

The General Certificate Examinations as a Tool of Measurement & Quality Control of Educational Objectives in Some Arab Countries with Special Reference to Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

National examinations are means by which learners' academic achievements can be judged, through national competitions of standardized examinations. The General Certificate of Education (GCE) is an effective tool for the assessment of educational objectives; as from the results achieved by students in these examinations, we can measure: the degree of their performance, to see the points of strength to reinforce them or to spot weaknesses to cure them. These tests can also tell us about the effectiveness of the teaching force in their practice in classrooms, as well as telling us about the success of the teaching units (curriculum). The (GCE) is a tool of quality control, through which the organization (state, government, institute) can achieve social, cultural and political agendas. The decentralization of the Saudi school certificate - as an example - was expected to serve national objectives, but it has yielded negative impact on education, due to the implementation of controversial examining criteria of students' performance, as a result of absence of uniformity of measuring devices within the teachers' community. The (GCE) is an important educational document. It is a means of assessment, control device, as well as a symbol of national pride; with local and international implications.

Key words: education, decentralization, assessment, quality control, standardization, uniformity.

1:0 The Socio-economic & Political implications of General Certificate Examinations: General Certificate of

Education (GCE) were/are instituted in many countries to serve two purposes. They are taken at the end of secondary school studies to certify the completion of secondary school at a satisfactory level of achievement. The other function is to help in selecting young people for higher education, professional training which would finally help to lead high status in society. (Noah, et tel:1993) In doing this, they were considered as instruments where valuable rewards were distributed to a very limited number of winners of successful candidates going on to advanced studies. But such examination systems also serve additional purposes. We are all well aware that examinations have powerful influences on individual success in his future life. Results of examinations can be politically interpreted to show how well the national resources have been spent and to measure how much progress has been achieved in comparison with other nations' educational levels. Changes in examinations may be directed at what are essentially political or ideological issues: nation-building in a post-independence society, or the promotion of social justice and the achievement of greater equity among social groups.

In ex-colonial countries the pre-independence secondary school leaving examination was normally imported from the colonial power. (Noah, et tel:1993) After independence, the slogans 'Bring the examination home' and 'Indigenize the curriculum' have conveyed an attractive political message. Indeed, until such changes are made, the new nation is unlikely to feel truly independent of its former colonial master. Similarly, social justice may demand that examination standards and content be changed. Hopkins in (Ross: 1963). National examination system yields results which are used in many ways, directly associated with teaching and learning in schools, others in other aspects of life as means of quality control, or as instruments with social, economic and political implications. National examinations can be seen as monitors of nations' ethical values and beliefs; they are as well indicators of achievement at the personal and national levels.

1:1 The Sudan School Certificate: The Ministry of Education reported in (1970) that the Sudan School Examinations should be a fair and just criterion to provide equal opportunities to all candidates.

It should also be the means with which to measure the students' performances as well as to assess the teaching methods. So the Sudan School Certificate Examinations Formats witnessed some modifications to achieve the objectives of the curriculum. By introducing those reforms the Sudan School Certificate Examinations could tell us what the students should achieve in their learning process and can also help in judging their performance according to their achievements in the final examinations. The following years witnessed considerable improvements in all educational aspects in the Sudan by specifying and planning the objectives of education, and describing the means with which those objectives could be achieved. The Sudan School Certificate is a device of measuring as it is the only means with which students in the Sudan are positioned in government universities. Historically, coordination between the Sudan examination board and Cambridge Examination Syndicate continued up to 1962, when a cabinet decree was passed to establish the Sudan Council of Examinations. And as it was stated in the reports of the Ministry of Education in (1962), the Ministry established a committee for examinations and the law of the Sudan Examinations board was approved in 1962. By this time the coordination between Cambridge and the Sudan Educational authorities was no longer valid.

This connection with Cambridge used to give the Sudan Certificate some validity and vitality as the examinations used to come directly from Britain. Therefore, the Sudanese student was easily admitted to British Universities with very little complications. In 1969 the educational ladder was changed from 4:4:4 to 6:3:3, to give more primary education to early school leavers or dropouts from 4 to 6 years in free primary education. Another change took place in 1989, as the general education was divided into two stages: 8 years for the primary education and 3 years for the secondary education and a whole year was dropped. This change was supposed to provide primary school student with 8 years of free compulsory education, but this system yielded negative effects in the entire Sudanese education, but some reforms are being followed now by the recommendations of the last education conference in Feb 2012, which recommended some changes in educational ladder by adding one more year to the secondary stage to be 8+4 to lead to the final Sudan School Certificate, which qualifies students to university admission in the country. Bu despite of all problems with education in the country today, the Sudan School Certificate still remains one of the nation's good products in the market of education. This document still has its power and authority as the only reference of students' success to state or private universities.

1:2 Secondary School Examinations in Egypt: (*Thanawiya Amma*)

Egypt is a leading Arab and Islamic country. It has long educational traditions that go back to the founding of Al-Azhar Mosque, as the first university in the world, one thousand years ago. Education in Egypt witnessed many changes through ages. Egyptian teachers were pioneers in the Islamic and Arab world. They have had undeniable efforts at all levels, as Egypt was and still an effective cultural and political power, affecting both Arabic and Islamic arenas. To enter the secondary school, pupils at preparatory stage must pass a national exam which is given after six years of elementary school education. A high percentage of students completing preparatory stage are expected to be enrolled in secondary education. At this level, students have formative and summative assessments during the first year plus the average at the end of the school year. National standardized exams for the second two and third years qualify students to take the Certificate of General Secondary Education, known as the *Thanawiya Amma*, which is the only requirement for admission to universities. So far efforts are underway with the support of many international organizations to make the general and vocational secondary school educational system less rigid and provide equal opportunities to students in the two tracks to opt for higher education. This being implemented by the World Bank, led to the enhancement of secondary school education in Egypt.

The *Thanawiya Amma* is an important examination as it stirs up the interest of individuals, families and government organizations. A lot of time, money and efforts are spent in preparing students for this examination. Most of the Egyptian families declare a state of emergency within the family environment if one of their sons or daughters would sit for this examination. The entire time, money and care will be allotted for the examinee to be able to pass his/her exams, as this would help him/her in getting higher marks to compete in the general admission to universities and higher institutes in the country. Most families pay big money for their children to pursue additional private tutoring. These classes are headache as they absorb most of the Egyptian families' deposits. *The Thanawiya Amma* generates heavy anxiety in families as well as examinees. A state of emergency within the family environment arouses great tension. Many students find it difficult and hitting on their nerves.

The situation is very much similar to the situation with the Japanese students in their national examinations competition; as a large share of resource is borne by candidates and their families, who invest time and funds in one-on-one coaching, after-school (the famous *juku*), and the expenses of travel to distant cities to sit for the second-level examinations.

The *Thanawiya Amma*, then is of great importance to the community in Egypt as it is the only *requirement* and the only *means* for university admission. The bureau of admission, which is known as coordinating office - is the sole agent responsible for positioning students in colleges and universities according to their general achievements in the *Thanwia Alaama Examinations*. The placement of students into college is fair, where the marks gained in achievements examinations are the only criteria used for university admission in Egypt. The importance of this certificate - in young peoples' future career - sometimes drives people to behave illegally and unethically as to leak examinations to their children, but the examinations boards do the best to keep the credibility and accountability of this certificate untouched to remain as an important national document that qualifies young Egyptian for education inside and outside their country.

1:3 The General Secondary Examination (Tawjihi) in Jordan: Students in secondary school are required to take 9 subjects; Arabic, English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Computer Studies, Earth Science, Chemistry, Biology, and Physics. Islamic studies are also mandatory for all students except for Christian students. The Secondary Education level consists of two years' study for students aged 16 to 18 who have completed the basic cycle (10 years) and comprises two major tracks: the secondary education is academic or vocational when at the end of the two-year period, students sit for the general secondary examination (Tawjihi) in the appropriate branch, and those who pass will be awarded the Tawjihi certificate (General Secondary Education Certificate). The academic stream qualifies students for entrance to universities, whereas the vocational or technical type qualifies for entrance to Community Colleges or universities or the job market, provided they pass the two additional subjects. Vocational secondary education, which provides intensive vocational training and apprenticeship leads to the award of a technical certificate. Enrollment rates at secondary level have remained fairly constant since 2002 at around 89 percent. In terms of enrollment by gender, girls' enrollment rate is higher than the enrollment rates for boys. In 2007 there were 91 percent females enrolled in secondary education compared to 88 percent of males. The secondary enrollment rates are higher than the regional average by almost 25 percentage points.

The enrollment in secondary vocational education as a share of total secondary enrollment declined from 18 percent in 2000 to 12 percent in 2005. This shows that government needs to put in greater efforts to realign the national vocational program with reforms initiated by the Ministries of Labor and Social Affairs and Higher Education and Scientific Research to impart skills sought after by employers when hiring new workers.[i] Jordan still needs to focus on improving the quality of primary and secondary education levels. In international assessments, such as TIMSS and PISA, Jordan has performed well in comparison to other Arab countries, but it falls below many countries with comparable incomes and education expenditures. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Report in 2003, ranked Jordanian students scores to be 22 points above international average in science and mathematics. However, up to 30 percent of students drop out before the completion of the 12th grade. Despite highly equitable primary education, secondary level and vocational training still reflect gender and income distortions.[ii]

In an opinion poll conducted among high school students in Jordan, it is found that 40% of them supported the *abolition of the general secondary examination*, compared with 62% rejected the idea. According to the survey, 64% supported the replacement of the general secondary examination to be organized by the university admission bureau. The survey showed that the testing of a high school diploma increases the rate of tension among students and their families, as they earn bad habits such as the smoking habit as a result of tension. The Tawjihai in Jordan is a good example of efforts being exerted in education. The Jordanian labour force is now enforcing place in the Gulf States as the best required in Arab Gulf States. This is due to improvement in the education system in Jordan in the secondary school in general and tertiary level in particular. In a report released by the World Bank Jordan achieved the best rate among Arab and Muslim Countries in the field of research. [iii]

2.0 An International Comparative Perspective of Features of General School Examinations:

We can trace some of these educational experiences in the U.S.A, some Asian and European countries for comparing purposes. Controversy over examination policies is commonplace in the contemporary world.

According to (Noah, et al:1989), it has been exemplified in China's abandonment of secondary school and university entrance examinations during the Cultural Revolution, and their reinstatement 10 years ago; also in the disputes over the form and purposes of the Bac in France, disputes that from time to time threaten to undermine the very continuance of government; in the concerns expressed in Japan that whatever the benefits its 'examination hell' may bring in the way of stimulating student and teacher efforts, they are being bought at the price of severe tension placed on young people and their families; and in the current vigorous discussions in England over the institution of the GCSE, the changes proposed for the GCE Advanced Level examinations, and the introduction of periodic national assessments of pupils' progress throughout their school careers.

2.1 The United States: A noteworthy feature of the United States examination scene has been the rejection of the slightest hint of a centralized system of examinations in the hands of the national government. Nor, indeed, do most of the 50 states offer a secondary school leaving examination or university selection/entrance examination. Instead, the job is left to what are essentially private organizations, such as the Educational Testing Service (which provides the Scholastic Aptitude Test on behalf of the College Entrance Examination Board), and the American College Testing Program.^[iv] According to (Noah:1989), though the provision of examinations by these organizations has introduced a certain element of coherence to an educational system that would otherwise be exceptionally fragmented, their non-public status has nevertheless helped maintain the states' rights and even parochial bases of American education and they have done little to help raise general educational standards in less advantaged parts of the country. However, some change may be in the offing. The Educational Testing Service has recently (1987) been handed responsibility for conducting the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and for publishing and analyzing the results. At the same time, NAEP procedures are to break with past practice, and in future are to make possible the publication of interstate comparisons of cognitive achievement of students at ages 9, 14 and 17 years. In consequence, some observers are forecasting that the United States is, perhaps unwittingly, veering toward establishing a de facto national achievement test that will eventually drive the adoption of a de facto national curriculum. (Ibid)

2.2 Japan: At the other end of the spectrum of control and coherence of education in general and examinations in particular, Japan until 1954 operated a very economical system of selection for higher education entrance, on the basis of a single, nationwide, standardized examination". Noah. et al:(1989). In view of the extreme importance of the decisions that were being made on the basis of this single examination, the quantity of resources spent on providing it was remarkably low. Between 1954 and 1976 various other programmes of selection were tried, and in 1976 the present two-stage system was introduced, primarily in order to improve control by colleges and universities over the make-up of their entering classes.^[v] The first stage, the Joint First-stage Achievement Test (JFSAT) is retrospective and seeks to test mastery of the secondary school curriculum; the second stage examination is constructed, offered and graded separately by each higher education institution. These second-stage examinations are partly retrospective, but in many cases they also attempt to be prospective, trying to forecast candidates' potential fit to the future course of study.

According to (Noah, et al:1989), one effect of the two-stage plan has been to transform the JFSAT into a preliminary qualifying examination, and although the plan has enabled the institutes of higher education in Japan to retain a good measure of control over their student recruitment, the tradeoff has been the significantly higher resource costs that are now involved in selection for post-secondary education in Japan. The Japanese appear to have been persuaded, along with the Americans, that such tests are more objective, provide higher levels of comparability across candidates, and are generally more efficient to administer by examiners who are facing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of candidates. Perhaps more than in the United States, the Japanese have paid a heavy price for these benefits, producing tests that require candidates to memorize vast quantities of 'facts', thus downplaying originality and flexibility of thought.(ibid In addition, there are important intangible costs arising from intense competition for places in the best universities and the resulting academic and psychological pressure on candidates. Indeed, the competition is so intense and the pressures are so great during the secondary school period that the universities complain that students arrive burned-out, determined to make up for their lost youth, and unwilling to continue to study hard. upon their time and intellect.

2.3 France: Over the past four decades, France has placed increasing reliance on the school system (as distinct from employers) to provide its generally buoyant economy with trained labor. As a consequence, more young people are carried further in school to a degree that would have been very difficult to predict from the France of the 1950s.^[vi]

One consequence of the vastly increased numbers and new types of candidates finishing a full secondary education has been recognition of the limitations of the academically oriented Bac examination of, say, 1950, in the changed circumstances. The French solution to this problem has been to retain the Bac in form, but to furnish it with substantial new content. In a major effort of educational adaptation, a Bac that had been organized on a narrow humanities- and mathematics-oriented basis and was easy to comprehend, has become an extraordinarily differentiated and complex examination system, with a host of séries, lignes, and options (38 in 1988, compared to just four before 1950). (Noah, et al:1989). Although in some respects the French system has now moved some distance towards the English specialized model, this should not be exaggerated, as the Bac retains a large core of general education subjects required of all candidates. Nevertheless, one can no longer speak of a single nationally comparable examination administered to all candidates. Instead, a strongly demarcated hierarchy of prestige has emerged, with the mathematical options at the head, and the vocational options forming the tail.

According to (Noah, et al:1989), the most obvious has been a loss of comparability across candidates, who take widely different assortments of subjects, different papers in nominally the same subject, with different weights given to the results, depending on the particular option. In addition, the limited devolution of administrative authority from Paris also extends to the administration of the Bac. Each of the 23 académies selects its own assortment of questions from the centrally approved list, and has some latitude to set its own standards of grading. Noah noticed that The result of that policy has been the development of scandalously poor conditions of study for many students, especially those in the universities situated in and around Paris. Competition for entrance into the better provided areas of the universities and particularly into the grandes écoles has intensified to the point that the Bac has become a kind of first-level qualifying examination, with the decisive examination being either the concours, or the examination for admission to a grande école. This represents a devaluation of the Bac, perhaps an inevitable cost of its democratization and of its extension to the vocational tracks.

2.4 The Federal Republic of Germany: According to (Noah, et al:1993), the expansion of secondary education in the FRG took place a full 15 years later than in France, and, as with the Bac, the Abitur examination has been significantly altered to cope with the increased numbers and the changes in the kinds of candidates. In addition, while the Bac is marked by a generally high degree of central direction, a determining characteristic of the Abitur is its school-based control. In matters of format, both France and the FRG (in distinct contrast to the United States and Japan) have retained a traditional approach, relying on extended answers to questions, even to the extent of maintaining a certain reliance on oral examinations. Since 1979, the demands made on candidates for the Abitur have been reduced. In particular, they have been permitted to offer selected subjects at lower levels of difficulty. The changes have encouraged a vast expansion of the number of young people completing their secondary education with the Abitur, but again, as in France, certain costs have been paid for this advance. In addition, admission to the faculties and departments under numerus clausus is determined via a highly complex points system, that takes into account not only the marks received in the Abitur (with differential weightings for different subjects for candidates choosing different sets of major and minor subjects), but also school grades. Even so, because competition is so intense for admission to some faculties, tiny fractions of a percentage point in the final placement can become critical in the admissions process. Another cost of the changed system and the introduction of numerus clausus is that some candidates with the highest scores are entering the most favoured and prestigious faculties, even though their interests, aptitude or previous educational specialization may lie in other directions.^[vii]

2.5 The People's Republic of China: According to (Noah, et al:1989), the Chinese authorities have introduced substantial elements of multiple-choice and short-answer questions into what had previously been a traditional extended-answer type of examination. They have not yet moved to machine-scorable formats. Given the large numbers they are presently dealing with, the costs of grading and administration must be burdensome. As the number of candidates increases in future years, the temptation to move to machine-scorable tests and the attraction of the low marginal costs associated with such formats must grow ever greater. At least one of the examination policies in China has predicted that the time is not far off when the pressure of numbers on the examiners will become irresistible, and a vast school population of multiple-choice, machine-scored examinees will be added to those of the United States and Japan.

2.6 The Soviet Union: As in so many other respects, the Soviet Union according to (Noah, et al:1993), provides a sharp contrast to China.

Though there is significant influence exerted from Moscow, each of the 15 republics is responsible for setting the content and standards of the secondary school examinations for the leaving certificate, the attestat zrelosti. Schools work within the Republic guidelines, but in turn enjoy a good deal of local discretion. The teachers who have prepared the students dominate the process of setting the questions and evaluating the responses. Paradoxically, in a society and a school system that are in most respects characterized by substantial central direction, the school completion examination is not. Thus, the Soviet Union has settled for a curious compromise between the rhetoric of centralized planning and the practice of local discretion.^[viii] As in Japan, the examinations are highly competitive and can impose substantial travel costs on students. There is virtually no coordination among the VUZY concerning the dates on which they will hold their examinations, examination syllabi are idiosyncratic, and grading formulas, cut-off points, and so forth, confidential. Glasnost has much work yet to do in this corner of Soviet life! A consequence for many Soviet youngsters has been to turn higher education admission into a process incorporating large elements of game-theory, almost textbook examples of decision-making under conditions of imperfect knowledge and uncertainty. Apart from the persistent reports of discrimination against certain ethnic and religious groups, influence peddling and corruption, the system appears to lack important elements of overall fairness and objectivity.

2.7 Sweden: In 1971 Sweden introduced a new form of upper secondary school, designed to continue the education of a very large fraction of the post-compulsory age-group, and integrating three formerly separate types of schools (gymnasium, vocational and continuation school) See (Noah, et al:1989). In the mid-1970s, Sweden discarded a limited but usable final secondary school examination system in order to reduce the strain on pupils, produce more valid and reliable predictors of university success, and (it was hoped) correct socio-educational inequities in assessment. In place of the final examination, the Swedes installed a combination of marks gained during regular classroom and homework and in nationally set tests administered at intervals during the school career. Meanwhile, in 1977 a major reform of the higher education system revamped admissions criteria. Work experience and age (maturity) were given strong weight in the admission decision, and completing less demanding upper secondary school lines was not by itself sufficient for consideration for admission to higher education. According to (Noah, et al: 1989), the abandonment of final examinations was also motivated by the desire to improve the diagnostic and predictive value of tests of individual student achievement and to give teachers national benchmarks against which to set their own pedagogical efforts.

The Swedes have been willing (and able) to incur rather heavy costs to achieve these goals. The new system requires time-consuming collaboration among teachers in a given school, and across schools in a region. Exceptionally detailed record-keeping is required, and the Swedish National Board of Education is charged with the responsibility of preparing and standardizing the tests given in the basic school subjects at various points along the school ladder. (Noah, et al 1989) noticed, Although Sweden may have abandoned its final secondary school examinations, there has been no abandonment of tests and examinations in general. Indeed, one might well argue that there is now more examining and evaluation based on tests and examinations than ever before. In 1987, it was announced that examinations and testing in the upper secondary school will be complemented by an assessment programme for the compulsory school years, to begin with the 1988-89 school year and to take in successive grades. All grades will be covered and reported on at three-year intervals. This so-called 'National Evaluation to Give a Holistic Picture of School Activities' will not confine itself to the academic side of the school, but will include data on the social and home environments of the pupils, their health, their social and emotional development, and their attitudes. What is being proposed is a massive national enterprise, carried out to an exceptionally thorough degree, and demanding the expenditure of very significant resources, both human and material.^[ix] According to (Noah, et al:1993), such a thorough-going system of sustained scrutiny raises a question for Sweden: Is there a danger of turning education into mere instruction? Our own view is that the Swedes are indeed risking the payment of a very high price for their commitment to constructing a comprehensively detailed data base of the performance of their schools, their teachers, and their school children.

2.8 England and Wales: Recent developments in English secondary school examinations, the GCSE, A and AS levels and the introduction of plans for regular in-school assessments have been very contentious. Parallels with Sweden are striking, though the two countries have arrived at their present policies starting from distinctly different traditions of educational administration. Without going into the details, the events of the last couple of years represent an abrupt acceleration of what has otherwise been a glacially slow process of transferring authority over the schools from local to central government. (Noah, et al:1989).

In the interest of establishing national standards, voluntarism and localism are being forced to give way. Ever since Robert Lowe, Kay Shuttleworth and Payment-By-Results in the mid-nineteenth century, it has been clear that examinations and testing could be used effectively in England as a lever to change the way in which the schools operate. Since the termination of the General School Certificate and its associated London Matric regulations, it has not been necessary for a given student to take any particular subject or to follow any particular syllabus within that subject, except in so far as he or she wanted to take an examination or the school demanded it. (Ibid) The new structure of examinations is intended to help implement what amounts to a national curriculum, though that new structure is not likely to be accompanied by any change from the traditional extended-answer format. Perhaps it is worthwhile noting that a much greater effort has been made in England (both within and across the examining boards) than in either France or the FRG to ensure standardization of grading criteria. For this reason, some of the more serious doubts about the fairness of marking that are voiced in these last two countries have been absent here.

The changes already implemented or foreseen for the end-of-secondary school examinations in England should be seen as part of a proposed comprehensive assessment procedure throughout the nation and for the mass of the school population.^[x] This will be a major innovation in the English context, and will be one that is likely to come, at least initially, with a high price tag attached in terms of professional morale. Morale among teachers and head teachers in England has already fallen to levels not seen in the entire period since 1870, when the state-supported education system was established. Some will argue that comprehensive assessment procedures are necessary, because only if it can be publicly demonstrated that the schools are returning value for money will the teaching profession be accorded the respect, appreciation and material rewards that it deserves. And, it is argued, a recovery of such respect is the precondition for a major upturn of morale in the profession. This justification for what has become known as 'accountability' is heard on all sides in the United States, and is very strongly sounded in Sweden. However, it fails to explain how more intense scrutiny of the work of teachers is going to help them achieve that essential characteristic of respected professional status, a large degree of personal autonomy in deciding how professional practice shall be carried out. For this reason, it will be advisable in England to take careful note of Swedish experience. Because they are very far ahead along the road of examining, testing and evaluation that is currently being charted in England, any drawbacks (or remedies) the Swedes discover en route should be quite instructive here, too.

3:0 Decentralization of Education

Educational decentralization is a worldwide phenomenon, which takes different forms and leads to different outcomes in different socio-economic contexts (Astiz,2004; Kamat,2002; Kaufman,1997; Sayed, 1997; Tatto, 1999). Decentralization is defined as “the transfer of decision-making authority, responsibility, and tasks from higher to lower organizational levels or between organizations” (Hanson,1998), where educational decentralization is more politically oriented. Educational decentralization in Saudi Arabia does not carry that much politics in its nature, nevertheless, similar to reform of other kinds; decentralization in KSA does not face any *challenges*, concerning governance, stakeholders and sociopolitical outcomes, as it happens somewhere else. But the only challenge as the researcher thinks is the mechanism used for educational assessment for school leavers, as we will see on the next pages how the decentralization of the final secondary school examination has affected the teaching performance and the learning in the general education.

3:1 The Impact of the Decentralization of Saudi School Certificate Examinations: Saudi Arabia is a leading power in the Islamic and Arab World due to its religious role as the cradle of Islam and the land of the two holy mosques in Makkah and Maddinah. Saudi Arabia is the hosting home of the Organization of the Islamic World as well. Saudi Arabia is also an effective economic power, as it is the major oil producer in the world and has a powerful say in the economics and politics of oil, within OPEC vicinity. It has the largest oil reserve underneath its soil. Saudi Arabia is also playing a leading role within the organization of the Gulf States, with its relatively large population, in addition to its political stability. It is one of the best 25% money spenders in education according to a report from World Development Bank.^[xi] Although the science budgets of the OIC countries are all near the bottom of the world league, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Yemen's relative education budgets are among the worlds highest. Morocco, Tunisia and Iran also spend respectable sums on education. All six countries were among the world's top 25 spenders on education in 2002. The last budget in (2010/2011) in KSA allotted 26% to education.

Four new universities were established with a royal decree and the King Abdallah issued that all secondary school leavers should find places in universities and higher education institutes in the Kingdom; in addition to about 62,000 students were planned to leave the country for graduate and postgraduate education programmes all over the world. But despite the bright picture about education and in spite of the big money spent on the general education, the learning output is still poor. There is a tangible weakness in the degree of literacy among secondary school leavers, although the school environment is well equipped with the best infra-structure and the best human resources of qualified teachers recruited from Arab countries such as Sudan, Egypt and Jordan. Of course there are many factors behind the deterioration of education in the Kingdom such as poor locally trained teachers, instability of curriculum and lack of discipline among Saudi students in school. But as I believe there are two main factors behind this deterioration. These factors are: (1) the decentralization of the Saudi Educational Assessment System at the secondary school stage. (2) The involvement of Qiyas (The National Center for assessment in higher education) in the national examinations business. On the next pages we will examine the impact of these two factors in the deterioration of students' educational achievements in the general education.

The story of the examinations decentralization began when the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education for Educational Development, secretary general of the ministry, Dr. Naif Al-Roumi Hishal announced that the ministry approved on Tuesday, 27/11/1427 a number of actions relating to educational affairs in general education (for boys and girls), including the adoption of the ministry of the decentralization of secondary school certificate Examinations.^[xii] By this decision the Ministry of education laid too much educational authority into the hands of the regional education directorates to administer the entire educational processes at region level. So, all the teaching and all the testing tasks have become local issues. Naturally, decentralization of authority, whether political or social is one good feature of democratic practice. But this strategy of allowing that too much freedom to regional administrations, to carry out such educational decisions, will at length, weaken the role of the Ministry of Education as the sole provider of education at the national level and the sole organizer who should have the last say on the credibility of the national education programmes in the Kingdom.

3:2 Reasons behind educational decentralization: According to (Hanson:1997), there are at least eight factors, often interrelated, reform goals of decentralization of education, among them is improving the quality of education. Hanson believes that almost all decentralization reforms identify this as a goal. The expectation is that decision making closer to the school level, will foster a greater degree of student and teacher motivation, parent participation, a sense of ownership, curriculum adaptation to local settings, and community willingness to contribute financially to schools. But the question remains, "does decentralization increase learning? The answer comes from (Hanson:1997) that improving the quality of education is typically a key objectives of decentralization. However, numerous studies such as of (Brown:1994), have concluded that while parents, students, and educator appear to be more satisfied under decentralization, it is still unclear whether, and under what circumstances, it makes any real difference in levels of student attainment of academic or social objectives. This may be applicable to decentralization in the Saudi context, as improving the quality of education is still questionable as we will see later through the rest of this article.

At the local level, "Al-Hyat Daily " of 16/1/2007, saw that the decision was made to decrease the cost of education; as the administration of examinations at national level was considered a burden to the budget of the country. The decision was not based on objective justifications, but built on the consideration of financial cost of examinations. But everyone knows that spending money on such matters relating to education is not financially wasteful. (Al-Hyat:2007) went on to say, " we expect negative results due to the decentralization of these examinations, as some people considered the high school certificate as one of the most important documents that many people relied upon in taking decision to differentiate between school graduates." This idea of economizing cost does not seem sound, because the educational output should not be calculated in terms of profit & loss. The ministry of education is not a profit-generating organization, aiming to gain money from its operations in education. (Al-Hyat Daily:2007) went on to say that, the human resources are more valuable than saving some money from budget. Examinations at the national level are not a burden because examinations should be seen as integrating with the whole education process. Testing student is a duty because testing is the twin of teaching. Every teaching situation creates a testing situation. Testing serves the teaching, so testing is a learning situation as (Hughes:1998) believes. When learners are exposed to a new testing situation they are expected to add additional information. It is important that the (TEST) to be seen as a teaching situation in which we seize the opportunity to expose students to additional *learning experience* that can help them modify certain behaviour.

The test is an obedient servant since it follows and apes the teaching as Davies (in Hughes:1998) asserts, so when there is good teaching, we would – naturally - expect good testing. Then the question will remain Why do we need to test them?

4:0 Examinations as tools of measurement and quality control of national objectives

The Ministry or Department of Education worldwide can determine the quality of education based on results of examinations, made by experts under its supervision. By means of examinations, we can be sure about the quality of teaching done in the classroom by teachers. We can also be sure about the quality of the learning output judged by students' performance in their achievement examinations. Examinations are tools of measurement of the degree of the attainment of the national educational, social, political and religious objectives (agendas) of the nation or the government. Ministries/Departments of education are the arms which the government let free to supervise the educational objectives of the country and make them attainable. Ministries of education are responsible for establishing educational policies through which the state or the government achieves its objectives and goals in qualifying the labour force. Every ministry of education is *fundamentally* responsible for designing teaching units (curriculum or syllabus) and training teaching forces through which it can achieve the educational intentions, desires and aspirations of its citizens. So, by implementing this tool of examinations, we can be sure that teachers have taught exactly what we wanted them to teach in classrooms.

We can also be sure that our children have learnt exactly what we wanted them to know at each specific stage of their education. Through these examinations strategies the authorities can make the whole school environment (students, teachers, administrators, workers, educators, syllabus designers and engineers) conducive to teaching and learning, as this will be the best environment we need in our schools. The ministry of education is *practically* an educational and social authority, responsible for the change of the society by engineering the human behaviour, through the teaching done by the teaching force and through the learning acquired by learners. So, we believe that the decentralization of certificate examinations to be in the hands of teachers may not be the right choice, not because teachers are unqualified (although some are) or un-trusted (although some are) – as we will see - to do this job, but *because different teachers will use different methods of teaching and then make different forms of tests to measure their students' performance in the classroom. Basically, we have no objections to the practice of decentralization of education, but we have objections of authorizing teachers to make the last decision about school leavers based on different personal criteria of evaluation.* Teachers have different criteria in measuring students' work therefore, if there are 1000 English language teachers, then we will be having 1000 different judgments about students' scholastic achievements. This will create a state of non-uniformity in evaluation of school graduates. In addition to that, some bad practices in students' assessment have been noticed within the teaching community. We have embarrassing situations when we have a student getting 100 out of 100 in English language test, while he is practically unable to spell his name. Some malpractices in examinations are common in most schools in general education. Evidences from international sources have also been detected. See (Al-Maerfa Journal:2000) for more details.

4:1 Different Reactions to Decentralization of Secondary school Examinations The decision of the decentralization of the (GCE) in Saudi Arabia has been received with different reactions. Some Saudi teachers said that the decision would give them full confidence in themselves, as this will make them feel more responsible, especially in preparing the final third year examinations. They added that the decision has abolished fear from their students and dismissed the negative feelings towards examinations. Ahmed:(2007), from Dammam said that some students were happy with the decision as they would have direct questions in examinations. Massa'd:(2007), said that the decision would stop the leaking that used to happen in certificate examinations. The decision has also been positively received by some educationists who said the decision will give confidence to teachers, as teachers are more familiar with their students than any other person. Such ideas came from an education expert Gassim:(2007) who thought that the decision was too late. He believed that the examination system in KSA was more advanced than in many countries. Shanghiti:(2007) the director of Education in Gunfuza Directorate of Girls' Education, supported the decision by saying that the decision would help in decentralization of examinations. On the other hand there were many people who believed that the decision was not successful at all. Alharthy:(2007) from Maddinah said that non-Saudi students were not happy with the decision. They said that the decision would do them great harm as their counterparts in private schools would collect higher marks than those in the government schools, because supervision on those schools is weak.

They believed that those students would get (easy) marks which would qualify them to attend universities in their own native countries and that would make the competition harder and mostly unfair in their home countries. This is true as we will see some cases from Egypt and Sudan, in the next chapter. Sabbig: (2007) a specialist in students' Counseling and Psychiatrist thought that education in KSA has become a field for experiment. He considered the decision of the ministry a catastrophe to the future of education in the Kingdom. He thinks that those decisions were based on personal mood not on objectives grounds. He said that the decision would decrease the importance of the Saudi (GCE). He thought that one of the consequences of the decision students would quit serious schools to private schools or loosely managed government schools. Another aspect that examinations would be non-uniformed which would create a situation of differences due to the different mechanisms of assessment that would be used by different teachers. He said it would have been better for the ministry to discuss the exaggeration in students attaining full marks by way of malpractices in examinations. More students had strong evidences against this decision.

For example Algothani: (2007) said; "I am excellent in my work. I have not been pushed by any teacher or paid any money for any private tutoring. But when the moment of truth comes how can we distinguish between good achievers and low ones, since the only criterion of assessment has been cancelled?" He says; "There must be a difference between the student who goes to public school and exerts good efforts and the other one who goes to private schools, where marks are given without efforts, since the student can pay for that and sits for examinations with an *already* limited specified pages instead of full text." In an opinion poll run by (Al-Harbi:2007) in Jeddah- he found that 89.5% out of 1064 students believed that the decentralization of the (GCE) was not right as there would be differences in the mechanism of assessment from one teacher to another. 85.4% said that the decentralization of the (GCE) would decrease the value of the Saudi Secondary school certificate abroad. These results agree with another study in progress by the same writer.

4:2 The Complications of the decentralization of the (GCE) inside KSA

4:2:1 Ministry of Education a loser: This decision rendered the Ministry of Education a loser, as the tangible loss can be seen in the diminishing of its role as an authority, responsible for the entire planning of human resources in the country. The Ministry of Education is supposed to be the sole organization responsible for education of the Saudi men and women. It is the authority that gives orientation and instructions through curriculum and syllabus, designed by its educational experts to attain the *national educational objectives in the country*. The ministry of education has given authorities to teachers to design teaching and make assessment, so the teacher is allowed to shape the future of his students with no or with very little interference from any authoritative reference. So far, *this a good policy to allow teachers such freedom*, but it has created chaotic situation of non-uniformity due to the different criteria each teacher implements to evaluate his/her students in their classrooms. The ministry of education is responsible through the supervision of teaching and testing to achieve the social, political, cultural and religious policy of the government or the state. By authorizing teachers to do the task the national educational objectives will be a threat. So aiming to save some money by decreasing the cost of education, great values will be missed. The question is: where does 26% of the national budget go if it is not to serve the educational process which is composed mainly of *teaching and testing*? This act seems to me as similar to dismissing military personnel and termination of the ministry of defense. People in educational profession are soldiers but equipped with different weapon.

4:3 The Role of the National Centre for Assessment in Higher Education (Qiyas): The role of the ministry of education as the sole authority to carry out the school certificate assessment in the kingdom, is now mandated to (Qiyas) which is carrying out assessment through two examinations: an achievement test and a proficiency test. *Qiyas took the lead in assessment and cancelled the role of the ministry of education as the only provider of general education and the sole authority to evaluate students' scholastic achievements in the Kingdom*. We have noticed that some students with high marks in Qiyas are low achievers in achievement tests in our English languages classes. Now colleges and universities consider 70% from Qiyas and 30% percent for the general school certificate as admission requirement to university. *This practice has yielded negative results in education as most of the teaching is now oriented to reading and preparing students for Qiyas tests, and very little teaching and learning is taking place in classrooms. Teachers and students tailor their teaching and learning strategies in the classroom so as to collect high marks in Qiyas*. See Siddiek:(2011). Qiyas is a measuring device but the problem in the Kingdom is not the lack of measuring devices. The role of Qiyas should not be seen as rival to the role of the ministry of education, but it should be integrating.

The ministry of education is the provider and evaluator of education programmes, while Qiyas exploits the products of the ministry to run its highly profitable business. "We do not mean to gloss over the complex ramifications of efforts to change a nation's examination system, which are not limited to education alone but closely tied to many aspects of society, political as well as social and economic." But to (Noah, et al:1993), there must be a "policy on educational control generally, including powers over local authorities as well as external examinations. National examinations are controlled by both central government and regional authorities; the balance of shared authority/responsibility depends on national precedents in educational administration. In the more decentralized systems, examination practices may differ considerably, though regulated by a national authority." Qiyas put more burdens on student who have to repeat some of their courses again and again to collect better marks at each trail. Sometimes students have to cover the syllabus of 3 past years in secondary school. Students also feel some sort of wrath as they believe that Qiyas has stolen 12 valuable years of their ages spent in school, as all the efforts there will be of no practical use, since university admission recognizes only 30% from their secondary certificate achievement. Qiyas examinations are not *reliable* and *valid* criteria of measuring students' achievement as the two terms *reliability* & *validity* of test have been defined by (Gronbach:(1975), Hughes:(1995), Lade:(1975), McNamara,(2001), Sax:(1980), Thorndike:(1969).

4:3:1 Financial Burden: Qiyas has put on more financial burden on the family financial resources. Parents have to pay for Qiyas examinations once or twice or even thrice, an amount that might come to 700 riyals per year, in addition to the burden of the physical efforts, time and psychological pressure on their children. Most parents – even highly educated people – complain that they do not have the knowledge and techniques of these new forms of examinations so as to help their children perform well in these examinations. It will take longer time for many Saudi families to be familiar with these types of examinations. So, the role of this examinations must be *optional* for the time being, till people have become fully alert and expert with these new forms of educational assessment techniques. And until these tests of Qiyas have been validated to measure the real performance of the Saudi students. There is not any survey– to the best of my knowledge - carried out to defend the reliability and validity of these tests

4:3:2 Poor Classroom Teaching Performance & Poor Learning Outcome: The direct result of the decentralization of (GCE) has resulted in poor teaching performance as teacher resort to give small teaching task to their students and do not cover all materials in the textbooks. See (Siddiek, et al:2011). Most of students complain of being poorly instructed in their secondary schooling as teachers pool all efforts to teach students the techniques of how to respond to the (Qiyas) proficiency test instead of spending time in doing real teaching from students' textbooks which are usually uncovered. See (Siddiek, et al: 2010). This (lazy) and (poor) teaching techniques have yielded destructive learning habits & strategies among young learners. See (Siddiek:2010).

4:3:3 Implications of Decentralization of the (GCE) in Some Arab Countries: The direct results of the decentralization of the (GCE) has aroused many problems not inside the Kingdom only, but it has made great confusion in the educational systems in some neighboring Arab countries, especially those countries which have considerable number of people working in Saudi Arabia such as Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Yemen and some other minorities, who send their children to attend the public and the private schools. These students began to face problems in their own countries, due to the new assessment criteria of the secondary school leavers' achievements, by adopting locally, the Qiyas proficiency and achievement examinations.

4:4 Sudan & Egypt: Sudanese and Egyptian students complain about highly exaggerated and inflated marks given to their counterparts, who attend (private schools) with no real teaching or learning efforts, while they (Sudanese & Egyptian students) get lower marks in public school, which seem a bit more serious than those private schools, which are not under direct control of the ministry of education. The educational authority in Sudan and Egypt is also facing the dilemma of how to process these inflated marks of students in both: the general certificate and Qiyas proficiency tests. The Ministry of higher Education and Scientific Research in the Sudan made recognition of 60% from the general Saudi School Certificate and 25% from Qiyas Achievement tests and 15% from the proficiency test. The natural result of these calculations means that the best Sudanese student holding a Saudi Arabian secondary school certificate will not be able to find a seat in the leading colleges in the country. (Banaga: 2011) gave examples of two Sudanese students: the first one got 99.8% in the general Saudi School Certificate and 91% in the Qiyas test. The second girl got 99.5% and 86% in Qiyas tests, but both girls did not get seats in colleges of medicine in Khartoum, Gezira or Omdurman Universities as these colleges are best preferred in the country.

It is clear that both girls would have got higher marks, to qualify them to any college in their country, had they sat for the local Sudan School Certificate Examinations in the Sudan, which is the only requirement for university admission in the country. In Egypt the Supreme Council of Education had set new rules, where the Egyptian Students in Saudi Arabia will be admitted to Egyptian Universities. According to Alghreeb:(2011), Secretary of the Council, the Supreme Council of Universities has decided to postpone the adoption of the achievement test as the only admission criteria to Egyptian universities. She explained that exams in Saudi Arabia are not uniformed as the case in Egypt and in most other countries of the world. She said it was difficult to adopt the new system of educational assessment of Saudi Arabia because students sat for three different types of non-standardized examinations which negatively affected their performance, then it would be difficult for them to get into fair competition with their counterparts in Egyptian universities who sat for only local standardized achievement examinations.

5:0 Conclusion

Countries decentralize their basic education systems for economic, political or for social factors or simply to improve effectiveness of financial and human recourses by making change in the education system.. But in the Saudi context decentralization of education has negatively affected the entire teaching and learning most school disciplines, as very little materials are covered in the class due to the adoption of test-oriented teaching techniques. We as university teachers can feel the poor performance of students, so we need to say that the only way out is to carry out immediate reform of educational evaluation system. The Ministry of Education has to take the lead in *administering national uniformed summative standardized achievement tests*, all over the Kingdom to secondary school leavers. They can trace the New Zealand model, where the board of school chooses or develop curriculum (with national objectives) but the ministry of education uses national achievement tests to assess the school performance. (McGinn:1999). We need to care for education as an integrated process of teaching and testing in our classroom and an instrument of change. According to this quotation from India, "the destiny of any [nation] is now being shaped in her classrooms. This we believe is no mere rhetoric. In a world based on science and technology, it is education that determines the level of prosperity, welfare and security of the people." [^{xiii}]

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