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On the Role of Scorers in Curbing Examination Malpractices

Netra Prasad Sharma^{1*} and Kamal Kumar Poudel¹

¹Department of English Education, Mahendra Ratna Campus, Tribhuvan University Nepal

*Corresponding email: tu.netrasharma@gmail.com

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Abstract

Examination malpractices as a phenomenon cross the boundaries set by time and geography and are often an issue in Nepal as well generating a considerable amount of discourse amongst students, teachers, parents and all the concerned. In theory, subjective testing does allow scorers the room for the play of their personal judgement. Nonetheless, a thread of argument prevails in the Nepalese academic circle, the argument attempting to curtail the judgement of scorers stating that scorers are obliged to award scores for what answer sheets contain and that they lack any right to judge whether or not the examinee performances might be the result of one or the other kind of malpractices that are also the product of the dereliction of invigilators and other test administration staff responsible for overseeing the performance of examinees. This paper follows this argument and endeavors to supply evidence for reinforcing the counter-argument that stands equally strong – the argument advocating the scorer right to judge and treat any malpractices evident in examinee performances. This right is conceived as one of the effective measures to curb examinee malpractices. For this, it supplies the justification for the exercise of scorer right, if formally and explicitly conferred on scorers, to treat the instances of examinee malpractices that are evident in the answer sheets of examinees.

Keywords: role of scorers, examination malpractice, Tribhuvan University, examinee behaviour, scoring rubrics

Context

Examination malpractices taken as a common phenomenon, not to be conceived as a natural one though, often generate a considerable amount of discourse in the Nepalese context as well. One of the issues on which such discourse takes place is the scorer right to treat the examination malpractices that are manifest in the written responses of students. Often, two lines of argument are encountered regarding this. The first argument asserts that scorers lack any right to judge whether or not the written responses of students is characterized by the malpractices of different sorts and different degrees and, therefore, they should award scores for whatever appears in the answer sheets. Advocates of this line of argument hold that the responsibility of overseeing and curbing examinee malpractices is that of invigilators and other test administration staff. The second is the counter-argument that advocates the right to treat the clear instances of malpractices. Whatever the arguments, it is generally agreed upon

that examination malpractices are to be curbed at all costs for the benefit of all including the examinees themselves.

Examination Malpractices

Examination malpractices often conceived to be “widespread” and “epidemic” in higher education (Imran & Ayobami, 2011) are also taken synonymously with cheating and academic dishonesty. Fulcher and Davidson’s (2007, p. 133) assertion that “high-stakes testing, as it has come to be known, will always be the target for attempts to cheat” emits an impression that cheating is a natural occurrence in the summative type of examinations with high stakes such as the university examinations – the phenomenon being common worldwide, the Nepalese context obviously not an exception. It is usually taken to be any individual or institutional fraudulent activities that are intended to inflate or deflate the scores of examinees (Anzene, 2014; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). “In general, cheating is described as any of a variety of unethical behaviors” (Kaufman, 2008, p. 1). The point to be noted is that examination malpractice is not related to examinees alone. Rather, it is something that might occur due to the involvement and dereliction of multiple parties, both individual and/or institutional, connected to test construction, administration and scoring.

Different factors responsible for examination malpractices have been discussed in the literature (Anzene, 2014; Felix, 2015; Odeymi, 2010; Onwuzo, 2014; Young, 2013). For instance, Felix discusses psychological factors, environmental factors, value system of the society in question, admission and employment requirements, rising cost of education, political climate, level of income, and so on.

Strategies for curbing examination malpractices have also been suggested (Anzene, 2014; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Odeyemi, 2010; Reynolds, Livingston & Willson, 2011). The strategies suggested include effective supervision and control, administration of appropriate sanctions and penalties, counseling, maintaining discipline, inculcating morality and ethics, enforcing honour codes, continuous assessment, and the like. It is important to note that examination malpractices can be curbed only through the collaborative efforts of all involved in assessment affairs, including examinees, examiners, invigilators and so forth.

Malpractice and Provisions in Tribhuvan University

Tribhuvan University (TU) examinations are no exception if considered in the light of “widespread” malpractices in higher education, in fact, all over the world. For instance, this phenomenon in Nepalese higher education, and therefore TU also, is pictured in the documented literature as well (Basnyat, 2006; Khaniya, 2013; Rijal, 2018). Basnyat (2006, p. 141), a student then, comments that “... students prepare cheats and use it [*sic*] in the examination hall ...”. In a similar vein are Khaniya’s (2013) opinions. Detailing some vignettes of examination malpractices, he also states that:

Sometimes I find myself in an awkward situation when I find my M. Ed. students’ answer sheets better than I could have possibly done. The explanation is that their answers were either directly copied from a book written by world renowned scholars in that area or memorized from the books written by famous writers. My problem is: should I award full marks to the answers or no marks or fifty percent marks? (p. 47)

In the same way, Rijal (2018) points out the different problems prevailing in test administration and scoring in TU – “mass cheating”, lack of seriousness in marking, and so forth. For instance, he states that:

In many places, the students' exam papers show that they are involved in mass cheating because in the exam papers the examiners can find every paper started with the same letter, words, and mechanics and commit the same type of mistakes throughout the package. This is either because of the colleges or schools themselves or because of the negligence of the superintendent and observers. (p. 211)

Tribhuvan University takes examination malpractices with utmost seriousness and, therefore, has formally maintained different provisions in its documents, particularly Regulations for Tribhuvan University Organization and Administration – 1994 and

Tribhuvan University Examinations Management and Operation Guidelines – 2015 (TUEMOG). The documents clearly spell out the responsibilities of different stakeholder groups involved in examination-related affairs and the sanctions that might come into effect in case the stakeholder groups fail to accomplish their responsibilities. For instance, Chapter 9 of TUEMOG provisions the sanctions, penalties and also right to appeal in case of any irregularities or malpractices. Sanctions and penalties range from just issuing a warning to the more serious ones such as dismissal from the responsibility assigned or expulsion of examinees up to four years, cancellation of all the academic certificates received from TU, submitting the malefactors to the local administration for trials in accord with the public act, and so on. This all makes it evident that the university provisions condone no examination malpractices at all. Nonetheless, rather tragically, the issue of such practices is surfaced during almost every examination and the university does claim that it brings its provisions into effect against such unethical practices.

Objective of the Study

This study intended to investigate the feasibility of formally and explicitly designating the scorer the right to take necessary measures in order to treat the examination malpractices evident in answer sheets amidst the contentious opinions as to whether the scorer should award scores for what has been produced in answer sheets even if the written texts evidently indicate one or the other sort of malpractice or the scorer should use his/her personal judgement judiciously based on empirical facts in order to treat such malpractices.

Method

Adopting the “content analysis” approach, the instances of different tendencies as portrayed by examinees in written responses were noted during the marking of the answer sheets of the Bachelor's level in English education. The instances were analysed in depth and only a limited number of broader categories of such instances were identified. The instances were presented and discussed, and then the conclusion was drawn based on the discussion. It is to be noted that, in compliance with the ethical principle of confidentiality, the code no. of the course of study, the region to which the answer sheets belong and the years of the examinations remain unstated.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the broad categories of instances derived from a number of individual instances of examinee behaviour portrayed during the written examination conducted by TU. Table 1 presents the observations on the behaviour of examinees.

Each of the categories of examinee behaviours as portrayed in Table 1 clearly suggests that the responses of examinees lack a genuine picture of their abilities and skills. This assertion is doubtlessly hard, but not impossible, to justify in that it either requires a panel of experts to carefully study the responses of examinees and reach a conclusion unanimously and anonymously as well or, as a final resort, it might require the same examinees to show their performance in a well-invigilated test environment.

Table 1: Categories of Observations in English Education Answer Sheets

S. N.	Observations
1	Within the same answer sheet, some of the answers paralleling the academic texts with enough citations whereas most lacking even the basics of grammaticality.
2	Texts with the Nepali translations of the main words in the answers, the general practice observed in guidebooks and guesspapers.
3	Completely irrelevant answers with highly academic language and contents but related to some other topics.
4	Almost exactly the same texts across a number of answer sheets, even the grammatical, lexical and stylistic errors in one answer sheet repeated across several answer sheets.
5	Writing one or two good paragraphs and leaving the space for some paragraphs and again writing some good paragraphs related to the answer to a question. The same common in other answer sheets also.
6	In some answer sheets only the beginning paragraphs of an answer, in some others the middle paragraphs only and in still others only the final paragraphs of the same answer, whereas in some all the paragraphs which are exactly the same found in the other answer sheets.
7	The answer containing "... is shown in figure 2" but lacking such a figure.
8	Two or three lengthy academic texts with proper citations but not related at all to any of the questions asked. At the same time, other texts very poor in terms of the basics of grammar, meaning and so forth.
9	Two answers placed continuously together with only a question number written at the top. The same instance common in other 4 or 5 answer sheets coming immediately one after the other.
10	Polar difference in the quality of the language in the two sections of the same answer.
11	Two questions requiring the same answer (the answer being the complete answer for the short-answer question but only the part of the long-answer question). Several students writing exactly the same answer in bullet forms to the short-answer question but only one or two students writing the same as part of the long-answer question.
12	Almost exactly the same but wrong answer to a question repeated in several answer sheets.
13	Almost all the items in "objective" section attempted correctly by almost all students from an exam centre whereas almost the reversed in "subjective" section.

The second option can also be taken as one of the general procedures for establishing the reliability of a test – the stability reliability (Bachman, 2004; Ingram, 1977). Nonetheless, for this kind of validity the conditions need to be as uniform as possible in the administration of the test in question and also that the feasibility for re-administering the test to all the examinees suspected of being involved in malpractice is another problem. Sampling, as in the validity procedure, yields no expected results until and unless the validity of the interpretation of the test is sought for that way and decisions of different

sorts are based on the degree of the validity of the test. Given the developmental stage of testing and assessment in the country at present, the issue of estimating the validity of a test, the interpretation of the degree of validity and the enforcement of validity decisions at the practical level seem so distant to be reached that we have a lot to work on in this direction. Both the options doubtlessly result in a number of decisions to be made at the policy and the practice levels. Additionally, the incurring financial pressures are another challenge to cope with.

Then, what could be the solution that is both feasible and agreeable amidst the individuals and stakeholder groups that are strongly convinced of the fact that examination malpractices must be curbed at all costs? One of the easy solutions might be suggested: well, let's make the examination centres, the people overseeing the performance of examinees, and the examinees themselves more accountable in whatever way it is possible – amongst other several parties, the three having a crucial role in deterring examination malpractice in the specific and immediate context. This is what is the usual mode of functioning and this is what is expected by those who claim that scorers lack any right to judge whether or not examinee responses are the result of malpractices as well. The line of thought could be justified only had the instances of examinee behaviour not occurred in answer sheets, as displayed in Table 1. But the issue that is being dealt with in this paper is the result of our inability to reach that height of accountability – the fact evident in instances of examination malpractices that have recurrently surfaced publicly even in the media.

Chapter 66 of Regulations for Tribhuvan University Organization and Administration – 1994 and Chapter 9 of TUEMOG include only a few possibilities of examination malpractices and the resulting sanctions. Regarding the possible malpractice in written responses, for instance, one of the possibilities as stated in Clause 9.2.1 of TUEMOG is that the subjective answers of two or more examinees might read exactly the same and, in such a case, the results of the examinees might be cancelled for one year. Thus, as it is the scorer who goes through the written responses and knows whether or not the two or more subjective answers read the same, TUEMOG implicitly states the right of the scorer in treating the malpractices palpably clear in the answer sheets of examinees. The line of argument that advocates “no right” of scorers in judging whether or not the written responses of examinees might also be the result of some kind of malpractice is obviously nullified by the TUEMOG provisions.

The issue is, then, clear in that scorers do have a crucial role in curbing examination malpractices. Nonetheless, given the gravity of the issue, things need to be handled with care. As stated earlier, examinees alone are not accountable for examination malpractices. Rather the malpractices are the byproduct of a number of factors including examinee motivation that has been inculcated by socioeconomic and political air as well as the moral values of the society in question, dereliction of different stakeholders concerned with conducting examinations, and so forth. All should be treated for their share in examination malpractices including examinees, invigilators, scorers, and so on. The issue under immediate consideration, however, requires scorers to take the responsibility seriously and act accordingly. It needs extra thought, time and effort on the scorer side to convince all including the judiciary in a court in the light of the existing provisions for appeal of the Office of the Controller of Examinations (OCE) that the scoring has been carried out with utmost care and endeavour. For this, it is desirable to expect that OCE, firstly, consumes all its efforts deterring any examination malpractice in the examination centre itself, and, secondly, it facilitates scorers by developing a set of scoring rubrics

that also address the issue of possible malpractices that might occur despite the attempts to curb them in examination centres.

Conclusion

This paper, born out of our encounters with the competing lines of arguments regarding the role of scorers in curbing examination malpractices evident in answer sheets, presents some evidence for the room that allows the scorer to exercise his/her careful and evidence-based judgement so as to treat the malpractices that creep into the answer sheets of examinees due to different reasons and circumstances. For this line of thought to function effectively, it is doubtlessly mandatory on the part of OCE to make the existing provisions that are only suggestive more explicit and to develop a set of well-worked on scoring rubrics so as to address the issue of curbing examination malpractices. In addition, scorers burdened with more grave responsibility of careful judgement that might possibly disadvantage examinees need to function in a different frame of mind than they are functioning in the prevailing circumstances – with more care, endeavor and accountability. Furthermore, it is also necessary for the concerned to be convinced of the fact that all this is for the good health of the educational community at large.

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