

Forms of Dishonesty Amongst Academic Staff and the Way Forward

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Abstract

This study sets out to investigate the forms of academic dishonesty prevalent among academic staff and the reason for their prevalence. The study used academic staff in two tertiary institutions in Cross River State, Nigeria. The survey research design was adopted. Three research questions guided the study. A questionnaire was developed, face validated and used for data collection from a convenient sample of 105 academic staff. Findings show that collection of money to change grades for students, inclusion of name in a published paper one did not contribute to, taking adjunct lectureship in more than one place at a time and covering up examination malpractice cases are some examples of the academic dishonesty exhibited by the teaching staff. Desperation for promotion, get rich quick mentality and corruption in the society, laxity in punishing “culprit” lecturers and pressure from students and their parents or guardians were cited as contributory factors to the prevalence of academic dishonesty amongst the teaching staff. Suggested strategies for curbing the menace include ethical re-orientation seminars for academic staff, proper supervision of academic staff by heads of departments and appropriate sanctioning of guilty lecturers.

Key words: Academic dishonesty; Academic staff; Prevalence; Academic integrity; Moral value

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INTRODUCTION

Nations of the world whether developed or developing have values and norms they seek to transmit to the next generation as well as aspirations to achieve greatness and become key players in the global economy. Formal education has been identified as a key instrument for the attainment of these goals. At the apex of the formal education hierarchy are tertiary institutions charged with the responsibility of developing the human capital required for the overall development of the nation. The critical role that higher educational institutions should play in the development of Nigeria is succinctly summarized in the National Policy on Education (2004) as:

- To contribute to the national development through relevant high-level manpower training.
- To develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of society.
- To promote scholarship, Community Service, national unity and international understanding.

The extent of the realization of these noble goals is often dictated by factors both external and internal to the tertiary institutions. Issues such as inadequate number of academic staff with the attendant poor staff-mix, brain drain, insufficient funding of education, unconducive teaching-learning environment, incessant strikes etc., have taken their toll on the quality of education delivery and the academic standard attained in Nigeria. This paper is not intended to discuss challenges to education in Nigeria, but it is obvious that the realization of the objective of any endeavour depends to a large extent on the willingness and ability of the principal actors to effectively carry out their assigned responsibilities.

No group of persons plays a more critical role in the actualization of the goals of education than the academic staff. They are crucial to the endeavour of the knowledge industry. Societies rely on academic staff

in tertiary institutions such as universities to teach, do research and perform community services. In essence, nations depend on the knowledge generated by tertiary institutions to propel them to the desired social, economic and technological development. Viewed from another perspective, this implies that a lot of confidence is reposed on academic staff by the society. An academic staff must therefore be a person of unquestionable character, one who is able to abide by the tenets of the university, and willing to uphold the culture of integrity for which the ivory tower is known. In other words, an academic staff must of necessity be a self-disciplined individual with very high moral standards.

The quality and standard of any academic programme is a direct responsibility of the academic staff. In fact, it can be boldly stated that an academic staff is a principal custodian of standards in any educational institution. This assertion stems from the power to judge academic attainment that is vested on the academic staff. It is this cadre of staff that awards pass or fail grades to students based on their performance. At the point of graduation students are said to have been found worthy in character and learning. This cannot be possible if the academic staff that have direct interaction with the students throughout their duration of study fail to serve as role models, or worse still, participate in any form of academic dishonesty that thwarts the purpose of the education enterprise.

Academic dishonesty has taken root and is yielding undesirable fruits in higher institutions of learning in both developed and developing countries of the world. Olasehinde (2000) aptly notes that it is no longer news that academic dishonesty remains one of the major challenges of the Nigerian education system. Moreso, Bello (2011) asserts that there is no disputing the fact the university system in Nigeria contemporarily is faced with the threat of unethical attributes.

THE STUDY PROBLEM

Nigerian public universities have been plagued by challenges such as inadequate funding, incessant strikes by various unions in the system, dearth of academic staff and so on. These challenges have certainly contributed to the decline in the quality of education delivery as well as the quality of graduate output. While efforts have been directed at improving funding and staff development, the cankerworm that is eating the essence of the ivory tower – academic dishonesty - is on the increase. The challenge is that it is not just students perpetuating academic fraud; there are clear indications of academic staff involvement as well. Three immediate problems are therefore posed:

- (1) What forms do academic staff dishonesty take?
- (2) Why is the phenomenon on the increase?
- (3) How can this problem be controlled?

THE STUDY PURPOSE

The need to undertake this study is fueled by the fact that while a lot of research has been undertaken on the issue of academic dishonesty, most of it focused on students. This work is intended to add to existing studies on academic staff involvement. It is arguably true that the pressure to obtain the gains that accrue as a result of academic excellence is the major driving force behind academic dishonesty among students. To what can be attributed the disregard for integrity among academic staff? The purpose of this study is to contribute to knowledge in the area of academic dishonesty among the teaching staff by:

- identify the forms of academic dishonesty prevalent among academic staff.
- ascertaining the factors aiding its prevalence and;
- identifying viable strategies of controlling the problem.

To achieve this aim, the following research questions are posed.

- What are the forms of academic dishonesty associated with academic staff?
- What factors are aiding the prevalence of academic dishonesty among academic staff?
- What viable strategies can be adopted to control the menace of academic dishonesty among academic staff?

METHOD

The design for this study was a survey involving two tertiary institutions located in Cross River State – one college of education and one university. Convenient samples were used for this study because of the need to include academic staff from various disciplines in the study. The research instrument was administered during an academic staff union meeting in the university while that of the College of Education (COE) was distributed by schools. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed. Of this number, 105 were successfully filled owing to unwillingness on the part of some academic staff to respond to the items on the questionnaire.

The 105 respondents that completed the questionnaire were made up of 66 males and 39 females. In terms of rank, the sample consists of 10 Assistant lecturers, 18 Lecturer III, 20 Lecturer II, 17 Lecturer 1, 20 Senior lecturers, 6 Principal lecturers, 5 Chief lecturers, 6 Associate professors and 3 Professors.

The research instrument was the researcher's constructed open-ended questionnaire. The instrument contained 2 sections. Section A sought demographic information on gender and rank. Section B contained three (3) open ended items. Item 1 sought information on the forms of academic dishonesty associated with academic staff. Item 2 inquired into the factors aiding the increase in academic dishonesty among academic staff, while item 3 sought for strategies for curbing academic dishonesty

among academic staff. The research instrument was adjudged suitable for the study through face validation by two academic staff in the area of measurement and evaluation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results will be presented and discussed, research question by research question.

Research question 1: What are the forms of academic dishonesty associated with academic staff?

The response of the study subjects to this question is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Forms of Academic Dishonesty Associated with Academic Staff

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- Forcing students to buy text books with assignments attached
 - Forceful/compulsory sale of substandard text to students
 - Collection of money to change grades for students
 - Exchange of grades for sex
 - Extortion of money as typing fee
 - Writing project and seminar papers for students for money
 - Leakage of examination question
 - Swapping of names for publication in order to take credit
 - Plagiarism/ use of students ideas
 - Inclusion of name to publish paper one did not contribute to
 - Falsification of data/research finding
 - Taking adjunct lectureship in more than one place at a time
 - Absenteeism from work
 - Giving students exam without teaching
 - Allowing students to cheat in examination hall through poor supervision
 - Covering up exam malpractice cases
 - Awarding undeserved scores to students/arbitrary award of continuous assessment scores
 - Falsification of exam record
 - Allowing students to mark students scripts
 - victimization of students who do not “cooperate”
 - Delay in preparing students results
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Table 1 shows forms of academic dishonesty prevalent among academic staff indicated by the research subjects. A close examination indicates that the issue related to forceful sale of text books to students by some academic staff was pointed out by respondents. Management of all public universities in Nigeria have had to battle the ‘handout’ syndrome that took hold of the university system from the 1990s through outright ban on the sale of handouts and insistence that staff submit their published books to the central books committee for evaluation. Apparently some scrupulous academic staff in order to make their illegal gains have taken to forcing students to buy their textbooks by attaching assignments to them and binding the handouts with covers to make them look like quality textbooks.

The “publish or perish” syndrome in the Nigerian university system appears to be behind the four inter-

related factors cited by respondents. Some academic staff in their quest to meet the demands for promotion have resorted to using students’ work especially those they supervised without due credit to the students, ‘swapping’ the order of appearance of names on publications in order to take credit as the lead author and adding their names to work they simply paid the publication fees but did not make any academic contribution to. Added to these examples of dishonest forms of behaviour is the falsification of research data and findings.

One of the problems plaguing the Nigerian university system is the dearth of academic staff, a problem that has been exacerbated by the rapid expansion in the establishment of universities, especially the private ones. This probably explains the indiscipline of holding more than one adjunct position alongside a full employment in a university by some academic staff. Such staff, in a bid to cover the various institutions they are committed to, are always on the move. This results in absenteeism and inability to adequately teach the students, appropriately cover the course content in a given semester or resort to trying to teach everything in two or three visits to the class. In the end some set exams for students on what they did not teach. These actions have other negative implications for the quality of education delivery and students’ performance.

Examination malpractice is a disease that has festered and eaten deep into the moral fiber of Nigerian universities. Its manifestation is perverse and seems to be on the increase. The respondents in this study are indicting academic staff of participation in examination malpractice through poor supervision of students during examinations and unwillingness to report students caught cheating. Commenting on this issue Copeland (2005) asked “what kind of expectation for ethical behavior is communicated when professors ignore cheating? Abdulkareem and Alabi (2004) on their part opined that many strategies so applied to curb examination malpractices within the university system tend to be ineffective. This situation according to them might not be unconnected to the fact that the student culprits are usually targeted by these strategies, brushing aside the contributory roles of others university members in the ultimate act. Although, the established procedure for handling cases of examination malpractice can be tiresome, ignoring offenders certainly gives the impression of either indifference or collusion. Another related issue cited by the respondents is the award of undeserved scores to students. These fraudulent practices are serious dents to the image and integrity of the ivory tower.

Research question 2: What factors are aiding the prevalence of academic dishonesty among academic staff?

The answers obtained from the respondents with regards to the factors are aiding the prevalence of academic dishonesty among academic staff is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Factors Aiding the Increase in Academic Dishonesty among Academic Staff

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- Stagnation in career
 - Desperation for promotion
 - Emphasis in publication as basis for promotion
 - Lack of research skill
 - Lack of commitment to the profession(teaching)
 - Greed for money
 - Lack of discipline/poor moral/integrity
 - Living above means(income)
 - Pressure from students and their parents/guardians
 - Wanting to be popular among students
 - Fear of student “cult” attack/ intimidation
 - Enticement by students through offering money/sex
 - Get rich quick mentality/corruption in the society
 - Poor supervision of academic staff
 - Lack of feedback from students
 - Laxity in punishing “culprit” lecturers
 - Nature of staff employment-adjunct/part time
 - Faulty employment procedure in academic staff employment
 - Employment of incompetent lecturers
 - Excess workload on academic staff
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Several factors as shown in table 2 have been cited by respondents as aiding the increase in academic dishonesty among academic staff. Stagnation in career and the need to get promoted are cited as contributory factors to the prevalence of academic dishonesty among academic staff. There are two dimensions to this promotion related factor. First is the fact that some academic staff have stayed at a particular level/rank for so long owing to their inability to meet the requirements for promotion namely acquisition of higher degree and particularly publication of quality articles. The second dimension has to do with those that want to beat the system and get promoted by any means. Given this scenario, coupled with the lack of research skills by some academics, it is not surprising that respondents viewed emphasis on publication as a basis for promotion as a part of the reason for dishonesty among academic staff.

The teaching profession in Nigerian public universities is made up of individuals with varying degrees of passion for the job. Among the academic staff are those who exhibit greed for money, live above their income and lack the commitment and dedication needed to bring about quality education delivery. In line with the views of the respondents Ikhariale (2003) observes that Nigerian universities are currently harbouring misfits within their belly and that there are those who call themselves teachers but who, due to their intellectual and ethical weakness, ought not to be associated with the ivory tower. Pressures from parents and students as well as the corruption in the society are certainly yielding undesirable fruits in the universities. It is no longer news that some students in their desperation to pass either entice the academic staff with money, gifts and even their bodies or on the other

hand those in cults use threats to obtain their desires.

Poor supervision of academic staff, laxity in punishing “culprit” lecturers, faulty employment procedures in academic staff employment and employment of incompetent lecturers were equally advanced by respondents as factors contributing to the increase in academic dishonesty among academic staff. These indicated causative factors are administrative in nature and seem to indict the university management. Some of the occurrences in the university system such as absenteeism of academic staff from duty, delay in preparing and release of students’ results and the non-formalized means of obtaining feedbacks from students especially about teaching quality seem to give credence to the opinion of respondents on the issue of poor supervision of academic staff. The delay in meting out deserved punishment to offending persons in the system owing to the bureaucratic process involved in the disciplinary procedure, the “man know man” (network of friends or relations) and sacred cow syndrome in Nigerian society which shields culprits often provide the boldness for other academics with weak moral to indulge in academic dishonesty. The fact remains that the severity of a written sanction loses its bite and weakens the system if not promptly executed when necessary. Again, it is often difficult for the university management to cleanse the system of morally bankrupt academic staff due to students’ unwillingness to testify against them either because they benefit from the corruption or are afraid of reprisals. The employment of academic staff ought to follow the due process in order to establish the suitability of such an individual for the position, but this is not often the case as the university managements are often under pressure to employ staff based on other considerations. Such action often brings in staff that heads of departments find difficult to manage because they are the untouchables with high connections. Commenting on employment of lecturers into the Nigerian universities, Abudugana (2009) notes that there are those employed based on merit, due process, the man-know-man factor and some based on quota system. He partly attributes the alarming decline in the quality of education to the fact that quality and merit is not a major determinant of who becomes a lecturer in Nigerian universities.

The respondents equally cited excess workload as a factor contributing to the manifestation of dishonest behavior among academic staff.

Research question 3: What viable strategies can be adopted to control the menace of academic dishonesty among academic staff?

The suggested strategies for curbing academic dishonesty among academic staff by the respondents are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Suggested Viable Strategies for Curbing Academic Dishonesty among Academic Staff

- Ethical re-orientation seminars for academic staff
- Orientation of staff on employment
- Mandatory mentoring of younger lecturer by senior ones
- Enhancing the teaching-learning facilities
- Appropriate sanctioning of guilty lecturers
- Following the proper procedure for staff recruitment
- Proper supervision of academic staff by heads of departments
- Ensuring recruitment of qualified academic staff
- Training and re-training of academics
- Set up lecture monitoring team in each faculty
- Review of promotion criteria to be more comprehensive
- Feedback mechanism should be put in place to enable students report erring lecturers
- Employment of more qualified lecturers so as to reduce workload

The respondents have given diverse suggestions aimed at curbing the menace of academic dishonesty among academic staff as shown in Table 3. The suggestion of ethical re-orientation of academic staff by respondents is apt in view of the fact that high ethical standard is certainly expected of the university given the crucial role it plays in the molding of youths and the overall societal development. Equally, the university management should give due attention to the orientation of new academic staff on employment. The gains of orientation exercise and mentoring programme cannot be over emphasized particularly as orientation provides an avenue for letting new staff know the norms guiding conduct in the institution while mentoring provides a means of ensuring an all-round development of a staff.

All the other suggested strategies equally require action from the various administrative cadre of the university be it at the departmental, faculty or management levels. The need to properly supervise academic staff by the Head of department and monitor lectures at the various faculties has been suggested by the respondents. Again, the reduction of academic staff workload through employment of more qualified staff, training and re-training of academics, enhancing of the teaching-learning facilities and appropriate sanctioning of guilty lecturers has been mentioned by respondents as issues to be tackled if the university is to make headway in reducing the prevalence of academic dishonesty among academic staff.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Academic dishonesty is a major challenge to educational systems both in developed and developing countries and

curbing the menace is a concern to all stakeholders in the education enterprise. This study in no way provides all the answers to the issue of academic dishonesty among academic staff. It has however provided some insight into the manifestations of academic dishonesty among academic staff and the factors aiding its prevalence. Although, this paper has a major limitation as a result of sample size, the findings may still be applicable to other Nigerian public tertiary institutions of the same status.

Several strategies for curbing academic dishonesty were advanced by respondents. There is a need for Nigerian public universities to develop an academic integrity policy that stipulates the professional norms or ethical codes all academic staff are required to uphold. Bisong (2011) has urged the need for moral education or re-orientation to basic moral values. This in no small measure will help to ensure that academic staff cultivate and maintain the culture of academic integrity

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