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STRATEGIC OPTIONS TO IMPLEMENT SCHOOL EXAMINATIONS DURING COVID-19

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Key Points

- Examinations are important because they are used to select or certify students as they progress to grades 9 and 11 in lower and upper secondary schools and tertiary institutions in Papua New Guinea.
- Examinations play vital roles in terms of equity in our education system and minimises biases in the selection processes.
- Options that can be utilised to manage examinations during COVID-19 are: rescheduling examinations, suspending or cancelling examinations and using different methods or formats to deliver examinations.
- It is necessary to provide more remedial lessons to bring students up to date with the curriculum. The examinable subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science have to be given priority.

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STRATEGIC OPTIONS TO IMPLEMENT SCHOOL EXAMINATIONS DURING COVID-19

By Peter Michael Magury

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), school examinations have been part of our education system. These examinations assist teachers and examiners in assessing the performance of students each year. For many students, this usually comes towards the end of each school year where grades 8, 10 and 12 students sit for their final examinations. The outcomes from these examinations are used to select or certify students to continue to grades 9 and 11 in lower and upper secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Students who do not make it to the next level of education move into the workforce or upgrade their marks through Flexible Open & Distance Education (FODE) and then enrol in the formal education system or progress to vocational schools. The examinations taken each year play vital roles in terms of equity, minimisation of biases in the selection process, and the promotion of fairness and justice in the education system (Kombra, 2011).

The current COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an education emergency of an extraordinary scale. PNG, a country which was already facing institutional learning challenges before the pandemic is now being further affected. The pandemic has also forced schools into shift teaching to encourage social distancing as a way to minimise the spread and contracting the virus. The measures taken by the Department of Education (DoE) to encourage social distancing, shift teaching and ban students' gatherings should enable students to prepare for the examinations that will be held towards the end of the year (DoE Secretary's Instruction Circular No. 4 of 2020). While there are several ways to approach the school examinations during COVID-19, this paper presents some strategic options.

Strategic Options for Examination Management

Reschedule all Examinations

According to the Department of Education (DoE, 2020), the Grade 10 Written Expression Examination scheduled for 4 June 2020 was deferred to 18 June 2020. The DoE has not only rescheduled the examinations but also the academic calendar to recover the lost instruction hours and complete the 2020 academic year. PNG is not the only country that has postponed its school examination dates as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. There were some countries that

have suspended or postponed student examinations due to COVID-19. These countries include Hong Kong, Ireland, India, Norway, China and Colombia (Lieberman, et al., 2020). The governments of these countries are working to review the examinations schedule and adjust the academic calendar, similar to what PNG has done.

In the event of rescheduling the examinations, the government should ensure that upon returning to school, more efforts should be put to address any gaps and catch students up in line with the curriculum. DoE, development partners and parents have to support teachers to carry out students assessments in order to identify gaps in learning and to provide more remedial lessons which respond to the results of the assessment and bring students up to date with the curriculum (Global Partnership for Education, 2020). The examinable subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science have to be given priority. Teachers have to give additional support to grades 8, 10 and 12 students who will be sitting for their examinations.

Suspend or Cancel Examinations

A research conducted by Guy (2009), associated with formulating and Implementing education policy, clearly states that student attendance is compulsory in order to receive school certification in PNG. The maximum number of days for absentism is 30 days in PNG. Any students whose absentism from school exceeds 30 days will either be dismissed from school or will be ineligible to sit for their examinations (Devette-Chee, Post Courier, 2020), particularly, grades 8, 10 and 12. For other grades, they may not progress to the next education level.

However, in order for grades 8, 10 and 12 students to be eligible to sit for their examinations and for other students to progress to the next level of education, the government has to ensure that upon returning to school, more efforts should be put to address any gaps and catch students up in line with the curriculum.

The government will be unable to cancel the examinations for grades 8, 10 and 12 students in primary, lower and upper secondary schools. The consequences of the cancellation of these examinations will be too severe and have multiple effects for PNG educational sector. The Grade 8 Basic Education Examinations account for 100 percent of final grade to

enroll grade 9 students to lower secondary schools. Grade 10 Examination account for 50 percent of external marks or final grade to enroll students in grade 11 in upper secondary schools. The Grade 12 Examination account for 50 percent of external marks or final grade and is very important because they are used in college and university admissions process.

The cancellation of the examinations would mean that students will be unable to decide which courses and careers they can pursue in life. This would also mean that students will be given an estimated grade based on the assessment of their performances in class. They will be given grades they are likely to get, had the examinations gone ahead. Schools, colleges and universities will be unable to closely examine the fairness and transparency of students' grading and admission procedures. In the event that students will repeat next year, the schools will require more resources to accommodate the increase in the number of students.

The elementary prep to grade 7, grade 9 and 11 will be promoted to the next grade without taking examinations. In these grades, students can progress to the next level or grade based on their subject-work and the established assessment process, objectivity and quality control has to be built into the school assessment programs.

Use different methods to deliver examinations

In PNG, it will be practically impossible to move examinations to another mode of delivery, especially online method. If examinations are moved to an online format, it will not be fair to all students. Students in remote areas, students with disabilities and those with poor or no access to internet or computers will not be able to take the examinations. The examination security may be compromised and examinations manipulation or leakages of questions may become more common. It will be difficult for students with disadvantaged background to prepare for new delivery of examinations in an equitable and fair manner, given the disruption of classroom learning.

Appropriate methods for implementing school examinations in Papua New Guinea during COVID-19

While the long-term effects of COVID-19 is still unclear, many parents, students and teachers may be thinking about the right approach for students to sit for their final examinations towards the end of 2020. On the other hand, others may be thinking whether examinations will be taken at all during COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, it all depends on how the country controls the spread of the pandemic. The government sets the school examinations in every academic year to make decisions about

students' progress through the education system. These include the allocation of spaces, scholarships, quotas and other education opportunities.

Due to the impact of COVID-19, examinations taken at the end of 2020 has to be consistent, fair and standardised for all students throughout PNG, regardless of geographical locations of each school. These include the content and layout of the examination papers, accessibility to examination resources and materials.

The final analysis of the examination results has to be the same for all students across the country. The validity and reliability of the examination papers, equity role in fairness, absence of biases, justice and impartiality have to be maintained as important decisions are made about students' futures based on their results (Lieberman et al., 2020).

The examination results can be maintained by DoE through its Examination Committee and the National Education Board. They have to monitor the current situation and the future uncertain duration of COVID-19 and establish important decisions on how to implement the examinations. These important decisions are based on;

1. Cancellation or postponement beyond the scheduled date
2. Examination methods or approaches
3. Distance learning

DoE and its relevant committees have to ensure the decisions they make lead to the right approach for examinations for all students regardless of the location of the school.

Cancellation or postponement beyond the scheduled date

Every year, on average, there are about more than 150,000 grade 8 students, 60,000 grade 10 students and 25,000 grade 12 students sitting for their examinations (DoE, 2016).

If the grade 8, 10 and 12 examinations are cancelled or postponed beyond the scheduled date, then the Examination Committee, Education Board and DoE have to reach a decision on how to allocate limited resources, such as secondary school, college and university spaces or scholarships and the tertiary students' loan schemes. The decisions has to be based on equity role in fairness, absence of biases, justice and impartiality.

Examination methods or approaches

With the limited information computer technology infrastructure, particularly, the internet in PNG, there is a very minimal chance of delivering examinations through an online format

If examinations are moved to an online approach, it will

not be fair for all students. Students in very remote or rural areas, students with disabilities and those with poor access or no access to internet, computers or tablets will be unable to take the examinations. The examination security will not be maintained, manipulation or leakages of examination questions will take place. Students with different socioeconomic backgrounds will find it difficult to adjust to the new mode of delivery of examinations in an equitable and fair process.

Distance learning

There has to be a better decision made on the kind of teaching and learning materials to be delivered to teachers and students to ensure accurate and fair assessment and effective communication of what teachers and students know and can do. A delivery method similar to that of Flexible Open Distance Education can be applied to the delivery of teaching and learning materials but at a high cost.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an uncertain duration of disruption in our education system. Schools were suspended for some weeks followed by shift classes. Students missed a lot of days and hours of lessons. The DoE introduced certain measures for schools to make up for hours and lessons lost. Students, parents and teachers are not sure how much more impacts COVID-19 will have on 2020 grades 8, 10 and 12 examinations.

Grade 8 and 10 examinations are set to admit students to lower and upper secondary schools and grade 12 students for admission to colleges and universities. At this time of the pandemic, it is uncertain which approach of examination is correct to take. But in the coming months, the existence of the pandemic will determine different methods that are appropriate for specific examination systems. At present, the best method is rescheduling the examinations. Parents are very concerned about the future of their children. Students will also develop the fear that their examinations will be affected if this pandemic continue to spread.

But there is still a glimmer of hope that there are not many cases in most parts of PNG except in the National Capital District. Most of the cases were found in the National Capital District. However, with the establishment of new infrastructures, this means that the government will continue to slowly reopen safely and layout safe protocols in the coming months. Thus, students will go back to normal classes and continue to study and prepare for their examinations in

whichever method or approach that is appropriate for the specific examination.

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