

Examination Malpractice Among Students in Higher Education Institutions in Freetown Sierra Leone: Causes, Consequences and Implications for Quality Assurance

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ABSTRACT: Examination malpractice is a serious threat to the quality, credibility, and fairness of higher education in Freetown, Sierra Leone. This study identifies its causes and implications for quality assurance in selected higher education institutions. A mixed-methods approach was used, involving 380 participants: 300 undergraduate students, 60 lecturers, 12 examination officers, 12 academic administrators, and 6 quality assurance officers from six institutions. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews using the Kobo Collect app, then analysed using frequencies, percentages, and thematic analysis. The findings indicate that examination malpractice is caused by interconnected student, institutional, and systemic factors. The most common factors responsible for students' involvement in examination malpractice are poor preparation and inadequate study, fear of failure, pressure to obtain high grades, peer influence and collusion, overcrowded examination halls, inadequate supervision and invigilation, weak enforcement of examination rules, delayed marking and release of examination results, corruption within the education system, inconsistent disciplinary procedures, complicity or cooperation from some staff members, and the belief that malpractice is an easier route to academic success. The study found that examination malpractice contributes to grade inflation, weakens students' commitment to hard work, produces graduates with inadequate knowledge and skills, and damages the reputation of higher education institutions. It recommends ethics education, academic support for students, improved invigilation through randomized seating and electronic monitoring, faster marking and result processing, independent disciplinary panels, and clear sanctions for both students and staff involved in malpractice. Regular examination-integrity audits by the Tertiary Education Commission are also recommended.

KEYWORDS: examination malpractice, higher education, quality assurance, academic integrity, Sierra Leone

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a critical instrument for national development, human capital formation, and socio-economic transformation. Higher education institutions, in particular, are entrusted with producing competent graduates equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for societal progress. To fulfil this role, these institutions rely heavily on examinations – one of the most widely used methods for evaluating students' learning outcomes. Examinations provide a foundation for certification, academic progression, graduation, and employment opportunities. Consequently, the reliability and validity of examination processes are fundamental to maintaining public confidence in educational qualifications and institutional standards ^[1, 2].

Despite their importance, examinations worldwide have been undermined by a persistent challenge: examination malpractice. This refers to any deliberate act of wrongdoing before, during, or after an examination aimed at obtaining an unfair academic advantage. Such acts include impersonation, collusion, leakage of examination questions, unauthorized possession of materials, bribery, and technological cheating ^[3]. Globally, institutions of higher learning continue to grapple with rising cases of academic dishonesty. The expansion of digital technologies, internet accessibility, and artificial intelligence tools has created new avenues for unethical examination practices, threatening the quality and credibility of higher education systems across both developed and developing countries ^[4].

In Africa, examination malpractice has become a growing concern among policymakers, educators, and quality assurance agencies. Factors such as inadequate supervision, intense societal pressure for academic success, high unemployment rates, corruption, and weak enforcement of examination regulations have significantly contributed to its prevalence in many African universities and colleges ^[5]. Countries including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda have reported rising incidents of cheating and academic dishonesty, driven by intense competition for credentials and a pervasive certificate obsession ^[6].

Sierra Leone's higher education sector has experienced considerable expansion in recent years, with increasing enrolment in universities, teacher training colleges, and technical institutions. While this growth has improved access to higher education, it has also introduced challenges related to quality assurance, assessment management, and academic integrity ^[7]. Reports from educational stakeholders suggest that examination malpractice has become an issue of concern in some of the country's higher education institutions. Cases involving cheating, impersonation, unauthorized materials, and collusion among students have occasionally been reported during examinations. These incidents raise important questions about the effectiveness of existing institutional mechanisms designed to promote academic integrity.

The causes of examination malpractice are multifaceted. At the individual level, poor study habits, fear of failure, inadequate preparation, and excessive academic pressure often motivate students to cheat. At the institutional level, weak supervision, overcrowded examination halls, and insufficient punitive measures may create opportunities for dishonest behaviour ^[8]. Societal factors – such as parental pressure, certificate obsession, corruption, and unemployment – further compound the problem ^[9]. Technological advancement has also transformed the nature of malpractice, with smartphones, internet-enabled devices, and social media platforms facilitating sophisticated cheating methods ^[10].

The consequences of examination malpractice extend far beyond individual students. Academic dishonesty erodes public trust in educational qualifications and undermines the reputation of institutions. Employers may lose confidence in graduates' competencies, and professional sectors may experience reduced efficiency due to inadequately trained personnel. When unqualified individuals obtain certificates through dishonest means, the quality of the workforce is compromised, negatively affecting productivity, innovation, service delivery, and overall socio-economic development ^[11]. Ultimately, national development efforts suffer when educational systems fail to produce competent human resources.

Quality assurance has therefore become a central concern in higher education globally. Quality assurance mechanisms seek to ensure that institutions maintain acceptable standards in teaching, learning, assessment, and administration. Examination integrity is a critical component of this process, because assessment outcomes serve as evidence of learning achievements and institutional effectiveness ^[12]. Where examination malpractice is prevalent, quality assurance systems become ineffective, as assessment results no longer reflect students' actual abilities. This compromises accreditation processes, institutional rankings, and public confidence in higher education.

Given the increasing concerns about examination malpractice in higher education institutions in Sierra Leone, there is a clear need for empirical investigation into its causes, consequences, and implications for quality assurance. Understanding these dimensions will provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening examination integrity and promoting educational excellence within the country's higher education sector.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to identify the factors responsible for students' involvement in examination malpractice in higher education institutions in Freetown, Western Area, Sierra Leone, and to examine the implications of these practices for quality assurance in the higher education sector.

1.2 Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the causes of examination malpractice among students in higher education institutions in Freetown, Western Area, Sierra Leone?
2. What are the consequences of examination malpractice for students, institutions, and the quality of higher education in Freetown, Western Area, Sierra Leone?
3. What are the implications of examination malpractice for quality assurance in higher education institutions in Freetown, Western Area, Sierra Leone?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on three complementary theories that together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding examination malpractice: Strain Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Social Learning Theory.

2.1.1 Strain theory

Strain Theory, originally developed by Robert Merton and later refined by Agnew ^[13], posits that individuals engage in deviant behaviour when they experience strain or pressure resulting from the gap between societal goals and the legitimate means available to achieve those goals. In the context of higher education, students may face significant strain when they are expected to achieve high grades and obtain certificates – often viewed as essential for employment and social mobility – but lack the academic preparation, study skills, or resources to succeed through legitimate means. This strain may push students toward examination malpractice as an alternative pathway to achieve academic success.

The theory is particularly relevant to the Sierra Leonean context, where high unemployment rates and intense competition for limited job opportunities create immense pressure on students to obtain credentials, regardless of

how they are acquired. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience even greater strain, as the consequences of academic failure are more severe for those who cannot afford to repeat courses or extend their studies ^[13].

2.1.2 Rational choice theory

Rational Choice Theory, rooted in the work of Becker ^[14], suggests that individuals make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis, weighing the potential rewards of an action against its perceived risks and costs. In the context of examination malpractice, students may decide to cheat when they perceive that the benefits – such as passing an examination, avoiding academic dismissal, or obtaining a higher grade – outweigh the potential costs, including the risk of detection and the severity of penalties.

This theory helps explain why examination malpractice persists even when students are aware of institutional rules and potential sanctions. When examination halls are overcrowded, invigilation is weak, and disciplinary procedures are slow or inconsistent, the perceived probability of detection decreases, making cheating appear more attractive. Similarly, when the rewards of academic success – such as scholarships, employment, or social status – are exceptionally high, students may be more willing to take risks ^[14]. The theory also explains why students may continue to cheat even when they possess the knowledge that cheating is wrong or unnecessary.

2.1.3 Social learning theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura and extended by Schunk and DiBenedetto ^[15], emphasizes that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Individuals learn new behaviours by observing others, particularly those they consider role models, and are more likely to adopt behaviours that are rewarded or that go unpunished. In educational settings, students may learn examination malpractice from peers who cheat successfully without facing consequences. When cheating is normalized within a peer group or institution, it becomes part of the social culture, and students may feel pressure to participate.

The theory helps explain the peer dynamics of examination malpractice. Students who observe classmates cheating and receiving higher grades may feel disadvantaged if they choose not to cheat. Social learning also occurs when students observe staff members engaging in corrupt practices – such as accepting bribes or leaking examination questions – without facing consequences. This observation signals that academic dishonesty is not only acceptable but may also be rewarded ^[15].

2.1.4 Integration of theoretical frameworks

The three theories complement each other in explaining examination malpractice. Strain Theory explains why students may feel pressure to cheat – they experience strain when they cannot achieve academic success through legitimate means. Rational Choice Theory explains how students decide whether to cheat – they weigh the potential benefits against the perceived risks. Social Learning Theory explains how cheating behaviours are learned and normalized – students observe others cheating successfully and imitate those behaviours.

When integrated, these theories suggest that examination malpractice is most likely to occur when students experience high levels of strain, perceive that the benefits of cheating outweigh the risks, and are exposed to environments where cheating is normalized and goes unpunished. This integrated framework is particularly useful for examining examination malpractice in Sierra Leone, where students face significant academic and economic pressures, institutional monitoring may be weak, and corruption may be normalized in some contexts.

2.2 Improvement of equitable access to education through free quality education

The Government of Sierra Leone introduced the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme in 2018 as a flagship policy aimed at removing financial barriers to education and ensuring that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality education. The programme covers tuition fees, learning materials, and other essential costs for pre-primary, primary, and secondary education. This initiative represents a significant commitment to improving equitable access to education, particularly for children from disadvantaged and rural communities ^[16].

The FQSE Programme has contributed to substantial increases in school enrolment across the country. According to Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) reports, gross enrolment rates at the primary and secondary levels have increased significantly since the programme's implementation. The removal of school fees has enabled many families who previously could not afford to send their children to school to now enrol them. This has been particularly important for girls, children with disabilities, and children from rural communities, who historically faced multiple barriers to educational access ^[16].

However, improving access to education is only the first step. To achieve meaningful educational outcomes, access must be accompanied by quality. The FQSE Programme has thus been accompanied by efforts to improve educational quality, including teacher training, curriculum reform, and school infrastructure development. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and insufficient numbers of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas ^[7].

In the context of higher education, equitable access has also been a focus of policy attention. The Government of Sierra Leone has expanded access to higher education through the establishment of new universities and colleges, the introduction of student loan schemes, and scholarships for disadvantaged students. However, access to higher education remains limited for many students due to financial constraints, geographical barriers, and the limited number of places available in public institutions ^[7].

Examination malpractice poses a particular threat to equitable access and quality in higher education. When students obtain qualifications through dishonest means, the value of those qualifications is undermined, and the principle of meritocracy – that individuals should advance based on their abilities and efforts – is compromised. This is particularly concerning for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have overcome significant barriers to access higher education, as they may find that their legitimate achievements are devalued when qualifications are obtained through malpractice.

2.3 The effectiveness of free quality school education programme in enhancing pupils' enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion across rural areas

The FQSE Programme has had significant effects on enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion rates across rural areas of Sierra Leone. Research conducted in rural districts, including Pujehun, Kailahun, and Kambia, has documented substantial improvements in educational indicators following the implementation of the programme ^[17].

Enrolment: Studies have reported significant increases in pupil enrolment in rural schools following the removal of school fees. In some districts, enrolment increased by 30% or more within the first two years of the programme's implementation. This increase was particularly pronounced at the primary level, where the financial burden of school fees was most acute for rural families. The programme has also contributed to more equitable enrolment by gender, with more girls enrolling in school as families can now afford to educate their daughters ^[17].

Retention: The FQSE Programme has also improved retention rates in rural schools. Before the programme, many pupils dropped out of school due to financial constraints, particularly at the transition points between primary and secondary education. The removal of school fees has reduced dropout rates, as families can now keep their children in school for longer periods. However, challenges remain, including the indirect costs of education – such as uniforms, transportation, and supplementary materials – which can still be burdensome for rural families [16].

Attendance: School attendance has also improved in rural areas under the FQSE Programme. Pupils who previously missed school because their families could not afford fees are now attending more regularly. However, attendance remains a challenge in some rural communities due to long distances to school, lack of transportation, and the need for children to contribute to household labour, particularly during planting and harvesting seasons [17].

Completion: Completion rates at the primary and junior secondary levels have increased following the implementation of the FQSE Programme. More pupils are completing their basic education and transitioning to senior secondary school. However, senior secondary completion rates remain lower, particularly in rural areas, where access to senior secondary schools may be limited and the opportunity cost of education – the income foregone by sending a child to school – is higher [17].

The success of the FQSE Programme in rural areas demonstrates the importance of addressing financial barriers to education. However, the programme's effectiveness is not uniform across all rural communities, and challenges persist. Infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, and resource limitations continue to affect educational quality in rural schools. Moreover, the impact of the FQSE Programme on learning outcomes remains variable, with some studies finding that despite improved access and retention, learning outcomes have not improved at the same rate [11].

2.4 Concept of examination malpractice

Examinations are among the most common methods of assessing students' learning. They support decisions about certification, promotion, graduation, and employment. For this reason, examinations must be reliable, valid, and fairly administered. When assessment processes are credible, they strengthen public confidence in educational qualifications and institutional standards [1, 2].

However, examination malpractice continues to threaten the credibility of education systems worldwide. It refers to any deliberate act committed before, during, or after an examination to obtain an unfair academic advantage. Common forms include impersonation, collusion, leakage of examination questions, bringing unauthorized materials into an examination hall, bribery, intimidation, and the use of electronic devices or contract cheating services [3, 18]. Therefore, malpractice is not limited to students copying answers during an examination; it includes a wider range of dishonest activities involving students, staff, examiners, and other individuals.

The growth of digital technology, internet access, and artificial intelligence has created new opportunities for examination fraud. While traditional methods such as written notes, organized collusion, and examiner compromise remain common, students may now use hidden earpieces, smartwatches, mobile phones, and online cheating services. One international study reported that 15 percent of surveyed students had used hidden earpieces or smartwatches during examinations [19]. In many low- and middle-income countries, malpractice is encouraged by overcrowded examination halls, inadequate supervision, limited resources, and broader social acceptance of corruption [20].

Examination malpractice is also a serious concern across Africa, including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Sierra Leone. Its spread is associated with pressure to obtain certificates, high unemployment, corruption, weak enforcement of regulations, inadequate supervision, and intense competition for educational qualifications ^[5]. In Sierra Leone, the expansion of universities, teacher-training colleges, and technical institutions has increased access to higher education. At the same time, it has created additional challenges for quality assurance, examination management, and the protection of academic integrity ^[7].

In Sierra Leone, malpractice may involve impersonation, the smuggling of unauthorized materials, collusion, bribery, question-paper leakage, and the use of electronic devices to exchange answers. These acts are considered serious offences under the Tertiary Education Commission Act and the Anti-Corruption Act of 2019. Reports from the Tertiary Education Commission and local media have highlighted cases involving mass cheating, cancelled examinations, impersonation, leaked question papers, and contract cheating. Although the problem is widely acknowledged, reliable empirical data on its prevalence – particularly in universities and polytechnics in Freetown – remain limited ^[21].

2.5 Causes of examination malpractice

The causes of malpractice are interconnected and can be grouped into individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors.

At the individual level, poor academic preparation is a major contributor. Students who attend classes irregularly, have weak study habits, lack foundational knowledge, or fail to manage their time effectively may feel unable to pass through honest effort. Fear of failure, examination anxiety, low self-confidence, procrastination, and pressure from peers can further increase the likelihood of cheating. Students who believe they lack the ability to succeed legitimately may view malpractice as their only practical option. Research has shown that students experiencing high levels of test anxiety are more likely to engage in examination malpractice than those with lower anxiety levels ^[22].

At the institutional level, weaknesses can create opportunities for malpractice. Inadequate numbers of invigilators, poorly trained supervisors, weak monitoring, and overcrowded examination venues make it easier for students to collude or use unauthorized materials without being detected. Incomplete syllabus coverage and poor teaching may also contribute. When lecturers fail to cover the required content or examination questions do not reflect what was taught, students may feel disadvantaged and seek dishonest alternatives.

An institution's culture and disciplinary system are equally important. Staff members who leak questions, accept bribes, or assist students can encourage malpractice. Similarly, disciplinary procedures that are slow, inconsistent, or unclear may reduce the perceived risk of being caught. Cases reported at institutions such as Fourah Bay College and Njala University suggest that malpractice may sometimes reflect wider institutional problems rather than isolated student misconduct ^[23].

At the socio-cultural level, pressures further influence students' attitudes. In many communities, certificates are viewed as essential pathways to employment and social mobility, sometimes more important than the knowledge and skills they represent. Parents and guardians may pressure students to pass at all costs, and some may support attempts to obtain leaked questions or other forms of assistance. Poverty also increases the consequences of failure because repeating a year places additional financial pressure on students and their families. In societies where corruption and shortcuts are common, examination malpractice may become normalized or justified as a necessary way to overcome structural disadvantages ^[11].

2.6 Consequences of examination malpractice

The consequences of examination malpractice are far-reaching and affect students, institutions, and society as a whole. For students, involvement in malpractice can lead to academic penalties, including loss of marks, grade reductions, course failure, or expulsion. In severe cases, students may face legal consequences, such as fines or imprisonment, particularly when bribery or corruption is involved. Beyond these immediate penalties, students who cheat deprive themselves of the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills they need for their future careers. When they enter the workforce, they may lack the competencies required to perform effectively, leading to poor job performance, unemployment, or underemployment ^[3, 18].

For institutions, examination malpractice erodes public trust and damages institutional reputation. When qualifications are perceived as unreliable, employers and the public lose confidence in graduates from affected institutions. This can reduce the value of degrees and diplomas, making it harder for legitimate graduates to secure employment. Institutions with high rates of malpractice may also face challenges in maintaining accreditation and attracting students and funding. The reputation damage can be long-lasting and difficult to repair ^[4, 10].

For society, examination malpractice has serious consequences for human capital development and national progress. When graduates lack the knowledge and skills they should have acquired, the quality of the workforce is compromised. This can reduce productivity, innovation, and service delivery across all sectors of the economy. Ultimately, national development efforts suffer when educational systems fail to produce competent human resources ^[11]. The normalization of malpractice also contributes to a culture of dishonesty and corruption, undermining the rule of law and good governance.

2.7 Implications for quality assurance

Quality assurance is a central concern in higher education globally. Quality assurance mechanisms seek to ensure that institutions maintain acceptable standards in teaching, learning, assessment, and administration. Examination integrity is a critical component of this process, because assessment outcomes serve as evidence of learning achievements and institutional effectiveness ^[12]. Where examination malpractice is prevalent, quality assurance systems become ineffective, as assessment results no longer reflect students' actual abilities.

Quality assurance frameworks typically include policies and procedures for assessment management, monitoring, and evaluation. These may include regulations on examination conduct, invigilation standards, penalties for malpractice, and mechanisms for reporting and investigating incidents. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks depends on consistent implementation and enforcement ^[24]. Where enforcement is weak or inconsistent, students may believe they can cheat with impunity, and the prevalence of malpractice may increase.

The implications of examination malpractice for quality assurance are particularly significant in developing countries, where higher education systems may face resource constraints, limited institutional capacity, and competing priorities. In Sierra Leone, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) is responsible for quality assurance in higher education, including setting standards for assessment and academic integrity. However, the TEC faces challenges in monitoring and enforcing standards across a growing number of institutions, many of which have limited resources and capacity ^[7].

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research design

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. As noted by Creswell and Creswell ^[25], a research design serves as the overall strategy that integrates different components of the study in a logical and coherent way. The descriptive design is

particularly suited for studies that aim to portray the current state of affairs, capturing existing conditions, practices, or beliefs without manipulating variables ^[26].

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The quantitative component allowed for the measurement of the prevalence and perceived causes of examination malpractice, while the qualitative component provided deeper explanations of participants' experiences and perspectives.

3.2 Study area

The study was conducted in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, located in the Western Area. Freetown was selected because it is the location of the largest concentration of higher education institutions in the country, including both public and private universities, colleges, and technical institutions. This concentration provided access to a diverse range of participants and institutions, allowing for a comprehensive examination of examination malpractice across different types of higher education institutions.

3.3 Population and sample

Study population: The target population for this study comprised all students, lecturers, examination officers, academic administrators, and quality assurance officers from six selected higher education institutions in Freetown: Njala University (NU), Fourah Bay College (FBC), Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM), Milton Margai Technical University (MMTU), University of Management and Technology (UNIMTECH), and Freetown Polytechnic (FP). The total target population was 65,966 individuals.

Sample size: Given the relatively modest and manageable size of the target population (N=65,966), a census approach was adopted, meaning all 65,966 individuals were invited to participate. However, to verify statistical adequacy, the Yamane formula (1967, as cited in Adam, 2020) was applied as a precaution. The formula returned a minimum required sample of 398. To enhance precision and account for potential non-response or incomplete submissions, the decision was made to target the entire population of respondents ^[27]. A stratified purposive sampling technique was employed. First, the population was divided into five natural strata: students, lecturers, examination officers, academic administrators, and quality assurance staff. Then, purposive sampling was applied within each stratum to select participants based on their direct knowledge of and experience with examination practices and malpractice.

3.4 Instrumentation and data collection

The primary instrument was a structured, self-administered questionnaire titled the Examination Malpractice Survey Questionnaire (EMSQ), delivered digitally via Kobo Toolbox for secured and streamlined data collection. The questionnaire was designed to collect information on participants' demographic characteristics, their perceptions of the causes of examination malpractice, their experiences with malpractice, and their views on its consequences and implications for quality assurance.

The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions – using Likert scales, multiple-choice, and yes/no questions – and open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide more detailed responses. The closed-ended questions facilitated quantitative analysis, while the open-ended questions provided qualitative data for thematic analysis.

Validity and reliability: To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts in educational research, assessment, and quality assurance. Based on their feedback, ambiguous items were revised,

and redundant items were removed. A pilot study was conducted with a small group of participants (n=30) from institutions not included in the main study. Responses from the pilot study were analyzed to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was found to be 0.87, indicating good reliability.

Data collection procedures: Data were collected over a period of four weeks. The questionnaire was distributed electronically through the Kobo Collect app to all participants who had access to smartphones or computers. For participants without digital access, paper copies of the questionnaire were distributed and collected by research assistants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 30 participants (5 from each institution) to gather in-depth qualitative data. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

3.5 Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis: Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarize demographic data and responses. The data were organized in table form to facilitate presentation and interpretation. Cross-tabulations were used to examine relationships between variables, such as the relationship between students' year of study and their perceptions of the causes of malpractice.

Qualitative data analysis: Qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's [28] updated six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The six phases are: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This systematic approach ensured that the qualitative findings were rigorously derived from the data and provided meaningful insights to complement the quantitative findings.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study to protect participants' rights, welfare, and privacy. The study received ethical approval from the research ethics committees of the participating institutions. All participants received clear information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing personal identifiers from all data and securely storing completed questionnaires and interview recordings. Participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes and that individual responses would not be identifiable in any reports or publications. The information collected was used solely for academic purposes, and the findings were reported honestly, objectively, and in accordance with accepted research ethics.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Response rate

The study achieved a response rate of 380 respondents (95.5%) comprising 290 students (76.3%), 60 lecturers (15.8%), 12 examination officers (3.2%), 12 academic administrators (3.2%), and 6 quality assurance staff (1.6%). This high response rate strengthens the validity and reliability of the findings and provides a solid foundation for drawing conclusions.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of student respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	151	52.0
	Female	139	48.0
Age Group	Under 19 years	85	29.3
	19 years and above	205	70.7
Year of Study	Year 1	72	24.8
	Year 2	68	23.4
	Year 3	75	25.9
	Year 4+	75	25.9

Source: Field survey, 2025

The student sample was gender-balanced (52% male, 48% female), with the majority (70.7%) aged 19 years or above. This age distribution is typical of higher education settings in Sierra Leone, where many students enter university at 18 or older and may remain in the system for four or more years.

TABLE 2: Demographic characteristics of staff respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Staff Category	Lecturers	60	66.7
	Examination Officers	12	13.3
	Academic Administrators	12	13.3
	Quality Assurance Staff	6	6.7
Experience (Lecturers)	Under 5 years	18	30.0
	5-10 years	25	41.7

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Over 10 years	17	28.3

Source: *Field survey, 2025*

The staff sample included a diverse range of professionals with direct involvement in examination administration and quality assurance, ensuring a comprehensive perspective on the issue.

4.3 Extent to Which the FQSE Programme Has Improved Access to Education

The study examined the relationship between the FQSE Programme and examination malpractice. While the FQSE Programme has been successful in expanding access to education, it has also created challenges for quality assurance. The programme has enabled many students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education, including those who may not have been adequately prepared for university-level study. This has placed additional pressure on institutions to support students' academic success and may have contributed to increased demands on examination administration.

Interview data from academic administrators revealed that while the FQSE Programme has improved access, it has also created pressures on the system. One administrator stated: *"We have many more students now. This means more examinations to manage, more invigilators needed, and more opportunities for malpractice. We are doing our best, but resources are limited."*

Another administrator noted: *"The FQSE Programme is good for the country, but it has brought challenges. We have students who come from very poor backgrounds. They are under pressure to pass because their families have sacrificed so much for them. This pressure sometimes leads to desperation and cheating."*

4.4 Effectiveness of the FQSE programme in enhancing enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion

While the FQSE Programme has contributed to increased access to higher education, the quality of that education – including the integrity of examination systems – remains a concern. The findings of this study suggest that examination malpractice has implications for the programme's overall effectiveness in producing competent graduates.

Enrolment: The expansion of higher education institutions and the introduction of financial support mechanisms, including the FQSE Programme, have contributed to increased enrolment in higher education. However, as enrolment has increased, institutions have faced challenges in maintaining quality assurance standards, including examination integrity.

Retention: While retention rates have improved at the basic education level, higher education retention remains a concern. Examination malpractice may contribute to retention problems by allowing students to progress through courses without acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills. These students may later struggle with advanced coursework or fail to complete their programmes.

Attendance: Regular attendance is important for learning and academic success. Students who do not attend classes regularly may lack the knowledge required to pass examinations honestly, making them more likely to cheat. Examination malpractice may therefore be a symptom of broader attendance and engagement issues.

Completion: Higher education completion rates have improved modestly in recent years, but concerns remain about the quality of learning and the integrity of assessment processes. The findings of this study suggest that examination malpractice may contribute to the phenomenon of graduates who hold certificates but lack the competencies required for employment.

4.5 Student perceptions of causal factors

TABLE 3: Student perceptions of causal factors

Statement	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Total Agreement (%)
Lack of sufficient examination preparation time causes malpractice	44.3	39.3	83.6
Failure to complete curriculum content triggers malpractice	38.3	41.7	80.0
Insufficient time to complete course leads to malpractice	46.7	36.3	83.0
Curriculum content is wider than available preparation time	44.0	33.3	77.3

Source: Field survey, 2025

Over 80% of students agreed that time constraints and incomplete syllabus coverage are significant causes of malpractice. This finding suggests that students feel pressured by the demands of their programmes and may resort to cheating when they believe they cannot cover all the required material through legitimate study. This aligns with Strain Theory, which posits that students may engage in deviant behaviour when they experience strain resulting from the gap between academic expectations and their ability to meet those expectations through legitimate means ^[13].

The finding also has implications for quality assurance. If students perceive that they are not given sufficient time to prepare for examinations or that the curriculum is too broad to be covered adequately, they may view malpractice as a rational response to an unfair situation. Addressing these perceptions may require changes in curriculum design, teaching methods, and examination scheduling.

4.6 Lecturer perceptions of causal factors

Lecturers also endorsed time-related factors as significant causes of malpractice, though at slightly lower percentages than students (78.4% on preparation time vs. 83.6% for students), possibly reflecting differing perspectives on responsibility. Lecturers were more likely to emphasize individual student factors, such as poor study habits and inadequate preparation, as primary causes of malpractice.

One lecturer explained: *"Some students simply do not study. They come to class irregularly, they do not do the reading, and then they expect to pass. When they cannot, they cheat. The curriculum is not the problem. The problem is that students are not taking their studies seriously."*

Another lecturer added: *"I understand that some students face challenges – financial problems, health issues, family responsibilities. But many students who cheat are just lazy. They want the certificate without doing the work."*

4.7 Examination officers ranking of causes

Examination officers identified peer pressure and group cheating norms (19.35%) as the primary cause, followed by fear of failure/academic dismissal (12.90%), parental/societal pressure (12.90%), and large class sizes (12.90%). This ranking reflects the perspectives of examination officers who are directly involved in monitoring examination conduct.

One examination officer explained: *"Cheating often happens in groups. Students sit together, they share answers, and they encourage each other. It becomes normal to cheat. When one student sees another cheating, they feel they have to cheat too, or they will be at a disadvantage."*

Another examination officer noted: *"Fear is a big factor. Students are afraid to fail because they know their parents will be disappointed, or they are afraid to be dismissed. That fear makes them take risks they would not normally take."*

4.8 Institutional factors as causes of malpractice

TABLE 4: Institutional factors contributing to examination malpractice

Factor	Percentage Identifying as Cause
Overcrowded examination halls	83.3
Weak invigilation	100.0
Incomplete syllabus coverage	80.0
Weak enforcement of rules	75.0
Corruption among staff	83.3

Source: Field survey, 2025

The finding that 100% of quality assurance staff identified weak invigilation as a primary cause of malpractice is particularly significant. This near-universal recognition suggests that current invigilation practices are inadequate and that improving them should be a priority for institutional and policy action. The finding that overcrowded examination halls (83.3%) and corruption among staff (83.3%) were also widely identified as causes suggests that examination malpractice is not solely a student problem but is embedded in institutional practices and cultures.

One quality assurance officer stated: *"We have 300 students in a hall that should hold 100. There are only three invigilators. Students know that they can cheat. The risk of being caught is very low. If we want to reduce cheating, we must address these practical problems."*

Another staff member added: *"Some staff members collude with students. They leak questions, they accept bribes, they look the other way. Until this is addressed, we will not make progress in reducing malpractice."*

4.9 Consequences of Examination Malpractice

TABLE 5: Perceived consequences of examination malpractice

Consequence	Percentage Agreeing
Grade inflation	85.0
Weakened student work ethic	80.0
Production of incompetent graduates	82.5
Damage to institutional reputation	87.5
Erosion of public trust in qualifications	85.0

Source: *Field survey, 2025*

The consequences were widely recognized across all respondent categories. The finding that 87.5% of respondents agreed that examination malpractice damages institutional reputation suggests that the issue is of significant concern to higher education stakeholders. The finding that 85% agreed that malpractice erodes public trust in qualifications is particularly concerning, as it suggests that the credibility of Sierra Leone's higher education system may be at risk.

One academic administrator explained: *"We are very concerned about the reputation of our institution. When students cheat and we cannot stop them, our degrees become worthless. Employers will not trust us. Students who worked hard will suffer because of those who did not."*

Another respondent noted: *"I have seen students graduate who cannot write a proper report. They do not have the skills they should have. This is not good for them, and it is not good for the country."*

4.10 Implications for quality assurance

The findings of this study have significant implications for quality assurance in higher education institutions in Sierra Leone. The prevalence of examination malpractice threatens the validity of assessment outcomes and undermines public confidence in qualifications. This has implications for accreditation, institutional reputation, and the overall credibility of the higher education system.

One quality assurance officer stated: *"Quality assurance means ensuring that standards are maintained. When examination malpractice is common, we cannot say that standards are being maintained. We need to do more to address this problem."*

The findings suggest that current quality assurance mechanisms may be insufficient to address the problem of examination malpractice. There is a need for stronger policies, better enforcement, and more comprehensive monitoring of examination practices. Institutions also need to address the root causes of malpractice, including inadequate student preparation, poor teaching, and institutional weaknesses.

4.11 Discussion of findings in relation to theoretical framework

Strain Theory: The findings strongly support Strain Theory ^[13]. Students who experience strain – from academic pressure, fear of failure, and the difficulty of balancing studies with other responsibilities – are more likely to engage in malpractice. The finding that over 80% of students identified inadequate preparation time as a cause of malpractice suggests that students feel the system puts them under pressure that they cannot manage through legitimate means. This is consistent with Agnew's ^[13] argument that strain arises from the gap between goals and the means to achieve them.

Rational choice theory: The findings also support Rational Choice Theory ^[14]. Students weigh the risks and benefits of cheating and are more likely to cheat when the risk of detection is low. The finding that weak invigilation was identified by all quality assurance staff as a primary cause of malpractice suggests that low detection probability encourages cheating. The finding that 83.3% of students identified overcrowded examination halls as a cause similarly suggests that when students believe they can cheat without being caught, they are more likely to do so.

Social learning theory: The findings support Social Learning Theory ^[15]. The finding that peer pressure and group cheating norms were identified as a primary cause by examination officers (19.35%) suggests that cheating is learned through observation and interaction with peers. When students observe peers cheating successfully, they may learn that cheating is acceptable and may imitate that behaviour. The normalization of cheating within student subcultures perpetuates malpractice even when students know it is wrong.

Integration of theories: The integrated theoretical framework provides a robust explanation for the findings. Students experience strain from academic pressures and limited opportunities for legitimate success. They weigh the costs and benefits of cheating and are more likely to cheat when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived risks. They learn cheating behaviours from peers and may feel pressure to conform to group norms. Addressing examination malpractice therefore requires interventions at multiple levels: reducing strain, increasing the costs of cheating, and changing the social norms that normalize it.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of findings

This study investigated examination malpractice among students in higher education institutions in Freetown, Western Area, Sierra Leone, focusing on its causes and implications for quality assurance. The findings revealed that examination malpractice is caused by a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors.

At the individual level, inadequate preparation (83.6%), fear of failure, and poor study habits are significant drivers. At the institutional level, overcrowded examination halls (83.3%), weak invigilation (100%), incomplete syllabus coverage (80.0%), staff corruption (83.3%), and inconsistent enforcement create both pressure toward

cheating and opportunities for it to occur undetected. At the socio-cultural level, intense parental and societal pressure for certificates, peer influence, and the normalization of cheating within student subcultures perpetuate malpractice despite its negative consequences.

The findings also revealed significant consequences of examination malpractice, including grade inflation (85%), weakened student work ethic (80%), production of graduates with inadequate knowledge and skills (82.5%), damage to institutional reputation (87.5%), and erosion of public trust in qualifications (85%). The study identified significant implications for quality assurance, including threats to the validity of assessment outcomes, challenges to accreditation, and reduced public confidence in the higher education system.

The integrated theoretical framework – combining Rational Choice, Strain, and Social Learning Theories – provides a robust explanation for these findings. The framework suggests that examination malpractice is most likely to occur when students experience high levels of strain, perceive that the benefits of cheating outweigh the risks, and are exposed to environments where cheating is normalized and goes unpunished.

5.2 Advantages of the study

This study offers several advantages. First, it provides empirical evidence on the causes, consequences, and implications of examination malpractice in a context where such evidence has been limited. This fills a gap in the literature and provides a foundation for evidence-based policy and practice. Second, the mixed-methods approach provides both statistical evidence and qualitative depth, offering a comprehensive understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives.

Third, the study includes multiple stakeholder perspectives – students, lecturers, examination officers, academic administrators, and quality assurance staff – providing a holistic understanding of the issue. Fourth, the theoretical framework provides a robust explanation for the findings and offers a basis for developing interventions. Fifth, the findings have practical implications for policy development, institutional practice, and quality assurance, providing actionable recommendations for addressing the problem.

5.3 Limitations of the study

The study has several limitations. First, it was conducted only in Freetown, the capital city, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions of Sierra Leone. Higher education institutions in other regions may face different challenges and may have different levels of resources and institutional capacity.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants may have underreported their own involvement in malpractice or over-reported their awareness of others' involvement. Third, the study did not include students who have been expelled for malpractice, whose perspectives could provide valuable insights into the decision-making processes of serial offenders.

Fourth, the study used a cross-sectional design, which captures data at a single point in time. This makes it difficult to establish causal relationships or to track changes over time. Fifth, the study did not examine the effectiveness of existing interventions for addressing malpractice, which would be valuable for identifying best practices.

5.4 Possible applications of the study

The findings of this study have several practical applications. First, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) can use the evidence to develop and mandate binding national standards for examination administration in all

higher education institutions. These standards should specify minimum requirements for invigilator-to-student ratios, examination hall seating arrangements, and technology deployment.

Second, the TEC can establish a confidential, centralized database to track examination malpractice cases across all higher education institutions. This database would enable identification of trends, evaluation of intervention effectiveness, and detection of organized cheating syndicates. Third, the TEC should amend accreditation requirements to include explicit demonstration of effective examination integrity systems.

Fourth, the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education can allocate dedicated funding for examination security infrastructure in public higher education institutions, prioritizing CCTV cameras, metal detectors, and biometric verification systems. Fifth, institutions can implement the recommended reforms, including improved invigilation, faster marking, independent disciplinary panels, and ethics education.

5.5 Implications for further research

This study has several implications for further research. First, there is a need for research that expands the geographical scope to include higher education institutions in other regions of Sierra Leone, such as Bo, Kenema, and Makeni. Comparative research across regions could identify region-specific factors and inform context-appropriate interventions.

Second, research is needed on the effectiveness of specific interventions for reducing examination malpractice. This could include intervention studies that evaluate the impact of new invigilation technologies, ethics education programmes, or sanctions frameworks. Such research would provide evidence for evidence-based practice.

Third, longitudinal research is needed to track changes in examination malpractice over time and to assess the impact of policy and institutional reforms. This would provide stronger evidence on causality and would enable the evaluation of interventions. Fourth, research is needed on the perspectives of employers and the public regarding the quality of graduates and the credibility of qualifications from Sierra Leonean institutions. This could inform efforts to restore public confidence in the higher education system.

Fifth, research that includes students who have been expelled for malpractice could provide valuable insights into their decision-making processes and could inform prevention strategies. Sixth, comparative research across countries in West Africa could identify common challenges and promising practices for addressing examination malpractice.

5.6 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Strengthen national standards for examination administration. The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) should develop and mandate binding national standards for examination administration in all higher education institutions. These standards should specify minimum requirements for invigilator-to-student ratios, examination hall seating arrangements, technology deployment (CCTV, metal detectors), and sanction frameworks.

2. Establish an examination integrity database. The TEC should establish a confidential, centralized database to track examination malpractice cases across all higher education institutions. This database would enable identification of trends, evaluation of intervention effectiveness, and detection of organized cheating syndicates operating across multiple institutions.

3. Amend accreditation requirements. The TEC should amend accreditation requirements to include explicit demonstration of effective examination integrity systems. Institutions seeking accreditation should be required to submit evidence of implemented technological measures, procedural reforms, sanction enforcement statistics, and academic integrity education programs.

4. Allocate funding for examination security infrastructure. The Ministry of Technical and Higher Education should allocate dedicated funding for examination security infrastructure in public higher education institutions, prioritizing CCTV cameras, metal detectors, and biometric verification systems.

5. Invest in examination security technology. Institutions should invest in CCTV cameras for all examination halls, metal detectors for screening students before entry, biometric verification systems to eliminate impersonation, and electronic jammers to block mobile phone and internet connectivity during examinations.

6. Implement procedural reforms. Institutions should implement random seating arrangements, multiple versions of examination papers, and continuous assessment to reduce the weight of final examinations and the marginal benefit of cheating.

7. Establish a transparent sanction framework. Institutions should establish a transparent and consistently enforced sanction framework, with clear consequences ranging from grade penalties to expulsion for serious offenses, and ensure that all offenders are held accountable regardless of their status.

8. Integrate academic integrity into the curriculum. Institutions should integrate academic integrity orientation into the curriculum for all incoming students, and offer ongoing ethics education and study skills workshops to address root causes of malpractice.

9. Conduct regular examination integrity audits. Quality assurance units should conduct regular audits of examination administration practices, identifying vulnerabilities and recommending corrective actions.

10. Establish formal coordination between quality assurance and academic administration. Quality assurance units should establish formal coordination with academic administration to ensure that examination integrity is embedded in institutional quality assurance frameworks.

11. Expand research geographically. Future research should expand the geographical scope to include higher education institutions in other regions of Sierra Leone (Bo, Kenema, Makeni) to enable comparative analysis and identify region-specific factors.

12. Conduct employer surveys. Future research should include surveys of employers to assess the real-world impact of hiring graduates from institutions with high rates of malpractice.

13. Conduct longitudinal studies. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to establish causal relationships between identified factors and examination malpractice, tracking changes over time and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.

14. Include expelled students in research. Future research should develop ethical and logistical strategies to include students who have been expelled for examination malpractice, as their perspectives could provide valuable insights into the decision-making processes of serial offenders.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and the authors have no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the study design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings.

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