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Maintaining academic integrity among East African university students

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the extent to which academic integrity is maintained in the academic programmes of three East African university students selected from one of the universities in each one of the three countries. For confidentiality and identification purposes, the universities were labeled A, B and C. The level of academic integrity was interpreted on the basis of the extent to which participants admitted to have engaged in plagiarism and academic misconduct in its various manifestations. The findings clearly indicated that academic dishonesty is widely practised by East African university students. The extent to which this held true varied from one item to another of the sixteen questionnaire statements with the highest score being in items related to plagiarism. Overall, 37% of the students in university C, followed by 32% of students in university A and 24% of students in university B engaged in academic dishonesty. The rate at which academic dishonesty was reported was comparable to what has been reported in other countries including Canada, Ethiopia, South Africa, the UK and USA.

Keywords: Academic integrity; cheating at university; students' academic misconduct; university students and plagiarism; compromising academic standards

Introduction

Academic dishonesty in the form of plagiarism, cheating during tests and examination, falsifying data, having others write examinations and research papers, unloading assignments from the internet, using notes and books in the

writing of tests and examinations, securing confidential information about impending tests or examinations and many other similar scholarly activities is a common phenomenon among university students worldwide (McCabe & Trevino 1996; McCabe & Pavela 1997; Hanson 2003; Clark 2006; Mwamwenda 2006, 2007; Gull, Kohler & Patriquin 2007; Bulstrode 2008; Lipsett 2008; Tam 2008; Jalali 2009; Macleod 2009).

Given this state of affairs in terms of its prevalence and magnitude, many scholars have described it as: alarming, scandalous, widespread, very high, epidemic, rampant, substantial, getting worse, on the increase, common, real problem, rife, and that academic dishonesty poses a serious threat to the university as we know it and the degrees conferred in terms of status and credibility (Curry & Rainey 2007; Charteris 2009; Maker & Power 2009; Thomas 2009; Swemmer 2009).

In the past century more research academic misconduct, reported in over 200 journals, has been carried out and published in the United States of America than any other country (Lupton & Chapman 2002). Among American university students, nationwide surveys have shown that the number of students engaged in academic dishonesty is as high as over 70%. For example, Curry & Rainey (2007) argue that cheating in academic work is prevalent to the point that it has been referred to as epidemic. In a survey of American university students, 75% admitted cheating at least once during their academic career (Curry & Rainey 2007).

In another survey, Sarpotdar (2009) stated that statistics on plagiarism revealed that 74% students admitted that they plagiarized their work from internet. In similar survey carried out among some of the American prestigious universities, 66% showed that they had plagiarized their academic assignments on the internet (Sarpotdar 2009). According to Gull et al.(2007) 70% American students admit cheating in their academic work in one form or another., whereas according to Staarts & Hupp (2008), the number of university students cheating ranges from 50% to 80%. And further point out that the number of students who abstain from academic dishonesty is rather small.

In a survey carried out across Canada, Gull et al. (2007) observed that over 50% of Canadian university students engaged in academic dishonesty before the completion of their studies and that 53% admitted that they cheated in their written work. They further admitted that they used passages from internet or secondary sources without acknowledgement as well as submitting assignments done for them by others.

In Ottawa, the Canadian national capital, Tam (2008) indicates that for the past decade, the rate of cheating among university students has risen substantially among the universities located in this city. At Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, students writing examinations would ask for permission to go to the bathroom with the intention of cheating since they had hidden answer sheets in the stalls (Hi-tech cheating 2009).

In the United Kingdom, 168 universities were surveyed to find out the extent to which plagiarism was used in students' academic work (Lipsett 2008). Among the 100 universities that cared to complete the survey, there were 9 000 incidences in which plagiarism was reported to have been used. According to Bulstrode (2008), a survey based on the University of Cambridge, a well known and prestigious British University, 49% of the undergraduate students reported to have engaged in cheating by submitting others' academic work, as if it were their own.

Of all the students that engaged in plagiarism revealed using, without due acknowledgement, internet site Wikipedia as their source of information (Bulstrode 2008). Macleod (2009) states that cheating in Scotland universities has been on the increase. For example, at the University of Edinburg the number of students cheating had risen from 50 the previous year to 121. Similar occurrence has been reported from other Scottish universities such as Aberdeen, Glasgow and Strathelyde.

In Russia, more than 80% of the students interviewed said they had cheated by using crib sheets during examinations, looking at other students' work while in an examination, using lecture notes in the examination, copying from another student's homework, buying term papers and engaging in plagiarism (Lupton & Chapman 2002).

In a comparable study of Russian and American students, 55% of American students admitted cheating as compared to 64% of Russian students (Lupton & Chapman 2002). While Russian students did not think it was bad to cheat, American students thought otherwise. Consequently, Russian students had a greater propensity to engage in academic dishonesty.

What other universities are going through with academic dishonesty is also taking place in South African universities irrespective of their status (Mwamwenda & Monyooe 2000; Mwamwenda 2006, 2007; Russouw 2005; Charteris 2009; Swemmer 2009). Govender (2007) has reported plagiarism among South African students and staff occurring at some of the universities including those deemed most prestigious.

Charteris (2009) argues that plagiarism in South Africa has become common not only in universities, but also in society, and that this is aided by modern media and computer technology, as a result of resultant easy mode of retrieving information. Swemmer (2009) adds to say, that plagiarism in South African schools and universities is a real problem that must be reckoned with. This is illustrated by a report showing that close to 50% of the cases of academic misconduct brought forward for discipline involve students engaging in plagiarism at Wits University (Swemmer 2009).

Thomas (2009) advances the argument that academic integrity is under siege not only in South Africa, but world-wide. In a similar line of reasoning, Russouw (2005) asserts that on the basis of evidence academic dishonesty is rife in South African universities. For example, at the University of Pretoria, in a survey of 150 undergraduate students, 80% admitted that it was a common practice for them to copy their assignments from internet.

At the University of Cape Town, more than 50 cases of academic dishonesty were brought to the attention of the Disciplinary Committee (Russouw 2005). At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, a former student had to be stripped of his doctoral degree in Engineering, on account that he had plagiarized several chapters of his doctoral thesis (Maker & Power 2008).

In a study of South African students at Walter Sisulu University, there was clear evidence that academic misconduct was a common practice, not only in response to the questionnaire, but also on the basis of the observation of the researchers who were members of teaching staff (Mwamwenda & Monyooe 2000). Students acknowledged in their responses that they had cheated by not acknowledging the original author or source of information used, using false references, not acknowledging joint work, misplacing library reference books and journals and using false medical certificates for missed tests/ assignments and examinations (Mwamwenda & Monyooe 2000).

Teferra (2001) argues that academic dishonesty is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in Ethiopia, as there have been reports on irregularities such as stolen examinations, answers for sale, collusion of invigilators, copying from other students without or with their consent, as well as exchanging worksheets. .

Why study academic integrity?

Park (2003) is of the view that academic misconduct poses a serious challenge to academic integrity as well as a threat to institutional assurance. The credibility

of a university is essential for the recognition of its degrees within the country, as well as outside countries where its graduates may seek employment or wish to pursue further studies (Teferra 2001). This cannot be realized when dubious standards are practised without due control.

Charteris (2009) argues that academic dishonesty, and therefore lack of academic integrity, poses a threat to the basis of a university. For this reason, he argues that it is important that draconian measures are employed to stop academic dishonesty. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that engaging in plagiarism is tantamount to denying oneself the opportunity of learning how to produce scholarly work. Students therefore must be admonished to shun academic dishonesty, in so far as it diminishes their scholarly work, the value of their degrees, and for the simple reason that it is ethically wrong (Curry & Rainey 2007).

Moreover, Gull et al. (2007) reason that engaging in academic misconduct compromises academic standards and degrees conferred on such students, as matter of fact, such qualifications lose their credibility. According to Macleod (2009) it is important to know that cheating is not only unethical, but also undermines one's knowledge, and carrying out research in a competent and scholarly manner.

Moreover, those who believe that they have reason to cheat in their academic work, will also have reason to cheat in their world of work, in addition to flooding the labour market with people who are incompetent and deficient in the skills needed in the workplace. Graduates who have obtained their qualifications partially by means of cheating have an adverse impact on the economy and the labour force. They are not fit for the purpose and are likely to engage in malpractice in their fields of specialization (Gull et al 2007) Academic integrity enhances and maximizes the credibility of university education (Staats & Hupp 2008).

Therefore, it is important for educators to understand academic dishonesty as practised by students given that such knowledge will enable academics to communicate with students regarding the serious educational implications of such behaviour. Studying academic dishonesty familiarizes all those concerned with higher education with what is going on and therefore place appropriate measures in place to control the occurrence of such behaviour for both the present and the future.

It is with this in mind, that the present study is undertaken. It seeks to find out the extent to which university students in East Africa maintain academic integrity in their academic pursuit of their higher learning. The study also aims at comparing and contrasting the extent to which academic dishonesty is prevalent in each of the three universities.

Method

Sample

The sample was drawn from three East African universities. The participants comprised 104 students from university A, 103 students from university B and 268 students from university C. The total was 475 participants registered for degree programmes in education, in preparation for a teaching career at various levels of the school systems in the three countries.

Procedure

During lecture time, students were requested to fill in the answers to the questionnaire which took them about twenty minutes. Participants were asked to respond with a no or yes response. As soon as they completed the questionnaire at the end of the time, they were handed in.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire started with a preamble which stated as follows; “This questionnaire aims at determining the behaviour of university students as regards writing assignments, research papers, tests, and examinations in pursuit of academic or professional qualification. They were therefore asked to tick under “yes” or “no” against the appropriate statement showing whether at one time or other, they had engaged in the described behaviour. In addition, participants were asked to indicate their gender and date of birth. For the purpose of confidentiality, they were forbidden from revealing their identity in any way. This was adhered to by all participants.

The questionnaire comprised sixteen statements covering most of the activities students engaged in while at university. The objective for each statement was to detect whether academic integrity is strictly observed and maintained.

The questionnaire was the same as those used in similar studies carried out in many countries numerous times. The questionnaire had to be similar given that the scholarly activities students engage in are of a universal nature (Mwamwenda 2007; Lupton & Chapman 2002; Jalali 2009; Teferra 2001)

Scoring

Scoring was simple and straightforward. For each participant both yes and no responses were counted against each statement and then tabulated for all the participants.

Results

The responses from three groups of participants (universities A, B & C) are displayed on Table 1. In response to statement one regarding paraphrasing material without acknowledging the original source, (64%) of students in university B and 56% of students in university C admitted engaging in such activity. Similar results were observed as regards allowing one's course work to be copied by someone else, where 69% of students from university A and 56% of students in university C agreed engaging in such behaviour.

The three sets of respondents engaged in fabricating references, the highest frequency being among university A (59%) and university C (57%) followed by university B (41%). More than 50% of respondents from universities A and C reported that they copied material from other books or publications without giving due credit to the authors.

The number of participants from university B engaging in similar activity was comparatively low as displayed in Table 1. University C participants (41%) further agreed doing another student's coursework for them. Moreover, it was reported that 50% of participants from the same university lied about medical certificates for extension or exemption of given assignment. Both universities A (54%) and C (41%) preplanned to communicate answers with one another during the examination session. Each set of respondents admitted on a very low scale writing examinations for other candidates.

Table 1: Performance in percentages of East African University Students on Academic Integrity Questionnaire

N=104 University A; N=103 University B & N=268 University C

Statements	VarsityA	VarsityB	VarsityC
Paraphrasing material from another source without acknowledging the original author.	64	45	56
Allowing own coursework to be copied by another student	69	22	56
Fabricating a reference or a bibliography	59	41	57
Copying material for coursework from a book or other publication without acknowledging the source	56	28	50
Copying another student's coursework with their knowledge.	50	22	57
Ensuring the availability of books or journal articles in the library by deliberately mis-shelving them so that other students cannot find them, or by cutting out the relevant article or chapter.	20	39	25
Submitting a piece of course as an individual piece of work when it has actually been written jointly with another student	26	24	51
Doing another student's course- work for them	26	08	41
Copying from a neighbour during an examination without them realizing.	17	22	35
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get an extended deadline or exemption from a piece of work	17	24	50
Taking unauthorized material into an examination (e.g. cribs)	31	18	11
Illicitly gaining advance information about the contents of an examination paper	09	19	11
Copying another student's coursework without their knowledge	13	14	22
Premeditated collusion between two or more students to communicate answers to each other during an examination	54	23	41
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get special consideration by examiners (e.g. the Exam Board to take a more lenient view of results; extra time to complete the exam)	02	23	21
Taking an examination for someone else or having someone else take an examination for you.	05	07	12

It was interesting to observe that in most areas, where there was considerable academic dishonesty, both universities A and C students were comparable, with university B scoring far below their counterparts. The only areas where they scored relatively high was in fabricating references and paraphrasing without proper acknowledgement, though they were still below those of universities A and C students. The only areas where university B students exceeded others by far (39%) was ensuring the availability of books or journals in the library or deliberately mis-shelving them so that other students could not easily access them. University A was leading (31%) in the number of students who admitted taking unauthorized material in the examinations

Discussion

In view of the concern for academic integrity among students of higher learning and the alarming rate of academic misconduct reported in numerous research studies, the present study was undertaken in three anonymous East African universities. The objective was to establish the extent to which academic misconduct of prevails among students in the three selected universities.

The picture conveyed by the analysis of data is that academic dishonesty is common among all the three East African universities. As matter of degrees, it is jointly more prevalent in universities C and A than is the case in university B. In view of this, it is appropriate to state that findings of this study confirm rather conclusively that indeed university students engage in academic misconduct to an increasingly high level (Lupton & Chapman 2002; Cummings, Muddax, Harlow and Dyas 2002; Park 2003; Clark 2006; Gull et al. 2007; Bulstrode 2008; Tam 2008; Charteris 2009; Macleod 2009; Swemmer 2009). As many as one third to 50% of the respondents admitted cheating in a variety of ways, which is similar to what has been reported in Canada, Russia, Ethiopia, South Africa, UK and USA.

The overall cheating among East African university students is certainly a serious challenge to university standards of excellence and academic integrity (Russouw 2005; Mwamwenda 2006; Curry & Rainey 2007; Charteris 2009; Swemmer 2009). Even if compared to what has been reported elsewhere, the figures are lower, it is correct to conclude that the level of cheating prevailing is simply unacceptable and therefore calls for all stakeholders including students, academics, community leaders and others to bring this under control, as a way of maintaining academic excellence and integrity (Staarts & Hupp 2008).

In studies undertaken in South Africa on academic dishonesty (Mwamwenda & Monyooe 2000; Mwamwenda 2006, 2007) the amount of cheating observed was relatively low. In the present study, students engaging in academic dishonesty far exceeded previous African studies, including the one carried out in Ethiopia (Teferra 2001).

In light of Teferra's (2001) comments on why students in developing countries cheat, the results of this study seem to fall in line in a rather interesting manner. Teferra (2001) presents the argument that in most developing countries, there are additional reasons why university students engage in academic dishonesty. To begin with, the importance attached to examinations is enormous. This is even more so where there is economic insecurity, competition, and a prevalence of unemployment (Teferra 2001).

In fact, examinations serve as a passport to government and private jobs available on the labour market which inherently facilitate and enhance one's social mobility and economic security. A qualification from university guarantees better job opportunities, better livelihood, better social values, personal development, life chances, earnings, status as well as lifestyle (Teferra 2001). Given such a scenario, many students find it extremely tempting to engage in academic dishonesty (McCabe & Trevino 1996; Cummings et al. 2002; Hanson 2003; Lothammer 2005; Mwamwenda 2006, 2007).

Relatively speaking, job opportunities in two of the three countries are rather difficult to get, because of the large number of graduates which is not the case in the third country, where very few graduates are joining the labour market given the small number that have access to university education. One could argue that South Africa also commands a huge number of graduates given the number of universities in the country. While this is so, South Africa has a strong economy which is able to handle such demand relatively well.

According to the reported review of literature in Canada, India, the UK and the USA, students cheated by using unauthorized notes in the examination, copying from another student in the examination, as well as engaging in plagiarism. Such academic misconduct was confirmed among the participants of this study. It is further reported that in a comparative study of American and Russian students, academic dishonesty for the two sets of sample was 55% and 64% respectively (Lupton & Chapman 2002).

This compares well with the findings of this study where the rate of cheating in some of the identified behaviour was as high as 69%. The present study further confirms what has been reported in Canada, South Africa, the UK, USA, that over 50% of those interviewed admit engaging in academic misconduct (Frankly-Strokes & Newstead 1995; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes & Armstead 1996; Mwamwenda & Monyooe 2000; Gull 2007; Bulstrode 2008; Sarpotdar 2009). In examination-related cheating, Kennedy, Nowak, Raghuraman, Thomas and Davis (2005) reported that those who cheated ranged from 40% to 60%. A similar level of cheating was observed in this study with scores ranging as follows: 35%, 41%, and 54%

Conclusion

The present study, nevertheless, failed supporting studies claiming that academic dishonesty is as high as 70% or 80%. Regardless of how high or low the level of academic dishonesty may be, it is simply indefensible in any academic institution worth its name and status. For this reason, no respectable institution of higher learning should allow academic misconduct to continue in perpetuity and with impunity.

Therefore, it is important for educators to understand cheating as practised by students as such knowledge will enable academics to communicate with students regarding the serious educational implications of such behaviour (Ashworth et al. 1997). Lupton and Chapman (2002:24) comment as follows: "Instructors should educate students on the virtues of not engaging in cheating and the penalties for cheating with the hope that this will reduce the incidences of academic dishonesty"

As a result of attempting to understand cheating as practised in institutions of higher learning, educators' understanding of what is going on, as far as cheating goes, will enable them to introduce appropriate measures for combating such behaviour and deter it from occurring for both the present and the future (Staarts & Hupp 2008; Macleod 2009; Swemmer 2009; Thomas 2009). This is done on the understanding that credibility of a university is essential for the recognition of its degrees and graduates for employment and further studies purposes (Teferra 2001; Gull et al. 2007; Seymour 2007; Curry & Rainey 2007; Charteris 2009).

The university, as an institution of higher learning, expects its students and academic staff to uphold the principles of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, excellence and responsibility. In light of this, it is imperative that academic

integrity is upheld at the highest level possible. Where this is not sustained, then there must be a mechanism by which damage control can be monitored. Probably this is happening in most institutions, except there is need for vigilance to ensure that standards of excellence are strictly adhered to.

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