago, my daughter told me that her school asked them to register for an examination I had already registered for. She explained that the school will take them to another interior place where they will write the exam. I was shocked and withdrew her. (Parent, Anambra)

3.2. The operations of MECs

It is important to explain how MECs operate, and especially how they collude with other actors to compromise the examination process. MECs rely heavily on poaching candidates from other schools, which is a source of concern to schools that follow the rules.

The missionary school in my community had three years of mass failure in WAEC because they wanted [to do] a clean job, so when it comes to SS 2 third term the students will leave the school, and of course, go to where they will pass. So, from JSS 1 they will have a population of above 200, but once it is getting to SS 3 the school will have just about 100. (University Student, Kogi)

Facilitating their recruitment strategies are tutorial centres that ostensibly provide students with extra tuition to help improve their confidence and knowledge before they sit the examinations. Our findings show that tutorial centres form a key link between candidates looking for fraudulent means to achieve good grades in SSCE and the MECs. This linkage is lubricated by kickbacks from the MECs to the tutorial centres, as well as the fees that the centres charge their clients. In Edo State, we found tutorial centres all over the State. The operations of tutorial centres are explained in more detail below, but the following quote gives a flavour.

We go back to the schools we know that the students will pass very well and negotiate with them to enrol the students. We will now function as agents and collect our commissions from the schools. Then we also follow-up to ensure that the promises are delivered. The only major challenge with the schools is that we are taking the students away from them, and it means that they will not pay first term and second term fees. (Owner of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

For MECs to enable their candidates to pass the examinations, they need to ensure that they provide the answers to the examination questions. This means that MECs either facilitate the leaking of examination questions in advance, or compromise the examinations once the examination papers arrive at the venue. On the leaking of papers, participants acknowledged that NECO appears to be more porous than WAEC, stating that they often received NECO question papers before the examination period, but not WAEC papers. Furthermore, differences in exam starting times, which could be caused by transport difficulties, hard-to-reach locations, and sometimes by the deliberate efforts of corrupt supervisors, could facilitate leaking of questions from a venue where the examination has already commenced to a venue where it has yet to begin.

My friend showed me WAEC answers before the exam, but I doubted and I didn't look at them. I confirmed all the answers to be real after the exams, I regretted it because it was something he gave me few minutes before the exam, but I chose not to believe. NECO comes out many hours before the exam because they are not organised like WAEC. (University Student, Edo)

This quote points to officials of the examination bodies and persons recruited as supervisors by the Ministries of Education abetting the leaking of questions, and MECs encouraging and exploiting differences in start times to arrange the swift sharing of questions with their clients. MECs also employ so-called 'mercenaries' – teachers or students and graduates of higher education – to work out the answers to exam questions, and then distribute these to their clients, or even write openly on boards for the candidates to copy. They are able to delay start times or add extra time at the end of exams, as well as publicly distribute answers to exam questions, because supervisors have been bribed with substantial amounts of money, gifts and meals.

*In the school I wrote WAEC, they usually write the answers on the board for us after the people they hire, or their teachers, solve the answers. That school knows what they are doing, because they always get the questions before time.
(Community member, Abuja)*

The schools in the rural areas get the questions from those in the urban areas. For instance, I can remember that some of our teachers travelled to a centre in urban areas just to snap [photograph] the questions and send them to the teachers who will solve them for us. They sent the questions through WhatsApp, and our teachers told us to relax that they have gotten the questions. Everything took place even before the arrival of the invigilator in our centre because the place was hard to locate. I also witnessed a situation where an invigilator told us to bring out and use whatever we had without making noise. Obviously, they have settled him, because we paid for all these services. (University Student, Edo)

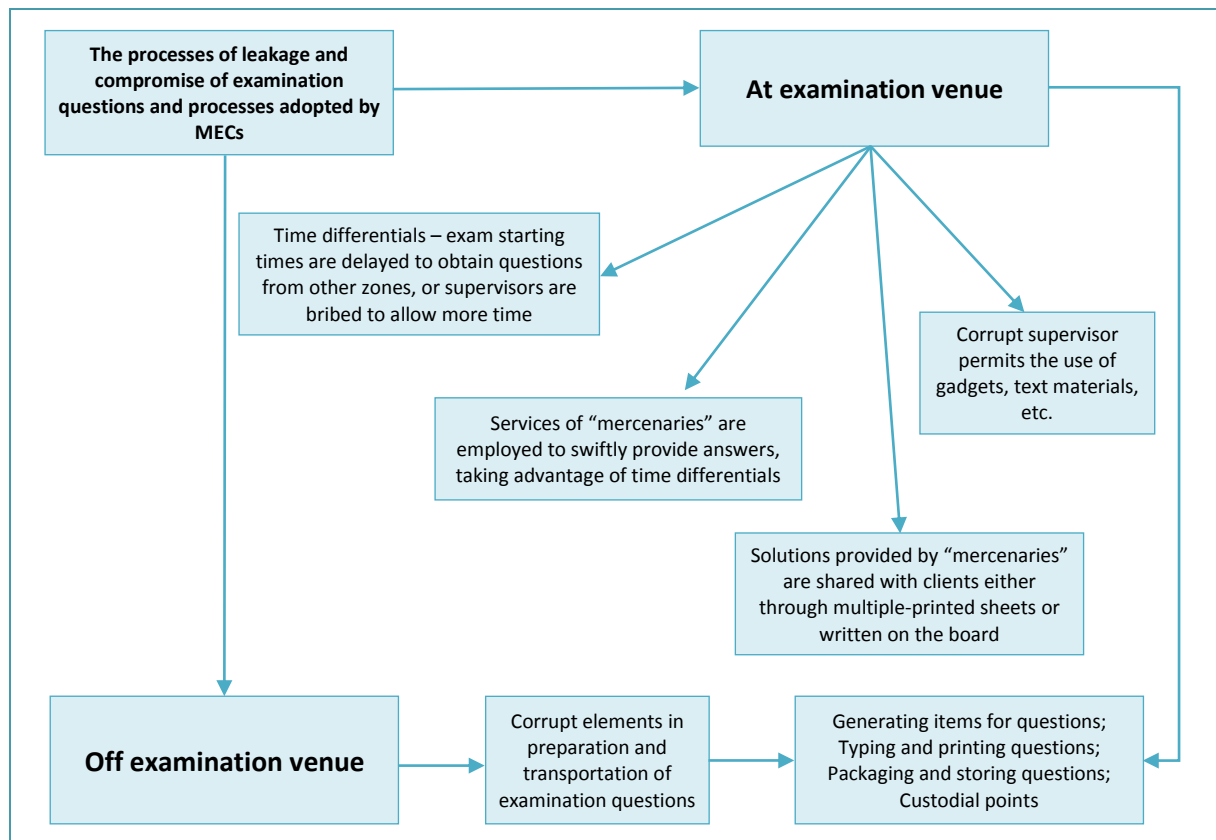
Besides these means of exam fraud, there are strong indications that leaks happen at the points of typing, printing, storing and packaging of question papers, as well as once the papers have been dispatched either to the custodial venue (a central location where examination materials are stored for distribution to surrounding examination venues) or the actual examination venue. In transit, exam papers are sealed and placed in locked bags, to be unlocked only once they reach the examination venues. It is because of the difficulty of accessing the questions while in transit that MECs often exploit or engineer different start times. However, there is emerging evidence that some tampering with the bags of exam papers might occur at the custodial level.

For a very long time, we have not experienced this. What we experience often is what we call 'foreknowledge'. Foreknowledge is a situation whereby the fraudulent elements amongst us will tactically give information about a particular paper prior to the exam either by going somewhere to photocopy the exam paper or by snapping them. This gets to happen because we share the question papers with them an hour to the exam and it is always difficult to control everybody. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

If there is no leakage you can't formulate anything but in a situation like I told you before, people that set questions for example, could have their children writing or relatives or friends, and could divulge to their networks. It usually begins that way. (Official, Ministry of Education, Kogi)

Figure 3 illustrates how MECs collude with a range of actors to compromise WAEC and NECO examinations by gaining prior access to questions and by openly supplying answers to their clients at the examination venues.

Figure 3: Graphical illustration of how MECs collude with actors to compromise WAEC and NECO examinations



Some participants mentioned MECs offering a service whereby the candidate does not need to be present at the examination venue but will be issued an original certificate. This, again, involves the services of 'mercenaries'. Those who take advantage of this premium service pay much higher fees; a first-hand account from one of the participants is quite revealing:

The first time I wrote WAEC I failed. So, I was told to come to Benin, here in Edo State. As soon as I got here, I was told to go to one of the schools in the interior places. I tried to locate the school. The first thing the principals asked was if I wanted to write with others or go home and get my result at the end. The money to pay for the second option was too much. I accepted the first option. (Community member, Edo)

MECs invest heavily in guaranteeing good grades for their candidates, including tracing their scripts to where they will be marked. This is because they depend on the referrals and testimony of their candidates to grow and expand their businesses. To track scripts, they usually make use of networks of insiders within the examination bodies or those employed by the examination councils to mark scripts, or they write phone contact details on some of the scripts, so that they can be contacted. That way, they can pay a bribe to the marker of the scripts. Different options are offered to exam candidates, and those who are not interested are either taken to different halls to sit the examinations, or have to sit in different rows from those that are availing themselves of these services. Finally, MECs and their clients might be aggressive and even violent against supervisors who try to prevent any cheating:

Also, if they [supervisors] become strict in the hall, they could be beaten by students and their friends in the communities. It is because of some of these violent experiences, my uncle who supervises WAEC exams told me that he intentionally leaves the students to carry out their plans whenever he is posted to a rural area. (University Student, Edo)

3.3. Tutorial centres as core facilitators of the operations of MECs

Our findings show that tutorial centres (also called lecture centres) are key within the network of facilitators of MECs. Often not registered with the government, tutorial centres exist primarily to provide extra lessons to students who are to sit SSCEs; they are supposedly complimentary to schools. In practice, our data shows that tutorial centres have evolved to run like schools and are operational during conventional school hours. They attract exam candidates from the mainstream schools, and enrol them to be taught, as well as linking them with MECs to register for their SSCE. An official from an examination body narrates her experience.

For instance, I know of a place that serves as a tutorial centre but turns to a magic centre (MEC) whenever WAEC exams are ongoing. Children always go there for extra academic lessons. These tutorial centres are another problem. I once had a boss here who tried to negotiate the closing of these centres, but he didn't have the statutory power to do so. They are a problem. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

Tutorial centres operate as businesses, in which people invest. We discovered that they are more prevalent in Edo than in other areas, and they compete fiercely among themselves. They engage in aggressive advertising through radio and printed adverts, but because adverts are expensive (in the case of Edo, four 10-minute radio appearances in a month cost N250,000 [£454]), they mainly focus on satisfying their clients, believing that their success stories will attract more referrals and patronage. Thus, they rely heavily on the services of MECs that are renowned for delivering good results, and that will permit staff of the tutorial centres to take part in supervising the examinations, giving them an opportunity to assist

their candidates. Tutorial centres take kickbacks from MECs for providing them with candidates, as well as charging fees to the candidates.

It is not a positive development as it is being practised. These lecture centres pretend to be doing tutorials, but they encourage students to withdraw from their respective schools only for them to resell these students to some schools, and they collect exorbitant money from these children. It is something that should be drastically tackled by the government of the state where it is happening. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

We found that some students prefer the tutorial centres to their conventional schools, claiming that they learn more at the tutorial centres which often employ undergraduates and young graduates as tutors. Other participants said that students prefer tutorial centres because they are not as regulated as conventional schools and the students have more freedom.

The thing is that most conventional schools don't teach well especially the government schools. The students will have no option than to resort to lecture centres where they end up being convinced that they will clear their papers simply by registering under the centre. And you know that in lecture centres we do not wear uniforms, and everyone is free. It is just like pre-university. So, young people are fascinated by that kind of setting. (University Student, Edo)

Agents in tutorial centres are often said to be responsible for online uploading of answers to examination questions, because they are usually young and familiar with internet technology.

These boys in tutorial centres are the ones buying the scripts. Schools even depend on them. Then they have a way to upload online, or they use WhatsApp and charge their fees, usually ₦1,500 per subject. (School administrator, Abuja)

Since MECs lose money in terms of school fees from students who move to tutorial centres and return to the MECs only when it is time for the examination, they tend to increase registration fees for returning students to outrageous amounts, with students paying per subject taken. That way, they can recover some of the money lost through the non-payment of school fees by such students. Those that stay with the MEC, rather than moving to a tutorial centre, would thus pay less than the returning students. This could account for the variations in registration fees even within a particular MEC, and helps explain why MEC services can be so expensive.

3.4. Drivers of MECs

Figure 1 showed the demand and supply relationship that allows MECs to thrive. Here, we use information gleaned from the narratives of participants to uncover the drivers of MECs: the rationale behind them, who uses them, and how they are sustained. To deepen our understanding, we split these drivers into three categories: micro drivers, which include individuals, peers and families; macro drivers which represent the wider structure or system

of schools, communities and examination bodies; and drivers related to the wider political economy and the government.

3.4.1. *Micro drivers*

(i) Actions and inactions of parents and guardians

We found parents and guardians encouraging their wards to register with MECs and normalising the practice of sitting examinations in such centres. Their reasons included avoiding repeated payments for examinations when their wards fail; saving the students the shame of failure; securing good grades to qualify their wards for the courses they want them to study at university; and having bragging rights within their neighbourhoods – to mention but a few. On the other hand, there are parents and guardians who pay little attention to the academic needs of their wards, so that the students take their own decisions about where to sit the examinations.

Each time I recall that I spent so much at her previous school to pass her WAEC, I feel bad. I had to take her myself to this MEC that is close-by, and she made the result. I know my daughter is brilliant, but she needed the assistance. (Parent, Kogi)

I will say that some parents don't know [that they are getting] involved in examination malpractice because they call the fee different names such as administration, logistics or mobilisation fee. On the other hand, the students can just lie to their parents just to get this money. So, parents most time pay for this unknowingly. (University Student, Edo)

(ii) Peer influence

Peers facilitate participation in MECs through word-of-mouth recommendation and peer-to-peer collective decisions to sit the examination in places where the students are sure of success.

The fastest way news spreads amongst students is through peer groups. Many people have cliques and that's how they get information and intimidate their mates. A single decision of one person is a decision of all. So, when one person decides to migrate to a miracle centre or cheat on an exam, others tend to pressurise their parents towards allowing them to follow suit. They also share links to these websites amongst themselves. (University Student, Edo)

Peer influence also manifests in terms of students not wishing to be left behind. They will take whatever action is needed to avoid being seen as a failure by their peers.

Peer groups contribute to malpractice; when your peers indulge in malpractice and pass to higher institutions of learning, they will begin to mock you. You will naturally feel the pressure and do whatever it takes to get the papers. (University Student, Kogi)

Furthermore, MECs recognise the influence of peers and tend to take advantage of it.

I know of a miracle examination centre that subsidises the registration fee for a student that can bring 10 more students for them, and you will see people meeting up to this demand through their peers. (University Student, Edo)

(iii) Individual factors

Some participants talked about personal factors driving the patronage of MECs. Lack of self-confidence was a key factor in this category, as external examinations, especially WAEC, are commonly believed to be hard. Students thus turn to MECs to overcome this anticipated difficulty.

Speaking from experience, NECO is an alternative exam to WAEC because WAEC seems to be harder. Many of us failed WAEC, and for us not to fail again, MECs become helpful. (University Student, Edo)

Students also talked about the reduction in workload and studying which is associated with MECs.

3.4.2. Macro drivers

(i) School system

Several aspects of the education system were mentioned as driving students to register with MECs, including poor levels of teaching and learning and the failure to recruit quality staff. This made students lose confidence in themselves, and feel insufficiently prepared to sit final examinations, and pushed them to consider MECs as an option to secure good results.

You go to so many schools you only see the principal and one teacher, and these children are registering there with hope to pass. Now, how can they pass? The best of teachers can at least take two or three subjects. Any other thing above this, you are deceiving yourself. (Official, Examination Body, Kogi)

We discovered that some schools recruit and promote teachers on the basis of the help they offer students to pass WAEC and NECO examinations. The teachers are encouraged to aid students during the examinations, in order to keep their jobs and secure promotions.

In a particular school, the proprietor gathers all subject heads and charges them to make sure her students do not fail. So, each day that a particular subject is to be written, the subject head teacher must do whatever must be done to make sure that students write well. Do you understand? Of course, you do what the proprietor has said should be done. (Teacher, Anambra)

Private-school teachers are often poorly paid, which makes them vulnerable to institutionalised malpractice in the schools where they teach, as a way to increase their earnings. Moreover, private schools appear to be in competition with each other, scrambling

to secure profits as well as rents. One way to edge competitors is to be known as a site where success in external examinations is guaranteed.

It is difficult to find a private secondary school that will not want to assist the students. If you do not want to, be ready to lose the students from SS 2. It is now an integral part of private schools. (School administrator, Kogi)

(ii) Communities

An important finding from the research is that MECs are beneficial to communities, which hold them in high esteem. Apart from the fact that MECs satisfy their 'SSCE-passing' needs, members of communities benefit economically by renting apartments and selling wares to those who come into the communities to use the services of the MECs.

Once WAEC time is approaching, we are happy because students always come to that school to write. We will rent out some houses to them, and market will be doing fine. (Community member, Edo)

There is evidence that community members collaborate with MECs to obstruct external supervisors who could constrain the MECs' activities. They do this by giving the wrong directions to the supervisors, deliberately damaging entry-roads to impair or block access to the schools, making phone calls to alert the schools to strangers who might be approaching, or even physically assaulting examination officials who are not open to bribery. Security men – who are usually from the communities – may prevent or delay access to the schools until a message has been sent to the examination halls to allow for any malpractice to be covered up. Some representative quotes are outlined below.

In these schools they usually have an understanding with the community people. If you go to those areas as an external supervisor, because they are remote and the schools will have no signpost, the community members could even misdirect you. Sometimes, the gatemen have signs they give to those in the halls that an external supervisor has arrived. They could use the padlock of the gate to make sounds. They are accomplices. (Official, Examination Body, Anambra)

Community members will go as far as digging holes across the road that the supervisors will certainly follow. By the time they pass through all these hurdles, the school must have gotten the questions to solve and are waiting for the papers. Also, if they [the supervisors] happen to be strict in the hall, the community people will stop and beat them on their way. (University Student, Edo)

It might sound hilarious to say that my community once blocked the three major entrances to our school with mounds of sand because even the traditional ruler's child was a candidate in that year's exam. The external examiner had to take another route that is three times farther than the ones he could have followed. (University Student, Edo)

3.4.3. Political-economy drivers of MECs

Political-economy considerations appear to have a strong influence on the set-up of MECs, as different parties seek to advance or maximise rents. We identified five distinct parties within the political-economy drivers of MECs: tutorial centres, MECs, candidates, government actors and examination bodies.

(i) The role of tutorial centres

Tutorial centres are not regulated by the government, despite the prime roles they play in facilitating and enabling MECs; moreover, we found that the government was making little attempt to curb or monitor their activities. Rather, they were seen as employment opportunities for the youth population, as ways of serving kinship interests given that some of the owners have relatives in powerful positions, and as an avenue for the government to enjoy increased tax returns – the more tutorial centres proliferate, the more taxes are secured by the government. All these factors appear to be prioritised over educational standards and examination integrity.

Schools were shut down for up to one year and the government went ahead to demand that we pay tax. It was initially 15,000 Naira but was increased to 50,000 Naira after the pandemic without any consideration. It was a very bad experience. (Owner of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

The Ministry has fought for years against the activities of the lecture houses. It is a battle that we haven't won for even a day till now. The top people think they are creating jobs, and because their relatives and friends are involved they are slow to take actions against them. (Official, Ministry of Education, Edo)

The role of tutorial centres in connecting candidates to MECs serves the interests of some politicians who have wards that will sit SSCE – and sometimes they themselves need to sit exams. We found evidence of a popular tutorial centre owner in a neighbouring state who became a special adviser to a governor after years of operating tutorial centres and serving various political interests. Since his appointment by the governor, he became more emboldened and blatant about using his tutorial centres to link candidates to MECs.

That man now occupies a political position as a Special Adviser to a Governor. He now has different branches of his tutorial centre. Once you register with him, he will take you to one of the special centres around when it is time for the exam because the man is well-connected. He sometimes goes to the extent of following the papers of his students up after the exams to make sure that all of them succeed. I don't know how connected he is, but people don't play with him, they believe that he has a strong spiritual backup also. There are cases also where he threatened supervisors who wanted to punish his candidates. (Community member, Anambra)

Tutorial centres tend to offer much better earning opportunities for their staff, compared to what most of the conventional private schools offer. Staff are paid approximately ₦2,000 (£4) per hour, and are allowed to teach in more than one tutorial centre, increasing their earnings. They are permitted to sell books and other text materials to students, which rarely happens in mainstream schools, and they may be given incentives for recruiting candidates. An estimate by some tutorial centre agents suggests that teaching staff of tutorial centres could earn over ₦50,000 (£91) each month, compared to ₦15,000–₦30,000 (£27–£54) for teachers in private secondary schools. Thus, the tutorial centres tend to attract better staff, some of whom also bring students from the schools at which they previously taught. Tutorial centres charge students between ₦3,500 and ₦5,000 (£6–£9) per month, which is less than standard school fees. This explains why they get large numbers and capitalise on the external examinations to make more money from the students they attract.

Teachers give their best in tutorial Centres. An average teacher earns as much as 3,000–4,000 naira in a day and you know what that means in a month excluding book sales because they have the monopoly to sell their books. So, you can see that an average teacher makes up to 100,000 naira in a month from a tutorial centre. Even if you employ that teacher in your school, how do you expect that teacher to give you the best? It is not possible and with the way we take care of teachers they convince students from those schools to join us. We give bonuses for referrals. (Owner of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

Since the activities of tutorial centres are seen as threatening to conventional schools, in one of the study locations, the conventional schools are beginning to work together against the tutorial centres. This has led the tutorial centres to unite, in turn, to fight back. The tutorial centres are resolute and believe that they cannot be stopped, although they might have to pay more taxes and regularise their operations through the Ministry of Education, for a fee. There is evidence in Edo that some tutorial centres metamorphose into full-fledge schools which implies that the candidates they attract will stay within their realm of malpractice for the remainder of their school years. However, such a metamorphosis depends on the operator having access to sufficient capital, and having the desire to start and run a school. Otherwise, they remain as tutorial centres, and may invest instead in opening branches all around the state.

We started as a tutorial centre but our director has opened a school. Our candidates write the exams in the school. (Staff of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

(ii) The role of MECs and candidates

MECs and some of their candidates were found to exercise high-level political influence, affording them political protection for their corrupt activities. MECs can provide good exam results to politicians who need them to run for political office, and to constituency members of politicians, ensuring that they are 'qualified' for positions the politicians might have reserved for them. In return, the MECs are protected by the politicians who use their services.

Politicians usually have people they want to help in their constituencies. Some of them do not have SSCE results. So, they use the MECs in their communities to help such persons. Those MECs will definitely be enjoying their influence. (School administrator, Abuja)

We found extreme cases of blatant disregard for rules by some schools. The common refrain is that such schools are politically connected and there is nothing anyone can do. Being politically connected might not imply connections to politicians, but could involve connections to elements within the Ministries of Education and examination bodies, potentially including relatives. Candidates who have such connections also enjoy some privileges.

Have you ever written an examination on Sunday? Oh, I did. We got a strict supervisor on the actual day of Mathematics. And no one could write anything. The owner of the school is very powerful. He told us not to worry, that he will tell us when to return to rewrite the exam. Not too long, we were told to report to the centre on Sunday, and we all wrote Mathematics again. I made 'A' in the end. (Community member, Edo)

Yes, they use political connection, once you have somebody in power, definitely you will be protected. If a petition comes against your school, the petition will be sorted out and nothing critical will be done to your school. (Teacher, Anambra)

(iii) The role of Ministries of Education, supervisors and the government

The survival of MECs is generally ascribed to the State-level Ministries of Education. Supervisors who are known to be open to bribes are selected by the Ministries. There is evidence that supervisors pay to be selected, and remit kickbacks from bribes for their selection. There is also evidence that some MECs pay bribes to the Ministries to appoint certain supervisors with whom they have developed relationships and whom they trust. Examination councils cannot sanction supervisors except through the Ministries of Education. This means that supervisors are protected by the Ministry officials to whom they pay kickbacks. It is telling that the Ministries of Education are not prepared to let the examination bodies pick supervisors themselves.

If you want to be a supervisor, you must pay a certain amount for you to be taken unless you have somebody that can connect you. When you pay like 30,000 Naira to be given the opportunity, you will try everything possible to get the money back. So, it will be very difficult to curb. (Owner of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

The examination bodies, particularly WAEC, are aware of how supervisors compromise the examination system, and are making attempts to address this by rotating the supervisors through the drawing of lots. However, the supervisors have formed a tight informal clique, which they use to get themselves into the MECs that they know will pay. There is a consensus that most supervisors dislike going to schools that follow the rules.

We swap supervisors every week and sometimes, based on the sensitivity of the subjects ... we do ballot when there is a technological failure (failure of the system that tracks the postings of supervisors). We do all kinds of things to swap just to make it difficult for them to predict where they will go to. But what do we get in return? These supervisors work as cliques and they already know the schools where they can mess around and the schools where they must stick to the rules. We have noticed that some of them informally swap keys and bags among themselves once they leave the council This is possible for them because they already know each other and as well have common agenda. They also swap back after the exams so that we will not know what they did The more you fight, the more these people devise ingenious ways to circumvent things and I must confess that 98% of exam malpractice is observed in collaboration with the supervisors. (Official, Examination Body, Abuja)

Given the understanding that MECs are often of low educational quality and most focused on making money from conducting external examinations, the question of how they are registered in the first place keeps recurring. For most MECs, the answer is political and kinship connections and the ability to pay bribes. There are also examples of inefficiencies and lack of consistent monitoring leading to MECs getting away with breaking the rules. Furthermore, since only government-approved schools can request accreditation from the examination bodies, government approval of schools with poor infrastructure and incompetent services tends to encourage MECs. Perhaps such schools are denied accreditation by the examination bodies, it could irk the government officials that granted the approval, as well as the school, which could cause squabbles between the government officials, the school, and the examination bodies..

For instance, when I went to Edo and Abia, I noticed that there were some schools that were mere exam centres which I refused to take their entries when they came for it but these schools have been endorsed by the Ministry officials. I totally refused to take the entry and I was surprised to even see some Ministry officials coming to intercede for these schools. They would want to protect their people. A Ministry official along the line once asked me whether schools in my state are better than theirs. So, these are some of the things we see. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

From our research, it is clear that migration of students across different schools, especially when it is drawing close to the examination period, is a core enabler of MECs. The Ministries of Education must take responsibility for the continuous migration of students. The Ministries clear students to write the examination before forwarding their names to the examination councils. The names submitted to the Ministries are barely scrutinised, so long as the school pays the more or less compulsory clearance fees per head for the candidates. This leads to suspicions that there are elements in the Ministries that make money from these clearance fees.

Before names of candidates are sent to WAEC and NECO, the Ministry must clear those names. MECs could pad up their lists and take to the Ministry because they are expecting more persons to register with them. There is an amount that is paid per head of a candidate to the Ministry to clear the student. This is where there is another problem. I believe that if this will be done just through WAEC and WAEC reports to the Ministries, some of these things will stop because data will be easy to track. (Teacher, Abuja)

Both WAEC and NECO depend on Continuous Assessment Scores (CAS) to complete the marks of candidates and determine their final grades. CAS are to be submitted by schools for each candidate from classes SS 1 and SS 2, but not for SS 3 (which is the class when the final examination is taken). When students migrate prior to the final exam, they do not take their CAS with them; this implies that MECs forge CAS for their candidates. We found that policies intended to enforce CAS – which should deter students from migrating – are yet to yield substantive results. This is because of a lack of cooperation from Ministry officials who try to protect their own political-economy, which relies on the mass clearance of candidates supplied by the MECs.

Proprietors or school owners who have jobs at the Ministries leverage their positions to get privileged information and to evade sanctions. We found that, despite reports that some of their schools have been banned from hosting examinations because of malpractice, they continue without any form of hindrance from the authorities.

The Ministries are the ones to ultimately punish schools that do wrong. But they don't punish those caught indulging in examination malpractice because they have collected bribes from them. Some of those schools are owned by those in the Ministry. Nothing is done to them. (School Administrator, Abuja)

Finally, supervisors and schools that have been identified as corrupt are expected to be sanctioned by the Ministries of Education who made the appointments. But our findings show that the sanctions either do not happen as a result of political or kinship connections, or are not effective as a form of deterrence. This has a negative effect on the motivation to report malpractice, including the goodwill and anti-corruption efforts of some Ministry officials.

WAEC issued letters to schools and gave us the copy containing the names of schools that were involved in examination malpractice. From our end, we have queried these schools and have got a list of the supervisors that supervised those schools. Yes, they have been blacklisted but I can't tell for how long because we have started hearing all sorts of things. How do we fight it? You get a phone call immediately you try closing any of the illegal schools or dealing with a corrupt supervisor. If you fight, they will attack you. (Official, Ministry of Education, Edo)

(iv) The role of examination bodies and their staff

Examination councils can be approached by politicians for SSCE certificates, but we found no evidence showing that such requests are granted. Rather, supervisors from the examination

councils are bribed to stop them reporting malpractice cases when they carry out routine monitoring of schools during the conduct of the examinations. This could explain why a representative of one of the examination bodies said that they get very few reports, despite the prevalence of MECs as reported in this study.

The following quote illustrates how such bribery occurs:

Upon arrival at these schools, while going in, the principal or any of the teachers might want to take you to an office so you can be bribed or entertained and forget about the business why you came. Our organisation has advised that we should always move from the gate straight to the examination venue. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

Finally, participants in the study mentioned people within the examination bodies using their positions to influence fraudulent procedures for their relatives – a clear case of conflict of interest which has yet to be effectively resolved by the examination bodies.

Our candidates must pass. Besides writing in the school where I will refer him to, we also follow the scripts through my mother who works in one of the examination bodies. (Owner of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

The girl always stayed quiet. But she will keep writing. I was bold enough to confront her on one of the days. She told me that her mother works in that very examination body and provides her with the questions. (University Student, Edo)

3.5. Overall systemic inefficiencies

As with the drivers of MECs, we uncovered a range of inefficiencies within the educational space across the study locations. These include: poor monitoring of schools by the Ministries of Education; weak enforcement of sanctions against corrupt supervisors (which could be for political reasons but denotes a systemic defect); a dearth of social service professionals within the school system; poor pay and absence of protection for supervisors from threats and hurts; failure to determine the character and integrity of potential supervisors before recruitment; insufficient numbers of supervisors; and absence of clear reporting channels.

Schools are expected to meet certain minimum standards before they are approved. The shanty structures and poor teaching and learning conditions that characterise most MECs are below the minimum standards, yet they are approved to run as schools. We found that some schools used borrowed facilities to get approval, while others resorted to political and kinship connections. However, repeated and unannounced monitoring can help identify such schools, and can be especially effective during examinations. The Ministries of Education complain of lack of funds to make monitoring effective, but some corrupt elements within the Ministries will actively impede monitoring even when funds are available because they need to protect certain political, kinship and economic interests.

Routine monitoring is needed to make sure that we identify schools that are not of standard. And of course, this is money. The Chief Inspector of Education should with some people move around schools and even during examinations. But we do not have the funds to send them out so often. (Official, Ministry of Education, Kogi)

Supervisors reportedly complain that they are poorly paid; the rents they secure from enabling malpractice are used to augment their low salaries for the supervision they have been recruited to do.

But naturally, supervisors complain that the money they are paid is small although you know that there is no amount of money you will pay someone that will be enough for the person. We can only keep appealing to them that once our finances increase that we will increase theirs. But when you fail to invite some of them, you will discover that they will keep begging to be involved, such that you would not know whether it is the pay that is making them do the job or the kickbacks they get. (Official, Examination Body, Abuja)

Those who wish to exercise their roles with integrity are threatened by insecurity, so they turn a blind eye to malpractice to save their livelihoods.

Nothing has been really done about protecting the supervisors. It is more like a risk. Check the form of security we have in most schools not to talk of some public schools that have none. In fact, you are on your own. (Security Personnel, Kogi)

One notable finding is that the stakeholders involved in recruiting supervisors do not use integrity indicators to help in the selection process. By integrity indicators, we mean markers or scorecards that could show how upstanding the candidates might be. This could be done, for example, by examining personnel files at the schools they are recruited from or by random surveys from students in their schools. There are also complaints that there are insufficient supervisors which could be a result of the limited money available to fund the payment of supervisors. We discovered that some MECs exploit this inadequate supply of supervisors by having several examination venues within their premises: one supervisor might be required to supervise in more than one venue at a time, meaning that the examinations are poorly supervised.

Where I wrote, we had about three halls. The supervisor that came was shuttling [between] all three halls because she did not want any help from the teachers. So, what the teachers had to do is to monitor her. Whenever she leaves a particular hall, the teachers will enter and share answers. They continue that way as soon as she leaves any of the halls. (University Student, Edo)

Schools were also found to lack social service professionals who can help students with career choices, mental health and other value-based needs. In other words, there is almost nobody attending to the psycho-social needs of students, despite the possibility that the decision to sit SSCE in an MEC could be a result of psycho-social factors. Finally, we found

that clear and consistent channels for reporting the activities of MECs were lacking. Students who were victimised in some of the MECs or had other complaints had nobody to report to.

3.6. Inconsistent policies of the examination bodies

Our study also highlighted the 'low candidature fee' policy being advanced by one of the examination bodies which was cited as a reason for schools to liaise with tutorial centres. The policy implies that schools with less than a certain number of candidates are expected to pay ₦30,000 (£54) for the examination to be conducted in their schools. The fee is to assist the examination body in catering to certain overhead costs and to balance the differentials incurred by conducting the examination for a small group of people. To avoid paying the low candidature fee, some schools collaborate with tutorial centres to increase the number of candidates. Liaising with the tutorial centres, however, implies an acceptance of the *raison d'être* of those centres, which is to ensure that students are assisted to pass.

We can allow you to register even one candidate. Only that you must pay for low candidature. For example, the principal that left my office not long ago has eight candidates. It is 30,000 naira; it is a kind of administrative charge. They can be allowed to write the exam without paying the money but they must pay before the result is released which gives them enough time to source funds. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

While ₦30,000 appears to be a small amount, we found that schools avoid paying these fees by getting candidates from tutorial centres. This could be related to the profit motivation of private institutions, or it might be that they consider the fee to be punitive.

Schools come to us to get candidates. They are bent on not paying fine to the examination body for not having enough candidates. They feel it is a loss to them. (Staff of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

Meanwhile, the reporting policy of the examination bodies is not straightforward and there are few incentives for reporting malpractice. Some teachers we interviewed cited this as a reason for not reporting corrupt practices.

I am also a WAEC examiner, I mark WAEC and NECO as well, so now if supervisors aid malpractice for ₦50,000 [£91] for instance then you are now expecting an examiner to identify and report case of malpractice for ₦200 [£0.36] per script? I think you know that doesn't work. I vowed that even if I see any case of malpractice I won't [report it] because the supervisor and the school aided it. You don't expect me to identify and report such cases for ₦200 per candidate. (Teacher, Kogi)

Finally, the use of security operatives by the two examination bodies is inconsistent. While the security operatives feel they could help in curbing MECs, they complained about being underutilised. They mentioned being sent to rule-following schools, as against rule-breaking ones, and not being allowed to get close to examination venues so as not to cause the candidates stress.

3.7. Gender influence

Our study also highlighted a number of ways in which gender plays a role. One was the issue of MECs making use of female students to distract male supervisors. While some supervisors ignored the distractions, we also heard evidence of some falling for this trick.

So, after the particular exam, a teacher walked up to me and said that what's going on between me and that supervisor? I was like "Nothing oh! He only asked me out". And to my greatest surprise, do you know what that teacher told me? He said that I should agree to date him now, that they will be using my influence. The plan is to be using me as a distraction, so that he will be concentrated on me and they can reduce his money. I played along until he invited me to his house. That was when my mother got to know. (University Student, Kogi)

Another angle to this is the use of female candidates to trap male supervisors. If the male supervisors react in certain ways that could seem like harassment, then that could be used against them. One male supervisor told his story:

Then, too, in some of these centres, they could set you up with a female. I had this experience. I got into one of these centres [MECs], and I saw this lady in front who had hid her exhibit [an item with answers to questions] very close to the breast. I refused to use my hand. I used my pen, then called on a female invigilator to bring it out. If I had misbehaved, the school might take me up for it, and no one would want to hear if I was doing my job. (Official, Examination Body, Anambra)

Our findings also suggest that while males are more likely to engage in malpractice within the examination space, as they dominate ownership of tutorial centres and MECs, sanctions could apply differently, with female owners of MECs more shielded from sanctions and confrontations than their male counterparts.

Our society is becoming wrapped in gender concerns. If you attack a woman, it might be said that you are attacking her because of her gender. So, sometimes you just avoid them. ([Official, Ministry of Education, Abuja)

A different gender issue was raised by the students, many of whom said that it was their mothers who were interested in their academic performances and future, leading up to registering them in a MEC.

My dad will always say that he doesn't have money, but my mum kept giving me money and encouraged me to always do whatever possible to make me pass. She even paid an invigilator such that the man checked on me often whenever I am writing to confirm if I was flowing well. Someone wrote my mathematics for me outside the hall and that was the one I submitted. This was about 5 years ago and I was part of the few that passed. (University Student, Edo)

Finally, some narratives suggested more regard and fear for male security personnel than females.

We as security women might not be hard like the males. We sometimes have this sympathy for the children. Other times, we are afraid of what will happen to us or members of our families. (Security Personnel, Abuja)

3.8. Religious and cultural influences

We found some evidence in our study of religion playing a role. Some schools considered to be religious were also involved in examination malpractice, because they were tired of losing their students to MECs owing to their strictness.

There is a school in our community. It is a missionary school. Whenever it is approaching WAEC and NECO, students will leave the school. The owners had to start considering helping their students. It was one of the students that told me. But you will not know that something of that nature is happening there because it is a missionary school. (University Student, Kogi)

There are reports that religious schools are respected by external supervisors, and not seen as likely to engage in malpractice; they are deemed to be trustworthy because they are owned and managed by the church or a committed member of the clergy. We found, by contrast, that religious schools might not be entirely ethical or honourable in upholding examination ethics.

When her husband who was a Pastor died, the woman took over and turned it to a special centre. Supervisors were not going there because they felt the husband's legacy will be continued. It was unfortunate. (Teacher, Anambra)

We were also told about the influence of voodoo, with a top government official who was actively opposed to MECs facing spiritual attacks. She was forced to resign and give up the fight.

It is a battle that we haven't won for even a day till now. The former commissioner of education at a time trusted only me here, she was seeing fetish things all around her office and got threatening phone-calls. People were diabolical, she felt threatened and filed a resignation letter and that was how she went back to her former workplace. (Official, Ministry of Education, Edo)

Finally, some MECs are said to use native languages to communicate with candidates in a way that the supervisor will not understand if they are not from the tribe whose language is dominant within the centre.

4. Interventions

4.1. Horizontal interventions

The SOAS-ACE approach favours anti-corruption interventions that seek to galvanise actors at the grassroots. The grassroots actors in our study include school owners, supervisors, students, teachers, principals, faith-based groups, civil society groups, community-based groups and parents. In this section, we provide evidence of the potential for such actors to advance anti-corruption activities, given the right incentives and motivation. We classify these interventions according to various categories of actors.

Supervisors

Our research has shown that supervisors are powerful and could be blatant about breaking the rules for their own benefit. But we also found situations where they did not get their own way.

As a WAEC exam officer back in those days, if we go for WAEC supervision in that school, if the exam is two hours for a paper, the exam must start and end within the stipulated time. The external supervisor will never be allowed by the invigilators from the school to give students extra time. (Community member, Anambra)

While this quote concerns a school that follows the rules, it demonstrates the potential for effective peer monitoring within the context of WAEC and NECO examinations, if supervisors are incentivised and motivated to do so. Such incentives could include school owners rewarding honest invigilators and supervisors, in a bid to make them understand the positive ripple effects of ethical behaviour during examinations.

Religious schools

Although we have established that malpractice can be found in schools with a religious outlook, we also found that schools within certain religious sects are regarded as strict and have zero tolerance for examination malpractice. The Deeper Life Church, especially, was frequently mentioned. School owners from these sects can elicit discipline from supervisors posted to them or can attract supervisors who share the same values of honesty and integrity. Identifying and incentivising such schools and supervisors could contribute to curbing MECs, as they can advance anti-malpractice campaigns, and can be used as examples of good behaviour, and perhaps rewarded.

I left my school in SS 2 to write my WAEC in another school owned by not a pastor but a Deeper Life elder. You will be amazed at the amount of spacing (large gaps between seats to prevent cheating). Far beyond the social distancing of COVID-19 spacing to be honest, and we were not even much. People did not come to that centre because they know that malpractice is not allowed. There were 46 of us

and we were not doing anything [against the rules]. The invigilators that came were very disciplined. (University Student, Kogi)

Examiners usually refuse to come to our school because we do not permit money exchanging hands here. They prefer going to schools where they will make money. (School administrator, Edo)

The supervisors do not want to come here. When they are posted here, they are disappointed, and they keep sighing around. Sometimes, when they are late in reporting, we go to their office to pick them up. We will also follow them to make sure that they submitted our students' scripts at the right place. (Teacher, Abuja)

Community efforts

We also came across a case in which community members reported a MEC because they felt that the current female proprietor was adulterating the school's standards of religious respectability by turning it into a MEC.

This is the case of a pastor that owned a school but later died, the wife took over and started indulging in exam malpractices which attracted people to the school. It was as if the wife has been waiting for the man to die so that she can carry out her plans. It was unbearable for some community members such that they went and reported the woman to the Ministry of Education. This made them send strict invigilators to the school. (University Student, Edo)

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC)

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is a compulsory one-year youth service in Nigeria for graduates from tertiary institutions. In our study, we found evidence of Youth Corps members who were posted to secondary schools standing up against the activities of MECs during examinations. However, our evidence suggests that they can only be firm if they are backed by the NYSC authority and other related institutions.

My cousin who was a Corps Member in Sokoto [a State in northern Nigeria] was to invigilate in the school he was posted to. He insisted that malpractices will not happen and it caused a lot of discomforts. Unfortunately, he was victimised by the principal of the school, who refused to sign his clearance form. (University Student, Kogi)

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

Our findings suggest that CSOs play an important role, with evidence of some successes. They were said to have moved beyond sensitising people against examination malpractice to voluntarily monitoring the conduct of examinations.

For instance, we got a report from a group that helped us to monitor exams three years ago that some high-profile schools engaged in malpractices. We didn't

even commission this group, but after our separate investigation, we discovered that the report from the CSO was true and detailed the actual occurrence and the schools involved were sanctioned accordingly. So, we need more of this group in the system such as the non-governmental organisations ... and the faith-based organisations. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

CSOs can be statutorily permitted to perform external monitoring and observation of the conduct of WAEC and NECO examinations. A CSO representative told us:

A lot of roles ... we need to join in sensitisation and should partner with the examination bodies to monitor the conduct of examinations. They can do like it is done during elections – some kind of external observers. (Representative of CSO, Abuja)

One examination official stressed the importance of informing candidates and the general public about the actual fee for WAEC registration, which is ₦13,950 (£25). He believes that the CSOs should include that in their campaigns, so that people will know that if they are charged above that amount, there is something fraudulent going on.

One area of sensitisation the CSOs can help with is to tell parents and guardians that WAEC fee is ₦13,950. We give the schools all the needed items for each candidate. When there are charges above this, then such a school is doing something fraudulent. I recall when a neighbour was asking me about the fee, that his child was demanding a lot from him. I asked him to go to the area to find out what happens. He returned and told me that the school was going to send them somewhere else to write the exams, and that the money includes all they will do to make sure the child passes excellently. That is how bad the system is now. (Official, Examination Body, Kogi)

With the rapid emergence of many CSOs in Nigeria, there is a chance to instil in them the importance of promoting examination ethics.

Teachers and school owners who value the proper conduct of examinations

In the course of our research, we were told of teachers and school owners taking a public stand against a major MEC owner at an event. They refused to listen to his public lecture and called him out, hoping that the organiser of the event will not invite him a second time.

We held a programme where we invited teachers and school owners from all around the State. So, he was a guest speaker. When he stepped onto the stage to talk, everyone started saying "no!" We were later told that he runs a popular MEC which makes him unqualified to address the audience. (Principal, Edo)

It was also suggested that the National Association of Proprietors of Private Schools (NAPPS) should begin conversations on MECs and could be incentivised to institute penalties for schools that break the rules.

You know that it is now compulsory to be in NAPPS if you own a school. Before the Ministry of Education recognises your school, you must be a member. NAPPS can sanction a school, as well as join in sensitising school owners against indulging MECs. (Teacher, Kogi)

Social service professionals

We also heard recommendations for the strengthening of psycho-social services in secondary schools by employing guidance-counsellors, social workers, psychologists and others. An official of an examination body said:

The guidance-counsellors are usually closer to the students and can be able to relay the essence of hard work to them which can help them shun malpractice. I also noticed that some of these children get involved because of lack of self-confidence. If the guidance-counsellors can help build the self-confidence of our students from the start, they will mature with the mind-set that they can achieve things legally. (Official, Examination Body, Anambra)

Tutorial centres

Although, as described above, tutorial centres are strong facilitators of MECs, we noted that some of the tutorial centres decried the alarming rate at which MECs are spreading and expressed concern about the future of those who patronise them. Participants from tutorial centres talked about how close they are to their candidates, and with the right engagement they could dissuade some candidates from using MECs. One of the owners of a tutorial centre said:

This is a business ... it is my business. I can tell you that the schools are threatened because we are taking their candidates but we are genuinely taking those students because the children feel we teach better. The schools are ganging up against us, yet they are the Miracle Centres. In this Edo State, there are just about four private secondary schools that are not MECs. If the government can support us to grow and engage us properly, we can talk to these candidates and stop them from registering with MECs. We are the ones doing the linkage and we can stop that linkage once the government is ready. (Owner of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

Students

Students are interested in joining the campaign against MECs if only they can be given the opportunity to talk, share and report their experiences.

If only WAEC and NECO can create something like an app or even provide us with addresses to send our complaints, we can be reporting these things by ourselves. I wrote in a MEC where I was treated badly, and I was forced to pay a sorting fee. Neither my parents nor I could report the situation because we do not know who or where to turn to. (University Student, Edo)

Some of the students suggested they could be involved in evaluating teachers, with such evaluations forming a basis to reward trustworthy teachers internally and to select them for supervision of external examinations.

We know the teachers better. The Ministry came to our school to reward a teacher. As they called the name of the teacher, we were all laughing because we know that it was so undeserving. The Ministry official that came had to withhold the award It will be nice if we can be allowed the opportunity of evaluating the teachers because we know them better. Our evaluation can be used to appoint supervisors. (University Student, Edo)

Another idea offered by students was to use them as vanguards against MECs, suggesting that they could start up awareness-raising campaigns in schools and homes.

As students, I think we can organise seminars to convince them [school pupils] that if one is optimistic and courageous, there will be no limit to what one can achieve because most of them have no confidence in themselves. (University Student, Kogi)

I think we can start from our homes to advise our younger ones on what they can do to come out prosperous without necessarily indulging in malpractices. We can also convince our parents who bring out the money for all these things that it is possible for them to write in those good schools and still succeed. I think they need orientation generally. (University Student, Kogi)

Parents

Data shows that mothers are the main enablers of registering their wards in MECs, with fathers often expressing some sense of disapproval. It has been suggested that they should work together with Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). PTAs comprise more parents than teachers, and the heads of PTAs are always parents. PTAs are not just based in schools; there are PTAs at both sub-national and national levels. Making PTAs aware of the ills of MECs could motivate them to adopt the upholding of examination ethics as part of their agenda as well as demonstrating how certain actions and inactions on the part of parents encourage their wards to consider MECs.

Parents have a lot of roles in this. The parents are the ones that register their children in MECs and some do not even care about the education of their children. Some will even force their children into courses that are too difficult for them, or that they do not like. (University Student, Edo)

4.2. Vertical interventions

Participants in the study pointed to successful and unsuccessful efforts of the government and the examination bodies to stem the tide of MECs. Some of these narratives were backed up with evidence while some came as recommendations.

Unannounced or disguised visits by external supervisors and officials from Ministries of Education

One of the external supervisors in our study explained the importance of unannounced or disguised visits in uncovering activities of MECs. He narrated a personal experience:

Just recently, I went to this school. So, it happened that I was putting on an attire that looks like the uniform of the school. The security man saw me as a student and reprimanded me for coming late. So, I apologised to him. As I got to the hall, I saw the Vice Principal sharing exhibits [answers] with the students. I immediately got hold of some of them before they had recognised who I was. I reported the school, attaching the exhibits as evidence. Reports must be accompanied with evidence. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

We also heard that unannounced visits were used in the past to keep schools on their toes. A Ministry of Education official said:

At every educational board, we should try and look at the blueprint of educational inspectors of the 1970s and 1980s – how they go to schools one after the other to do monitoring. It should be impromptu. You use that to find out how they are doing. No need to inform them that you are coming. That is how you can catch those that are adulterating standards. (School Administrator, Kogi)

CAS policy

The Continuous Assessment Score policy of WAEC, which issues fines of ₦100,000 (approximately £178) to schools that register candidates after the approved deadline, appears to have stimulated schools to ensure timely registration.

Yes, I registered all of them once because I didn't want to fall victim to paying a 100,000 Naira fine for late registration. I urged my students to pay on time because I don't like avoidable stress. (Owner of Tutorial Centre, Edo)

Although the CAS policy shows some promise if it is well implemented, there are concerns that MECs could devise ways around the policy. An official of an examination body told us:

CAS is good, but we cannot say that CAS is a success, and it is still a work in progress. We are hoping and believing that if we can at least achieve even 60%–70% success with the CAS, then we are good to go in the type of environment we have found ourselves in. Let us encourage the CAS and as time goes on, I believe more ideas will come through our brainstorming. CAS will have an impact on the migration of students from one school to another. The malpractice level will still be high when their students cannot migrate anymore because they will still devise other means of indulging in malpractice. Let's just keep our fingers crossed and be optimistic. (Official, Examination Body, Abuja)

Strict sanctions against MECs and their enablers

Participants talked about the dread of hearing that results from certain MECs have been cancelled or withheld by the examination bodies. This could be a form of deterrent, but it requires the reporting of MECs to be backed up with evidence, and appropriate sanctions to be undertaken, such as the seizure of results. Nevertheless, there is also a concern that some innocent candidates might be affected.

Most times, you will “discourage yourself by yourself” because when you check some results from these miracle centres, you will be seeing either withheld or cancelled. (Community member, Abuja)

Yes, it worked for last year because when people hear that all the results of all the students in this centre were seized because of malpractice, they get scared away from that place and start looking for other places. It controls such [malpractice] to an extent but is not holistic. (School Administrator, Kogi)

The impact of government sanctions of erring principals, supervisors and schools is considered to be significant, when it is done properly. Private schools are still regulated by the government and could therefore face stringent sanctions if they engage in malpractice. Some participants emphasised that violence against supervisors by schools and communities must be punished, as a tool of deterrence, and not brushed off. There is evidence that such a policy has worked in the past.

WAEC went to Ukpata [a town in Kogi State, Nigeria] in 2016/2017 to monitor their exams. They stopped students from writing because they were doing malpractice. The students damaged their vehicle and stoned them. WAEC stopped them from writing exams for a long time and they learnt their lessons. (School Administrator, Kogi)

Technological solutions driven by the examination bodies

There is an array of technological solutions which are being deployed by the examination bodies, and especially by WAEC, with the aim of improving the integrity of the examinations they conduct both in terms of the candidates' actions and the supervisors they recruit. However, deploying these technological solutions requires funding, which is not always available at the levels needed.

There are so many other ways of detecting examination malpractice even if an examiner decides not to report it. For these objectives, we use technology. When we notice that we are getting the same wrong or right answers and we find a high percentage of such, the technology will reveal this to us after which we will bring some examiners to scrutinise the scripts to find out if there is evidence of examination malpractice. (Official, Examination Body, Abuja)

We also have some papers we print using the voucher data printing method and those papers are customised such that there are some security features on them. That way, even when they are smuggled out or they take pictures of them, we have a way of apprehending the supervisor and the students that are involved just as the examination is going on. However, this is an expensive venture which is why we don't do it to all our papers. (Official, Examination Body, Abuja)

We now have our calculator, and we are even working on customised pens for the exams. We are investing in technology. We have the coded answer sheets, it is called Variable Data Print (VDP). With that we can monitor ongoing exams. There is a team from WAEC dedicated to monitor the internet during examination periods. We flag malpractices ongoing at that level. If our question papers are uploaded online, we can use the code on it to trace where it is coming from. We currently have cases of this nature in court. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

Warding off political interference and improving the autonomy of NECO

We found that NECO, which is an agency of the Nigerian government, is more affected by political interference than WAEC. The fact that WAEC is not 100% owned by the Nigerian government gives it some level of autonomy. It is also able to use its regional structure to ward off political influence.

The regional nature of WAEC has helped us so much that even when there is political interference, we remind them that we can't take decisions on our own and that we collaborate with the Ministry of Education because our mandate is to improve the standards of education in the country through assessment and all that. We are not facing the kind of problem sister-examination bodies are facing because our structure is different and that puts a check to their interference because when they remember that you are not directly under them, they pull back. The government doesn't appoint who heads WAEC. (Official, Examination Body, Edo)

The content and delivery of curriculum

A further recommendation is that harmonising the teaching and examination curriculum will help improve the confidence of students in what they have been taught in class, making them less likely to seek the services of MECs.

Most schools' syllabuses do not match with that of WAEC, and this causes the discrepancy. Schools should be enlightened on the necessity of following the WAEC syllabus while preparing these students. (University Student, Edo)

Improving welfare conditions within the education sector

Improving the welfare of teachers and supervisors is another prominent recommendation. It is based on the belief that an improvement in their welfare conditions will insulate a good number from chasing after bribes from MECs.

The money paid to teachers and supervisors is too small. I wish they would increase it, so that the justifications for always wanting bribes will reduce. (CSO Representative, Abuja)

Other recommendations

The study also threw up a number of other recommendations. For examples, supervisors could operate in pairs, partly as a way of improving scrutiny of examination practices, and partly to create a system in which supervisors could caution each other in instances of wrongdoing. Other recommendations included: intensifying actions to prevent the migration of candidates such as compulsory biometrics for senior secondary school students in their respective schools to stop them from changing to SS 3; asking examination centres to install CCTV; providing adequate security to ensure the safety of supervisors at red-flagged examination venues; communicating the CAS policy and its implications to students and the general public; communicating the private candidates' examination (an examination for adults who are not students of any secondary school) organised by WAEC to the general public effectively; organising town-hall meetings across communities on examination malpractice and MECs; promoting whistle-blowing policies against MECs and creating smooth reporting channels for students and the general public; and devising means to openly reward schools which do not tolerate examination malpractice.

5. Discussion

This study has investigated the nature and extent of examination malpractice in three Nigerian States and the Federal Capital Territory. It uses academic enquiry to uncover the systematic operations of MECs, especially in the context of private secondary schools. The sensitivities around corruption, especially institutionally driven corruption, make it difficult for researchers around the world to obtain and publish evidence of corrupt practices. The systematic review of MECs by Agwu et al. (2022) highlights the dearth of quality academic literature, particularly empirical studies, on the topic. Nevertheless, some studies on this kind of academic corruption have been conducted in Egypt (Ille and Peacey, 2019), China (Qijun and Yaping, 2015) and India (Tierney and Sabharwal, 2017).

The impact of the widespread examination corruption in Nigeria is perceptible. As a developing country, Nigeria needs quality human resources to drive development. High-quality education is key to the development of human resources, and compromising educational standards will inevitably impact on the quality of graduates that flow into the labour market. Hardworking and dedicated graduates also lose opportunities for further education and good jobs, as people with fraudulent grades take up positions in tertiary education and subsequently in employment. It is clear that compromised examination processes make way for mediocrity to thrive, and the continued reliance on mediocre human resources has been identified as one reason for the slow and regressive development in Nigeria (Achebe, 2012). With the practices of MECs negatively impacting the country's development, there is a clear and urgent need to address the MEC problem.

The evidence from our study reveals the multiplicity of actors involved in perpetrating examination malpractice for MECs, which in turn highlights the complex, systemic and endemic nature of this phenomenon at the secondary school level in Nigeria. The variety of actors involved makes it even more challenging to identify a solution or strategy. The motivations for their involvement in MECs are wide-ranging, but there is a common understanding across all the actors involved that the certificates to be obtained from writing SSCEs are indeed very important for further career advancement. This creates a serious demand for those certificates. Although some authors (e.g. Okorodudu, 2012) have urged Nigerian institutions to reduce the emphasis on certificates in their recruitment process, others have recommended improving certification processes so that certificates have more meaning (Fowoyo et al., 2019). This can only occur when acquiring a certificate is clearly associated with merit.

Service-users (mostly students and parents/guardians) are involved on the demand side of the MEC phenomenon as they are desperate to get 'good' grades to enable them to secure admission into higher-level education. But why does this desperation lead to engaging in malpractice? Parents and students often lament the poor quality of education in Nigeria and the inability of institutions to cover the academic curriculum stipulated by the education authorities, upon which the examinations are focused. We do not disregard the fact that students' abilities differ and that some students may indulge in other behaviours that contribute to poor learning outcomes and consequently poor preparedness for

examinations. Notwithstanding these caveats, one consequence of the inability to cover the curriculum is that students feel ill-prepared for the examinations. Because they are not confident of their preparedness, they seek out other means to achieve their goals: this is where MECs become useful to them.

Parents, who often provide the fees for examinations, understand the importance of the SSCE and consider it a worthwhile investment of time and resources to pay for the services of MECs rather than endure the costs of failure – given that failure implies that parents are required to register their wards in a new school/examination centre and pay the examination fee again. Many low-income earners see MECs as a solution. One could conclude, therefore, that MECs are used either to circumvent an ineffective education system that produces poorly prepared candidates, or to curb excessive spending burdens for poor households. Indeed, among poor households, good-quality education could actually serve as an antidote to failure in examinations and a tool to improve household economies in the long run. This is why those involved in educational quality assurance must emphasise the need to improve educational standards, alongside the need to promote examination ethics.

However, the situation is complex. Our research found that when good schools that offer quality education insist on following proper examination procedures, they lose many of their students who are about to enter examination classes to MECs. This suggests that students and parents know the quality they get from good schools and go there to acquire better education in the early grades (JSS 1 to SS 2). But when the time comes for the SSCE examinations, they perform a sort of cost-benefit evaluation and many choose to go to a place where they have more confidence of getting good grades, albeit through corrupt means. Here, low levels of confidence in students and parents play a role; lacking confidence that candidates will succeed under standard examination conditions, they migrate to MECs that guarantee their students will get 'assistance' and make good grades. Systemic corruption also has an impact: parents and students believe that to have the edge in a non-rule-following context requires a combination of quality and fraud, where fraud is considered to enhance quality. It is thus vital to target the systemic orientation that encourages the use of fraud, but it is also important to instil confidence in students who attend good rule-following schools, and to pursue policies that will stop students from migrating to MECs. While improved teaching/learning styles and psycho-educational/counselling activities may help in tackling the challenges of poor confidence and negative systemic orientation (Chui et al., 2013), regulatory agencies should take on the challenge of student migration to MECs.

In our study we found that examination bodies were aware of the problem of students migrating to MECs and have begun implementing policies/mechanisms to stop the trend such as the CAS system, which requires that students register with the examination body in the first year of the senior school category. Although CAS shows signs of success, it is not without challenges. The CAS system is being seriously compromised by schools which are suspected to be MECs exploiting systemic difficulties such as late registrations, as well as migration for genuine reasons. MECs also create and register 'ghost students' in the CAS system. Nevertheless, strengthening the CAS system has potential. Since CAS is electronic-

based and captures biometric information, monitoring schools that submit late registrations and tracking the history of their students, in addition to conducting unannounced supervision visits to these schools, could help address corruption concerns. Appropriate sanctions could then be applied to confirmed MECs.

As noted in this paper, there are political-economy dynamics involved in the problems posed by MECs. Informal influence, connections and networks are reportedly used to shield MECs from sanctions. Although the situation may seem intractable, given that actors on both the supply and demand sides contribute to the corruption, there is potential for actors and situations to be leveraged to drive positive change.

Taking the SOAS-ACE approach, the question of who benefits from the activities of the MECs and who loses from MEC corruption is key. Although MECs were reported to operate in public and private schools, the latter seem to be more heavily involved in malpractice. Privately operated schools are usually profit-seeking. The narratives of participants suggest that while rule-following private schools emphasise quality education and maintain examination standards, rule-breaking schools compromise the examination process to secure better grades and so attract more profit at the expense of rule-following schools. So, rule-following schools lose money while rule-breaking schools gain from their dubious activities. It could therefore be valuable to mobilize the rule-following schools and upstanding stakeholders against the MECs. This can be done through implementing in-school policies that prevent the migration of students, encouraging whistle-blowing, and lobbying top government stakeholders and the NAPPS to support an anti-MECs agenda.

Stakeholders who may support positive change include examination councils (especially WAEC) and (actors within) communities that are opposed to malpractice. Individual actors and officials have expressed a willingness to campaign against MECs. While it is vital to acknowledge and galvanise all efforts against MEC corruption, it is particularly important to identify powerful actors who can canvass for change, and especially those who stand to gain if the MEC problem is tackled. Through the sharing of studies such as this one, stakeholders can begin to see the bigger picture and build coalitions to tackle MECs. Rule-following schools and communities know and can identify MECs and even share some platforms, such as NAPPS, with the proprietors of MECs. Aligning the interests of rule-following schools to combat MECs may be a plausible way to counter MECs and related fraud-facilitating structures (e.g. tutorial centres), following the SOAS-ACE approach. Encouraging whistle-blowing and providing better communication channels could facilitate reporting of MECs to exam-regulation bodies, while unannounced monitoring visits and rigorous journalism (undercover if necessary) could be used to validate reports of MEC malpractice.

Given the wide range of reasons for students to seek out MECs – from sheer laziness on the part of the students to poor-quality education and poor funding of the public education sector, as well as parental and peer influence – it may be difficult to target students based on what drives them to MECs. A more plausible strategy for change is identifying and neutralizing MECs themselves. The evidence indicates that they are relatively easy to identify, given the characteristic 'inverted pyramid' shape of the student population. MECs are known for their low-quality infrastructure for learning and are easily identifiable through

informal conversations with host communities. Interestingly, host communities seem to feel quite at ease mentioning MECs in their locales, while those who patronise the MECs speak openly, sometimes regretfully, about what they see as the deplorable state of educational standards in Nigeria. (That is, half the opinions are from the community, half from people who use MECs.)

6. Conclusion

Our study highlights the granular concerns that should be considered in combatting MECs. Clearly, MECs corrupt Nigeria's academic space and represent a grave threat to the integrity of its examination system, as well as undermining the value assigned to school certificates from the country. Our research shows that the issue of MECs is widely recognised in Nigeria, and that examination bodies are very aware of the problem; however, there is a limit to what they can do without cooperation from the Ministries of Education who are the eyes of the government on educational affairs. There is evidence that the problem can be tackled if national and sub-national governments take decisive steps against MECs and their accomplices, the tutorial centres, by enforcing school registration requirements, carrying out unannounced monitoring of schools, ensuring proper funding of the examination councils and public education, acting on reports pertaining to examination malpractice cases and, importantly, working together with the examination councils to develop and employ integrity benchmarks in the recruitment of examination supervisors. The examination bodies have a role to play by tightening their internal policies, censuring staff who engage in malpractice, and implementing policies related to conflicts of interest among their staff. On a positive note, our research found that promising interventions are possible, involving grassroots actors such as community members, CSOs, school owners, examiners, students, youth corps members and teachers. Such interventions against MECs can be effective, but they will yield better results if horizontal actors are incentivised and encouraged by vertical actors such as the government and examination bodies.

Limitations

Regarding the limitations of our research, we acknowledge that there were indications of the existence of MECs in some other states outside the scope of our research, and reports that some public schools also adopt the operations of MECs. Future studies should be encouraged to bring public schools into MEC-related investigations. The focus of this study was to capture concerns pertaining to examinations under WAEC and NECO. Participants' responses did not always specify the involvement of WAEC or NECO, so it is important to acknowledge that some of the concerns expressed could be peculiar to one or other of them, as against both. Again, we understand that focusing on WAEC and NECO means the research cannot be representative of all the examination bodies that conduct exams in Nigeria. We would recommend specific investigations into the examination ethics of the other examination bodies including the National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB) and the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB). This study focused on the SSCE; further research is needed on the General Certificate Examination (GCE) conducted by both WAEC and NECO. Finally, we could not sample the opinions of university students in two of our selected study locations – Abuja and Anambra – for fund-related reasons. However, our review of the literature and our first two visits to the field showed that MECs were more endemic in Edo and Kogi States than in Abuja and Anambra. Therefore, we prioritised Edo and Kogi in seeking the views of university students on MECs who had written any of the examinations not earlier than 2011.

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