

THE INTENSITY OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN TANZANIA AND HOW TO CURB THE SITUATION

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ABSTRACT

Education stakeholders have always been striving to maintain academic integrity in higher learning institutions. This is because higher learning institutions are viewed as a source of truth and honesty where students are shaped in both academic and moral aspects. This paper investigates the intensity of academic dishonesty among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania and goes a step further to elicit some appropriate measures to curb the situation. The study participants included postgraduate students (master's degree students) in two-degree programmes namely; education and social sciences from four universities as well as quality assurance officers and head of departments. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews. The results show that academic integrity can be maintained in higher learning institutions through a number of ways. These include the establishment of taught courses on academic ethics, conducting mutual discussions between lecturers and students on academic integrity, and appropriate application of plagiarism detecting software. Other measures that could be taken include, change of assessment methods, use of external examiners on final assessment projects, strengthening the internal quality assurance system, conducting frequent seminars on supervisory roles, and raising the level of academic commitment among postgraduate students. Therefore, this study recommends that maintaining academic integrity in higher learning institutions should be carried out in a collaborative way among the education stakeholders.

Keywords: Academic integrity, dishonesty, postgraduate students, higher learning institutions, Tanzania.

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that academic dishonesty has been taking place in academic institutions all over the world. Studies have indicated that academic dishonesty at higher education is simply a transition from academic dishonesty behaviours at high school which proves that such

unethical behaviour will not stop, but continue to slither its way into the professional careers that such people will undertake (Desalegn & Berhan, 2014; Krueger, 2014; Bali, 2015). In higher learning institutions, students acknowledge that they have been engaging in one way or another in academic dishonesty (Helliot, Deal & Hendryx, 2014). It is disheartening to note that academic dishonesty emanates from the context of the community and the school.

Academic dishonesty undermines one of the key roles of higher learning institutions which is to create an environment conducive to learning that will produce graduates who not only are highly skilled and technically competent, but also demonstrate high standards of honesty, ethical responsibility and commitment to serving their relevant profession and society well (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005). Thus, it is a common image of most institutions of higher learning to aim for academic excellence and to develop characters so as to develop their professionalism. However, owing to the results of many researches in this area, different situations are being observed (Resurreccion, 2012).

There is no consensus on the actual definition of academic dishonesty. This is because definitions vary according to culture (Heyneman, 2014). However, it suffices to say that, academic dishonesty involves all behaviours or actions that are not accepted by academic institutions because it undermines academic integrity (Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox & Payne, 2010; Bali, 2015). From a historical perspective, students in higher learning institutions have been engaging in academic dishonesty by using both modern and traditional methods of academic cheating (Sorgo, Marija, Urska & Marko, 2015).

In higher learning institutions, there are many forms of academic dishonesty practice. The most common form is fabrication and falsification, which involves purposely altering information or inventing information, citation, or data. This happens when a student invents a reference source or provides a false claim of how the information was gathered or collected. Another form is cheating. This involves a student looking at another student's work during the examination or quiz when collaboration is not allowed, or trying to communicate with others in order to get help during an examination or quiz. Another form of academic dishonesty is plagiarism, which is the intentional or unintentional presentation of someone else's words or ideas without clear and proper acknowledgement. Furthermore, academic dishonesty takes place in form of multiple submissions. This involves a student submitting the same work or substantial portions of the same work in a course for credit more than once without the permission of the instructor. The last form of academic dishonesty is misrepresenting. This involves the taking an exam or quiz or completing any academic assignment for another person or having someone do the same for him/her (Fontana, 2009; Johnson, 2013; Bali, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In various contexts, numerous researchers agree that the intensity of academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions is at an alarming rate, hence collaborative efforts to curb the situation are needed (Novotney, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Hodges, 2017). The study conducted by Freiburger *et al.* (2017) proposed that, higher learning institutions should establish strong deterrent policies that can combat academic dishonesty. Chirikov, Shmeleva and Loyalke (2019) add that university administrators can stop academic dishonesty through the enforcement of policies on academic integrity such as honor codes. On the same vein, smaller class sizes and the increased clarity and relevance of instructions are also associated with decreases in cases of academic dishonesty (McCabe, Butterfield, and Trevino, 2012).

The study by Naghdipour and Emeagwali (2013) maintain that making sense of students' reasons and justifications for cheating or getting involved in academic dishonesty will definitely help raise our awareness as to the appropriate tactics and strategies needed by faculty to prevent it from becoming a norm on university campuses, no matter how strong individual factors or students' temptation might seem to be. Also, Tabsh, Elkadi, and Addelfatah (2019) opine that faculty members are recommended to either make their own assignments or modify the end-of-chapter problems from textbooks because students may have access to solution manuals. They are encouraged to give different homework problems and projects from one semester to another since students may have access to graded past work. They further point out that while test banks provided to faculty by publishers may be used as a guide when creating exams, problems from such sources should not be put verbatim on exams by faculties because they are often available for purchase by students on the internet.

A study conducted in Zimbabwe by Chireshe (2014) on academic dishonesty indicated that it was possible for the university lecturers to curb academic dishonesty among students of higher learning institutions if they taught students about how to cite sources of information, improve the provision of reading resources, improve ways of lecturing, and impose strict invigilation and encouraged to study hard consistently. Another study which was conducted in South Africa by Thomas and De Bruin (2012) on student academic dishonesty proposed that in order to eliminate academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions, universities and their faculties should be proactive in establishing organisational cultures, along with supportive structures and systems, that address this threat to academic integrity.

Moreover, there was a study conducted by Omonijo, Oludayo, Uche and Rotimi (2014) on curtailing academic dishonesty using student affairs personnel in Nigeria. The study found that academic dishonesty could be eliminated by organising seminars on maintaining academic integrity in university campuses. Such seminars help to remind students, faculty members and administrators about their roles of maintaining academic integrity. In Malawi, there was a study by Seleman, Chawinga and Dube (2018) on the reasons as to why postgraduate students plagiarise. The study recommended that in order to stop such academic dishonesty, universities should conduct awareness campaigns about the negative effects of plagiarism, targeting postgraduate students. The study further recommended that universities should introduce advanced academic writing skills training for postgraduate students. In Zambia, the study conducted by Akakandelwa, Jain and Wamundila (2015) on academic dishonesty recommended that in order to curb academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions, the university authorities should introduce robust policies and regulations that take into cognizance the advent of various information and communication technologies and the different learning modes being adopted by the university.

In general, from the literature, it has been shown that academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions is a scourge nevertheless, higher learning institutions have been working hard to eliminate this problem. Higher learning institutions are urged to develop a collective measure to combat this problem. In Tanzania, little is known about proper measures that can be deployed by higher learning institutions to combat the problem. Therefore, this paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by addressing the following questions: How can the faculty address issues regarding academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions? How can individual postgraduate students engaged in efforts to address academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions?

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to determine the intensity of academic dishonesty among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania and how to curb the problem. The study deployed the qualitative approach as a method of inquiry. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews. The qualitative approach was chosen in order to gain an understanding of the feelings and experience of graduate students, head of departments and quality assurance officers regarding the intensity of academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions in Tanzania and how the problem can be eliminated. Focus group discussion was chosen as a data collection tool because in some instances, these discussions produced new thinking among participants which resulted in a more in-depth discussion. Also, FGD allows group participants to easily share their opinion, whether they agree or disagree with discussion before them.

On the other hand, interview was chosen as a data collection tool because it provides flexibility to the interviewers. Also, the interviewer can judge the non-verbal behavior of the respondent. Data for the study were collected from Dar es Salaam, Dodoma and Iringa regions. These regions were purposively selected because they have a good number of private and public universities which offer various degree programmes. The participants were drawn from four universities doing education, and social sciences programmes. A total of 8 focus group discussions were conducted in four universities. Each group consisted of ten participants. Also, a total of 8 head of departments and 8 quality assurance officers were interviewed. The information from the focus group discussions and interviews was audio recorded and later on transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis Process

The data were analysed using the thematic approach as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013), whereby appropriate themes were identified, described and illustrated by the quotes from participants. Earlier on, before commencing data collection, a research permit was obtained from the Open University of Tanzania. Thereafter, informed consent to conduct the study was also obtained from the respective authorities and universities. Confidentiality of the information gathered and anonymity of the respondents were ensured.

RESULTS

Several issues emerged from the focus group discussions regarding the intensity of academic dishonesty among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania and how to curb the situation. These are discussed below.

Introducing Courses on Academic Ethics

In higher learning institutions, school administrators are supposed to include a course on academic ethics. Through this, students will learn what is right and what is wrong, hence knowing the consequences of following a wrong path. Most of respondents who participated in the focus group discussions and interviews explained that if postgraduate students are taught about academic integrity and then assessed at the end of the semester cases of academic dishonesty will diminish. The respondents gave the following explanations:

A course on academic ethics will help student to understand a wide range of issues regarding academic integrity and how to maintain it. And through assessments offered at the end of the semester, a lecturer will get feedback on students' level of understanding the course (Interview, head of department of university D).

Indeed, introducing a course on ethics is very important since it will enable lecturers to monitor the students' behaviour particularly that related to academic cheating. Also, a lecturer will be able to discuss with students who cheat about how to maintain academic integrity (Interview, head of department of university C).

I think it is very good to introduce a course on academic ethics. Once this course is introduced, I think cases of plagiarism during dissertations submissions will not be entertained by universities. Currently, there are many such cases among postgraduate students (Interview, quality assurance officer of university A).

These voices indicate that teaching postgraduate students about academic integrity may have positive results since students will be able to know the disadvantages of engaging in academic dishonesty. When postgraduate students are engaged in academic dishonesty their respective universities and the entire society will lose credibility. Thus, academic cheating has negative impacts not only on the education system, but also the society at large.

Conducting Mutual Discussion between Lecturers and Students on Academic Integrity

The second theme which was mentioned by the respondents as one of the measures to stop academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions in Tanzania was that lecturers should conduct mutual discussions with their students on how they can maintain academic integrity. It was advised that lecturers should spend some minutes during teaching hours to discuss issues about academic dishonesty. The respondents explained that if university lecturers discuss academic dishonesty with their students, students will be aware of its impact, and consequently they will stop practicing it. The respondents argued as follows:

What I can say is that those classes where lecturers take time to discuss about academic dishonesty have very few cases of students committing academic fraud. On the other hand, those classes where lecturers do not discuss with students about how to maintain academic dishonesty are worse in terms of academic dishonesty (Interview, head of department of university A).

I thank some lecturers in this university who devote their time to explain to us the meaning, types and disadvantages of academic dishonesty. It is from their advice that I am able to paraphrase well and avoid plagiarism. Now I am aware of types and forms of academic dishonesty (FGD, student of university B).

Appropriate Application of Plagiarism Detecting Software

The third theme regarding the methods for curbing academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions in Tanzania that was mentioned by the respondents was the appropriate application of plagiarism detecting software. It should be noted that the goal of higher learning institutions is to prepare a student who is credible and who will be able to construct his/her own ideas when reading different academic works. A student is expected to acknowledge the sources that he/she has used in his/her work to avoid theft in academic. By doing so, he will be able to maintain his/ her academic integrity. Respondents opined that universities should teach lecturers on using plagiarism detecting software to verify the authenticity of academic works. Some of the respondents gave the following explanations:

If lecturers use a plagiarism detecting software such as Turnitin, they will be able to spot the work which has been plagiarised and penalise the students as per rules and regulations that the university has set. So, it is very important for every lecturer of this university to be familiar with the application of this software for the purpose of maintaining academic integrity (Interview, head of department of university D).

As a quality assurance officer in this university, my role is to ensure that academic integrity is maintained by students and lecturers. I always encourage lecturers to use plagiarism detecting software especially Turnitin to check for students' assignments and also for their final projects especially dissertations and theses. And we are very serious on this (Interview, quality assurance officer of university A).

Change of Assessment Methods

Through interviews and focus group discussions conducted to the respondents, it was advised that lecturers should change their current assessment methods and assign more weight to presentations and oral examinations. They said by doing so grades will not be based on a single high-stakes essay or examinations. The head of departments who participated in the study gave the following explanations:

It is during seminar and theses presentations that we can easily identify dishonest students. Most of them fail to answer questions raised by the panellists. They accept every comment without giving any clarification. If we were so strict on this most of them would fail (Interview, head of department of university A). During seminar or dissertation presentations, it is very easy to identify dishonest students since they lack confidence in answering questions from the panellists. Some of them cannot answer any question; they just remain silent after finishing their presentations (Interview, head of department university B).

Use of External Examiners on Final Assessment Projects

It was proposed by the respondents that in order for universities to maintain academic integrity, external examiners should be deployed so as to double-grade the examinations. External examiners have a duty to evaluate all forms of assessment which contribute to students' degree results; ensure fairness and consistency in the assessment process; and comment, if invited to do so, on any alleged cases of assessment irregularities. Thus, external examination will help to ensure that students' assessments have been evaluated by an external agent other than the lecturers who taught them. One head of department had the following to say:

In this university external examiners are very important. They are invited when students have submitted their dissertations and theses in order to check whether such students deserve a degree award. When hiring external examiners, we always consider their academic profile. Sometimes we recruit them from outside Tanzania (Interview, head of department of university A).

Strengthening the University Internal Quality Assurance System

Most of the internal quality assurance parameters for universities focus on teaching and learning, and curbing academic dishonesty. This shows that they are entrusted by the universities to ensure that quality education is attained by eliminating any vices which will hinder the provision of quality education. As such, universities are obliged to strengthen the internal quality assurance system by providing all equipment needed for this activity. The respondents had the following to say:

Quality assurance should be conducted in an inclusive manner, with full university commitment and stakeholder participation. Quality assurance officers should be given all necessary working equipment to enable them carry out their duties efficiently (Interview, head of department of university C).

Conducting Frequent Seminars on Supervisory Roles to Lecturers

Research findings revealed that one of the strategies to maintain academic integrity in higher learning institutions is to enable universities to conduct frequent seminars on supervisory roles among lecturers so as to ensure professional development for staff relating to academic integrity. It is expected that these seminars will empower lecturers to understand various new forms of academic cheating that students always use because of the adoption of science and technology. This was acknowledged by a head of department from university D. Thus, it is very important for the faculty members to be empowered through seminars so as to understand various new techniques employed by students to cheat. This will allow the faculty members to address issues before they become worse.

Academic Commitment among Postgraduate Students

It was found that students who are highly committed to studying and those who strictly follow the university calendar are less engaged in academic fraud. Such students properly use their time to attend classes and study in the library to further their understanding of what had been covered in the classroom. Therefore, time management is an important aspect in maintaining academic integrity. One of the graduate students gave the following explanation:

...yes, you asked me how I maintain academic integrity at this university. It is easy to say that I always study the university calendar and do my assignments as early as possible before the deadline. This has helped me to meet deadlines for my assignments and get enough time to study in the library (FGD, student of university B).

It is evident that academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions is a serious problem whose elimination requires collaborative efforts. Faculty members, students and education stakeholders are called upon to work tirelessly to fight this education malpractice. If proper measures are not put in place, the quality of education will be at risk, and consequently, our graduates will not be trusted by employers and the community at large.

DISCUSSION

This study found that academic dishonesty is a serious problem among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania, and that various measures need to be put in place to eliminate the problem. One of the ways proposed is the teaching of courses on academic ethics. The findings further indicated mutual discussions between lectures and students on academic integrity may help to eliminate academic dishonesty. The findings are consistent with Tabsh, Elkadi and Addelfatah (2019) who reported that discussion of academic integrity issues between lecturers and students, helps to make students familiar with academic integrity and how to maintain it. The findings are also in line with Elliot, Deal and Hendryx (2014) who argue that lecturers who take few minutes to discuss issues related to academic integrity in classes make students refrain from engaging in intentional commitment of academic dishonesty. The findings also revealed that academic cheating can be stopped when there is an appropriate application of plagiarism detecting software. Anney and Mosha (2015) maintain that plagiarism is a critical problem in higher learning institutions in Tanzania, and thus the application of plagiarism detecting software is very important. Eret and Ok (2014) add that the problem of plagiarism in developing countries is huge in such a way that most assignments, particularly, take-home assignments, and theses/dissertations contain some elements of plagiarism. Thus, they opined that before submission for grading of those works, they should be checked for plagiarism. Adiningrum and Kutieleh (2011) warn that that plagiarism in higher learning institutions cannot end if academic members of staff do not use a plagiarism detecting

software, such as Turnitin. Similarly, Mbilinyi and Msuya (2018) argue that, since the increase of academic plagiarism is attributed to 21st century technological advancements that render plagiarism effortless, it is the role of university lecturers to use scientific methods for detecting plagiarised work.

Moreover, the respondents who participated in the study were optimistic that change of assessment methods will help to curb academic dishonest behaviours among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions. Cluskey, Ehlen and Raiborn (2011) propose that lecturers should make a test available on the day it is offered, not earlier, and that they should set specific and time-based periods for taking the test. They further advised that lecturers should change banks of questions to every end of the semester or year so as to avoid students copy and paste from previous examinations. Howell, Sorenson and Tippets (2009) argue that low stakes assessments are less likely to trigger cheating. This is because they are smaller in scope and do not threaten student grades, they can create a culture that values assessment. McGee (2019) urges university lecturers to use performance assessments rather than objective tests to limit opportunities for cheating and plagiarism. This is because aligning assessment type with instructional objectives may identify new opportunities to use performance for practice. Using performance for low-stakes formative assessment or high-stakes summative assessment at the end of the course can also make it less appealing and more difficult to cheat or plagiarise

Furthermore, the study findings show that academic cheating among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions can be stopped by engaging external examiners in final assessment projects. This is because external examiners check for quality assessment in form of grades that students have acquired during the final assessment. These findings are consistent with the findings by Israel (2019) who argued that external examiners in higher learning institutions are required to verify that standards are appropriate for each unit of study and to provide independent impartial comment on standards set and student achievement of those standards. Similarly, Asamoah (2016) contends that external examiners are important because they verify that the process of deciding assessment outcomes for individual students is fair, fairly operated, and in line with the university's regulations. The findings also revealed that in order to curb postgraduate students' academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions, universities should strengthen their internal quality assurance systems. Bretag and Mahmud (2016) reiterate that internal quality assurance officers in higher learning institutions encourage institutions to maintain detailed records on academic misconduct, making it easy to know the magnitude of the problem.

Another mechanism was conducting of frequent seminars on supervisory roles to lecturers. These seminars will make lecturers aware of the new forms of academic dishonesty and how to deal with them. Mbilinyi and Msuya (2018) argue that frequent seminars on supervisory roles to lecturers are very important to make lecturers updated with new information concerning academic dishonesty. Lastly, the findings indicate that academic commitment among postgraduate students and strictly observing the university calendar will help to eliminate academic dishonest behaviour in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. If students are committed to their studies and strictly follow the established deadlines, they will use their time properly by attending classes and studying in the library. This is consistent with Bali (2015) who concluded that time management among postgraduate students in Tanzania is an important aspect of maintaining academic integrity hence curbing academic dishonesty.

CONCLUSION

Generally, academic dishonesty is a threat to higher learning institutions. As such, its intensity cannot be underestimated. The research findings have shown that there are various measures that universities can apply to eliminate academic dishonesty. What needs to be emphasized alongside all these measures is collaboration between universities, parents, students and other stakeholders who should come together to fight this academic malpractice. This will result into having credible and trusted graduates.

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