



Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education

West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) Sierra Leone Test Taker Analysis (2021)

***An analysis of the 2021 test takers, including
total number, age profile and results from a
survey of Senior Secondary Schools***

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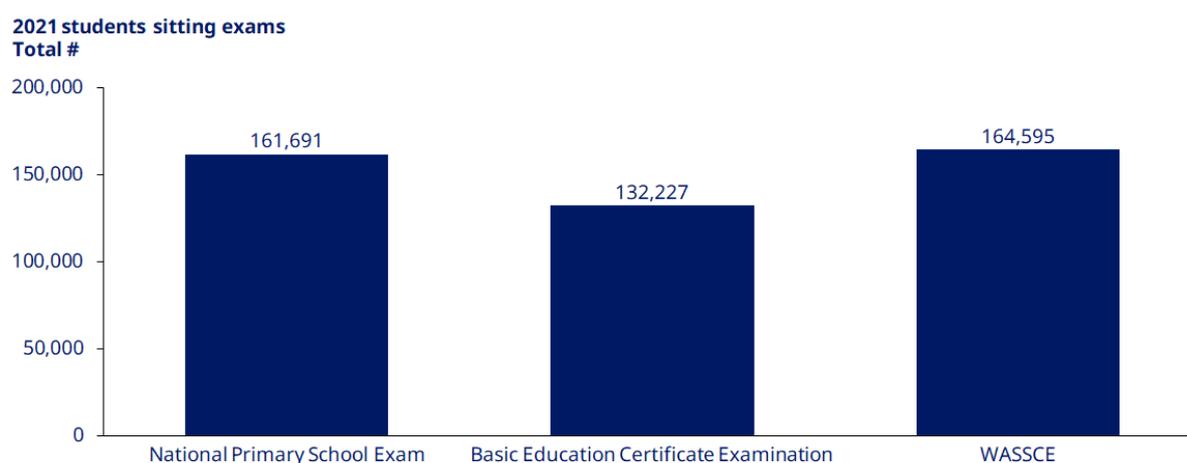
1.0 Introduction: Total Number of Test Takers and Fees Paid

This analysis looks at the total number and the profile of students sitting the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in Sierra Leone in 2021. The purpose is to assess if it is likely that more students received public payment of the exam fees than those who qualified under the conditions for exam fee payment by the Government of Sierra Leone.

In general, since the introduction of the Government's flagship Free Quality School Education (FQSE) program, the number of students who enroll in schools and sit the national transition examinations in Sierra Leone is at an all-time high. The 2020 Annual School Census (ASC) of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) indicates that 700,000 more learners enrolled in schools across all levels from pre-primary to senior secondary school than in 2018.

In 2021, based on data from the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), the number of candidates sitting transition exams was higher than ever for all three national transition exams. In fact, the number attempting the WASSCE is the highest of all three national transition examinations (see figure 1 below). This is the case although Senior Secondary Schools (SSS) have a lower total enrolment and lower gross enrollment rate (% of students attending school out of the estimated population eligible) than both Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) and Primary Schools in the 2020 ASC.

Figure 1: Number of Students Sitting Transition Exams in 2021



Moreover, many students do not complete the full six or three years of primary, JSS or SSS as indicated by the retention rates below (calculated as the ratio of enrollment in final year to first). On the other hand, the transition rate from JSS to SSS is above 100%, indicating that out-of-school students who did not complete junior secondary school the previous year joined senior secondary school. This increase was likely due to the government's policy of making SSS tuition free and otherwise lowering costs of attending school. Furthermore, to support the transition of students into higher and technical institutions, government made room to pay for repeaters. This may have been a reason for students who had otherwise dropped out or failed their WASSCE to register as repeaters.

Table 1: 2020 Total Students, Gross Enrolment Rate, Retention Rate, Transition Rate from the 2020 Annual School Census:

	Total students	Gross enrolment Rate	Retention rate	Transition rate
Primary	1,759,775	137%	38%	98%
JSS	467,585	78%	87%	109%
SSS	327,499	59%	60%	-

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The West African Examination Council (WAEC) fee for sitting the public WASSCE in 2021 is SLL 295,000 (~USD 27), which is paid by the government if a student fulfills one of the two following conditions:

- The student is currently finishing the final year of SSS
- The students finished SSS the previous year but did not pass the WASSCE at that time (repeater)

In 2021, the government paid fees for 148,997 students, 15,598 fewer than the total indicated in figure 1. It is likely that most of the students who did not receive fee payment attended private Senior Secondary Schools that do not receive public subsidy for WASSCE fees. This is different from the private WASSCE exams, which follow a different procedure and happen at a different time.

2.0 Comparison to Total Enrollment and Age Group Analysis

There is reason to believe that some students had their fees paid without fulfilling one of the two conditions for benefiting from the government fee payment. First, the sheer number of test takers compared to other transition exams is very high when bearing in mind the enrollment, transition, and retention rates presented above. In fact, the amount of test takers is equivalent to 50% of total enrollment in all three years of SSS, and, in the Western region, up to 60% of all enrolled students. In the Southern region, this number is 33%, which is closer to what's expected given that there are three years in SSS:

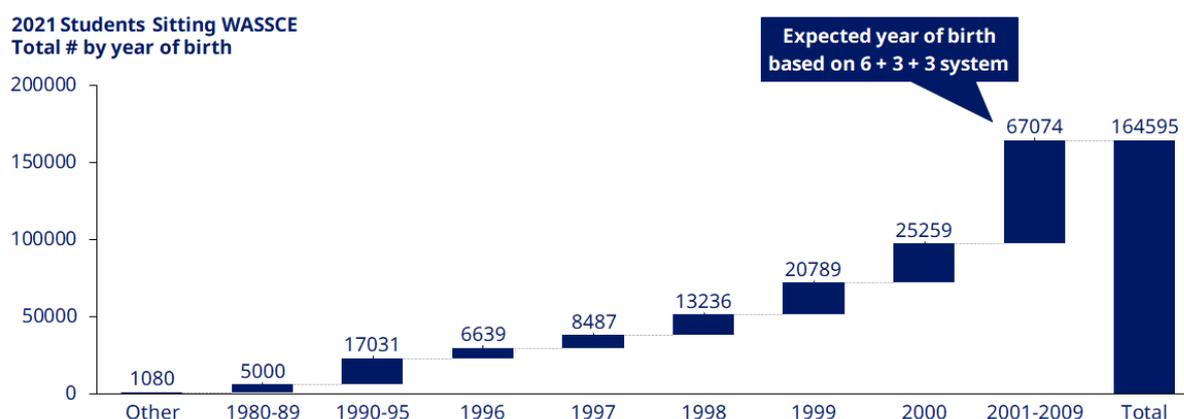
Table 2: Regional Breakdown

Region	SSS enrollment (2020 ASC)	Test takers	Test takers / Enrollment
Eastern	69,822	35,377	51%
Northern	86,447	36,529	42%
Southern	39,481	12,892	33%
Western	131,749	79,686	60%
Guinea	-	111	-
Total	327,499	164,595	50%

The upshot is that either there is a very large number of repeaters taking the examinations, or there are people registering for the examinations who are not eligible for public payment of their fees.

Second, when one takes a look at the age distribution of test takers, it is clear that there is a significant number of older students sitting WASSCE:

Figure 2: Students Sitting WASSCE in 2021 by Year of Birth



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Based on the 6 + 3 + 3 system, a student would be expected to be 18 or 19 years old at the time of the test in 2021, which means they were born in 2001 or later. As it turns out, more than half of 2021 test takers were born in 2000 or earlier. More than 1/8 or 13% were born before 1995. Below the same calculation for other years.

Table 3: Year of Birth, Minimum Age, and Cumulative Statistics based on 2021 WASSCE

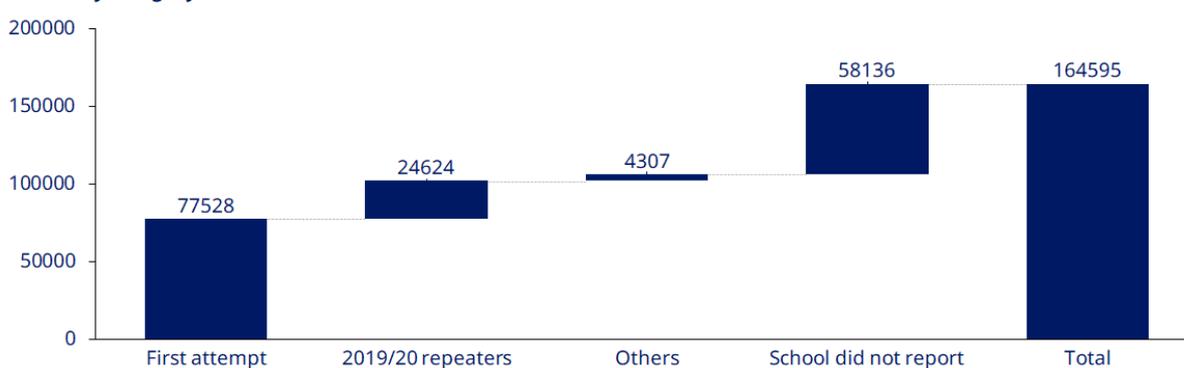
Year of birth and earlier	Minimum age in 2021	Cumulative # Test takers	Cumulative % of total Test Takers
1995	25	22,031	13%
1996	24	28,670	17%
1997	23	37,157	23%
1998	22	50,393	31%
1999	21	71,182	43%
2000	20	96,441	59%

To be sure, government policies have expanded access to education to many who previously did not have the opportunity. In addition, many students in Sierra Leone start school later than six years of age or pause their schooling for different reasons before resuming it at an older age. Many students also sit the BECE and WASSCE multiple times and with the latter they can combine credits from different years to obtain the combination they need to continue their studies in higher and technical institutions. Therefore, it is likely that not everyone is 18-19 when sitting WASSCE; however, it remains unlikely that everyone in the older age groups of 22+ years old completed SSS in 2021 or 2020 and therefore qualified for public fee payment or paid their way through private SSS.

Thirdly, in September 2021, a survey was sent to all senior secondary schools to ascertain the profile of the students who attempted the WASSCE in 2021. 294 out of 681 schools (43%) responded to the official request from the MBSSE. Below is the breakdown from schools that responded.

Figure 3: Survey Results of Students Sitting WASSCE in 2021

2021 Students Sitting WASSCE from schools responding to survey
Total # by category



Through self-reporting from less than half of schools, it is observed that at least 4300 students sat the exam and did not qualify for public subsidy. The true number is likely to be higher once the schools that did not report are factored in, and once under-reporting is taken into account.

3.0 Cost Implications

While it is undoubtedly positive that more students are seeking to finish senior secondary school and qualify to obtain higher education in Sierra Leone, the sheer number of test takers also represents a high cost to the Government of Sierra Leone.

The table below represents the potential costs to the Government of Sierra Leone of students not qualifying to receive government payment for WASSCE who still receiving a fee payment:

Table 4: Scenario Modeling of 2021 WASSCE fee costs

% not qualifying of total receiving payment	# not qualifying	Cost (SLL B)	Cost (USD M)	% of 2021 FQSE budget (~258 SLL B)
5%	7450	2	0.2	1%
10%	14900	4	0.4	2%
15%	22350	7	0.6	3%
20%	29799	9	0.8	3%
25%	37249	11	1.0	4%
30%	44699	13	1.2	5%
35%	52149	15	1.4	6%
40%	59599	18	1.6	7%
45%	67049	20	1.8	8%
50%	74499	22	2.0	9%

If we were to assume, to take one example, that 50% of the test takers of 22 years of age and above do not qualify to sit the WASSCE with public payment of exam fees, then about 25,000 students or more than about 15% of all students receiving public payment do not qualify for public payment of their exam fees. That number corresponds to more than 0.6 million USD or about 3% of the total FQSE budget.

As mentioned, it is possible that a large number of the older students or the additional students compared to BECE started school late or attend a private secondary school, but it is highly unlikely that this condition applies to all of them.

If we were to assume, to take another example, that there should be parity between the number of students sitting BECE and WASSCE (32,368 more sit WASSCE), then more than 20% of the students sitting WASSCE do not qualify for public payment of the exam fees. That number corresponds to more than 0.8M USD or about 3% of the total FQSE budget.

4.0 Conclusion and next steps

To achieve its vision, the MBSSE has made it a policy priority to integrate evidence and data into its planning processes. Furthermore, the Ministry has continued to engage all stakeholders to understand their roles and responsibilities towards the effective delivery of public education services. This report invites the public to join government to problem solve with us as we improve service delivery which enhances national human capital.

In all, there is strong reason to believe that a number of students sat WASSCE in 2021 and received public support without fulfilling the requisite conditions, but we do not know the exact number. However, by improving the monitoring of those whose fees are paid, the Government of Sierra Leone could potentially make large savings that can then be dedicated to other education needs.

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This could also benefit other WASSCE-related processes. With fewer candidates sitting WASSCE, the time needed to mark and release all of Sierra Leone's WASSCE exams will also fall. In addition, a lower number of total candidates will help determine the true pass rate of students who have recently completed SSS.

As next steps, the MBSSE will:

- Request detailed registration data from a sample of Senior Secondary Schools to determine how many students of these students who received public payment of their 2021 WASSCE fee fulfilled the conditions
- Request detailed registration data from Senior Secondary Schools to determine how many students who are registered to benefit from public payment of their 2022 WASSCE fee fulfill the conditions
- Work to ensure that for 2022 only students who are in SSS 3 or finished SSS in 2021, but did not pass and are enrolled in schools, receive government payment of the public WASSCE fee
- Work to ensure that all examination candidates next year are fully registered using their unique National Identification Numbers. This will also be required for registration in class 1, JSS 1 and SSS1 in the 2022 academic year.

Other stakeholders are requested to help ensure that only eligible candidates are registered for public examinations. Specifically, the MBSSE calls on

- Communities including Boards and School Management Committees to ensure that all examination lists are verified before onward submission to MBSSE or WAEC
- School leaders (Principals and Head Teachers) to take full responsibility where government finds out that there are students who are ineligible to receive government payment of exams fees who still benefit from public payment

As mentioned, WAEC conducts "Private WASSCE" exams annually that other students can sign up for with different eligibility criteria.

The MBSSE invites all stakeholders to continue engaging the Ministry by using the toll-free phone line "8060" for the MBSSE Situation Room and reporting any cases of violation of Ministry rules. The fight to achieve an equitable and inclusive education requires every citizen to play a part.