



WORKPLACE ETHICAL LAPSES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM



¹Ameh, Eyiene

eyiene.ameh@gmail.com

²Ekaette, Samuel Okpon

sammylucky2009@yahoo.com

&

³Omini, Ettah Ettah

ominietta@gmail.com

12&3 Department of Educational Management
University of Calabar, Calabar.

Abstract

Workplace ethics in universities serves as moral compass that guides the activities of academic and non-academic staff for quality service delivery. Based on this premise, this paper identified and described some ethical issues/lapses in Nigerian universities. The Paper touched on the definition of ethics and professional ethics. It also addressed the issues of ethical lapses and burden in the universities in Nigeria today. These included issues of indiscriminate absence from classes and non-availability for project supervision, non-enforcement of class attendance, late commencement of lectures and non-completion of course outline, setting of difficult tests and examinations, gratification and sexual harassment, campus prostitution, cultism, drug/substance abuse, examination malpractice, favoured marking and deceitful recording/substitution of scripts, admission syndicates and racketeering, non-utilization of TETFund grants and falsifying research data/plagiarism. The paper noted that there are ethical standards that are to be upheld by academics for career progression. It was concluded that, upholding ethical standards is not just a matter of compliance but a fundamental aspect of a fulfilling and successful academic career. The paper recommended that to check unethical behavior in universities, administrators should engage in intense awareness campaigns within the university community.

Keywords: Ethics, University, Plagiarism, Academic staff

Introduction

Universities today cannot function without ethical rules. Professional ethics encompass all matters and principles of appropriate behavior for employees in the workplace. Professional ethics and standards are crucial in education, as they align with statutory requirements and ensure compliance. They help educators foster trust with students, parents and colleagues, as their adherence to ethical principles demonstrates integrity and reliability. They also ensure fairness, provide equal opportunities and avoid bias, all of which contribute to a positive and inclusive learning environment. If educators follow ethical guidelines and standards, it contributes to their personal and professional growth and encourages continuous improvement. It can help them develop their teaching practices and skills, enhancing student success and overall outcomes. It also sets a good example to students and hopefully instils the same values to help them in the future. Professional ethics in education are standards, guidelines, principles and values that guide educators' conduct and behaviour to maintain fairness, integrity and professionalism. It can influence educators' interactions with students, parents and colleagues, and the wider educational community. Educators should maintain high standards of ethics



and behaviours in and outside the educational setting. Some examples of educators' ethical responsibilities include:

Acting honestly and with integrity – they should act truthfully and adhere to strong ethical and moral principles.

Acquiring ethical knowledge and demonstrating understanding– they should understand ethical and moral principles. Continuously improving their knowledge and skills– they should have good subject knowledge and keep it up-to-date, be self-critical and be committed to ongoing skill improvement.

Treating others with dignity and respect – they should always treat people with dignity and respect to build relationships, regardless of their own beliefs.

Observing proper boundaries – they should maintain professional boundaries and be mindful of situations where they could be crossed or violated.

Safeguarding – they should have regard for the safeguarding of students, as per the law.

Demonstrating tolerance– they should respect other people's rights, values, faiths and beliefs.

Building positive professional relationships – they should foster trust and collaborate with others to forge positive professional relationships.

According to Ajayi and Adeniji (2009) ethics is about human behavior and ways of thinking that affect the behavior and well-being of other members of our community. Other views see ethics as rightness or wrongness. Ethics is anchored on what is right or wrong, what is good or bad in a given field or discipline. It focuses on how humans should live their lives and, in particular, how they should behave towards others, it is, therefore, pertinent to all forms of human activities. Ethics is also related to moral values. Adedara and Bewaji (2017, 179) see ethics as a moral philosophy that concerns itself with the "norms of behavior; right and wrong, good and evil, approbation and reprobation". Wimmer and Dominic (2003) state that ethical behavior is the "proper thing to do". These researchers assume that someone who behaves ethically will be convinced that he has acted in a "morally appropriate manner". Indisputably, ethics is found in all human endeavors as Parrish-Sprowl (2000, 204) asserts that "ethical considerations reside in nearly every human activity, be it thought, word or deeds".

According to Igbeka and Okoroma as cited by Uduma (2024), members of a group hold ethical rules in such high regard that it is easy to identify a professional group member based on occasional interaction or association. Namagembe and Ntayi (2012) assert that ethical codes include the group's interests, dos and don'ts, and are often associated with a logo. The collection of codes bearing the mark is periodically renamed to better meet the changing demands of the industry, their clientele, and society at large (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). As a result, academic staff members have an obligation to assume the duties that come with the independence they require. These obligations are to the following groups: (I) students, (II) scholarship, (III) colleagues, (IV) the university, and (V) the greater community the institution serves.

To ensure that academic staff adheres to professional and ethical standards and that efficient systems are put in place to oversee and uphold compliance, these obligations must be adopted. Academic personnel in postsecondary institutions, such as universities, are primarily responsible for teaching, conducting research, and providing community services. According to Archibong (2012), countries rely on university-generated knowledge to further their social, economic, and technical development. This suggests that society places a great deal of trust in academic workers. As a result, academic employees need to be individuals of unwavering moral character who can defend the university's values and the reputation for integrity that the Ivory Tower has earned (Bello, 2011). In other words, any educational institution needs its academic staff to be morally upright, disciplined, and guardians of these qualities.

According to Bello (2011), a clear and concise assessment of Nigerian universities will demonstrate a dearth of ethics in the country. This could be related to the idea of academic freedom, which is essential to the profession but has been dangerously overemphasized to the point where it is mistakenly understood to mean freedom from the law. Nwogu and Adieme as cited by Uduma (2024) report that unethical behavior has been observed among academics in some Nigerian universities. This behavior includes irregular attendance by some academic staff, borrowing human and



material resources during accreditation, plagiarizing research conducted by other scholars, and accepting bribes from students to improve subpar results. Additional examples include sexual harassment, forging age certificates, directing students to professionals who can create projects, dissertations, or theses, and renovating school spaces while the institution is accredited. Bruhn, Zajac, Al-Kazemi, and Prescott (2002) stated that academic staff members should be held to the highest standards since they are considered role models and moral or ethical advisors.

Additionally, Kuranchie, Twene, Mensah, and Arthur (2014) proposed that the problem of unethical academic practices influences tertiary students' academic achievement. They further said that professors engage in plagiarism, extort money from students by selling handouts, and trade money for marks. According to Whawoas cited by Uduma(2024), unethical behavior in higher education institutions in Nigeria includes, but is not limited to, cheating on exams, demanding money through extortion, and engaging in sexual relations with female students. All of these behaviors have a detrimental effect on students by producing low-quality graduates, delaying the integration of graduates into the workforce, and encouraging exam cheating.

Ethical lapses Nigeria university landscape.

Nigerian university education is marred with corruption, ranging from examination malpractice, sex scandal, bribery, poor curriculum development, lack and shortage of manpower, and poor manpower development. Some Lecturers moonlight regularly, teaching in five to six universities at a time. Lecturers also leave their universities and posed in other universities as full-time staff during accreditation just for the sake of one hundred thousand naira (₦100,000.00). Sad enough, society looks up to lecturers as role models and mentors of another generation.

The truth is, NUC has refused to do the needful by creating a database for Nigerian lecturers to track their place of primary assignment and to prevent moonlighting and the unethical behavior of lecturers during accreditation (Ngonso, 2022). These are some of the ethical issues that render Nigerian universities very ineffective and also affect their global ranking. University leadership sometimes submit to this unwholesome behavior as a means of rescuing the university from failing accreditation exercise. This is major because the proprietors of the universities have failed to provide the necessary funding for the proper administration of the universities. Adeyemi and Obadiora (2020) in their survey research conducted to ascertain the level of compliance to professional ethics by academic and non-academic staff as stakeholders in Nigerian universities found that they have a low level of implementation of professional ethics among the university staff.

The view expressed above shows that, despite putting a structure in place, the ethical standard needs to be set and above all, ethics without application further creates a chaotic situation. This is the true picture of Nigerian university education.

Ethical burden in Nigerian universities

Ethical issues that are common in these three institutions of higher learning in Nigeria according to Ngonso (2022).

Indiscriminate absence from classes and non-availability for projects supervision

Many Nigerian lecturers and teachers absent themselves from classes indiscriminately. Oftentimes, you see students waiting for hours in the classroom for their teacher without any information regarding whether or not the teacher will come to the class. Sometimes the teacher shows up 30 minutes before the end of the class. This scenario is rampant in government-owned universities, polytechnics/monotechnics, and colleges of education where lecturers are lords due to a lack of quality control and assurance. One of the major reasons why undergraduate projects in Nigeria is nothing to reckon with is the non-availability of lecturers to supervise the projects. For Nigerian lecturers, lecturing in Nigeria do not obey the law of contract and principles of engagement.



Non-enforcement of class attendance

In most Nigerian universities, polytechnics/monotechnics, and colleges of education class attendance are not taken seriously even when research has shown that there is a significant relationship between attendance and good performance. Some lecturers do not care about attendance so students could lazy around and possibly fail examinations so that such students could come for settlement. Another twist to this is the lack of quality control by institutions' administration. No mechanism is put in place to checkmate this act of indiscipline and unethical conduct among lecturers.

Late commencement of lectures and non-completion of course outline

This is another serious breach of contract by lecturers in the Nigerian tertiary educational system. Some lecturers due to over-engagement which as moonlighting may be attending to other institutions, while the parents or the second, third, fourth even fifth institution suffers. This is another avenue where lecturers make courses difficult for students, a strategy or lacuna that influences students to go for bribery for marks. It is a major reflection of the lack of quality control on the part of the institutional administrators.

The setting of difficult tests and examination

This unethical practice is very common with corrupt and deformed lecturers. Lecturers who want to collect money for students will first and foremost absent themselves from classes, resume their lectures late, disregard course outlines, and ignore attendances. All of these are psychological intimidations of students. Their questions sometimes do not have a marking guide because they have no answers to the questions they set. The aim is to collect money from students.

Gratification and sexual harassment

The outcome of lecturers' psychological intimidation of students is bribe-taking and sexual harassment. There are two sets of deformed lecturers in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The first group is the avaricious lecturers who can do anything for money and material gains. These interglots in their rapacious behavior lure students to give them bribes or material gifts for marks they do not deserve. Another category of deformed lecturers in Nigerian higher education is pleasure seekers. These lecturers are the ones who award marks for sex. This seems to be the number one unethical practice on Nigerian campuses. Many campuses are finding it difficult to deal with the issue of sex obsession and hypersexuality, a psychiatric disorder that has taken a toll on Nigerian tertiary education. According to Ikechi and Akanwa (2012), young academics are most guilty of sexual harassment.

Campus prostitution

Due to pressure on the female students to meet up with financial demands of certain lecturers, a percentage of the female students resort to prostitution to meet up with the demands. These young female students prefer to wear body-revealing dresses that could attract male lecturers.

Cultism

One of the greatest vices confronting Nigerian campuses as a result of lack of discipline and ethical standards which many scholars attribute to the long stay of the military in Nigeria is cultism. Cult activities have been on the increase for a long time now. Some students are initiated into a cult through their lecturers' influence and others through their friends. The reasons for cultism on campus include but are not limited to intimidation of female students, and access to lecturers who are members of the same course. Ikechi and Akanwa (2012) assert that cultism has dangerously affected the psyche of young Nigerians irrespective of gender, age, and religious background. Mfonobong (2022, 1) writes, "the Nigerian universities have been the major place that has been influenced and affected by activities of cult groups" Among the notable cult groups on Nigerian campuses are Pyrate Confraternity, Black Axe, Vikings, Buccaneer, Supreme Eiyeye Confraternity, Mafia Confraternity, Two-Two Confraternity, Eternal Fraternal Order, Maphite Confraternity, and Black Bra Confraternity, etc.



Drug/substance abuse

Drug abuse is the stimuli that catapult Nigerian students into a cult. It emboldens them to engage in cult activities. Due to a lack of ethical standards, Nigerian students are wholesomely involved in taking alcohol, marijuana, heroin, cocaine, nicotine, cigarettes, and other tobacco products.

Monetization of Intellectual property/ Lecturers' involvement in students' project writing

Academic standard in Nigeria is decaying as the day goes by. The trend today in Nigeria is the commercialization of intellectual property. This is now the development for the avarice and cupidity lecturers. These lecturers sell their works for money and also help students write their project, thesis, or dissertation for a fee. Sometimes these lecturers give the project, thesis, or dissertation to a younger colleague or bright students to write while he pays them for their service. The shocking part of this ugly trend is that most senior faculty members are involved in this dirty act.

Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice is not only widespread on Nigerian campuses but has eaten deep into the very fabric of the educational system. Ikechi and Akanwa (2012) described it as "scandalous" saying that lecturers have raised the bar of examination malpractice. Examination malpractice has reached its peak in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Lecturers even aid students to cheat in examinations. As invigilators sometimes they take their eyes off the students to enable them to cheat with any foreign material they came to examination with. While some invigilators do not even stay in the examination hall to invigilate, they will prefer to hang around the door or window or engage other invigilators in conversation to allow the students to have a filled day.

Favored marking and deceitful recording/ substitution of scripts

This is a very common practice in Nigerian institutions. Due to a large number of students, some examiners do give their scripts to their Postgraduate students, junior colleagues, or undergraduate in upper classes to grade for them. This new examiner then tells students that he is in the custody of their scripts and from there he is contacted. Sometimes, lecturers deceitfully record scores for students. This is common when fraudulent level examination officers would have collected money from a student and promised such students that he has access to all the scores and he can do something about them. Polytechnics and monotechnics in Nigeria are guilty of this unethical practice. When this attempt fails, lecturers sometimes resort to the substitution of the script to enable the students to write afresh even with their notes or textbooks.

Admission syndicates and racketeering

This unethical practice is usually an admission officer-student deal. On many Nigerian campuses admission is bought with money and the admission officers do have some students as the middlemen who collect money on their behalf. Some students who may not have the right contact for this illicit business do it on their own and oftentimes fall victim.

Non-utilization of TETFund Grant

The level of corruption in the Nigerian educational system is alarming. Tertiary institutions ordinarily ought to be a home of decency but in Nigeria, the reverse is the case. Many scholars who access TETFund grants do not utilize the fund for the purpose for which the grant was given. Some scholars have won a grant for research but diverted the fund for their marriage, purchase of a car, completion of their building project, health care, or travel abroad. While some who win grants for further studies abroad never travel, and some who travel abroad with the grant never return to Nigeria as contained in the grants/agreement.



Falsifying research data/plagiarism

Research is the life-wire of the tertiary institution, particularly the university education. Research is governed by ethics, yet many researchers do not border ethics in their profession. In Nigeria, research ethics is not emphasized. You may take two research courses at the undergraduate level without tutoring on research ethics. You may as well take a course at Masters and Ph.D programmes without knowledge of research ethics. These are some of the problems faced by academics in Nigeria, coupled with the fact that corrupt practices have become a norm in our educational system. Ethics is very important in research because it creates the boundary between what is right in research and what is wrong. According to Wimmer and Dominic (2003) researchers are always confronted with ethical problems such as tampering with data. These researchers averred that researchers are expected to exercise judicious caution in processing their data to guard against needless errors that might affect the results and warn researchers from plagiarism. This counsel is simply but noise to many Nigerian scholars. Data falsification and plagiarism are among the numerous ethical issues often ignored in Nigeria. Researchers may sample 10 respondents then add another "0" to 10 and claim 100. The responsibilities of the university are multi-dimensional due to its multi-disciplinary nature.

Ethical Standards and Academic Career Progression

Ethical standards are crucial for successful career progression in academia, fostering trust, credibility, and integrity. Upholding these standards can lead to professional growth and satisfaction, while neglecting them can hinder advancement and damage one's reputation.

1. Importance of Ethics in Academia:

Trust and Credibility:

Ethical conduct builds trust with colleagues, students, and the wider academic community, which is essential for effective collaboration and reputation building.

Integrity and Excellence:

Demonstrating ethical behavior showcases commitment to integrity and excellence, essential qualities for a successful academic career.

Professional Growth:

Embracing ethical principles allows individuals to navigate the complexities of academia with integrity, contributing to professional growth and development.

2. Impact of Ethical Standards on Career Progression:

Career Management:

Ethical practices are crucial for effective career management, including goal setting, exploring options, and building relationships for career advancement.

Research and Teaching:

Ethical conduct in research (e.g., data integrity, proper citation) and teaching (e.g., fairness, inclusivity) is fundamental to academic success.

Institutional Culture:

A strong ethical culture within a university fosters a supportive environment for academic career progression.

3. Factors Contributing to Ethical Failures in Academia:

Lack of Awareness:

Insufficient understanding of ethical codes and principles can lead to unintentional violations.



Pressure to Publish:

The pressure to publish in prestigious journals may lead to unethical research practices, like data fabrication or plagiarism.

Conflicting Priorities:

Conflicts between institutional expectations and personal ethical beliefs can create difficult situations.

4. Promoting Ethical Conduct in Academia:

Education and Training:

Providing comprehensive ethics education and training for faculty and students is crucial.

Clear Guidelines:

Establishing clear and enforceable ethical guidelines for research and teaching can help prevent misconduct.

Institutional Support:

Creating a supportive institutional culture that values ethical behavior can encourage positive practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, upholding ethical standards is not just a matter of compliance but a fundamental aspect of a fulfilling and successful academic career. Professional ethics is vital in education to understand how to manage ethical dilemmas and maintain professional conduct. Various legal and regulatory frameworks, standards and codes of practice require educators and educational institutions to consider specific ethical principles in their teaching practices, the learning environment and the wider educational setting.

Recommendations

Academic staff members are held up as role models and moral or ethical leaders, and their standards should always be high. They are viewed as individuals who play important roles in organizations that are often involved in learning and assist others in achieving personal growth. The following recommendations are made:

- To check unethical behavior in universities, administrators should engage in intense awareness campaigns within the university community.
- To improve career growth and promote a positive learning culture in universities, administrators should impose severe punitive measures on academic staff who engage in unethical behavior.
- Academics should be required to teach fewer than two courses, as research has shown that such lecturers are less likely to engage in unethical professional practices.
- Academic staff should also ensure they uphold academic integrity, avoid plagiarism and teach their students about its importance and the consequences of dishonesty.

References

- Adedara, P. B. & Bewaji, J. A. (2017). *Media theory, practice and ethics: A textbook of film and television studies*. Ibadan: Bwright Integrated Publishers Limited.
- Adeyemi, B. A., & Obadiora, A. J. (2020). Maintenance of professional ethics in a Nigerian higher institution of learning: Stakeholders views on the best practices. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 7(5), 11–20.
- Aguinis, A., & Glavas, A. (2019). On corporate social responsibility, sensemaking, and the search for meaningfulness through work. *Journal of Management*, 45(3), 1057-1086.
- Ajayi, K. & Adeniji, A. (2009). Pursuing discipline and ethical issues in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. *African Research Review*, 3(1), 284-300.



- Archibong, I. A. (2012). Forms of dishonesty among academic staff and the way forward. *Canadian Social Science*, 8(6), 39-43.
- Bello, K. (2011). Causes of ethical erosion in Nigerian universities. *Canadian Social Science*, 7(2), 213-217.
- Bruhn, J. G., Zajac, G., Al-Kazemi, A., & Prescott, L. D. (2002). Moral positions and academic conduct: Parameters of tolerance forethics failure. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(4), 461-493.
- Ikechi, K. S. & Akanwa, U. N. (2012). Unethical practices in the Nigerian educational system. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business*, 4(8), 451-464.
- Kuranchie, A., Twene, C., Mensah, M. K., & Arthur, C. (2014). The perceived corrupt practices of academics: What conditions promote them? *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 3(1), 189-196.
- Mfonobong, D. (2022). Top popular cult groups in Nigerian universities and symbols. <https://nigerianinfofinder.com/top-cult-groups-nigerian-universities>. Retrieved July 9th.
- Ngonso, B. F. (2022). Ethical lapses in the Nigerian higher education system. *Journal of Ethics in Higher Education*, 1, 53-73. 10.26034/fr.jehe.2022.337.
- Parrish-Sprowl, J. (2000). Ethical considerations in development communication. In A. A. Moemeka (Ed.), *Development Communication in Action Building and Participation*. University Press of America. 203-204.
- Puiu, S. (2023). Ethical dilemmas. In Idowu, S.O., Schmidpeter, R., Capaldi, N., Zu, L., Del Baldo, M., Abreu, R. (eds) *Encyclopedia of sustainable management*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25984-5_570
- Salmons, J. (2022). Honesty and originality in academic writing. Sage Research Methods Community.
- Uduma, U. E. (2024). Perceptions of workplace ethics among academic staff in south eastern Nigerian universities. *Asian Journal of Managerial Science*, 13(2), 7-14. <https://doi.org/10.70112/ajms-2024.13.2.4245>
- Wimmer, R. D. & Dominic, J.R. (2003). *Mass media research: An introduction*. Australia: Thomson Wadsworth.