Stakeholder Perspectives of "Miracle Examination Centres" in Nigeria

Abstract

Purpose – Schools commonly referred to as "Miracle Examination Centres (MECs)" have been identified as providing support services that are against examination guidelines, to help candidates excel. We engaged stakeholders in the education sector to assess their perspectives on this issue and to elicit possible solutions.

Design/methodology/approach – The study design was a stakeholders' approach involving 39 key actors within the examination system from northern and southern Nigeria using a combination of discourse, conversational, and thematic analysis to make meaning of the qualitative data we generated. The stakeholders comprised people from the Ministries of Education (MoE), Examination Councils (EC), school owners and teachers, security agencies and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) who were invited to interact, interrogate and debate the subject of MECs in Nigeria.

Findings: MECs may attempt to circumvent quality assurance and regulatory requirements and may find support from prominent leaders and members of the communities through a wider informal economy. Interventions against MECs might only yield incremental results and must involve various groups like CSOs, anticorruption agencies, EC, faith-based and community-based groups. These interventions will be even more effective if the MoE will strengthen its integrity and improve its monitoring and regulatory functions without political interference.

Originality/value – This paper revealed that improving examination integrity and building a solid and reliable secondary educational level in Nigeria will be achieved through the combination of horizontal and vertical approaches that involves local actors and those in authority.

Keywords: Anticorruption, examination malpractice, examination integrity, Miracle Examination Centres, Stakeholders' engagement.

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

In Nigeria, secondary education certification is arguably the most important qualification required of citizens, as it is the most widely demanded certification. Popularly referred to as 'SSCE' (which is the short form for Senior Secondary Certification Examination), the certificate obtained is a key requirement to further official life pursuits for Nigerians (Asadu and Abonyi, 2020). Possession of at least two credits in English and Mathematics and any other three subjects in the SSCE is a requirement for admission into tertiary education and employment in both public and private sectors. It is also required of any candidate aiming to contest for political offices during elections in the country. Therefore, SSCE is a critical qualification used to attest to the proficiency of the formal workforce in Nigeria (Anzene, 2014). It implies that it is expected that all ethical procedures in writing SSCE must be adhered to ensure that people will only emerge with merited grades.

For decades, there are reports of poor academic performance of Nigerian students who sat for SSCEs. West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) results for general mathematics, a core subject in SSCE, showed that less than 50 per cent of students who sat for the examination between 1991 to 2016 made credit and above (Zalmon and Wonu, 2017). Drivers of poor performance in SSCEs in Nigeria include poor remuneration of teachers, weak regulation of schools, poverty, lack of funding for the education sector, and inconsistencies in educational policies (Agwu *et al*., 2022; Onyibe *et al*., 2015; Omemu, 2015). Also, the teachers in Nigerian schools are said to lack the proper motivation to deliver high-quality teaching due to bureaucracies and political constraints (Bold *et al.*, 2017).

Thus, because of the high premium placed on the SSCE, candidates are often desperate to secure the SSCE certification with good grades on the subjects they consider important for their career progression. This desperation could lead to the deployment of devious means in securing desirable SSCE certificates (Adeniran *et al.*, 2020; Alhassan, 2017). It is important to note that Examination Malpractice (EM) is not peculiar to Nigeria but has been reported in other West African countries where WASSCEs are conducted (WAEC, 2017). However, Nigeria is peculiar because it produces the highest number of WASSCE candidates yearly and it is expected to provide leadership, having played a leading role in the establishment of WASSCE (Abubakar, 2017).

Hence, a big business has evolved around the demand for 'good' SSCE certificates. These tendencies of some Nigerians constitute rent-seeking and they are increasingly patronized (Omoniyi, 2019). There is a 'strong market demand' for good SSCE results and on the supply side, rogue individuals and businesses have emerged to meet these demands. One of the mechanisms that have evolved is the emergence of examination centres popularly referred to as "Miracle Examination Centres" (MECs) (Okoye and Onwuzuruoha, 2020), where an organized system of EM in SSCE is perpetrated.

Secondary schools in Nigeria are mainly organized around public (government) and private ownership. Based on data from the MoE in 2017, there are 9,015 and 13,423 mixed public and private schools, respectively, in Nigeria (Nigerian Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2019). Both schools also function as places where SSCEs are conducted, after being accredited and approved by examination bodies and MoE. However, private schools are said to be easily positioned as MECs because they are owned by individuals who are profit-driven (Agwu *et al*., 2022). Thus, school owners may collude with internal and external rogue actors to compromise the standards of SSCEs in such a way that their clients can make favourable, but undeserved grades. Other

rogue actors include teachers, parents, supervisors, students, tutorial centres, and some members of the Examination Councils (EC) and education authorities.

Typically, MECs promise success in SSCEs in one sitting. Parents/guardians pay more than the actual examination fees for their wards to be registered in MECs (Alhassan, 2017). During examinations, MECs owners use the extra fees to mobilize freelance teachers/'mercenaries' to provide solutions to examination questions and distribute them to the clients in a manner that obscures detection by examiners or could as well be done with the support of the examiners, after receiving an agreed sum. Invigilators/supervisors from examination bodies then collect bribes so as not to report the centres that comprise examination standards (Aworinde, 2015a). Other activities are embarked upon to ensure that desirable results are secured by clients.

Diverse measures have been applied to curtail the activities of MECs in Nigeria. The National Assembly have charged ECs and MoE to sanction defaulters of the Examination Malpractice Act and enforce a ban on schools identified as MECs (Atueyi, 2019; Odunsi, 2019). Additionally, clampdown on websites supporting improper examination activities, the use of CCTV on examination days and the distortion of mobile technologies around examination venues have been explored (Aworinde, 2015a). But due to the intricate network of actors that drive and sustain activities of MECs, solutions tend to make little progress, which implies that MECs have emerged as a perennial problem for Nigeria's educational system. As documented in Agwu *et al* (2020/2022), the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO), the foremost organisers of SSCE in Nigeria release a list of those who act contrary to examination guidelines annually. The numbers usually range from 50,000 to over 200,000, and many are connected to MECs. There are concerns that despite the release of such figures, EM in general, and MECs, in particular, have remained on the increase, and could get out of control in the future (Atueyi, 2019; Duru, 2020; Okoye and Onwuzuruoha, 2020).

There is a paucity of academic literature on the activities of MECs, as acknowledged in a recent systematic review (Agwu *et al*, 2020/2022). This is despite the abundance of academic literature on EM in Nigeria (Anzene, 2014; Omebe, 2014; Omemu, 2015; Onyibe *et al.*, 2015). However, MECs have formed an important subject for investigative journalism, and a concern for some Civil Society Organisations (Atueyi, 2019; Aworinde, 2015a; Damilola and Oladapo, 2020). For example, there is evidence that a MEC was shut down by a subnational government as a result of a widely published investigative report on the ill conduct of the school during the NECO examination. A particular CSO had to pressure the government into considering the investigative report and taking necessary action (Aworinde, 2015b).

Accountability mechanisms and anti-corruption approaches are beginning to understand and advocate the need to galvanize stakeholders, align their interests and incentivize them to act (Khan *et al.*, 2019). Stakeholders are those who see a problem as theirs and are backed by law or can cultivate the responsibility to address the problem. Gregory *et al* (2020) defined stakeholders as those affected by or capable of expressing interest in addressing a problem. With the increasing presence of MECs and the seeming loss of examination integrity in SSCEs, there have been suggestions to pull stakeholders into some tough conversations (Agwu *et al.*, 2020/2022; Nnam and Otu, 2015; Odidi, 2014).

Anti-corruption research into activities of MECs in Nigeria from a stakeholders' engagement perspective is lacking. But there are literatures on stakeholders' roles in curbing EM. Stakeholders like school administrators, teachers, CSOs, Community leaders and MoE are

identified as having key roles to play (Adeniran *et al*., 2020; Onuka and Durowoju, 2013). A major part of that role is to contribute their experience and perspectives to the issue. When stakeholders are properly engaged, cases of EM could reduce drastically. Stakeholders' engagement could promote examination ethics before, during and after any examination through public sensitization (Alhassan and Anya, 2017). In some instances, they promote stiffer penalties like cancellation of examination results and expulsion of candidates involved, including blacklisting of schools and agents complicit in EM (WAEC, 2017; Atueyi, 2019; Akintunde and Selzing-Musa, 2016). Whether on EM in particular or the existence of MECs and their activities, stakeholders' engagement presents opportunities to interrogate shortcomings of existing policies, sanctions as well as loopholes. This was showcased in one stakeholders' meeting on MECs organised in Enugu, Nigeria (News Agency of Nigeria, 2021).

In corruption contexts, stakeholders do not only aim at holding government or authorities accountable, but coalesce to discuss the issue, make examinations and assessments, point to what root problems are, provide options for solutions, and could sometimes take actions. These actions have been reported in a study of the health sector in Nigeria (Onwujekwe *et al.*, 2020). The fact that MoE and ECs have resolved not to condone EM presents an opportunity to develop an anti-corruption strategy with them as likely boundary partners. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask what stakeholders in education think about the problem of MECs and what their views are regarding how to tackle it? It is in line with these questions that we invited stakeholders within the secondary school examination sub-system to discuss the nature of the problem of MECs, the reasons for their survival and thriving for many years and solutions to the menace of MECs. In this study, stakeholders identified are relevant officials from the MoE, examination bodies, government parastatals that work within education, teachers, school owners, anti-corruption agencies, and CSOs.

Methodology

Study area

Three states (Anambra, Edo, and Kogi) and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), Nigeria were the study areas for the study. Kogi and Abuja are in northern Nigeria, whilst Anambra and Edo are in southern Nigeria. Across these four locations, there are about 2207 secondary schools that are approved by the government and qualified to be recognized as SSCE centres by the examination bodies (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Stakeholders were sourced from these locations for critical engagement and diagnostics of the problem of MECs.

Participants' recruitment

Key stakeholders were identified in this study using an adaptation of the methodology of stakeholders' analysis (Burton, 1999). Stakeholders' engagement helped to obtain a nuanced understanding of stakeholders' views on MECs. Respondents came from different backgrounds that include academia, civil society, security and law enforcement, relevant ministries/agencies (education and national orientation), EC, and public/private school owners. The stakeholder approach defines aspects of a social and natural phenomenon affected by a decision or action and identifies individuals, groups and organisations who are affected by or can affect those parts of the phenomenon. Such individuals and groups are prioritized in the decision-making process.

We adopted a system of strategically selecting stakeholders from representative groups in the Nigerian education and secondary school examination sectors. Participants were 39 individuals

from diverse groups operating within the Nigerian education sector. A full description of the participants is presented in Table 1 below. These groups include the EC (NECO and WAEC), the MoE, school owners and teachers, civil society organizations (CSOs), value orientation agencies, and anticorruption and security institutions. These groups were identified in EM literature in Nigeria (Gbagolo, 2011; Jokthan, 2013; Kawugana and Woyopwa, 2017; Agwu *et al*., 2022). Students were not included as part of the stakeholders because of the potential inequity in power relations and differences between them and other stakeholders.

We organised a two-day stakeholders' engagement forum in each of the regions within September and November 2020. Stakeholders from Kogi state and Abuja were invited to Abuja. After 3 weeks, stakeholders from Anambra state and Edo state were invited to Benin-City, the capital of Edo state. The discussion formats were uniform across the locations. In Abuja, of 25 invited stakeholders, 17 were present. While in Edo, of the same 25 invited stakeholders, 22 were present. Thus, in total, 39 stakeholders participated in the meetings. Identified stakeholders were formally invited using letters sent to all the heads of agencies sampled, informing them of the study and the workshops. Agencies who showed a willingness to participate were further communicated with the workshop venue and date. The invite was directly sent to heads of agencies but when it appeared that some of them may not be available, we requested them to send a staff of their agency with vast knowledge of the subject to stand as representatives.

Data collection

Participants were seated in an open hall in a round-table design. As the event was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, health protocols recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) were adopted. We first presented highlights from findings from a literature review on EM in MECs as well as how EM undermines different sectors (see Agwu *et al*., 2020/2022). This served as an icebreaker to let them into the conversation, and to align with full disclosure in research ethics. This also motivated the participants to give their feedback hoping to improve the education sector. A list of discussion points was developed to guide conversations, and at some point, participants were allowed into breakout sessions to brainstorm over the nature, scale, and potential solutions to MECs.

From the literature review, we developed a list of questions that bordered on the reasons why MECs emerge and endure despite measures taken against them. In Abuja, we organized the participants into four groups while in Benin, we organized them into five groups. We made efforts to ensure that the groups were mixed with participants from different agencies. Facilitators kept the discussion by enhancing rapport and keeping questions open-ended. Each session was audio-recorded, and members of the research team served as facilitators and notetakers. Participants were urged to give more clarification when they used terms, slang or gestures that were unclear. Group representatives were selected within each participating group to present a summary of each group's discussion.

After the breakout session, the groups converged again to harmonize issues and think about possible solutions to the problem of MECs. Members of the research team extensively took notes and saved them in a central SharePoint. The team lead was responsible for harmonizing all notes, and salient quotes were indicated. The breakout sessions helped participants to achieve ownership of the issue, which is key in the engagement of stakeholders (Gregory *et al.*, 2020).

Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and were required to give consent to participate in the meeting as well as have the discussions audio-recorded. Consent was either oral or written, as a form of reply to the letter of invitation which spelt out the objective of the stakeholders' meeting.

Data analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by some experienced members of the team. The notes were harmonized to compose a single and detailed narrative of the discussions in the workshop. Thematic analysis, guided by the 6-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), was used: 1), the texts were read multiple times to attain immersion in the data, 2) the data were organized systematically and initial codes were generated based on the objectives of the research, 3) we examined the codes and fitted them into themes – the following codes informed the themes: (a) Prevalence of the problem of MECs (b) Nature and operations of MECs (c) Survival of MECs and (d) Solutions to MECs, 4) we went further to explore theme properties by looking out for ideas and issues that give further credence to the themes, 5) we then refined the themes and examined whether the issues under them fit appropriately 6) during the write-up, verbatim quotes were used as illustrative of stakeholders' views on relevant issues under each theme. After the completion of the analysis, we took turns going over the analysis spreadsheet to ensure that excerpts from notes and relevant quotes were appropriately placed.

Results

Sociodemographic features of participants

There were more stakeholders in the south (Edo) than in the north (Abuja). There is no explanation for this difference because we ensured that the invitation letter got to all. The number of males exceeded those of females (see table 1). The number of stakeholders from the anticorruption and security agencies was more than the number for each of the other groups. It is important to state that the number of respondents in each of the groups neither implies the quality of information nor interest in the subject of MECs. They only reflect the number of agencies invited within a particular representative group.

Insert Table 1

Prevalence of MECs

First, we sought to know how prevalent or commonplace MECs are. Participants shared their experiences at plenary and in smaller groups. They had experienced MECs and expressed a common opinion that MECs are spreading widely and portraying the educational system in Nigeria in a bad light. The narration below reveals further:

> *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. Somehow, we got the information about those that went with them to that interior place, and they all passed. My daughter felt bad that she did not go with them because they had better results than her* ***[Participant, Abuja]***.

Although public and private schools can arrange to operate as MECs, participants agree that it is more prevalent in private schools because the owners are mostly accountable to themselves and

the parents whose children are enrolled in their schools. This explains the reported trend of public-school students migrating to private schools whenever the registration for SSCE begins.

> *Decisions in government schools would follow due procedures. Unlike in a private school that is owned by an individual. He makes the policies and decides what to do and what not to do. He can decide that his school should be a miracle examination centre. Such a decision cannot be taken in a public school, except if few persons will capture the examination conducts, and they will have to operate like the private schools or partner with them* ***[Participant, Edo]***.

Nature and operations of MECs

Participants elaborately discussed the features and operations of MECs. They talked about the poor infrastructures, skewed student population, their location in remote and difficult-to-access places, and how they beat regulations that target quality assurance. On infrastructure, they mentioned that MECs are often noticed to be in inadequate or shanty building structures. To illustrate:

> *I went for supervision at a school. It was so shanty that I began to wonder how they got approval. They only had a hall that was looking bad, and few classrooms. I could not tell if teaching and learning were happening in that school* ***[Participant, Edo]***

Further, most MECs had a skewed population of students. MECs had fewer students in the non-SSCE classes, yet many students are presented to sit SSCE. A teacher explained:

> *We need to question the fact that in these schools, you see 10 or 20 in other classes, and when it is time to write SSCE, the same school will present about 200 candidates or more. This is an obvious concern that has been on for years* ***[Participant, Abuja].***

The explanations for the skewed population of students in MECs are (a) some students in rule-following schools tend to migrate to MECs because they are not confident that they can be successful if they take the examinations under the proper/standard examination conditions, (b) tutorial centres (also known as a lecture or remedial centres) supply candidates that enrol with them for extra lessons to MECs for kickbacks, (c) persons without affiliation to any school (e.g., employees who are required to get certificates to be promoted) enrol with MECs because they are seeking good grades without having to pass through any form of academic stress.

> *A friend told me that he needs a WAEC result and he travelled to a location in a rural area to get it. He narrated further that at the centre, he negotiated to pay and not attend the exam. After the exam concluded and the result was published, he asked me to help him pick it up at the car park. Apparently, it was way billed to him by the school* ***[Participant, Edo]***.

During exams, upon receipt of the questions, MECs use their teachers and employed 'mercenaries' to solve examination questions and distribute the answers to their clients either by making many copies of the answers or by writing on boards for clients to copy. Thus, MECs need huge amounts of money to be able to drive irregularities and secure rents. Hence MECs generate money by charging higher-than-usual fees for clients who register with them. Registering with MECs could be as high as four times or more the official registration fees as stipulated on the websites of the EC. They equally go-ahead to take money from the candidates daily. A teacher said:

> *WAEC and NECO put together should not be above N26,500 [$53]. If you go to any MEC to register, you pay as high as N60,000 – N70,000 [$120 - $140] just for one of the exams. They add all manner of fees to the registration, including the one they call sorting or administrative fee. You still have to sew or purchase a uniform to look like their students, and you still need to come with some N1000 to N3000 daily for paying bribes per subject* ***[Participant, Abuja]***

It was explained that SSCE (WAEC and NECO) do not use just the performance during the examinations to judge the candidates. The candidates are expected to submit scores of their students in SS 1 and SS 2 before SS 3, which is the examination class. These scores are referred to as the Continuous Assessment Scores Capturing System (CASS). The motive of this policy was to discourage students from moving to different schools during SSCEs. Participants, however, observed that MECs continue to take most students in SS 3, which suggests that they may have forged the CASS for SS 1 and SS 2 of their candidates, and they do so by conniving with the MoE that should detect such irregularity before clearing the candidates.

Examination councils have been using different strategies to curb the activities of MECs but MECs have equally deployed numerous strategies to avoid detection, ensure 'success' and ultimately sustain their activities. They deploy their facility staff to detect and delay supervisors from examination bodies from effectively carrying out unannounced visits to examination centres. Most often, they use gate personnel to do this. This delay allows for signals to get to the writing venues, allowing cheaters to prepare and avoid sanctions for the supervisor. At other times, MECs resort to hostilities and violence when supervisors from examination bodies refuse to be compromised. For instance:

> *You will notice that strongly religious people avoid supervision. My colleague has stopped supervising. She said that since she cannot compromise and will not want to die so that she can be alive for her children, it is better she quits. And you know that there is no insurance package for the supervisors* ***[Participant, Abuja].***

It is important to note that not everyone who registered for the SSCE in a MEC intends to cheat during the examination. Some registered without understanding the nitty-gritty of the success brandished by these MECs. When they discover that their activities are against the prescribed guidelines for conducting examinations, they may dissociate themselves from them. However, MECs were reported to punish their candidates that are unwilling to pay to cheat. The essence of such punishment is usually to force them into accepting to join the trend.

> *I registered my cousin in a MEC, which I did unknowingly. She told me that each subject has a price and since we didn't pay, they punished her and those who didn't. They delay them from getting the papers at the right time and kept them under the sun* ***[Participant, Edo].***

Survival of MECs

Despite the law prohibiting the activities of MECs, measures by ECs and MoE, MECs appear to have survived for too long. We tried to find out how they have managed to survive and stay afloat. The stakeholders noted that the process for registering schools is defective because MECs could emerge after fulfilling the needed regulatory requirements. Most of the blame was apportioned to the MoE which is the first body responsible for evaluating schools to determine if they are fit for learning and conducting external examinations. The MoE engages in physical

assessment of schools to ensure that they meet the desired standard. It is consequent on successful approval by the government that the school can further apply to be recognized by the EC as one of its centres. An official from the MoE described how MECs outmanoeuvre the regulatory process:

> *When a school applies to be approved, we go to inspect the school. We have discovered that most of them present borrowed items, and even borrow teachers just to secure approval. It is worst that they could even borrow buildings. When they get the approval, they return to status zero. They even do it to the WAEC and NECO officials that visit them before they are recognized as centres. That is why you could see some of these shanty structures as examination venues* ***[Participant, Abuja]***.

Besides the MoE approving schools, they also clear candidates for the examination. Candidates cleared by the Ministries are those that are presented to the examination bodies. It was in the course of this conversation that representatives from the examination bodies mentioned that the MoE should explain how schools with an average of 20 students in classes below SS3, will then register over 200 students to sit for SSCE and questions are not asked. A teacher added that the Ministries make money in the process of clearing the students. So, the more students presented for examination clearance, the more income they make.

> *When the list of students that will sit for SSCE is taken to the Ministries of Education for clearance, they will begin to count the money for the clearance per head that is presented. That is why no one will ask you about the history of the students you are registering* ***[Participant, Abuja]***.

MECs operate as an organized system that works to benefit multiple actors involved in it. The actors include students, parents, school owners, examiners, invigilators, and corrupt officials in EC and MoE. They all stand to benefit either directly or indirectly through the activities of MECs. But those who refuse to collude with them could be swayed with financial reward or through threats, intimation and force.

> *As a supervisor, the principal who was also the proprietor knelt and told me to name my price and that this is her business. She said that if I am strict that the students would suffer. The same thing happened in NECO; I then refused to take up another Supervisor job* ***[Participant, Edo].***

> *One time, they locked up one of the supervisors and threatened to beat him up because he refused to allow the school to engage in malpractice* ***[Participant, Edo].***

The security agencies are supposed to be amongst the actors cracking down on MECs, but some of their personnel collude with MECs to frustrate the efforts of the agencies. We had a narration of deliberate omission of MECs from locations where security agents are to be posted, and owners of MECs seeking the transfer of strict security agents away from their centres. We got some kind of explanation that female officers were the lenient ones, as against the males. Some security personnel explained:

> *[…] They intentionally gave us places that are clean as red flags, and the actual red flags as clean. I noticed that each time we supervised the supposedly red-flagged schools, we found that nothing bad is happening there. I decided on my own to disobey that order and visited supposedly clean schools. When we got to one, the gateman*

> *refused to open the gate and we learnt of the high level of malpractice ongoing in the school. Later, we were queried by the office that we visited where we were not supposed to* ***[Participant, Edo].***

Solutions to MECs

Although the endemic nature and pervasiveness of MECs make the problem seems intractable, participating stakeholders expressed optimism that a mix of grassroots (horizontal) and institutional (vertical) mechanisms could help to drive positive change. For horizontal, they suggested the involvement of CSOs, faith-based organisations, the media and setting anti-corruption clubs in schools. Some quotes are below:

> *We should take this message against miracle centres to our churches, mosques, schools, radio and TV stations, and town-union gatherings. We need to let people aware of the dangers of what we are fast normalizing* ***[Participant, Edo].***

On the vertical (top-down) side, stakeholders identified the need for the MoE to improve their efforts in monitoring and regulating schools, as well as providing credible supervisors with proven track records of integrity. The findings indicate that even if EC set up robust policies to curb MECs, without the collaboration of the MoE, the policies might not achieve their objectives.

> *The truth is, the Ministries of Education hold so much of the power. We only conduct examinations and we are limited in making rules. We cannot always be in rivalry with the Ministries. They should improve on their quality assurance mechanisms* ***[Participant, Edo]***

It was said that the EC and MoE should agree on a uniform curriculum, as sometimes the questions the students see could be way above their capacities. Additionally, security agencies were recommended to be well involved, and payments for teachers and supervisors should improve. Lastly, the stakeholders wished for insurance packages for those who supervise the examinations, while incentives should be made available to those that report MECs.

> *It will be great if supervisors are insured because of the risks, they get involved with these MECs. That is why they also need security at such red flag centres. Also, pay teachers and these supervisors well enough, so they will stop justifying the taking of bribes as a way to augment their meagre incomes* ***[Participant, Edo]****.*

Discussion

The findings communicate the high prevalent nature of MECs which contributes to the loss of trust and confidence in Nigeria's educational system, with ripple effects on the competence of the country's workforce, and in the valuation of its educational certificates in other parts of the world. This study corroborates the negative effect of MECs on Nigeria's educational system (Adeyemi, 2011; Animasahun and Ogunniran, 2014) and suggests ways to reduce it. Not only does MEC affect effective learning outcomes, but it also produces citizens who cannot compete on the global scene and cannot solve developmental challenges. Industries and corporate organisations also suffer when they employ people whose academic performance does not match their quality (Kawugana, and Woyopwa, (2017). Miracle Examination Centres also

hinder the possibility of meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on quality secondary education.

The study found that MECs perpetuate their existence and evade detection by bribing authorities (invigilators and supervisors from the MoE as well as some elements in EC) to turn a blind eye, which is similar to the findings of Anzene (2014), who showed that officials can be bribed to provide examination questions and permit unrestricted access to sensitive examination materials to MECs. This is suggestive of faulty processes in the recruitment of invigilators and supervisors, who are not subjected to any form of integrity test or strict processes to elicit accountability. It also raises the question of quality pay of these persons, as too often there are complaints of poor pay to supervisors, officials of the education ministries, and staff of the EC.

Miracle Examination Centres may use threats, intimidation and physical assaults to coerce supervisors who refuse to yield to their practices. Dike (2017) corroborates this by revealing that uncooperative officials are given sedatives in their refreshments to enable them to sleep throughout the examination period. Amidst these ill occurrences, there is hardly coordinated on-the-spot security of supervisors as well as insurance packages to compensate them for any form of hurt incurred throughout the examination process. Thus, it is understandable why supervisors could most often permit EM to thrive, and why those with a high sense of integrity refuse to participate in supervision. To them, it is better to shun the entire process or stay aloof, than get hurt trying to change the system.

Private schools were shown to be more inclined to operate as MECs. Other authors have also resonated with this finding (Agwu *et al.*, 2020/2022; Anzene, 2014; Aworinde, 2015a). Unilateral decision-making in private schools makes it an easy and seamless breeder for MEC. This is in contrast to public schools where multiple actors are involved in making decisions. Considering the results, even if there is the existence of MECs in public schools, such settings are run and managed by private individuals who have captured the examination system of such schools. That private schools were singled out raises questions on how they are regulated by educational authorities and further suggests the presence of corruption and collusion between private school owners and education authorities like the MoE at the Federal and State levels.

The findings suggest that many private schools are much concerned about the proceeds from the rents in running MECs. And so, quality teaching, learning, and infrastructural development may mean less to them. If rules are followed, the absence of these three components in education should deprive any school of registration, let alone sitting external examinations like WAEC and NECO. Yet the reverse appears the case. However, schools with the components of good infrastructure and quality teaching and learning might also be implicated as MECs, even though stakeholders feel such could be rare. This is why stakeholders from the EC are vocal about the need to improve the regulatory role of the MoE. It is evident that if inspections are done properly by the MoE and disapproval is issued to substandard schools, the EC will have no business to consider such schools in the first place.

Schools operating as MECs may employ diverse mechanisms to achieve their objectives. They may offer their clients the choice of being present or writing in proxy, in which case, the school hires a ‘mercenary’ to sit on behalf of the candidates. Candidates who register in MECs most times pay inflated fees and get assistance such as being allowed to cheat by having access to examination aids that are not officially allowed. They may also get answers to exam questions from teachers and hired ‘mercenaries’, who may even write the exams in a candidate’s stead. Through this practice, they go against every ethics surrounding the proper conduct of

examinations and undermine the quality of SSCE certificates. The respondents also confirm that most times, MECs deliver on their promise of excellent grades. Aworinde (2015a) and Omoniyi (2019) also observed that MECs do everything necessary to deliver on their promise because success stories may attract more candidates. This is why all schools, particularly private ones, heedless of size, must be strictly monitored.

Solutions to MECs

Stakeholders suggested some horizontal (grassroots) solutions involving faith-based organisations, students, town unions and CSOs for monitoring examination conducts and providing reports to the appropriate quarters. Vertically, the need for government to step up, especially in the regulation of schools is important. The MoE must ensure that private schools meet all the required standards of operations before they are issued permission to operate. Likewise, examination bodies must ensure that schools qualified to take SSCE must possess the necessary structures before they are cleared. Furthermore, examination bodies and the MoE must work hand in hand in the effort to eradicate the activities of MECs. There appears to be very little interagency communication between these groups in the right approach to the regulation and monitoring of an examination centre.

To limit the migration of students in examination classes, participants mentioned that an uncompromised CASS system is needed. The CASS is a policy/mechanism advanced by WAEC and also adopted by NECO to combat examination irregularities associated with MECs. As recently modified, each student is registered into the database and assigned a unique identification number as soon as they enter level 1 of Senior Secondary School education (commonly called SS1). Biometric details are also taken. Each student's performance scores in the subjects of interest are uploaded online to the CASS platform until the student reaches SS 3. Since the student is already identified with a particular school where his or her CASS for SS 1 and SS 2 is domiciled, it becomes suspicious and impossible to some extent to attempt moving to a new school when it is time to sit WAEC and NECO examinations in SS 3. If circumstances mean that they must move to a new school, then they must provide their CASS details to the new school so that their performance can be tracked. Unfortunately, the study found that the CASS policy is subverted by MECs, even though the policy is yet to be strengthened as should. MECs capitalize on genuine reasons for late registration (i.e., migration of parents to another environment) to register their clients. They also create and register 'ghost students' in CASS as a way of holding slots for their clients (Agwu *et al*., 2020). It is important to monitor the computation of CASS across schools so that scores are not arbitrarily inflated or forged. This could be by requesting the scripts of candidates before they get to SS 3 or delegating officials of proven integrity to move around schools and cross-examine submissions of scores.

Limitations and future scope of research

The major limitation of the study is the absence of the voices of students and parents who are key stakeholders in education. They have the power to influence the activities of MECs. We hope that future studies will consider them.

Conclusion

Stakeholder engagement is critical to policy formulation. Stakeholders contribute to the overall development of Nigeria, particularly in holding governments accountable. There is, therefore, a need for concerted efforts by stakeholders in education to mitigate the activities of MECs who

have been shown to undervalue and undermine the quality of education in Nigeria. The findings of this study are useful in countries like Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and The Gambia, where similar examinations are conducted.

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Table 1: Sociodemographic features of participants

Category	Frequency (n = 39)	Percentage
Location		
Abuja	17	43.6
Edo	22	56.4
Total	**39**	**100**
Gender		
Male	22	56.4
Female	17	43.6
Total	**39**	**100**
Representative groups		
Ministries of Education	4	10.3
Teachers and school owners	7	18
Values orientation agencies	6	15.4
Anticorruption and Security agencies	10	25.6
Examination councils	3	7.6
CSOs	9	23.1
Total	**39**	**100**
Age		
> 35	4	10.3
< 35	35	89.7
Total	**39**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork (2020)