

UNPACKING THE EXPLOITATION FACED BY ECOS EXAM MARKERS

On Monday, November 23, 2020, the embattled Registrar of the Exams Council of Swaziland [ECOS], Dr. Edmund Mazibuko, announced that marking for the Swaziland General Certificate of Secondary Education [SGCSE] External Examination shall commence this coming Monday, November 30, 2020. Such takes place amidst a global pandemic [COVID-19] that almost threw the entire examination process into a limbo, compelling the ECOS to alter the normal schedule of writing and marking the external examination for all Grades [SPC, JC and SGCSE].

The ECOS is a quasi-Government organization in the country responsible for administering examinations and issue certificates. The Council was established through the Education Act No. 9 of 1981.

Dreadful

Whilst I reflected on the entire fracas of an academic year [2020] perforated with trial and error, my mind wandered on the dreadful conditions of educators who are turned seasonal labourers during this time of the year. It is public information that during this time, educators assume a new identity and role as markers contracting with a new employer [ECOS] under the guise of ‘offer and acceptance’ mantra, as used by capitalist establishments.

It is during this time that teachers, as qualified professionals, engage themselves in an atypical working relationship with the ECOS. They work in a fixed-term employment relationship, have a part-time contract: engage in ‘marginal’ part-time work as temporary workers with the ECOS manipulating them. This is what the ECOS takes pride in subjecting our ever-dedicated members to, year in and out, without showing any sign of

remorse. The crux of the whole fiasco is the result of the disintegration of the standard employment relationship and the emergence of new forms of work in recent years in the education sector with casualisation embraced as the new normal in engaging human resource.

Pertinent

Readers will recall how last year's [2019] marking was almost a non-starter with the ECOS slapped with a total of 11 demands by educators to address before it could be guaranteed that the educators would mark the external examination scripts. These professionals raised pertinent issues that the ever-pompous ECOS Management had to deal with before they could 'pick a red pen and start marking the scripts.' In fact, the feeling among the teachers was that the Council was exploiting them instead of treating them as professionals. They said they were only allowed to claim transport fee at bus fare rate yet a majority of them were driving from their different places of abode to the marking venue in their own cars. Again, the markers said they were not given accommodation yet they were expected to be at the marking venue as early as 5am and some of them worked until 8pm.

Taxed

Furthermore, our members correctly claimed that their payment, which was usually delayed, was taxed by 33 per cent. Regarding the 33 per cent tax, the markers said they wanted the council to negotiate with the Swaziland Revenue Authority (SRA) to at least tax them 10 per cent. This disposition emanated from what was happening during the 2018 National Elections, where the tax was allegedly reduced to 20 per cent, after the two entities allegedly engaged in talks. The stagnant pay rate came through as a concern too, the availability of a site nurse during the marking,

the need for hardship allowance and that the Council's Officers, including management, should work on their manner of approach when addressing them. They complained that the officers and management spoke to them anyhow and allegedly disregard that they were adults and professionals.

Unprecedented

These remain genuine concerns that the NEC did not turn a blind eye in addressing; instead, we engaged in concrete action in tackling which took the ECOS aback, falling short to label it a taboo as an unprecedented act. The Registrar did not conceal the fact that for them [ECOS], it was a novel experience to deal with the SNAT on such 'worker-employee' issues. That hurdle was, however, crossed culminating to the SNAT engaging in a sequence of bilaterals with the Ministry of Education and Training [MoET] and the ECOS on these fundamental issues, negotiating the terms and conditions of employment of teachers during the marking of an exam. A Collective Agreement [CA] is yet to be signed after a series of bargaining with the relevant parties.

Scheme of Service

As I gave thought to all this drama, it dawned on me that perhaps the bull in a China shop that needs confrontation is the prerequisite Scheme of Service for ECOS Markers. We have raised this contentious subject now and again with the MoET only to be given a cold shoulder. The SNAT believes in engaging in social dialogue where bilateral issues are discussed and a course of action paved by all parties. We are of the firm belief that the ECOS should craft a definite scheme of work for all persons engaged to be markers, moderators, team leaders etc during the overall administration of the external examination. This conundrum can never be ignored forever.

For this discourse, one deems it fit to opine that the scheme of service is a prerequisite as it specifies the duties, qualifications, competencies, skills and experience required of the prospective marker as well as the duties and responsibilities of the job. It specifies the mode of recruitment/ appointment as well as the salary attached to the post one is contracted to.

A scheme of service shall be valuable for:

- (i) job evaluation of the marking of the exam
- (ii) providing markers with a better understanding of their duties, roles and responsibilities as well as the performance expected from them;
- (iii) helping in determining training and development needs of markers; and
- (iv) assisting in the development of markers to assume higher responsibilities.

Disservice

For all intents and purposes, I would be doing disservice to bury my head in the sand, disregarding what the Parliament Select Committee from the House of Assembly, headed by MP Musa Mabuza, investigating the alleged gross irregularities relating to maladministration, production of results and other corrupt practices at the Examinations Council discovered, unearthing a can of worms at the institution. Besides the report of how results for four [4] schools in 2017 were fraudulently produced, the committee was informed of how ECOS Registrar, Dr. Edmund Mazibuko, allegedly received a E1 million handshake from Micro Projects. E14 Millions of looted funds had been picked up and reported to then Principal Secretary Dr. Sibongile Mtshali, who made means that the funds be recovered, hitting a snag in the process. All this takes place with the exploiter of teachers, Dr. Mazibuko at the helm.

Understatement

To say I was disappointed in reading the section on the ECOS, as contained in the October 2020 MoET Second Quarter Performance Report to parliament, would be an understatement. In the challenges segment, the ECOS states [in k] that, they only had a minor inconvenience with the mode of online application with markers as fewer markers were attracted this year, disregarding the proximal cause of same. How despicable! Instead of revealing the real time challenge of underpaying markers, exploiting them, not having a scheme of service in place and the dreadful conditions of markers, the ECOS only decries the poor turn-out of markers.

Professionals

Well, as much it is seldom said that marking exams is the best professional development an educator can get; it should be noted, on the flip side, that marking involves time and effort and any benefits need to be weighed against negatives. Some teachers appreciate the opportunity to earn extra income whereas others find they've signed up for weeks of misery. Teachers are professionals thus deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Subjecting teachers to a cap-in-hand situation where they are made to sit for an exam before marking the specific Paper, increasing the marking load and exposing them to COVID-19 is an unforgivable crime against humanity.

I cannot imagine the material conditions they will endure this year in the absence of a clear-cut COVID-19 Protocol [Standard Operating Procedures] for Marking External Examinations, as an addendum to the ECOS Handbook [2019/20] which sets out the regulations for conducting ECOS examinations, detailing the responsibilities of Centres, Heads of Centres and forms part of the contract between the Centre and ECOS. It can never be

acceptable for Mazibuko to do willy-nilly on our members as it has been the case since time immemorial. There is no debate around the failure or lack thereof by the Registrar to ameliorate the marking conditions of our members. The just course of action for him is to graciously embrace his protracted retirement as it is evident that he enjoys political protection from some quarters who lack the political and administrative will to rectify the ills of not only the Department; relatively, the sector as a whole. We submit.

For feedback and
comments, send to
motsamcolisi@gmail.com
or +268 7606 5972.